

The new age of terror

The greatest fear of American intelligence officials is that radical Jihadists will get a nuclear weapon and smuggle it into an American port. There is no available technology that can guarantee security against such an attack. The Jihadists don't need a nuke to pull off a 9/11-type horror show. A suicide bomber normally carries a few pounds of explosive to murder the people around him. But on an airplane, a few ounces could kill hundreds.

EVAN THOMAS

HAVE we learned anything since 9/11? President George W Bush has apparently learned not to overreact. In the panicky days after the September 11 attacks, the president wanted to see any scrap of information, no matter how thinly sourced. As a result, raw and unfiltered intelligence gushed into the Oval Office. A few weeks after 9/11, for instance, authorities in Pennsylvania received a frightening tip from an FBI office overseas: terrorists had a nuclear device on a train somewhere between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. The report went straight to the White House, where the president was anxiously consuming threat traffic like a midlevel CIA analyst. The information, while terrifying, turned out to be bogus. Within a day it had been traced back to a conversation between two men overheard at a urinal in Ukraine.

Characteristically, some time later, Bush made a mordant joke of the scare. "Is this another Ukrainian urinal incident?" he would sarcastically inquire when some alarming but shaky intelligence came across his desk. His briefers learned to screen out the more lurid but unchecked tidbits, like the "poison pen" or "jilted-lover letters" that sometimes arrive at the FBI to falsely accuse a former spouse or boyfriend of conspiring with terrorists. Bush now "trusts his team" to weed out such "speculative" intelligence, said a senior Bush aide. The aide, who declined to be identified discussing the president's state of mind, implied, perhaps without meaning to, that earlier in his administration the president was warier of intelligence advisers.

Though Bush can still probe the minutiae in intelligence briefings ("He's like a street cop," says Peter King, chairman of the Homeland Security Committee in the House), the president took a fairly hands-off approach to the biggest terror investigation since 9/11. Over the past several months, although British intelligence was closely tracking a plot to blow up as many as 10 airliners headed toward the United States from Britain, Bush was kept only loosely in the loop. At a briefing on August 3, "he was basically told, 'This is happening and you should know about it, but we don't have a lot of details yet,'" said a senior White House aide who asked to remain anonymous discussing intelligence briefings.

The next day, the president was given a fuller picture. On Sunday, August 6, Bush spent 45 minutes talking to British Prime Minister Tony Blair about timing when to alert the airlines? -- but he was informed of the impending arrests only as they were about to happen. At the time, he was at his Texas ranch, building a dock on the lake and riding his bike. While British intelligence was closing in on the alleged plotters, Bush was egging his junior aides to join the "100 Degree Club," an annual run in the scorching heat. Bush, who has quit jogging because of bad knees, rides a bike around his panting staffers, shouting, "Keep going! You can do it!"

Five years after 9/11, the president's advisers say they have learned a great deal about how to fight a war on terror, and they are no doubt correct. Bush was right to step back and to let his intelligence officials do their jobs. Before 9/11, America and its allies had few, if any, spies capable of penetrating jihadist cells. Although US officials knocked down press reports that the Brits were able to plant a "mole" inside the plot, they do say that British intelligence had helpfully one tip and maybe more from Britain's large and disaffected Muslim community. And although rival intelligence agencies at home and abroad still sometimes squabble and spar (and deny and deceive), they also cooperate better than they did before al-Qaeda became a truly global menace. "Everything flowed and worked as it needed to," said the senior Bush aide. "That's what made this a seamless operation, from start to finish."

Unfortunately, the enemy has also learned much in this new age of terror. Their radical mullahs have taken advantage of what was arguably the Bush administration's most

egregious overreaction to 9/11 -- the invasion of Iraq painting the United States as a vicious oppressor and murderer of Muslims. They believe that time is on their side. No matter how often their enemies capture a "high-value target" a top al-Qaeda leader a new one seems to emerge as the shadowy terror network metastasizes. It is unclear if an al-Qaeda Central, a hierarchal command structure, still exerts authority, but it may not matter: with the Internet and fanatical inspiration, al-Qaeda can morph and spread. The new Jihadists learn from the experiments and mistakes of their predecessors. The most recent bombing plot was, in a sense, a victory for the West in the struggle against radical Islam. A plot was foiled. But a look back at recent history shows how the terrorists can turn old plots into new ones.

Back before there was a war on terror, US intelligence officials could not imagine the scale of what they now face. Steven Simon was a White House national-security official who went around the world meeting with counter-terror operatives in other countries, or "fingernail pullers," as he jokingly called them. He was in the Philippines in the fall of 1994, chatting with some embassy officials, when he became intrigued by the strange case of a Philippine Airlines flight to Japan that had been the target of a terrorist bomb over the Pacific. The pilot had been able to land the damaged plane, but a Japanese businessman had been blown in half by the bomb planted under his seat. Law-enforcement officials couldn't figure out a motive. The businessman didn't seem to be the target of an assassination. Only later did Simon realize that the explosion was a test run for something much more ambitious and horrible, and that the businessman was only the first casualty of what the terrorists hoped would be a steep butcher's bill.

The plot was called Operation Bojinka, and its goal was nothing less than the midair destruction of a dozen airliners over the Pacific. The plan was fiendishly complex. The terrorists would fashion bombs out of liquid explosives, place them under the seats of the planes, set timers and then get off the planes at scheduled stopovers. Bad luck intervened: a kitchen fire in a Manila apartment led the police to discover the terrorists mixing explosives. The Filipinos extracted confessions, and that seemed to be the end of such an outlandish plot. Only as the world just learned in London and Pakistan, it wasn't.

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Jihadists spawned by radical Islam are nothing if not determined and patient. Struggles against the infidel are never-ending: to them a 12th-century crusade was only yesterday. "They are a persistent bunch," said Simon, who is now a consultant and author of a book called "The Next Attack." "They just keep coming in at you when they have a good idea." Simon ticked off the list. In early 2000, al-Qaeda wanted to attack a US destroyer in the port of Aden, Yemen, but the skiff filled with explosives was overloaded and sank. So a few months later the terrorists found a more seaworthy boat and blew a hole in the side of the USS Cole that nearly sank the warship. Radical Islamists wanted to bring down the World Trade Center, but the explosives used in a truck bomb in the February 1993 attack were not powerful enough. Some eight years later the terrorists returned in a pair of hijacked jetliners.

For the planned sequel to Operation Bojinka, the terrorists had learned and evolved. No longer was it necessary for the bombers to get off the plane. The Islamists had apparently found a squad of would-be martyrs who would board planes in groups of two or three, each carrying ingredients for the liquid bombing ingredients that could be drawn from nail-polish remover and concentrated peroxide, usually undetectable by airport screening devices as well as a simple electrical device, like a music player, to use as a detonator. The Jihadists' willingness to die "simplifies their planning," noted Simon. There seems to be a limitless supply of volunteers. Judging from the 24 arrests made by British police in connection with the latest plot, they are sometimes polite young men who live in tidy

middle-class houses in the lace-curtain suburbs of London. (Under the British legal system, the men can be held for questioning for up to a month before they must be charged; one man was released a few days after the arrests.)

For the moment, at least, it appears that Osama bin Laden has been thwarted in his relentless desire to stage an even grander spectacular than 9/11. But no one can doubt that he, or his successors and many imitators and acolytes, will try again and keep on trying until they succeed. Their ideology may date from the seventh century, but the Jihadists, especially bin Laden's sinister No. 2, Ayman al-Zawahiri, are eager to get control of 21st-century weapons of mass destruction. Five years after 9/11, al-Qaeda's top leaders may have been killed, captured or driven into the caves of Pakistan and Afghanistan, but they still exercise a powerful pull. Bush has made a personal mission of bringing democracy to the tortured Middle East, and his policies may one day succeed. But America's sometimes heavy-handed attempt to stomp out the terrorists with military force has reaped a whirlwind of anti-American hatred in the Middle East and turned Iraq into a terrorist training ground.

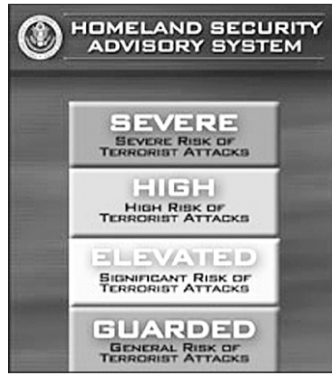
As Americans stood in newly long lines at airports, wondering if they would ever again be able to carry a tube of toothpaste or hair gel in their carryon bags, there was a feeling of helplessness, a return of the persistent low-grade anxiety that had lingered for months and years after 9/11. Bush tried to reassure Americans that they are safer than they were before the attacks. At the same time, his vice president, Dick Cheney, darkly warned that the Connecticut primary victory of anti-war candidate Ned Lamont over Senator Joseph Lieberman would only encourage "al-Qaeda types." (Interviewed by Newsweek, former Homeland Security secretary Tom Ridge bridled at his former colleague's remark: "That may be the way the vice president sees it," he said, "but I don't see it that way, and I don't think most Americans see it that way.")

White House aides insisted that Cheney was not trying to exploit the latest terror plot for political advantage. They claimed that at the time he spoke, he was unaware that arrests were imminent. Even so, these officials were somewhat hard put to explain why the normally press-shy Cheney volunteered to talk to wire reporters and offer his analysis on the national-security implications of a Lamont victory.

Bush got a slight boost from the thwarted terror plot. In the new Newsweek Poll, 55 percent said they approved of the president's handling of terrorism, up from 44 percent in May. But the terrorism issue doesn't seem to be helping Republicans as much as it has in past elections. In August 2002, the voters said they trusted the GOP more than the Democrats to handle terrorism at home and abroad in a whopping 25-point margin (51 percent to 26 percent). Now the GOP is preferred by just five points. Overall, half of Americans think they are safer from terrorism than before 9/11. A majority (63 percent) continue to believe that the Iraq war has not made them safer from the terrorist threat.

The war on terror has been consistently plagued by politics. It was political pressure from Congress (ironically, led by Lieberman) that forced Bush to reverse his initial reluctance and go along with the creation of a Department of Homeland Security that has turned out to be bloated and unwieldy. Secretary Ridge's panicky color-coded alerts and his aides' appeals to stock up on duct tape (to seal windows from chemical attack) became fodder for late-night comics. More seriously, congressional pork-barrel politics made a mockery of spending on homeland security. While cutting funding for obvious targets like Washington and New York, lawmakers have freely spent to defend tiny towns in North Dakota from chem-bio attacks and pay for a defibrillator for a high school in Lake County, Tennessee (The mayor said that it would be good to have one on site for the district basketball tournament.)

To an important degree, however, intelligence services around



the world have managed to rise above local politics. They share the bond of fellow spooks (sometimes greased with cash: intelligence officers, particularly in the developing world, are often on the CIA payroll). The CIA relies heavily on so-called liaison relationships. Jordanian intelligence, for instance, is more likely to penetrate a terror cell than the CIA. American intelligence services still suffer from a dearth of Arabic speakers. At the FBI, surveillance tapes have sat for weeks before a translator can get to them. But the CIA has received secret help from some surprising sources: even the Syrian Mukhabarat has chipped in morsels of useful intelligence from time to time. American intelligence has been able to count on help from the security services of countries, like France and Germany, whose leaders publicly scorn the Bush administration.

The Brits have long prided themselves on divining the mysteries of the Middle East. From imperial days, the Brits have long experience operating in the casbahs and souks. In Pakistan, where the local intelligence service is said to remember and still resist British rule, the American CIA has played the role of go-between.

Thanks to the so-called special relationship, British and US intelligence generally mean to get along and cooperate. This is not to say, however, that the Brits and Americans are one big happy family across the pond. For a time after 9/11, American intelligence officials privately but bitterly criticized British intelligence for taking a lax approach to Islamic instigators stirring up local mosques. The British, in turn, blamed the Americans for not giving timely access to an informant who had information that might have disrupted the July 7 subway bombings of last year.

British intelligence is often frustrated by the tendency of their glibly American allies to play politics and leak to the press. In the summer of 2004, shortly after the Democrats nominated Senator John Kerry at a flag-waving convention, the Bush administration let it be known that the CIA and Pakistani intelligence had uncovered a al-Qaeda summit meeting where, the officials believed, the Jihadists had been plotting against financial targets, including the World Bank, inside the United States. The Brits were forced to hastily and, they complained, prematurely ground up a group of Islamic militants who were plotting to attack targets in the UK. Since then, according to high-ranking intelligence sources who insisted on anonymity for diplomatic reasons, British operatives have been more reluctant to share secrets with their American counterparts.

It is a myth, of course, that the British intelligence services (MI 6, which handles foreign intelligence, and MI 5, which covers the home front) operate with the cool smoothness of James Bond. The Brits have been embarrassed by a series of intelligence bungles. Most recently, police shot a man while busting a house where, the spooks believed, a cyanide bomb was being made. It turned out that a suspect was charged with having child porn on his computer, but nothing relating to terrorism.

Nonetheless, there is no question that British intelligence performed capably in rolling up the plot to bomb the airliners. The Brits had been tracking the suspected plotters for more than a year, according to US and British counter-terrorism officials who declined to be identified discussing a classified investigation. It is not clear just how the Brits got wind of the plot, though there are strong suggestions that some tipsters inside the Muslim community were talking to the cops.

Generally speaking, intelligence services prefer to watch their targets, to allow plots to spin along for as long as possible before closing in to make arrests. Moving too soon can blow the chance to get deeply inside a terror network. While the little fish may fall into the net, the big ones get away. So for many months, British intelligence watched and waited.



A series of events in Britain and Pakistan forced their hand. The alleged plotters apparently began to explore the purchase of airplane tickets, possibly for a dry run. It is standard al-Qaeda practice to carefully rehearse and scope out targets. The 9/11 hijackers are believed to have taken a cross-country test run before the actual attacks. The suspects who were being closely monitored by British intelligence began going on the Internet to check out flights to the United States. "There was a focus on the month of August," said one senior US official. At least three US airlines were targeted: Continental, American and United. All have regular non-stop flights from airports in Britain to the United States.

According to some reports, the suspects had already acquired the chemical ingredients to make liquid explosives. TATP bombs can be created by mixing solvents like nail-polish remover with concentrated peroxide. The potion, sometimes called "Mother of Satan" by Islamic extremists because of its deadly power, can be blended into a bottle to look just like a sports drink. The threat from liquid explosives is hardly new. The Islamicists plotting Operation Bojinka were planning on using them back in 1995, and terrorist bombers routinely employ TATP to make suicide bombs today.

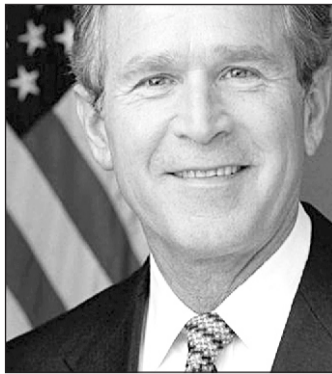
For years, experts have warned that airport security needs to be tightened to detect liquid explosives, but nothing has been done. Security tends to fight the last war to be on the lookout for knives or guns or the box cutters used by the 9/11 hijackers, or to spot the fuses protruding from the soles of Richard Reid's shoes. In what may be a controversial decision, US and British intelligence officials decided not to give early warning to the airlines of a brewing plot to blow up planes with liquid explosives. The officials feared that if airport security suddenly started checking baby bottles and banning toothpaste and hair gel, the alleged plotters would be tipped off that the government was on to them.

Investigators knew they were dealing with a suicide mission. They intercepted a "martyrdom video" of one of the suspects, according to a law-enforcement official who would not go into the details for fear of compromising the investigation. Suicide bombers routinely make their last will and testament to a camera before heading off to rendezvous with their maker.

Alarm bells went off louder when British intelligence discovered that one of the alleged plotters worked in security at Heathrow airport, the major hub outside London, and possessed a badge that would allow him egress into any part of the terminal. (One of the suspects arrested was identified as Amin Tariq, a tall, unshaven young man who, according to neighbors, worked at Heathrow.)

The immediate trigger for the massive bust was the arrest of a key player in Pakistan, a British national named Rashid Rauf. Wanted for questioning in Britain about the murder of his uncle in 2002, Rauf was described by intelligence officials as a ringleader of the plot, though perhaps not the only one. It is not clear just why the Pakistanis picked up Rauf. The British grumbled, as they often do, that the Pakistanis moved too soon. An intelligence report, described on a background basis to Newsweek, identifies Rauf's brother, Tayib, as the leader of the plot in Britain. Tayib, whose family runs a cake and candy business that may, some investigators believe, be a front organization, may have had ties to one of a group of bombers who tried and failed to blow up subways and buses in a "second wave" attack after last July's British subway bombings (the explosives fizzled).

According to a Pakistani official who declined to be identified discussing the investigation, Rauf quickly broke under interrogation. The questioning was probably not gentle; Pakistani security is known for its severe methods. There were reports that as Rauf was arrested, someone connected with Rauf may have tried to warn confederates back in Britain, maybe even order



them to begin the operation. An intelligence official, who would not publicly discuss highly sensitive intelligence intercepts, told Newsweek that a message was picked up from Rauf's cohort warning the other alleged plotters of his arrest and urging them to proceed with the attacks. But in any case, his arrest apparently moved the Brits to swoop in on a number of houses around London and in the British Midlands starting the evening of August 9.

Eager to avoid another clumsy confrontation and shooting, police in London went in unarmed. (Authorities were also investigating whether Matiur Rehman, a militant believed to be close to al-Qaeda in Pakistan, was linked to the plot.)

There are always fears that a conspirator will drop out of sight before the net can be closed. At one point, according to two officials who declined to be identified discussing intelligence matters, one of the suspects was briefly "lost" by MI 5. The alarm passed; the Brits found the man. But uneasiness over the possibility of second-wave attacks lingered on and may for weeks or months. Days after the arrests, there were still chaotic scenes of travelers waiting in endless security lines to have their toiletries checked or sniffed by dogs. Passengers will have to learn to check their contactless cases, hair gels and face creams, and to not carry water bottles or other drinks; in Britain, they will have to live without their laptops and iPods on the crowded (and no doubt tenser) flights of the future.

US intelligence seems to have played only a minor role in the takedown of the plot. There was a surge in eavesdropping requests to the secret intelligence court that approves wiretaps, according to a source who, like all intelligence officials, wished to remain anonymous discussing sensitive matters. The FBI and DHS kept looking for a link to the United States but found none, according to a senior law-enforcement official. Intelligence officials hinted that the Bush administration's secret warrant less surveillance operation was brought into play "we used all the tools in the toolbox," said one. It may be that the NSA, the super-secret electronic spy agency, listened in on calls between Pakistan and Britain that were routed through the switching stations of American phone companies.

It seems that no one got in the way or held back information, which passes as progress in the clannish, suspicious world of intelligence. "This shows how we're better equipped to fight the enemy now," Fran Fragos Townsend, the White House homeland-security adviser, told Newsweek. "We're seeing levels of cooperation between the FBI, CIA and the NSA we didn't see before. Nobody was trying to hide the ball." Outside experts and former officials remain skeptical.

They say that although the agencies have tried harder to share secrets after 9/11, well-intentioned intelligence reform has just created new layers of bureaucracy. It is unclear whether the new National Counter-terrorism Center is working to coordinate between the various agencies. The FBI and CIA and military intelligence still keep secrets to themselves.

There has been some improvement in the age-old rivalry between the CIA and FBI. But old ways die hard. From time to time the FBI wants to "run" an informant overseas. The CIA has been eager to protect its own turf with a little bit of devious disinformation. CIA officials derided the FBI's informant as unreliable, untrustworthy, a bad risk not worth the effort. It turned out that CIA officials were running the informant themselves.

Western intelligence has improved since 9/11. The question is whether the enemy has learned faster. Killing or capturing top al-Qaeda operatives like Khalid Shaikh Mohammed hasn't stopped al-Qaeda from reinventing itself. "I find it very troubling that it looks like the old al-Qaeda," said Richard Clarke, the former counter-terror chief who served under President Bill Clinton, and, briefly, under



President Bush. "This is not good news. It means that al-Qaeda is still around." The group seems to be able to replicate and multiply. "This is whack-a-mole," said Clarke. "It's almost to the point where for every one we kill and capture, they grow three."

British and American intelligence officials seem unsure about the degree to which the New al-Qaeda is working for, or tied to, the Old al-Qaeda. Bin Laden's number two, al-Zawahiri, still sends videotapes from his hideout, somewhere in the no man's land of northwest Pakistan, exhorting and instructing. But does he also pass operational orders, perhaps via courier? (al-Qaeda long ago stopped using cell phones that could be traced.) Intelligence officials were especially curious about the apparent leader of the airplane bomb plot, Rashid Rauf, who kept changing his phone and credit cards and dipping into Internet cafes as he was trailed by Pakistani security in recent weeks.

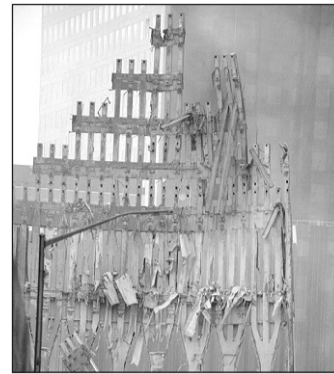
The good news for Western intelligence is that an expanding and diversifying al-Qaeda may be easier for a spy to penetrate than the more tribal, insular al-Qaeda hierarchy of the late '90s. After all, whether or not the Brits had a mole inside the airline bomb plot, they were able to bug and track the plotters. There is some evidence as well that the new recruits lack the élan and skill of, say, the 9/11 hijackers. The Jihadists who tried to hit the London subways two weeks after the 7/7 bombers last summer were unable to build bombs that detonated.

Of course, Iraq continues to be not only a recruiting ground but also a training base for future terrorists. The young Jihadists are learning how to use weapons, make bombs and, just as important, not fear the enemy. The "shock and awe" of the American invasion has long since worn off. A US intelligence official in Baghdad, who talked to Newsweek anonymously because he is barred from speaking to the press on sensitive matters, said: "When we first rolled in here, we weren't even human, they were (so) scared of us. But now they realize there's nothing special about (US forces) -- they're just human." Overnight, said this official, "we tripled the size of al-Qaeda" while radicalizing the Muslim world. "Let's say that 90 percent of world sympathy was with us back then (9/11). When we crossed the border, there was another great pause, then a transfer of sympathy, and those that were on the fence jumped over. The entire Islamic world took a step to the right." This official has reluctantly concluded that the United States has to quicken the transfer of power to the Iraqis and leave the country, a move he said would lead to a massive spike in violence.

That would be a disaster, argued Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad in an interview with Newsweek at his residence, a marble Saddam-era mansion inside the Green Zone. "If we were to get out, what would you have? Certainly, it's very plausible that (al-Qaeda) could take over part of Iraq." He warns that Iraq could become like Afghanistan pre-9/11. "Now that we're here," said the ambassador, "losing Iraq would put the region and the world at greater risk from al-Qaeda."

Bush has doggedly argued that it is better to fight the terrorists in Iraq than to fight them on the streets of New York. It increasingly appears that terrorists have spilled into the streets of Britain as well. For years, European and American intelligence services bleakly joked about "Londonistan," the London neighborhoods where radical imams like the notorious hook-handed Abu Hamza al-Masri spewed hatred and harbored suspected terrorists.

Lately, Scotland Yard has cracked down. But for a long time, American intelligence officials say, their British cousins were in denial about the enemy within. "We couldn't convince MI 5 to work on the radical-fundamentalist problem in the UK," said a former senior intelligence official who did not want to publicly criticize an ally. "They wouldn't even look at it." The official recalled the frustration of former FBI counterterror official John O'Neill,



who was one of the first American officials to really focus on the threat of al-Qaeda (and who tragically died in the World Trade Center attacks after he had left government for a private-sector job). "Once, I was over there (with O'Neill), and O'Neill turns to an MI 5 guy and says, 'If you don't take this seriously, the queen is going to end up living in Ireland,'" the official said.

American officials generally feel less threatened by Islamic extremists inside the United States. Europe has legions of young Muslim men whose parents arrived from the Middle East or South Asia as guest workers and never really assimilate into local society. They earn less than the average European and often feel a sense of estrangement and alienation, whipped up by radical imams in local mosques who exhortate the crusaders and dream of a new caliphate. American Muslims, by contrast, are better integrated and more middle-class; indeed, they earn more than the average American, according to studies by Muslim groups.

But it would be a mistake to complacently assume that radical Islam will not find a few recruits among American Muslims. Jessica Stern, a lecturer on terrorism at Harvard, warns of the creation of a "Muslim Timothy McVeigh." The Oklahoma City bomber went from alienated teen-ager to lethal terrorist after serving in the Army and seeing action in the first Gulf war. Young Muslim men are joining the American Army and being sent to fight in Iraq, where they see "horrible things," said Stern. Islamic citizens killed in fire fights or rarely but occasionally abused by American soldiers. These soldiers get weapons training and a dose of military discipline, and, like soldiers of all stripes, they sometimes return home traumatized. John Muhammad, an African-American who converted to Islam and later became the Washington, DC, sniper, fits this description. "I'd be surprised if it doesn't happen again," said Stern.

The greatest fear of American intelligence officials is that radical Jihadists will get a nuclear weapon and smuggle it into an American port. There is no available technology that can guarantee security against such an attack. In 2002, when the container ship Palermo Senator docked in Newark, New Jersey, detectors picked up what seemed to be traces of nuclear material. The container turned out to hold some ceramic pots. "Problem is," said Pat D'Amuro, who was in charge of counterterrorism at the FBI and is now CEO of Giuliani Security and Safety, "by the time the ship docks, it's too late. You need to be able to detect the threat before it leaves the port of origin."

The Jihadists don't need a nuke to pull off a 9/11-type horror show. A suicide bomber normally carries a few pounds of explosive to murder the people around him. But on an airplane, a few ounces could kill hundreds. Richard Reid was carrying a mere 60 grams of explosive material in the heel of his shoe. Had he been able to light a match and hold it steady, he would have brought down a jumbo jet with more than 300 passengers. Jimmie Oxley, a professor of chemistry and an explosives expert at the University of Rhode Island, explained what happens when a bomb fashioned from a juice bottle full of liquid explosives rips through the aluminum skin of an airliner. It wouldn't be all that dramatic, at first. "I'm not sure there would be much of a fireball," she told Newsweek. "The visual effect would not be large. You'd get a depressurizing of the cabin, but I don't think people would initially get sucked out like you see in the movies."

Instead, the small hole would gradually grow larger, tearing at the structure of the plane, until the airframe itself became unstable and started to break apart. The whole process would begin slowly, then catastrophically accelerate. You wouldn't want to be there.