

In the period between December 1999 and early January 2000, information about terrorism flowed widely and abundantly. The flow from the FBI was particularly remarkable because the FBI at other times shared almost no information. That from the intelligence community was also remarkable, because some of it reached officials—local airport managers and local police departments—who had not seen such information before and would not see it again before 9/11, if then. And the terrorist threat, in the United States even more than abroad, engaged the frequent attention of high officials in the executive branch and leaders in both houses of Congress.

Why was this so? Most obviously, it was because everyone was already on edge with the millennium and possible computer programming glitches (“Y2K”) that might obliterate records, shut down power and communication lines, or otherwise disrupt daily life. Then, Jordanian authorities arrested 16 al Qaeda terrorists planning a number of bombings in that country. Those in custody included two U.S. citizens. Soon after, an alert Customs agent caught Ahmed Ressay bringing explosives across the Canadian border with the apparent intention of blowing up Los Angeles airport. He was found to have confederates on both sides of the border.

These were not events whispered about in highly classified intelligence dailies or FBI interview memos. The information was in all major newspapers and highlighted in network television news. Though the Jordanian arrests only made page 13 of the *New York Times*, they were featured on every evening newscast. The arrest of Ressay was on front pages, and the original story and its follow-ups dominated television news for a week. FBI field offices around the country were swamped by calls from concerned citizens. Representatives of the Justice Department, the FAA, local police departments, and major airports had microphones in their faces whenever they showed themselves.⁴²

After the millennium alert, the government relaxed. Counterterrorism went back to being a secret preserve for segments of the FBI, the Counterterrorist Center, and the Counterterrorism Security Group. But the experience showed that the government was capable of mobilizing itself for an alert against terrorism. While one factor was the preexistence of widespread concern about Y2K, another, at least equally important, was simply shared information. Everyone knew not only of an abstract threat but of at least one terrorist who had been arrested *in the United States*. Terrorism had a face—that of Ahmed Ressay—and Americans from Vermont to southern California went on the watch for his like.

In the summer of 2001, DCI Tenet, the Counterterrorist Center, and the Counterterrorism Security Group did their utmost to sound a loud alarm, its basis being intelligence indicating that al Qaeda planned something big. But the millennium phenomenon was not repeated. FBI field offices apparently saw no abnormal terrorist activity, and headquarters was not shaking them up.

Between May 2001 and September 11, there was very little in newspapers