

TESTIMONY OF J. COFER BLACK
BEFORE THE
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES

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Introduction

Good afternoon. My name is Cofer Black. From 1999 until 2002 I was the Director of the DCI's Counterterrorist Center. We call my old unit "CTC". It is in that capacity that I am here to testify today. I promise to be brief in my opening remarks so we can get to your questions.

I am here today to tell you and the American public what we did, what we tried to do, and where we fell short in order to help this Commission and the Nation understand what happened and encourage the kind of discussion that will help us avoid a similar tragedy in the future.

- And believe me our enemies are still out there plotting to attack us and our allies in the war on terrorism. These attacks could take the form of spectaculars like 9/11 or could be smaller, but still deadly operations that are easier to mount, like what happened in Madrid.

I am not here to testify as part of a political process or to create another political firestorm over some new perceived allegation of negligence, inattention, or error by someone else.

- Too often in this election year, the effort you are engaged in has revolved around what people in this country perceive as partisan issues. I do not want to engage in an exercise that reflects that kind of unproductive exchange.

Frankly, what mattered to me and the men and women I led within the Counterterrorist Center did not depend on the flavor of the Administration, but rather was driven by what we thought needed to get done in our attempt to protect American citizens, property, and interests.

Overall Strategy

In order to understand the threats that emerged during 2001 and our response to those threats I want to briefly provide some context. A lot of this activity is highly classified so I will provide an overview.

I want to begin by describing our overall strategy. We have been systematically attempting to counter the terrorist threat since William Casey established CTC in 1986. Over the following 15 years we saw the nature of that threat evolve. Our approach to dealing with the threat also had to evolve.

By the time I arrived in the summer of 1999, CTC was ready to take the next step in its evolution—to embark on a new, more offensive strategy to deal with the terrorist problem. Our plan had a number of elements:

- First, because terrorism is a global problem, we needed to build a global coalition to work with us to fight the threat. We set out to engage with every liaison service worldwide that was willing to work with us. In some cases, we needed to build up the capabilities of those services, and we did.
- Second, we worked to engage actively with those services that have a regional or semi-global capability.
- Most importantly, we worked to develop our own operations to advance US CT objectives by penetrating terrorist safehavens and collecting intelligence that would both inform policy and enable our own operations.

Although this was our global strategy, the single issue that overwhelmingly occupied our attention was UBL and al-Qa'ida. The “Plan” we developed to deal with al-Qa'ida involved:

1. Disrupting UBL operations. This depended heavily on developing sources of both human and technical intelligence that could give us insights into his plans at the tactical level. This is easy to say, but hard to accomplish.
2. Channeling and capturing UBL. This required us to know where UBL was, to develop capture teams, and to find a way to have these two streams of activities intersect at a specific time. All from a distance.
3. Psychological operations. Psychological operations are always hard to conduct and hard to measure. But we were trying to drive UBL to areas that might be easier for us to operate in, at the same time that we disrupted his operations. One of our goals was to convince the Taliban that UBL was a liability.
4. UBL's lieutenants. Al-Qa'ida is not a one-person show. At the same time we were pursuing UBL, we were also working to develop intelligence on his chief lieutenants in order to conduct operations against them.
5. Technical operations. In order to improve our intelligence collection we were working with a variety of partners outside of CTC to develop innovative approaches to dealing with a denied area like Afghanistan.

We continued to refine our approach throughout 2000 and into 2001. Pushing forward with those initiatives that seemed to have promise. But this was a hard and a long-term effort. There were no quick fixes short of invading Afghanistan, and that was determined not to be an option prior to 9/11.

- Let me also set the record straight on the Predator. We were interested in a UAV program to improve our operations in Afghanistan as far back as 1999. While I had to live within my budget, CTC was interested in and pushed to develop Predator capabilities. I was convinced that we needed these capabilities and would be able to put them to good use. That said, wanting something does not translate into having it ready to deploy. There were very serious debates over how to proceed, and I object to any notion that CTC—that I—either did not want to develop this capability or that we tried to kill it.

Threat & Response in 2001

2001 started out with many distinct terrorist threads that required our attention. This is also a highly classified area. I will attempt to summarize. CTC was:

- Continuing effort to work with the FBI on the USS Cole attack.
- Working to follow through on a major, multi-country takedown of terrorist cells in SE Asia.
- Responding to a hostage situation in Ecuador.
- Dealing with another hostage crises in the Philippines.

Overshadowing all this was the rising volume of threat reporting. By the summer of 2001 we were seeing:

- An increasing amount of so-called “chatter” alluding to a massive terrorist strike. We were receiving this intelligence not only from our own sources, but also from liaison.
- Human intelligence was providing the same kind of insights.
- Disruption efforts and detentions were also corroborating our concerns about a coming attack.
- None of this, unfortunately, specified method, time, or place. Where we had clues, it looked like planning was underway for an attack in the Middle East or Europe.

At the same time, we were working on two tracks:

- To go after al-Qa’ida, and
- To disrupt the threatened terrorist attacks.

In going after the organization, we were doing several things simultaneously:

- First, we had to penetrate the threat—to do this we needed to penetrate both the al-Qa’ida safehaven in Afghanistan and the organization itself to collect better human and technical intelligence on its activities and to understand it well enough to conduct effective operations against it.
- Second, we had to look for opportunities to take down al-Qa’ida cells—with the intelligence we collected we worked to create plans to disrupt or degrade al-Qa’ida. Make no mistake, this was a difficult mission with a low probability for success in the near term.
- Finally, we were developing new capabilities—to enable us to penetrate and take down the organization. These ranged from the Predator to developing new approaches for going after the Afghan safehaven by working with groups within the country and with any cooperative service in neighboring countries. A number of these initiatives were included in the so-called December 2000 “Blue Sky” memo and in follow-on discussions within the CSG process that have been previously discussed by others and in your Staff Statements.

In order to disrupt, we approached almost two-dozen cooperative services to go after UBL-related targets worldwide. At best we were hoping to delay any attack to buy ourselves more time to find out what was planned. We were looking for every opportunity to go on the offensive against al-Qa’ida.

Where we did not have enough information to act, we warned. We produced CIA and Community analyses that examined the heightened threat situation. Your staff statement this morning ran through titles of a number of these documents.

- More broadly, I also want to emphasize that CTC and the Intelligence Community produced significant strategic analysis that examined the growing threat from international jihadist networks and al-Qa’ida. I believe that the record shows that the USG understood the nature of the threat. This understanding was the result of a range of products we produced or contributed to, including:
 - Personal interaction via participation in the CSG.
 - Periodic, stand-back assessments on UBL and Sunni extremist-related topics.
 - Contributing to the annual “Global Patterns of Terrorism”.
 - And, outside the Executive branch, activities such as the DCI’s Worldwide Threat Briefings support for the Bremer Commission on Terrorism, and briefings for the HPSCI terrorism subcommittee.

But ultimately, we were not able to stop what happened on 9/11 despite our actions and warnings.

Looking Ahead

I promised to be brief, so I will close with one final thought. What I have been largely talking about is what CIA can and has done. But ultimately what we at the Agency do is deal with the symptoms of terrorism at a tactical level. As long as there are people who are not happy with their lot in life, as long as the United States is perceived to somehow be the cause of this unhappiness, there will be terrorism. No matter how many plots we uncover and disrupt, no matter how many terrorist organizations we degrade or destroy, another individual or group will rise to take their place. We need to remind the American public of this reality. Those like the families who have lived thru the horrors of 9/11 will never forget. But I fear sometimes the rest of the country is losing sight of the long, hard way ahead.

At the more strategic level, the only way to address terrorism is to deal with the issues that create terrorism. To resolve them where possible, and where that is not possible to ensure that there is an alternative to violence. And that is not something that CTC or CIA can do. That is a mission for the broader United States government.