have referenced the citation in the report. As you read the material, think about these questions:

- Which of the forces listed above stand out in the pre-9/11 story?
- Which of these forces appears to have benefited al Qaeda?
- Which benefited the U.S. government?
- In what ways did al Qaeda utilize these forces?
- What hindered the U.S. government from taking maximum advantage of them?

### The 9/11 Commission Report Summary

#### What Happened?

**Who Carried Out the Attacks?**

The Commission found that the 9/11 attacks were a shock but should not have been a surprise. Prior to the attacks, the Commission identified ten attacks carried out by Islamic terrorists, starting with the first attempt to bring down the World Trade Center with a truck bomb in 1993, which killed six and wounded a thousand, and ending with the October 2000 detonation of a motorboat filled with explosives, almost sinking the USS *Cole* at anchor in the port of Aden, Yemen, in the Red Sea and killing seventeen U.S. seamen. The report identifies the attackers as "various groups of Islamist extremists." In particular, al Qaeda carried out the last three attacks prior to 9/11, while 9/11 was "driven by [Osama] bin Laden" (the leader of al Qaeda) himself. The enemy is not terrorism but an Islamist terrorist movement.

**How Did the Islamist Terrorist Groups Come into Being?**

In the 1980s, young Muslims went to Afghanistan as volunteers to wage a holy war, or jihad, against the Soviet Union, which was attempting to take over that country. Osama bin Laden was one of them. When the Soviets withdrew in the late 1980s, bin Laden and others formed al Qaeda to carry the holy fight to other parts of the world. To recruit his volunteers, bin Laden spoke of Islam's days of glory and how the Muslim peoples of the world had become victims of non-Muslim masters. Bin Laden cleverly blamed the failure of a succession of governments in the Middle East to improve the lot of their people, who were confronting rapid global change and needed to respond to it, on non-Muslim foreign governments and corporations. Among the worst foreign offenders bin Laden identified
were the United States and in particular, the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, where the most holy sites of Islam are located.

With this ideology, bin Laden secretly and systematically built his terrorist organization throughout the 1990s, using Afghanistan as a home base and a fundraising system that could not be tracked through banks to recruit and finance new volunteers. Each new terrorist success brought the arrival of more recruits. By September 11, 2001, bin Laden possessed a sophisticated organization with highly trained personnel and the capability to move people and money around the globe.¹

With the August 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, al Qaeda had become a powerful force against the United States. But the United States seemed powerless to take retaliatory action to stop the group. From August 1998 to September 2001, the United States tried a variety of strategies. After launching Cruise missile strikes against al Qaeda targets in Afghanistan and Sudan in retaliation for the embassy bombings, the Clinton administration applied diplomatic pressure to try to persuade the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to expel bin Laden. The administration also devised covert operations to use foreign agents paid by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to capture or kill bin Laden and his chief lieutenants. None of these efforts was successful.

By early 1999, bin Laden and his advisers had settled on an attack against the United States, suggested to them by leading al Qaeda planner, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, called “the planes operation.” Originally, the idea was to use ten planes and target both the West and East coasts of the United States. The plan was then modified to four planes. Bin Laden provided the first four operatives for the plane attacks and in the fall of 1999, training at an elite camp in Afghanistan began. An additional four operatives came from a cell of Islamist extremists, many of whom were attending a university in Hamburg, Germany. From this group came the tactical commander of 9/11, Mohammed Atta.

U.S. intelligence picked up reports of planned attacks, and the CIA managed to break up some al Qaeda cells, but the organizational core was unhurt. By the summer of 2001, three of the four Hamburg operatives had arrived on the East Coast and started pilot training. In early 2001, the fourth hijacker trainee arrived and went to Arizona. Note that U.S. and foreign intelligence had picked all this information up prior to the summer of 2001.

During the summer of 2000 the Clinton administration renewed diplomatic efforts to get bin Laden expelled from Afghanistan. The diplomatic efforts led to nothing. After the October 2000 attack on the USS Cole, evidence grew that al Qaeda had carried it out, but U.S. intelligence could provide no clear proof that bin Laden had ordered it. In the meantime, the U.S. government warned the Taliban in Afghanistan that the Taliban government would be held responsible if there were any further attacks on the United States.

No one in the U.S. government wanted to take the responsibility of military action without clear and unambiguous proof. Osama bin Laden must have concluded that he could do almost anything because the United States was afraid to respond. In 2001, George W. Bush became president and faced the same dilemmas as President Clinton before him. During the spring and summer of 2001, U.S. intelligence received warnings that something “very, very, very big” was going to happen. However, even though both Clinton and Bush had been informed that bin Laden planned to strike in the United States, and President Bush received a warning to this effect in August 2001, all the intelligence pointed to a strike overseas, and so all the efforts to disrupt the attack were focused overseas. There was no effective mobilization of U.S. domestic agencies.

Meanwhile, the attack planners were having problems of their own. Participants had to be dropped, some because they could not get visas or were refused entry to the United States for other reasons. Some of the operatives aroused suspicion, like Zacarias Moussaoui, who wanted to skip training in takeoff and landing procedures in the pilot’s training course. He was arrested in Minnesota August 16, 2001, after officials of the Pan Am International Flight Academy in a suburb of Minneapolis reported to the FBI that he was seeking flight training on a Boeing 747. In Afghanistan, bin Laden overruled opposition by the chief of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, and ordered the attacks to go forward.

On September 11, 2001, not one domestic agency was prepared. The hijackers went through airport security with no problems; they took over four flights, overpowering aircrews and passengers not prepared for high-stakes hijacking. The military received confused instructions about shooting the planes out of the sky. The response of the New York City fire and police departments as well as the Port Authority of New Jersey and New York was improvised. Heroism and self-sacrifice carried the day. Miraculously, all but “approximately one hundred of the thousands of civilians who worked below the impact zone (where the planes struck) escaped, often with the help of emergency responders.”²

Why Did 9/11 Happen?
If so much information was available, why weren’t the attacks prevented? The Executive Summary lists what it calls missed opportunities: losing track of the two operatives who went through Bangkok, Thailand; not taking steps to find them when they arrived in the United States; not sharing information about individuals involved in the attack on the USS Cole with the hijackers involved in 9/11; not linking the arrest of Moussaoui to the warnings of a big
attack; not discovering false statements on visa applications; not recognizing fake passports; not expanding no-fly lists to include names on terrorist watch lists; and not taking precautions in planes to put steel doors in front of cockpits nor training flight crews in defensive tactics. In short, the Report found that the U.S. government lacked:

- **Imagination**: The attitude was that terrorist strikes cannot happen here!

- **A coherent policy**: There was no policy. Al Qaeda was not high on the list of dangers in 2001, and neither the Bush nor Clinton administrations could conceive of an attack on the United States.

- **Capabilities**: The CIA had very little capacity to carry out paramilitary operations. At no time was the Department of Defense fully engaged; the U.S. homeland defenders looked outward for a threat coming from abroad, not from within the country; the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) did not adjust its training programs or flight procedures to take account of threats to planes other than those that had occurred in the past. Perhaps most serious of all, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) did not have the ability to link the knowledge collected by individual agents in the field to national security priorities.

- **Management**: “The missed opportunities to thwart the 9/11 plot were symptoms of a broader inability to adapt the way government manages problems to the new challenges of the twenty-first century. . . . Management should have ensured that information was shared and duties were clearly assigned across agencies.”

**Specific Findings of the Report**

The report gives several reasons for the U.S. government’s failure to prevent 9/11:

- **Failed diplomacy**: Both the Pakistani and Afghan governments refused to give up bin Laden at U.S. request. The United States pressed the United Arab Emirates to break off relations with and enforce sanctions on Afghanistan, to no avail. Before 9/11, there was virtually no sharing of information between Saudi Arabian intelligence and the CIA.

- **Inability of the military to take action**: Starting from 1998, the military presented a list of possible military options, but the policy makers did not like any of them. In particular, they expressed frustration at the lack of “actionable intelligence,” or information that provided proof without a doubt that bin Laden was where intelligence said he was. In 1998 and 1999, there were three occasions when intelligence looked credible enough to plan to kill bin Laden. But the strikes never went through because the policy makers at the top did not think the information credible enough to justify the risks involved.

- **Problems within the intelligence community**: Here the Commission faults “the combination of an overwhelming number of priorities, flat budgets, an outmoded structure, and bureaucratic rivalries.” The compartmentalization of unshared information made it impossible to put together a complete picture.
Problems in the FBI: Perhaps most important here was that FBI had not modernized to respond to terrorist threats. The agency’s approach to investigations was case-specific, decentralized, and aimed at eventual prosecution. It had insufficiently developed mechanisms to find information about and track down unidentified possible terrorists within the country.

Permeable borders and immigration controls: The list here of misdeeds by immigration and border control is detailed. The 9/11 hijackers included al Qaeda militants who should have been on the watch list, who presented faked passports or passports that suggested extremism, lied on visa applications, lied to border control officials, and violated immigration laws. At no time were the State Department's consular officers or Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) agents brought fully into the terrorist picture. Before 9/11, no senior policy maker thought it vital to secure national borders. Terrorist attacks happened abroad, not at home.

Permeable aviation security and lack of foresight in securing cockpits, training crew, and inspecting passengers and their luggage.

Financing: The execution of the 9/11 attacks cost between $400,000 and $500,000. The hijackers and al Qaeda personnel used banks in the United States, opening accounts in their own names using their own passports and identification papers. “Their transactions were unremarkable and essentially invisible amid the billions of dollars flowing around the world every day.” To this date, we do not know where the money used for the 9/11 attacks came from or how it got to the United States.

Improvised homeland defense: None of the agencies concerned with making the United States secure, including the Northeast Air Defense Sector and the National Guard, had individual or coordinated strategies to meet a terrorist attack on U.S. soil. The response to 9/11 was improvised, and at the senior level, communication was poor. Senior military and FAA personnel could not communicate with one another. The president could not reach some senior officials. National Guard sectors operated under different rules of command.

The emergency response was likewise improvised, but heroic. Agencies were unprepared.

Congress, like the executive branch of the U.S. government, responded slowly to the growth of transnational terrorism. Its oversight of the agencies that should have been reformed to deal with the new threat was episodic and splintered across several congressional committees. Congressional rules and regulations further hampered any action on reform.

Are we safer? The report finds that actions against al Qaeda since 9/11 and improvements in homeland security have made us safer, but we are not safe.

The problem is that al Qaeda represents an ideological movement, not a finite group of people. It initiates and inspires, even if it no longer directs. In this way it has transformed itself into a decentralized force. Bin Laden may be limited in his ability to organize major attacks from his hideouts. Yet killing or capturing him . . . would not end terror. His message of inspiration to a new generation of terrorists would continue.4

Recommendations

The Commission recommends “a global strategy to dismantle the al Qaeda network and, in the long term, prevail over the ideology that contributes to Islamist terrorism.” This strategy includes the following:

1. Attacking terrorists and their organizations
2. Preventing the growth of Islamist terrorism by defining the U.S. message and defending U.S. ideals, offering an agenda of opportunity that includes support for education and economic openness, developing a comprehensive coalition strategy against Islamist terrorism, making maximum efforts to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and “following the money” for intelligence as a tool to hunt terrorists.
3. Protection against and preparation for terrorists attacks by reforming U.S. homeland security. In particular the Commission calls for a national counterterrorism center and a national intelligence officer.

Notes

2. Ibid., 8.
3. Ibid., 10–11.
4. Ibid., 16.

Questions

Check Your Understanding

1. What facts struck you most in the 9/11 Commission's Report?
2. According to the Report, how did al Qaeda manage to gain the power and capability to carry out the 9/11 attacks?
3. What does the report cite as the most serious failures of the U.S. government in preventing the attacks?
4. What does the report say about efforts at international cooperation to dismantle terrorist networks?
Analyze the Issues
1. What examples can you find in the reading material of the new forces that are shaping our planet?
2. How did bin Laden and the terrorists benefit from these forces?
3. Can you give examples of behaviors or attitudes that prevented the agencies of the U.S. government from utilizing these forces to their advantage?
4. Which of these forces do you think contributed most to the success of the decentralizing strategies of the Islamist terrorist groups?
5. How do you assess the Commission’s recommendation of a national counterterrorism center? How would the national centralization of intelligence counter the decentralized actions of transnational terrorists?
6. Do you think the new forces cited in the chapter are contributing to the greater centralization of the world into a global village or its fragmentation into small entities?

Further Information
For more information on The 9/11 Commission Report, see the following books, articles, newspapers, and Internet sites:

Government Documents


Background Books on Terrorism and the New Forces in World Politics

Websites on the War on Terrorism and U.S. Security
http://www.butlerreview.org.uk/index.asp This is the home page of the Butler Committee Review of British Intelligence performance before and during the Iraq War. The Committee is the United Kingdom’s counterpart to the 9/11 National Commission in the United States.

http://www.cia.gov/terrorism/ The CIA Web site contains a thorough list of articles and studies relating to national security and terrorism.

http://www.debka.com/doc/about.php This is an intelligence news source run out of Jerusalem, Israel, which provides up-to-date intelligence coverage of transnational and international terrorist activities and gives factual information on how terrorist groups fight the war on terrorism around the globe.

http://www.fbi.gov/terrorinfo/terrorism.htm The FBI’s Web site on terrorism contains information on how the agency is handling the problem as well as links to other US government agencies.

http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/usterror.html The University of Michigan Library Web site is an encyclopedic source on terrorism and the U.S. and international responses.

www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr116.pdf This report, published by the U.S. Institute of Peace, provides fascinating information on how terrorists have exploited the easy access of the Internet to reach their targeted audiences.