

# CIA Chronicles

By Amy Zegart

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Summary:

To the Editor:

Paul Pillar ("Intelligent Design?" March/April 2008) spent most of the 1990s doing counterterrorism analysis at the CIA and rose to be the deputy director of its Counterterrorism Center. My book *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11* is highly critical of that center and finds that its weaknesses contributed to 11 operational failures prior to 9/11. How can an individual who served at the heart of the organization being criticized render an unbiased view of that organization's performance?

In his review of my book, Pillar attacks, among other things, my criticism of systemic weaknesses in the CIA's watch-listing program. He thinks it worked well overall, a claim flatly contradicted by evidence presented by the CIA's own inspector general's office. The inspector general's internal 9/11 review, made public last year, noted that none of the 50 to 60 CIA officials who could and should have watch-listed two of the 9/11 hijackers did so and concluded, "Basically, there was no coherent, functioning watchlisting program."

These and all the other findings in my book are based on facts, not feelings or fiction. My research included analysis of every unclassified report of intelligence and counterterrorism issued during the 1990s; every intelligence threat assessment presented to Congress; every State of the Union address, as well as other high-profile speeches by public officials; thousands of pages of public documents I obtained from the CIA, the Justice Department, the FBI, the congressional intelligence committees, and the 9/11 Commission; and interviews I conducted with 75 government officials (including senior CIA officials) over a five-year period. Pillar's review of my book gives the impression that I simply drank the Kool-Aid and then photocopied pages from the 9/11 Commission report.

Pillar did not even mention my book's core argument, that intelligence-agency adaptation failures stem more from organizational deficiencies and enduring impediments to fixing them than from individual mistakes. The intelligence agencies continue to flounder today for the same reasons they have struggled in the past: no organization changes easily from within. Self-interested bureaucrats, legislators, and presidents naturally impede executive-branch reforms, and the fragmented U.S. government ensures that legislative overhaul is an uphill battle. Good ideas to improve U.S. intelligence have been around for years. The hard part is getting any of them implemented. Understanding how and why barriers to reform transcend individual presidents, CIA directors, and crises is the first step toward overcoming them.

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Paul Pillar replies:

Dwelling on the sources, rather than the substance, of arguments rarely adds to one's understanding of a subject. Such an approach leads one to overlook errors of sources one prefers to trust, as well as valid observations from sources one distrusts. Amy Zegart's letter catalogs the reports on which she relies but never addresses how they led her to inaccuracies, noted in my essay, about pre-9/11 strategic intelligence. Nor does she mention the contradictions, which I also noted, within her argument on this subject.

The one substantive point Zegart's letter does address, about the watch-listing of terrorist suspects, involves a different sort of contradiction. The CIA inspector general's report she quotes was one of two reports by that office about the agency's pre-9/11 work on terrorism. The other one -- completed in August 2001, before post-9/11 hindsight kicked in -- is a dramatically different document: it describes the Counterterrorism Center as "a well-managed component that successfully carries out the agency's responsibilities to collect and analyze intelligence on international terrorism." That report tells of a "vastly improved" relationship with the FBI and

recommends almost no changes. So which, if either, of these two reports should one trust?

Intelligence failures have many possible causes, of which organizational shortcomings of the sort Zegart posits are only one. One will never understand the limits and possibilities of intelligence if one does not also understand the many severe challenges that are intrinsic to the business -- and which Zegart barely acknowledges in *Spying Blind*.

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