

VII. The Phoenix Electronic Communication

In July 2001, an FBI agent in the Phoenix field office sent an “Electronic Communication” (EC) to the Usama Bin Ladin and the Radical Fundamentalist Units at Headquarters and to several agents on an International Terrorism squad in the New York field office. The agent outlined his concerns about a coordinated effort by Bin Ladin to send students to the United States for aviation training. He noted an “inordinate number of individuals of investigative interest” taking such training in Arizona and speculated that this was part of an effort to establish a cadre of persons, trained in aviation, who could conduct terrorist activity. The EC contained a number of recommendations the agent asked FBI Headquarters to consider.

The FBI’s handling of the Phoenix EC is symptomatic of its focus on short-term operational priorities, often at the expense of long-term strategic analysis. The Bureau’s ability to handle strategic analytic products, such as the EC, was limited before September 11, 2001. The EC also highlights inadequate information sharing within the FBI, particularly between operational and analytic units. Several addressees on the EC, especially at the supervisory level, did not receive it before September 11 because of limitations in the electronic dissemination [page 342] system. The Joint Inquiry repeatedly heard such complaints about the FBI’s information technology. Finally, the FBI’s case-driven approach, while extremely productive in the Bureau’s traditional law-enforcement mission, does not generally encourage FBI personnel to pay attention to preventive analysis and strategy, particularly when the matter appears to have no direct, immediate impact on ongoing counterterrorism investigations.

A. The Phoenix EC

The Special Agent in Phoenix who wrote the EC told the Joint inquiry he first became concerned about aviation-related terrorism in the early 1990s, while he was investigating Libyans with suspected terrorist ties who were working for U.S. aviation companies. Possible terrorists with easy access to aircraft conjured up for the agent visions of Pan Am Flight 103, which terrorists had blown up years before. His primary concern was that Islamic extremists, studying aviation subjects ranging from security to piloting, could learn how to hijack or destroy aircraft