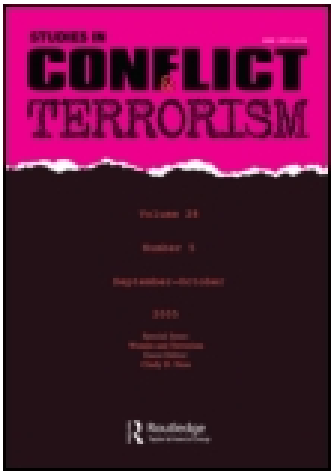


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# The Plots that Failed: Intelligence Lessons Learned from Unsuccessful Terrorist Attacks Against the United States

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# The Plots that Failed: Intelligence Lessons Learned from Unsuccessful Terrorist Attacks Against the United States

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*While much of the focus of terrorism research is on successful terrorist attacks, the most significant lessons for terrorism prevention may come from examination of terrorist plots and attacks that do not succeed. This article analyzes 176 terrorist plots against American targets that have been thwarted or otherwise failed during the past 25 years. It considers what kinds of intelligence and security measures are most useful in counterterrorism, and argues that the conventional wisdom about why intelligence fails—because analysts and agencies are unable to "connect the dots"—is wrong. Most plots, especially domestic terrorist plots, are not foiled through imaginative analysis, but through conventional law enforcement efforts and aggressive domestic intelligence collection that reveal to authorities just what the plotters are up to.*

Much of the research on terrorism focuses, not surprisingly, on the origins, tactics, and outcomes of successful terrorist attacks. When terrorists succeed in killing people and causing destruction, especially on a major scale, people pay attention: authorities investigate, blue ribbon commissions are often established, and scholars and policy analysts attempt to draw lessons from the attack. All of this is necessary and useful. But meanwhile, other terrorist attacks are being planned and attempted, and while a few of these—such as the Christmas Day 2009 airline bombing attempt—become widely known, most receive considerably less public attention. These are *unsuccessful* terrorist attacks, the plots that failed.

This article analyzes a new data set of 176 terrorist plots against American targets that have been thwarted or that have otherwise failed during the past 25 years. To the author's knowledge this is the most extensive such data base that has been developed. Government


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officials have occasionally in the past produced lists of thwarted attacks,[1] and scholars and terrorism analysts have published a few, mostly brief compilations and analyses of foiled plots.[2] Several useful works have examined the questions of why some terrorist attacks succeed while others fail, and why some terrorists quit or turn away from violence.[3] But no major study of the phenomenon of failed attacks appears to have been published, and no attempt has been made—at least in the unclassified literature—to develop a comprehensive listing of, or analyze the lessons learned from, unsuccessful attacks and plots.[4]

This article asks the questions, why do terrorist plots fail? And in particular, what kinds of intelligence and security efforts are most useful in preventing them? The lessons from these disrupted plots suggest that much of the debate over the use of intelligence to combat terrorism is misguided. The conventional wisdom holds that in most cases the information needed to prevent an attack is already available, and that the problem is not a lack of intelligence collection, but a lack of effective analysis that prevents authorities from "connecting the dots." This was the view following the 9/11 attacks, and it was a finding of the White House review of the Christmas Day bombing attempt.[5]

But the history of failed attacks shows that the conventional wisdom is wrong. Most plots are disrupted not when a highly skilled analyst detects subtle clues that link otherwise insignificant bits of data, but when intelligence and law enforcement agencies obtain very precise information about specific plots being planned by specific groups. And this precise intelligence is most often developed by ground-level, domestic intelligence and security efforts, rather than by the sorts of exotic espionage and foreign intelligence efforts that tend to dominate discussions of intelligence and terrorism.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. The first section considers the difficulties involved in studying failed terrorist plots and the question of whether or not such work can be useful or should even be undertaken. The second section reviews the major sources of data on failed plots and describes this article's data set and its limitations. The third examines what these plots can tell us about why terrorist plots fail, and what types of intelligence appear to be most useful in thwarting attacks. Fourth is a review of three case studies of foiled plots, chosen because they illustrate how various types of information and intelligence have been used in American counterterrorism since 9/11. The article concludes with observations about what this history of failed plots suggests about the use of intelligence in preventing future attacks.



## The Difficulty in Studying Failed Attacks

Experts on terrorism and intelligence generally agree that it is difficult to study cases of failed terrorist attacks—or to look at it another way, that it is difficult to study intelligence success against terrorism. As terrorism expert Brian Jenkins puts it, "We have thwarted a number of terrorist attacks; exactly how many is hard to say. It is difficult counting events that don't occur."[6] Former CIA official Paul Pillar argues that what has been publicly revealed about intelligence successes "only scratches the surface," but he believes the truth is unlikely to become known: "Unfortunately, the intelligence officer's curse of being unable to reveal most of his successes while his failures become public applies in spades to counterterrorism, where the failures are dramatic and traumatic and most of the operations that underlie the successes are especially perishable were they to become known."[7]

Senior intelligence community leaders make the same point. For example, Michael Hayden, then the director of the National Security Agency and later CIA director, testified to the Congressional Joint Inquiry into 9/11 that: "While our successes are generally invisible to the American people, *everyone* knows when an adversary succeeds. NSA *has had* many successes, but these are even *more* difficult to discuss in open session."[8]

There are several reasons why it might *not* be productive or useful to study these failed terrorist attacks. One reason often cited by intelligence and security officials is that information about how plots are foiled could prove useful to future attackers. Rohan Gunaratna acknowledges this argument in writing, "Security and intelligence services and law enforcement agencies have thwarted over 100 low- and high-scale terrorist incidents since 9/11, the details of which are usually protected to secure convictions and protect intelligence sources."[9]

Another argument against focusing attention on failed plots and attacks is that such plots may provide an inaccurate measure of the threat, because terrorists tend to think about and "plan" more operations than they can ever hope to carry out. Brian Jenkins writes, "When not planning, they talk about operations—partly thinking about opportunities, partly fantasizing. Arrests and interrogations often reveal far more plots than officials knew about; knowing about them might have caused even greater alarm."[10] This tendency of terrorists to think big can be seen in the testimony of 9/11 planner Khalid Shaikh Mohammed ("KSM") before a combatant status review tribunal at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in which he claimed to have played a part in at least 30 plots and plans, including assassination plots against former U.S. presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton as well as Pope John Paul II.[11]

Finally, it is possible that terrorists could use deception to suggest more plots than really exist in order to flood intelligence and law enforcement agencies with data. According to *The Economist*, "some security officials suspect Al Qaeda may be deliberately flooding Britain with terrorist plots in hope of overwhelming its defences."[12] Compiling and analyzing such deceptive reports could, therefore, play into the terrorists' hands.

So why, if information on prevented terrorist attacks is difficult to obtain and could actually harm counterterrorist efforts, should anyone attempt to study such events? One reason is that examination of these events may have more to tell us about effective counterterrorism than does the more typical study of successful terrorist actions. Put another way: while standard accounts of successful terrorist attacks can help us understand where intelligence and security procedures went wrong, the study of failed plots might be able to tell us what works.

Another reason for the study of failed plots is that even though not very much is known about them, such events are already a part of the national discourse. Government officials and agencies frequently cite failed plots as evidence that the terrorist threat is real and counterterrorism policies are effective. For example, in his State of the Union address in January 2007, President Bush described several prevented attacks, and said that "Our success in this war is often measured by the things that did not happen."[13] More recently the acting director of National Intelligence, David Gompert, responding to a highly publicized series of articles in the *Washington Post*, issued a statement that said "the men and women of the Intelligence Community have improved our operations, thwarted attacks, and are achieving untold successes every day."[14]

The most notable effort by U.S. officials to claim credit for failed plots came in October 2005, when the White House released a list of ten "serious al-Qaida terrorist plots" that had been disrupted since 11 September 2001, and five additional efforts by Al Qaeda to case targets in the United States or infiltrate operatives into the country.[15] This list included some plots that are well known, such as the 2004 "British bomb plot" and the arrest in 2003 of a man who had wanted to destroy the Brooklyn Bridge. But still today, little is known about several other episodes described by the White House, such as a 2003 plot to attack a tourist site "outside the United States" and a plot to use commercial airplanes against targets on the East Coast in 2003.[16]

Although little work has been done to collect and analyze data on how and why terrorist plots become thwarted, several researchers and organizations have studied what happens *after* plots are foiled and arrests are made, as defendants are put on trial. Organizations that study federal terrorism prosecutions have argued that the record suggests the government's claims of having foiled numerous terrorist plots are exaggerated. The Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse at Syracuse University, for example, examined cases against individuals identified as international terrorists during the five years following the 9/11 attacks. Their data showed that only about one in five of these cases resulted in convictions, and that the majority of those convicted received no jail time at all, indicating that public perceptions of the terrorism threat may be inaccurate or exaggerated.[17] A study by *The Washington Post* in 2005 found that only 39 people had been convicted of crimes related to terrorism or national security, considerably fewer than government officials had suggested in speeches and public statements.[18] And a New York University Center on Law and Security report in 2006 found that "the vast majority of cases" that are initially announced by the government as terrorism cases turn out to have no link to terrorism once they go to court.[19]



## What is Known About Failed Attacks?

Although some chronologies of terrorism incidents do include failed attacks,[20] several of the most readily available public databases on terrorism exclude information on failed or otherwise unsuccessful terrorist attacks. The website of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) Worldwide Incidents Tracking System, for example, states that "Terrorists must have initiated and executed the attack for it to be included in the database; failed or foiled attacks, as well as hoaxes, are not included in the database."[21] The Global Terrorism Database (GTD), maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland, does include failed attacks, but not plots that were foiled before the attack was actually attempted.[22] The Institute for the Study of Violent Groups at the University of New Haven does include unsuccessful attacks in their database, but they began collecting data in 2002 and do not offer comprehensive coverage of terrorist actions before that time.[23]

Terrorism analysts and intelligence scholars have noted that this gap in research is a problem. Joshua Sinai writes that although aborted and thwarted operations may be the majority of cases, "virtually all incident chronology databases focus only on successful incidents, but not on the spectrum of operations carried out by groups that fall short of the 'success' threshold."[24] Berto Jongman notes that a useful subject for future research might be the development of a dataset of prevented attacks, while Stephen Marrin comments that "while such a study of successes might be promising, it would also be very difficult to accomplish from outside the intelligence community."[25]

This study's data set is intended to include all unsuccessful terrorist plots or attacks against U.S. persons or targets during the past 25 years. It was developed by the author, and includes plots both within the United States and abroad, except that because of the difficulty of collection and because the circumstances are likely to be very different, attacks in Iraq or Afghanistan are excluded. It is based on only unclassified, openly available information, primarily press reporting, government statements and reports, and court records.

This data set includes 176 attacks or plots against Americans that have been prevented or that were otherwise unsuccessful, dating back to 1987 and including data through October 2010.[26] The list is shown in the Appendix. As shown in Figure 1, the number of attacks and plots was at its highest from the years 2001 through 2004, with the peak in 2003 with 25 unsuccessful plots. Of the 176 total plots, 73 involved plots or attacks that occurred or

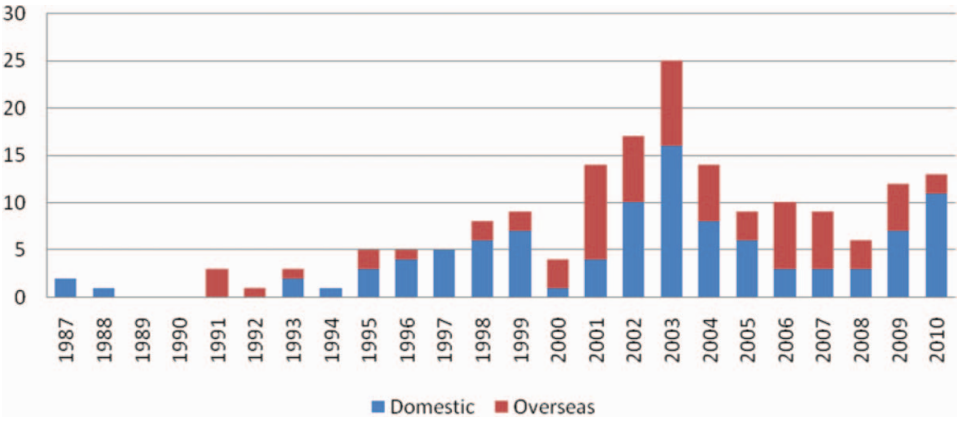


**Figure 1.** Unsuccessful plots and attacks against Americans, 1987–October 2010 ($N = 176$) (Color figure available online).



were primarily planned outside the United States (labeled "overseas" in Figure 1), while 103 plots were primarily planned or targeted within the United States (labeled "domestic"). Although a majority of these plots (121) took place since the 9/11 attacks, these data show that a significant number of unsuccessful plots (55) took place before 11 September 2001.

Although 126 of these plots appear to have been inspired by radical Islamism (72 percent), 42 were attributed to domestic rightwing and antigovernment extremism (24 percent).[27] Twenty-nine plots targeted U.S. embassies, consulates, or other diplomatic facilities abroad, while American military bases, facilities, or personnel—both overseas and within the United States—were targeted in 35 plots.

Because of the limitations of the information available, this data set cannot be considered comprehensive. There are undoubtedly more foiled plots about which nothing is publicly known. Even in cases for which a relatively large documentary record is available—such as those that have gone to trial—there may be little information available on the specific information used by intelligence and law enforcement authorities to prevent the attack or foil the plot. But a central finding of this study is that in most cases—and especially with domestic plots and attacks—there is enough evidence available of why the plots failed to derive at least initial conclusions about what methods and techniques appear to be successful in terrorism prevention.

### *Successful or Unsuccessful?*

Determining whether a given terrorist event should be considered a success or failure is more difficult than it might seem. Even some attacks that result in significant damage or multiple deaths (such as the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993) might be considered as a failure, if seen from the point of view of the attacker's presumed intent to inflict even greater damage. On the other hand, an attack that failed to kill anyone or do significant damage might nonetheless be logically coded as a success if it resulted in significant publicity for the attacker.

An attack is coded here as unsuccessful if it either: (a) was not carried out for whatever reason; or (b) was carried out but failed to kill anyone being targeted or to cause significant destruction. This coding method has the virtue of simplicity, although there is still ample

room for debate over how individual cases should be coded. For example, the National Counterterrorism Center codes the Christmas Day 2009 airline bombing attempt as an attack, rather than as a near miss or a failed attack, because the attacker's improvised explosive device did detonate (although it failed to kill anyone).[28] It is coded here as a failed attack, because it did not kill anyone or cause significant damage.[29] This approach also does not allow for nuance—such as labeling an attack a partial success—and it does not allow for consideration of other factors such as whether an attack might in the long run prove to be beneficial or harmful to the cause of the attackers.[30]

Not included are incidents in which individuals or groups have been charged with providing support for terrorist organizations, unless there is evidence of directly aiding, facilitating, or planning violence or attacks.[31] Also excluded are incidents in which non-terrorist- related violence was prevented, such as thwarted episodes of workplace violence or prevented school shootings. In addition, several prominent terrorist plots have turned out to be either hoaxes or to have been unfounded, and these are not included.[32]

One limitation to this study should be noted. Because it only examines cases of unsuccessful plots and attacks, it is guilty of selecting cases on the dependent variable. By limiting the study to failed attacks, it is impossible to know whether the factors found to be involved—such as tips from the public and other forms of domestic human intelligence—are not also found in cases of successful attacks. It is certainly possible that police informants or undercover FBI agents (for example) have been involved in investigating terrorist cells that, nonetheless, were able to carry out successful attacks. This problem is difficult to overcome, because few of these factors are tracked in standard terrorism data bases, but future research comparing successful and unsuccessful plots could be useful here.



## Why Do Terrorist Plots and Attacks Fail?

Understanding why these plots failed involves unpacking the data at two different levels. The first level separates the cases into four major categories: (1) those that reached the stage of an actual attempt, but failed in the execution; (2) those called off by the terrorist(s) themselves at some point during the planning; (3) those thwarted as a result of forces external to the terrorists, such as action by law enforcement or intelligence officials; and (4) those cases about which insufficient information is available to determine the cause of failure, or where the reasons for failure are disputed by the sources available. These categories are shown in Figure 2.

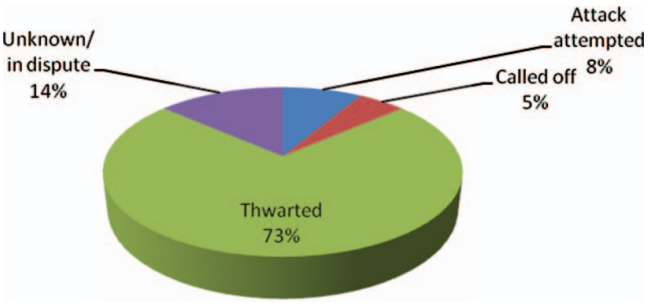


**Figure 2.** Reason for failure of plots against Americans, 1987–2010, all cases (N = 176) (Color figure available online).

Although failed plots that actually reach the stage of attempted execution are relatively rare, several of the most well-known recent failed plots—the Christmas Day 2009 airline bombing attempt, the attempted car bombing in Times Square, and the October 2010 explosive packages plot—fall into this category. Only 15 of the 176 cases reached this stage. Most of these took place overseas and involved attempted attacks on U.S. embassies, consulates, and military facilities. A prominent example was the failed attempt in 2000 to attack the U.S. Navy ship *The Sullivans* in Yemen prior to the successful attack on the U.S.S. *Cole*.[33]

Another relatively rare category—at least, it is rare that anyone knows about them—is that of plots that are called off by the plotters themselves. The nine cases in this category include Saajid Badat, who had planned to carry out a second shoe bombing at the same time as Richard Reid, only to back out and later be arrested in Britain,[34] and Al Qaeda operative Iyman Faris who considered and then rejected the possibility of destroying the Brooklyn Bridge.[35]

It may be unsurprising that in 24 of these cases of failed plots, there is not enough information available in open sources—or in some cases those sources disagree significantly with each other—to assign a specific reason for the failure. The problem of "unknowns" is especially significant in the case of overseas plots; 16 of the 73 overseas plots are coded unknown. For domestic plots this problem is less acute, as only 8 of 103 domestic plots have been coded as unknown.

The second level of analysis of these failed plots focuses on category 3, the plots and attacks foiled as a result of actions by law enforcement, security, and intelligence officials. For the purposes of this article, this is the most important and interesting sub-set of the cases, as these are the plots that were foiled by actions external to the plotters, before they were able to get into place to carry out an attempted attack. Of the total set of 176 plots, 128 fall into this category. The rest of this section "unpacks" this category in an effort to determine what kinds of intelligence or other means appear to be most successful in foiling plots. This level also separates domestic plots, about which more information is generally available, from overseas plots, where the universe of cases about which there is reliable information is considerably smaller.

The results of this level of analysis of the 128 externally thwarted plots are summarized in Figure 3 (which covers the 89 domestic cases in this category) and Figure 4 (the 39 overseas cases). For the domestic cases, seven factors or reasons have been identified to help explain why the plots were thwarted: Human intelligence, detainee interrogation, chance encounters with police, other law enforcement action, signals intelligence, intelligence from overseas, and public threats and announcements by the terrorists themselves. For overseas cases the same categories are used, with the exception that "public threats" is not used, as no overseas cases in the database appear to have been foiled for this reason. Of note, these categories are not exclusive; that is, two or more factors or categories were involved in preventing some plots. The next paragraphs discuss how these categories were coded, and offer examples to illustrate how these factors have worked to prevent attacks from taking place.

Not all plots are foiled as a result of intelligence gathering or deliberate investigation by police and security officials. Some plots fail when the plotters happen to encounter alert law enforcement or other security officials through routine activity such as traffic stops. Nine cases were foiled at least in part through what have been coded here as a "chance encounter." Examples include the December 1999 arrest of Ahmed Ressam, the would-be "Millennium bomber," when a Customs agent became suspicious as he was attempting to cross into the United States at Port Angeles, Washington,[36] and the 1988

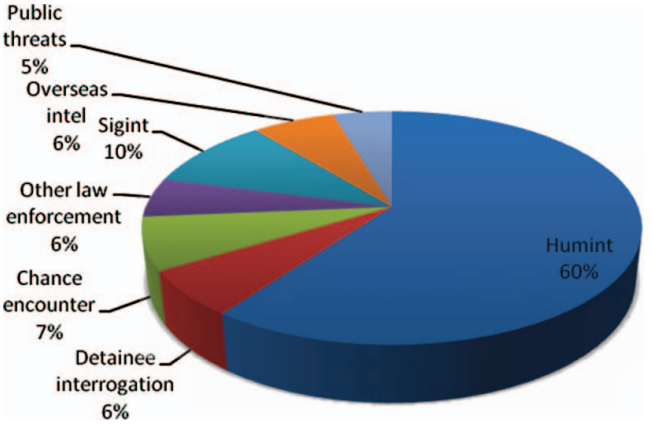


**Figure 3.** Reasons plots failed, externally thwarted domestic cases (N = 89) (Color figure available online).



arrest of a Japanese Red Army terrorist after a New Jersey state trooper noticed him acting suspiciously at a New Jersey Turnpike rest stop.[37] This is a small category, but it appears to be more significant domestically than overseas, as eight domestic plots and only one overseas plot were thwarted this way.

Other cases have been thwarted as a result of other types of police or law enforcement activity. A frequently cited example is the "Bojinka" plot to blow up a dozen commercial airliners over the Pacific, which was uncovered in 1995 when the plotters started a fire in their Manila apartment that drew the attention of Philippine authorities.[38] A domestic U.S. example is that of a Los Angeles–area plot uncovered in 2005 after a gas station robbery led police to the suspects.[39] Six domestic and two overseas plots were foiled at least in part this way.

Five domestic plots were disrupted after the would-be terrorists announced their plans or in some other way made public threats. This appears to be a strictly domestic phenomenon—no overseas cases have been noted—and it is notable that four of the five cases involve rightwing (or otherwise non-Islamist) extremists. An example is James Kenneth Gluck, who was arrested in Florida in 1999 after sending a letter to judges in

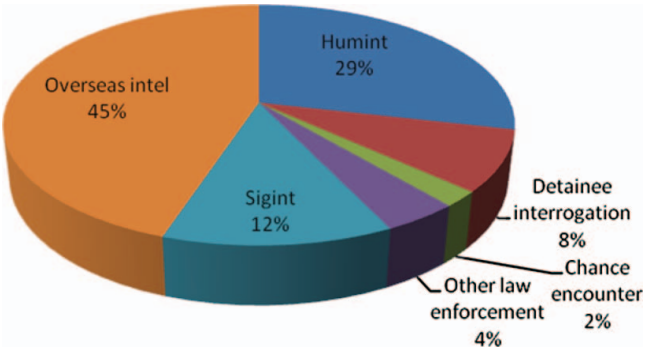


**Figure 4.** Reason plots failed, externally thwarted overseas cases (N = 39) (Color figure available online).

Colorado threatening to "wage biological warfare." When police searched his home they found materials needed to make ricin.[40]

A large number of plots have been prevented as a result of intelligence or security operations overseas. Information on this category is particularly difficult to obtain, but cases have been coded as "overseas intelligence" if they have reportedly involved U.S. intelligence operations abroad, intelligence from allies, or security and military operations carried out overseas. Of the 39 thwarted overseas plots, this was a factor in 22 cases. An example is the announcement by Tunisian authorities in January 2007 that they had killed or captured a number of Islamic extremists believed plotting to attack the American and British embassies in Tunis.[41] Seven of the 89 domestic foiled plots appear to have involved overseas intelligence.

Signals intelligence, or "SIGINT"—including wiretapping, Internet monitoring, and other forms of communications interception—is a mainstay of the U.S. intelligence system, but publicly available information, at least, suggests it may not be as useful as other methods in preventing terrorist attacks. Cases have been coded as SIGINT if they were foiled as a result of either telephone interception (wiretapping), or Internet and e-mail monitoring, or both. An example of a plotter detected through online activity is Hosam Majer Husein Smadi, who is charged with attempting to bomb a Dallas skyscraper. He came to the FBI's attention when he was discovered espousing terrorist attacks online.[42] Monitoring of Internet chat room discussions was also reportedly involved in breaking up a plot in 2006 based in Beirut, Lebanon, that aimed at blowing up tunnels connecting Manhattan and New Jersey.[43] Intercepts of e-mails and telephone calls have reportedly helped foil other plots, such as one in Germany in 2007 targeting Ramstein Air Base.[44] But overall, only 17 attacks and plots (eleven domestic and six overseas) appear to have been foiled as a result of some form of SIGINT.

Much of the debate over the use of intelligence in counterterrorism has focused on intelligence gained through interrogation, including the use of so-called enhanced techniques such as waterboarding of detainees captured and held overseas. CIA reports released in August 2009 stated that information gained from detainees had been useful in thwarting a number of attacks, including a plot against the tallest building on the West Coast. Other attacks reportedly prevented include those planned by Jose Padilla and Iyman Faris within the United States, and by Al Qaeda operatives overseas against Western targets in Karachi, Pakistan, against Heathrow Airport in London, and against the U.S. Marine base at Camp Lemonier, in Djibouti.[45]

Because information on interrogations is typically highly classified as well as controversial, it is difficult to judge the significance of such information in preventing attacks. Publicly available information—including claims by U.S. intelligence and administration officials, which are difficult to verify—suggests that information gained from detainee interrogations has been a factor in eleven cases: seven domestic, and four overseas.

Much more effective than either signals intelligence or detainee interrogation is human intelligence, or "HUMINT." This is not a surprise: It is commonly asserted that the most effective method of intelligence collection against terrorist targets is human intelligence, including in particular the difficult and lengthy task of penetrating terrorist groups. Brian Jenkins, for example, testified before the 9/11 Commission that "Knowing what terrorists might do depends largely on human sources—undercover agents and informants. Penetrating small terrorist groups may take months, years."[46] More recently the former Director of National Intelligence, Dennis C. Blair, was quoted telling reporters that the primary way U.S. intelligence determines which terrorist organizations pose a direct threat is "to

penetrate them and learn whether they're talking about making attacks against the United States."[47]

The record of foiled attacks suggests that while human intelligence does indeed appear to be very useful in breaking up plots, this intelligence does not necessarily come from secret agents penetrating terrorist cells overseas. The information available indicates it is most often HUMINT of a rather prosaic kind at work: intelligence gathered through the use of informants, and from tips received from members of the public.[48] The most significant finding of this study is that this kind of HUMINT appears to be the most effective counterterrorism tool for breaking up domestic plots.

Cases were coded as involving HUMINT if they were prevented at least in part as a result of the work of undercover agents and informants, or tips from the public. Of the 89 domestic plots thwarted, 66 involved at least one of these forms of human intelligence. Although reliable data is not so easy to obtain for overseas plots, it appears that human intelligence is also an important factor overseas, with 14 of 39 thwarted overseas plots involving HUMINT.

An example of a plot disrupted through the involvement of informants is that of four men charged with plotting to attack a Bronx, New York, synagogue and a National Guard base in Newburgh, New York, who were apparently discovered when they attempted to recruit an undercover informant who was operating out of a Newburgh mosque.[49] Another case involving an informant is the group of men who were arrested in 2007 on charges of plotting to blow up fuel tanks and fuel lines running beneath Kennedy International Airport in New York.[50]

In many cases an informant is placed among a group of plotters after authorities first receive a tip from the public. This pattern was seen in the 2006 British airplane plot that led to tightened restrictions on carrying liquids on commercial aircraft, and the aborted plan by a group of Miami men in 2006 to attack targets including the Sears Tower in Chicago and buildings in several other cities.[51] Another well known example is the case described later in this article of the group of men who plotted to attack the Fort Dix Army base in New Jersey.

These findings, especially concerning domestic plots and attacks, tend to confirm the argument of Stella Rimington, the former head of the British Security Service (MI5), that terrorism intelligence is not developed by spies overseas as often as one might expect. According to Rimington, "My own experience is that effective counter-terrorism frequently begins closer to home and may appear a lot more mundane."[52]

## Case Studies of Unsuccessful Plots and Attacks

Three cases of foiled terrorist plots are described here to illustrate how various types of information and intelligence have been used to prevent them from being successful. These cases are all post-9/11 examples of relatively complex plots, and they have been chosen because they represent what might be seen as three phases in the development of domestic counterterrorism within the United States since 2001. The case of the Lackawanna Six represents the first phase, during the years immediately following the 9/11 attacks, when U.S. authorities thwarted a large number of attacks. But as with the Lackawanna case, the government's case often appeared weak, and several of these prosecutions failed in court. The Fort Dix plot is typical of a number of "homegrown" terrorist plots that have been foiled more recently, often involving tips from the public and the use of informants. And the case of Najibullah Zazi represents what may be a new and potentially more dangerous pattern of foiled attacks, in which would-be terrorists within the United States are linked

to Al Qaeda or other cells overseas. The Zazi example demonstrates how in such cases intelligence developed overseas appears to be crucial in preventing attacks.

### *The Lackawanna Six*

This case involved a group of Yemeni-Americans from the Buffalo, New York, area who traveled to Afghanistan in the spring of 2001 to attend an Al Qaeda training camp. They were trained to use automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and explosives, and they met with Osama bin Laden.[53] Four of the men left the training camp before finishing the six- week course and returned to the United States a few months before 9/11.[54] They were arrested in September 2002 after one member of the group went to Bahrain to get married and sent back suspicious e-mails. This was the first case following the 9/11 attacks in which authorities believed they had dismantled an Al Qaeda cell within the United States.

The Lackawanna case is instructive as an example of how a wide range of intelligence sources can be useful to authorities. The group first came to the attention of the FBI through an anonymous tip: an unsigned, handwritten letter was sent to the FBI's office in Buffalo, warning that "Two terrorists came to Lackawanna . . . for recruiting the Yemenite youth." It named eight men who had supposedly attended an Al Qaeda camp, along with others who were involved.[55] The FBI began surveilling the men as early as June 2001, but it was only after 9/11 that concerns began to mount. Information pointing to the involvement of the men with the terrorist training camp came from intercepted e-mails and from a detainee captured in Afghanistan, but through the spring and summer of 2002 the men appeared to be going about their normal lives and did not seem to pose a threat.

Eventually the decision was made to arrest the suspects after one of them, who had traveled to Bahrain to get married, sent back an e-mail message titled "Big Meal," which read in part, "The next meal will be very huge. No one will be able to withstand it except those with faith."[56] Administration officials widely touted the arrests as a major success, and President Bush said in his State of the Union address in January 2003, "We've broken al Qaeda cells in Hamburg and Milan and Madrid and London and Paris, as well as Buffalo, New York."[57]

The case has been described by many observers as an example of government overkill, and most of the men do appear to have turned away from violence after returning from Afghanistan.[58] After 9/11 they had kept a low profile, and they were not actively plotting any attacks when they were arrested. No firm evidence was found indicating that the six men intended any acts of terrorism, and they eventually agreed to plea bargains on charges of providing material support to terrorism.

But the group had received terrorist training in weapons and explosives, and they had clear links to senior Al Qaeda leaders. They had been recruited by Kamal Derwish, an American Muslim who was born in Buffalo and raised in Saudi Arabia. Derwish had trained in Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and fought with Muslims in Bosnia, and in Lackawanna he hosted meetings at his apartment during which he told young Muslim men of their obligation to train for *jihad*. Derwish was a skilled and passionate spiritual mentor; one follower called him a "music man of religion."[59] Derwish was reportedly killed by a CIA Predator drone in November 2002 in Yemen.

Another man named Jaber Elbaneh had been with the men when they went to the training camp in Afghanistan, and at one point during the training he told one of the other Americans, "I want to be a martyr. I want to die."[60] Unlike the other six, Elbaneh did not return to the United States after the training. He was captured in Yemen in 2003, and after escaping from prison in that country was later recaptured, tried, and jailed.[61]

The Lackawanna case made headlines again in 2009, when it was learned that Bush administration officials in 2002 had considered using military troops to arrest the suspects. Such a move might have led to a Constitutional debate over the power of the president to use the military domestically, but in the end President Bush decided against using the military, and FBI agents made the arrests in Lackawanna.[62]

### *The Fort Dix Plot*

This more recent case typifies the sort of plots that have been seen in recent years and the variety of information and methods authorities are using to disrupt them. Six men described as Islamic militants were arrested in May 2007 and charged with plotting to attack the Fort Dix Army base in New Jersey and "kill as many soldiers as possible." They trained together, playing paintball and firing weapons in the Poconos. They conducted surveillance of a number of military installations, including McGuire Air Force Base, the Lakehurst Naval Air Station, and Dover Air Force Base, but found Fort Dix particularly appealing because the family of one of the plotters owns a pizza restaurant near the base, and he had made deliveries there. During a trip to Fort Dix one of the suspects reportedly said, "this is exactly what we are looking for. You hit 4, 5, or 6 humvees and light the whole place up."[63]

The case began, as many terrorism investigations do, with a tip from a member of the public. But while many such tips are anonymous, in this case the identity and the circumstances leading to the tip are known publicly. In January 2006 the plotters took an 8 mm videotape of their training to a Circuit City store to have it burned to a DVD. A store employee became concerned after watching the video and seeing men firing what he thought were automatic rifles and chanting. At first, however, he was not sure what to do, and he went home that night and told his family what he had seen. "I was considering whether or not this was really a threat, or something serious," he said later. "I came to the conclusion that that's not my job or decision to make."[64] The next day he told his store managers and called the police. Local police officers came to the store, watched the video, and asked for a copy, which they sent to state Homeland Security officials, and then to the FBI.

The FBI hired an informant named Mahmoud Omar to become friends with the men in the video. He began by visiting a grocery store owned by the family of one of the men, passing himself off as an Egyptian with a military background, and eventually recorded more than 100 hours of conversations with the suspects. The FBI later placed a second informant in the group, as a way to check on the first informant.[65] Undercover agents conducted surveillance as the group went on another trip to the Poconos for training, and watched the group for 15 months. The group was eventually arrested in a sting when two of the group went to the first informant's apartment and attempted to buy AK-47 and M-16 machine guns.[66]

Five of the six were found guilty in December 2008 of conspiring to kill military personnel. Four received life sentences, and the other received a 33-year sentence. The sixth man pled guilty to a lesser charge and was sentenced to 20 months in prison.

The Fort Dix case raised several issues that have become familiar in terrorism investigations. One is the use of confidential informants, who the history of failed attacks demonstrates are frequently key sources of intelligence. Informants often have less-than-stellar records themselves, and the defense typically accuses them of entrapping the defendants into illegal behavior. In this case, one of the government's two informants was reportedly a

convicted felon who expressed hatred for the United States, while the other bragged about wanting to kill and not being afraid to die.[67]

Another question is: once authorities learn of a plot, how long should they monitor the situation before moving in and arresting the suspects? In the first years after the 9/11 attacks, when law enforcement officials were anxious to move in as quickly as possible, the result was occasionally weak cases in which terrorist groups had not moved very far along the planning cycle.[68] In a situation such as the Fort Dix case, for example, the FBI a few years ago might have moved quickly to arrest the suspects after viewing the video and learning that several of the men were in the country illegally. But instead, they decided to take the considerable time and expense involved in placing two informants inside the group and conducting more than a year of surveillance.[69] The case demonstrates that when the situation permits, it may be useful for authorities to let plots develop at least to the point where the suspects attempt to acquire weapons.



### *Najibullah Zazi*

The case of Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan immigrant who has admitted to plotting to conduct a coordinated, multiple person attack on the New York City subway system, has been described by authorities as one of the most serious in recent years. Attorney General Eric Holder said that "were it not for the combined efforts of the law enforcement and intelligence communities, it could have been devastating. This attempted attack on our homeland was real, it was in motion, and it would have been deadly."[70] FBI Director Robert Mueller has said that this was "the first known instance since 9/11 that al-Qa'ida had successfully deployed a trained operative into the United States."[71] New information on this case has continued to surface even after Zazi pleaded guilty, making it clear that this plot was foiled as a result of the combination of several types of intelligence and investigative techniques.

Zazi, a permanent legal resident of the United States, was born in Afghanistan and raised in Pakistan, and went to high school in Queens, New York. He admitted that he traveled to Pakistan in 2008 to fight with the Taliban against the United States, and while there he received training in bombmaking. He agreed with Al Qaeda officials to become a suicide bomber, and after returning to the United States he moved to Colorado. Zazi found work as an airport shuttle driver, and at the same time began assembling the materials necessary for a bomb. On 8 September 2009 he rented a car and began driving to New York, where he and two others planned to strap explosives to their bodies, board trains at the Grand Central and Times Square stations, and blow themselves up during rush hour.[72]

By this time, however, Zazi had been under surveillance by U.S. officials for months, in what was known as Operation High Rise.[73] Zazi appears to have first come to the attention of U.S. authorities as a result of intelligence information gathered overseas. Some news reports indicate the CIA initially learned about Zazi through sources in Pakistan, and then notified the FBI.[74] While this link is unconfirmed, it is has become clear more recently that at least some early information on the case came from a tip from British intelligence.[75] In 2009 British officials had intercepted e-mails from a British citizen, Abid Naseer, to an account registered to a man named "Ahmad." Ahmad, who officials describe as an Al Qaeda facilitator in Pakistan, had also been exchanging e-mail with Zazi. Shortly before Zazi left Colorado for New York, he sent an e-mail to Ahmad, stating that "the marriage is ready." This apparently signaled that the attack was imminent.[76]

When he suddenly began driving cross-country toward New York in September, FBI agents were following him.[77] In order to keep a close eye on him, local law enforcement agencies were reportedly enlisted to help by pulling him over several times for speeding.[78]

As he approached New York City, Zazi's car was stopped and searched on the George Washington Bridge in an operation coordinated between the FBI and the New York Police Department (NYPD). He was told it was a random drug search, and after nothing suspicious was found he was allowed to continue on his way. But later authorities secretly broke into his car and searched his laptop, on which they discovered a jpeg image of nine pages of hand-written bombmaking instructions.[79]

Up to this point, law enforcement and intelligence officials had been conducting what was described as "a textbook case of how to conduct a terrorism investigation," combining national intelligence information with wiretaps, physical searches and surveillance, and close coordination between federal and local authorities.[80] President Obama reportedly had begun receiving regular briefings on the case beginning in August, and was sometimes updated several times a day.[81]

But then on September 10, the same day Zazi's car was stopped, officials from the NYPD's intelligence division approached a Queens imam in what was apparently an effort to gather more information about the case. The imam, Ahmad Wais Afzali, had provided information to NYPD officers in the past. Within hours of being interviewed, the imam spoke on the phone with both Zazi and with his father, tipping Zazi off that he was under investigation. Federal officials, who had not known about the intelligence division's actions, learned of the imam's involvement because they were monitoring Zazi's phone conversations. Believing their hand had been forced, they moved quickly to arrest Zazi and several accomplices.[82]

This case has continued to develop. In July 2010 federal authorities charged a senior Al Qaeda leader with personally directing Zazi's plot, and linked the Zazi plot with a thwarted Al Qaeda plot to use Western operatives to attack a target in Britain.[83] The Al Qaeda leader, Adnan G. el-Shukrijumah, is a naturalized American citizen who was born in Saudi Arabia and who has been sought by U.S. officials for years. He is on the FBI's Most Wanted list, and the United States has offered a reward of up to $5 million for information leading to his capture, but he remains at large, possibly hiding in the tribal areas of Pakistan.[84]

## Conclusion

This article has examined the lessons learned from a new data set of 176 unsuccessful terrorist plots and attacks against American targets dating from 1987 through October 2010. Although this article focuses on analyzing intelligence factors that make terrorism plots fail, the data presented here also help to advance our broader understanding of the terrorism problem and the threat against the United States and its citizens.

One finding is that despite the emphasis in much public discourse on the threat from international terrorism, especially from Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups, domestic terrorism—both from radical Islamist and from right-wing sources—has been and remains a significant threat. As demonstrated in the Zazi case, and has been cited by U.S. officials recently, there may be a new and more dangerous pattern emerging in which terrorists within the United States are receiving training and support from overseas.[85]

There is good news, in that law enforcement and intelligence officials have had considerable success in preventing attacks, and the number of plots has declined after a spike immediately following 9/11. But the bad news is that the number of plots leveled off to an average of nine per year from 2005 to 2009, and has jumped to 13 during the first ten months of 2010. In an environment in which it is often noted that terrorists need only succeed once in order to win, these numbers suggest the threat remains high.

Concerning the central questions examined here—why do terrorist plots and attacks fail, and what kinds of intelligence and security measures are most effective in preventing them—this study challenges one of the most enduring beliefs about intelligence failure: that the needed information is always there, and the primary failure is one of analysis, of an inability to "connect the dots" and understand warnings that would otherwise be lost amid widely scattered pieces of information. While there seems little doubt that it is good to have sharp, imaginative analysts in the intelligence and law enforcement communities who look carefully at every piece of information, this study indicates it is mistaken to believe that future attacks are likely to be prevented this way.

Attacks are not foiled when a sharp analyst puts together little bits of otherwise unrelated intelligence, realizes the danger ahead, and takes it all to a decision maker whose swift action averts catastrophe. Instead, most plots are foiled because officials have very precise, tactical-level intelligence, often from human sources, on what the plotters are up to. The intelligence picture is usually much clearer than it seems to have been before the Christmas Day attempt, suggesting that terrorist attacks are not prevented because intelligence officials connect the dots, but because they collect and act on very precise warnings.

The changes being implemented by the Obama administration following the Christmas Day attempt are focused on analysis, with the goal of ensuring subtle clues are not missed and analysts are trained and ready to connect all possible dots. These changes are not likely to do much to help develop the precise intelligence that history shows is most often needed to prevent attacks.

This study also shows that the precise intelligence needed to prevent attacks is not usually developed through the use of strategic-level tactics that get much of the public's attention, such as spies who penetrate terrorist cells, enhanced interrogations of captured suspects, or covert operatives listening in on terrorist chatter overseas. More typically, plots are disrupted as a result of tips from the public, informants inside home-grown cells, and long-term surveillance of suspects.

The lesson from the plots that failed is that the intelligence needed to prevent the next terrorist attack is probably not out there already, waiting to be understood once the U.S. intelligence community finally discovers the right organizational model to follow or implements new training programs for analysts. The necessary intelligence has probably not yet been collected, and it is most likely to be obtained through aggressive domestic intelligence efforts—which are just the sort of actions that raise questions about the role of intelligence in a democracy. The most important step toward preventing future attacks is to focus on local and domestic intelligence, and to figure out how to gather the necessary intelligence while still maintaining the proper balance between civil liberties and national security.



## Notes

1. The best known of these may be a list released by the White House in 2005 of ten plots that had been disrupted since the 9/11 attacks, which is discussed later in this article.

2. Brian Jenkins provides a list of some 46 failed plots, but provides few details and no citations; see Brian Michael Jenkins, *Unconquerable Nation: Knowing Our Enemy, Strengthening Ourselves* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2006), pp. 185–191. A slightly shorter list is included as an appendix to Dallas Boyd et al., *Why Have We Not Been Attacked Again? Competing and Complementary Hypotheses for Homeland Attack Frequency*, Defense Threat Reduction Agency ASCO Report Number 2008 007, June 2008, pp. 165–166. Useful recent listings are: Jena Baker McNeill, James Jay Carafano,

and Jessica Zuckerman, "30 Terrorist Plots Foiled: How the System Worked," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder*, 29 April 2010, and Alejandro J. Beutel, "Data on Post-9/11 Terrorism in the United States," Muslim Public Affairs Council *Policy Memo Backgrounder*, 13 May 2010. Marc Sageman has recently studied all Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda–inspired plots, successful and unsuccessful, in the West since the formation of Al Qaeda in 1988: Marc Sageman, "Confronting al-Qaeda: Understanding the Threat in Afghanistan," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3(4) (December 2009), pp. 4–25.

3. *Underlying Reasons for Success and Failure of Terrorist Attacks: Selected Case Studies*, Homeland Security Institute Final Report, 4 June 2007; Brian A. Jackson and David R. Frelinger, *Understanding Why Terrorist Operations Succeed or Fail* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2009); Michael Jacobson, "Terrorist Dropouts: Learning from Those Who Have Left," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy *Policy Focus* 101, January 2010.

4. Exceptions include a recent study that examines 32 attacks thwarted since 9/11: Germain Difo, "Ordinary Measures, Extraordinary Results: An Assessment of Foiled Plots Since 9/11," American Security Project Report, May 2010; and Kevin Strom et al., *Building on Clues: Examining Successes and Failures in Detecting U.S. Terrorist Plots, 1999–2009* (Institute for Homeland Security Solutions, October 2010), which examines 86 foiled and executed terrorist plots against U.S. targets. Another useful study that includes failed plots, but that is limited to post-9/11 radical Islamist attacks, is Jerome P. Bjelopera and Mark A. Randol, *American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat*, Congressional Research Service, 20 September 2010.

5. "Summary of the White House Review of the December 25, 2009 Attempted Terrorist Attack," released by the White House on 7 January 2010.

6. Brian Jenkins, "Lessons for Intelligence," *Vanguard* (Canada), 1 March 2006. Available at http://www.rand.org/commentary/030106VC.html

7. Paul R. Pillar, "Intelligence," in Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes, eds., *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), p. 123. Richard L. Russell, on the other hand, argues that intelligence successes are becoming known more often today, because the CIA public affairs staff often leaks its successes to the press anonymously: *Sharpening Strategic Intelligence: Why the CIA Gets it Wrong, and What Needs to be Done to Get it Right* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 22.

8. Statement for the Record by Lieutenant General Michael V. Hayden, USAF, Before the Joint Inquiry of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 17 October 2002. Emphasis in the original. Available at http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2002_hr/101702hayden.html. CIA Director Leon Panetta has more recently written that "The CIA cannot speak publicly about its major victories—the plots foiled, the terrorists neutralized." "The CIA is Proud to Be on the Front Lines against al-Qaeda," *The Washington Post*, 10 January 2010.

9. Rohan Gunaratna, "Combating Al-Qaida and Associated Groups," in Doron Zimmerman and Andreas Wenger, eds., *How States Fight Terrorism: Policy Dynamics in the West* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007), p. 190.

10. Brian M. Jenkins, "Intelligence and Homeland Security," in Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen and Daniel S. Hamilton, eds., *Transatlantic Homeland Security: Protecting Society in the Age of Catastrophic Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 127.

11. Adam Liptak, "Suspected Leader of 9/11 Attacks Is Said to Confess," *The New York Times*, 15 March 2007. A CIA study of the results of detainee interrogation found that detainees "often try [to] pass incomplete or intentionally misleading information, perhaps hoping that the volume of the reporting will make it difficult to sort out the truth." Central Intelligence Agency, *Detainee Reporting Pivotal for the War Against Al-Qa'ida*, 3 June 2005, p. 6. In a separate report—completed before KSM's Guantanamo testimony—the CIA argued that information obtained from his debriefing led to disruption of several plots against the United States: "Khalid Shaykh Muhammad: Preeminent Source On Al-Qa'ida," Central Intelligence Agency, 13 July 2004.

12. "Waiting for al-Qaeda's next bomb," *Economist*, 5 May 2007, p. 30.

13. State of the Union Address, 23 January 2007, transcript as provided by *The New York Times*, 24 January 2007. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/23/washington/23bush-transcript.html

14. Statement by David C. Gompert, Acting Director of National Intelligence, 19 July 2010. Available at http://www.dni.gov/. Of note, the principal reporter for the *Washington Post* series, Dana Priest, said in an interview that she had asked intelligence officials for examples of intelligence successes, but she was not provided any: "We asked them to share with us anything they could, plots that were foiled that we could put in the paper because we didn't have many examples. We said give us things, just in generalities . . . and we didn't receive anything back." NPR "Talk of the Nation," 19 July 2010, with transcript available at http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128624199

15. The White House, "Fact Sheet: Plots, Casings, and Infiltrations Referenced in President Bush's Remarks on the War on Terror," 6 October 2005. Available at http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-7.html. Other examples of the U.S. government touting its success in foiling terrorist plots and prosecuting terrorism related offenses include: The White House, *9/11 Five Years Later: Successes and Challenges*, September 2006; and the U.S. Department of Justice *Counterterrorism White Paper*, 22 June 2006.

16. For an examination of what is known about the incidents on the White House list, see "Thwarted Terrorist Attacks," New York University *Review of Law and Security* 7, April 2006, pp. 16–21; also Sara Kehaulani Goo, "List of Foiled Plots Puzzling to Some," *The Washington Post*, 23 October 2005.

17. Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, Syracuse University, "Criminal Terrorism Enforcement in the United States During the Five Years Since the 9/11/01 Attacks." Available at http://trac.syr.edu/tracreports/terrorism/169/. An updated report that examined data through 2009 found that an increasing number of cases have resulted in convictions, suggesting what it calls "a more effective use of the criminal justice system." *Terrorist Trial Report Card: September 11, 2001–September 11, 2009*, January 2010, p. i.

18. Dan Eggen and Julie Tate, "U.S. Campaign Produces Few Convictions on Terrorism Charges," *The Washington Post*, 12 June 2005.

19. New York University School of Law, Center on Law and Security, *Terrorist Trial Report Card: U.S. Edition*, 11 September 2006, p. 3. The Center on Law and Security has continued to track the results of terrorist trials, and its most recent reports are available at http://www.lawandsecurity.org/pub_newsletter.cfm?id=3. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Kyle Dabruzzi disagree with the Center on Law and Security's conclusion that this data suggests policymakers have overestimated the terrorist threat. They argue that because authorities are successfully disrupting plots at an early stage by using criminal and other non-terrorism charges, it is not surprising that few trials result in terrorism convictions. *The Convergence of Crime and Terror: Law Enforcement Opportunities and Perils*, Manhattan Institute Center for Policing Terrorism, Policing Terrorism Report No. 1, June 2007, p. 16.

20. A prominent database that does include failed attacks is the International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE) database maintained by Edward F. Mickolus. The ITERATE database, however, only tracks international terrorism, so does not capture purely domestic plots and attacks. On ITERATE, see Peter A. Flemming, Edward Mickolus, and Todd Sandler, "Research Note: Using the ITERATE and DOTS Databases," *Journal of Strategic Security* 1(1) (November 2008). Published listings of terrorist activities that do cover failed attacks include Christopher Hewitt, *Political Violence and Terrorism in Modern America: A Chronology* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Joshua D. Goodman, and Laura Grossman, *Terrorism in the West 2008: A Guide to Terrorism Events and Landmark Cases* (Washington, DC: FDD Press, 2009).

21. National Counterterrorism Center Worldwide Incidents Tracking System, "Methodology." Available at http://www.nctc.gov/witsbanner/wits_subpage_criteria.html

22. Global Terrorism Database: http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/faq/. A recent study sponsored by the Department of Defense found that it was difficult to find good quality, openly available data on terrorism events in general, whether successful or unsuccessful. *Rare Events*, JASON study JSR-09-108, The MITRE Corporation, October 2009, pp. 44–45.

23. See http://www.isvg.org/faq.html

24. Joshua Sinai, "New Trends in Terrorism Studies: Strengths and Weaknesses," in Magnus Ranstorp, ed., *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 43.

25. Berto Jongman, "Research Desiderata in the Field of Terrorism," in Ranstorp, *Mapping Terrorism Research*, p. 283. Stephen Marrin, "Preventing Intelligence Failures by Learning from the Past," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 17(4) (December 2004), p. 661.

26. The full data set, including criteria for the coding of intelligence and other factors, is available by e-mail from the author.

27. Eight plots are attributed to "other," neither radical Islamism nor domestic extremism. The causes in these cases vary and are not always clear, for example in the case of a man who wanted to bomb the Alaskan oil pipeline during the Millennium celebrations in order to manipulate the oil futures market and cause financial panic. "Canadian Man Pleads Guilty to Plot to Blow Up Tans-Alaska Oil Pipeline," Associated Press, 13 March 2008. Also coded as "other" are three attacks or plots against U.S. government facilities overseas in January 1991 that were apparently conducted by Iraqi Intelligence Service agents on orders from Saddam Hussein in retaliation for the U.S.-led Desert Storm. See U.S. State Department, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1991*.

28. National Counterterrorism Center, *2009 Report on Terrorism*, 30 April 2010, p. 5, available at www.nctc.gov.

29. The author has not attempted to define "significant" damage or destruction, but further research would be useful in helping to determine a threshold; at what point does a certain level of destruction in an attack suggest that it was "successful"?

30. A fuller discussion of the various factors involved in determining whether to define attacks as successful or unsuccessful is in Brian A. Jackson and David R. Frelinger, *Understanding Why Terrorist Operations Succeed or Fail* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2009), pp. 2–3.

31. A prominent example of this sort of case not counted as a failed plot is that of the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, a Texas-based Muslim charity accused by the U.S. government of providing support to Hamas. Five of its leaders were convicted on a variety of counts, including support of terrorism, in 2008, but the group was not accused of directly financing terrorist bombings or attacks. Gretel C. Kovach, "Five Convicted in Terrorism Financing Trial," *The New York Times*, 25 November 2008.

32. For example, in 2005 authorities in California received a tip that six individuals had been smuggled into the United States from Mexico in order to obtain nuclear material, and they were on their way to Boston to launch some sort of attack. It turned out to be a hoax. Shelley Murphy, "FBI Finds Terror Threat Was Fabricated," *Boston Globe*, 26 January 2005. Another case not counted here is that of the "Detroit sleeper cell": on 17 September 2001, authorities in Detroit charged four men with conspiracy after evidence found in their apartment suggested they might have been terrorists. The charges were later dropped after allegations were made of prosecutorial misconduct. Philip Shenon, "Ex-Prosecutor Acquitted of Misconduct in 9/11 Case," *The New York Times*, 1 November 2007.

33. In several cases plotters have thought they were carrying out attacks, only to find that law enforcement officials had supplied them with non-functioning weapons or explosives. These are not counted as actual attempted attacks, but as cases stopped at an earlier stage for some other reason (such as that an informant was involved and provided the fake weapons).

34. Michael Jacobsen, "They Trained. They Plotted. Then They Bailed," *The Washington Post*, 23 March 2008.

35. *KSM's Brooklyn Bridge Plot*, The NEFA Foundation, August 2007. Available at www.nefafoundation.org.

36. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: Norton, 2004), pp. 176–179.

37. Robert Hanley, "Suspected Terrorist Convicted in Bomb Case," *The New York Times*, 30 November 1988. For an extensive discussion of this case, see University of Arkansas, *Indicators of Terrorist Incidents*, pp. 277–284.

38. See, for example, the Homeland Security Institute, *Underlying Reasons for Success and Failure of Terrorist Attacks,* pp. 61–65.

39. Greg Krikorian, "Plot Posed a Real, Immediate Threat, Experts Say," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 December 2007.

40. Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Second Wave: Return of the Militias*, August 2009, p. 18.

41. Craig S. Smith, "North Africa Feared as Staging Ground for Terror," *The New York Times*, 20 February 2007.

42. *U.S.A. v. Hosam Maher Husein Smadi*, Criminal Complaint, 24 September 2009.

43. Al Baker and William K. Rashbaum, "3 Held Overseas in Plan to Bomb New York Target," *The New York Times*, 8 July 2006.

44. Craig Whitlock, "Trial Opens In Alleged Plot Against U.S. Targets," *The Washington Post*, 23 April 2009.

45. Central Intelligence Agency, *Detainee Reporting Pivotal*. Large sections of this report remain blacked out in the redacted version that has been publicly released, suggesting that additional plots and attacks may have been prevented, but are too sensitive to make public. Iyman Faris was reportedly arrested in part on the basis of information revealed by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed; he had apparently already decided not to carry out the attempt to destroy the Brooklyn Bridge.

46. Brian M. Jenkins, Statement to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, Washington, 31 March 2003. Available at http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/hearings/hearing1/witness_jenkins.htm

47. Karen DeYoung and Walter Pincus, "Success Against Al-Qaeda Cited," *The Washington Post*, 30 September 2009.

48. This is not a new finding. A RAND study on terrorism in the 1970s found that informants and undercover sources were more often useful than wiretaps or other sources. Sorrel Wildhorn, Brian Michael Jenkins, and Marvin M. Lavin, *Intelligence Constraints of the 1970s and Domestic Terrorism: Vol. I, Effects on the Incidence, Investigation, and Prosecution of Terrorist Activity* (Santa Monica: RAND, December 1982), p. xi. The importance of human intelligence in preventing terrorist attacks has also been seen in France: A French antiterrorism official recently claimed that 15 plots thwarted in recent years were all stopped as a result of information received from human sources. See Edward Cody, "Europe's Antiterrorism Agencies Favor Human Intelligence Over Technology," *The Washington Post*, 12 May 2010.

49. William K. Rashbaum and Kareem Fahim, "Informer's Role in Bombing Plot," *The New York Times*, 23 May 2009.

50. Cara Buckley and William K. Rashbaum, "4 Accused of Plot to Blow Up Facilities at Kennedy Airport," *The New York Times*, 3 June 2007.

51. On the British case, see for example Don Van Natta Jr., Elaine Sciolino, and Stephen Grey, "Details Emerge in British Terror Case," *The New York Times*, 28 August 2006. On the Miami case, see "The Miami Plot to Bomb Federal Buildings and the Sears Tower," The NEFA Foundation, updated January 2008. Available at www.nefafoundation.org

52. Stella Rimington, "'Humint' Begins at Home," *Wall Street Journal*, 3 January 2005. The study cited above by Kevin Strom and others, *Building on Clues: Examining Successes and Failures in Detecting U.S. Terrorist Plots, 1999–2009*, reached similar findings, noting that routine law enforcement activities and public vigilance are key factors in preventing terrorist attacks.

53. For background on the Lackawanna Six case, see Dina Temple-Raston, "Enemy Within? Not Quite," *The Washington Post*, 9 September 2007, and Bjelopera and Randol, *American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat*, pp. 109–112.

54. Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat* (New York Police Department, 2007), p. 62.

55. Matthew Purdy and Lowell Bergman, "Where the Trail Led," *The New York Times*, 12 October 2003.

56. Purdy and Bergman, "Where the Trail Led."

57. "Text of President Bush's 2003 State of the Union Address," *Washington Post*, 28 January 2003. Available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/bushtext_012803.html

58. For example, see Arthur S. Hulnick, *Keeping Us Safe: Secret Intelligence and Homeland Security* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), pp. 126–127; Ravi Satkalmi, "Material Support: The United

States v. the Lackawanna Six," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28(3) (May 2005), pp. 193–199; and Temple-Raston, "Enemy Within?"

59. Silber and Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West*, p. 59.

60. Temple-Raston, "Enemy Within?"

61. Ahmed Al-Haj, "Yemeni-American on FBI 'Most Wanted" List Jailed in San'a," Associated Press, 19 May 2008.

62. Mark Mazzetti and David Johnston, "Bush Weighed Using Military in Arrests," *New York Times*, 25 July 2009.

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## Appendix

Unsuccessful plots and attacks against American targets

| Year | Name of plot | Domestic | Overseas | Radical Islamist | Domestic extremist | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2010 | Explosive packages intercepted | | • | • | | |
| | Washington, DC, subway plot (Ahmed) | • | | • | | |
| | Would-be terrorist arrested (Shehadeh) | • | | • | | |
| | Plot to bomb Wrigley Field in Chicago (Hassoun) | • | | • | | |
| | Chicago man plots to attack U.S. troops (Masri) | • | | • | | |
| | Virginia man attempts to join Shabab (Chesser) | • | | • | | |
| | Alaska couple hit list (Rockwood) | • | | • | | |
| | New Jersey men arrested at JFK (Alessa and Almonte) | • | | • | | |
| | Indonesia plot against foreigners | | • | • | | |
| | Times Square attempted car bombing | • | | • | | |
| | Brooklyn men charged with supporting al Qaeda | • | | • | | |
| | Chicago taxi driver arrested (Khan) | • | | • | | |
| | Hutaree militia arrests | • | | | • | |
| 2009 | Christmas Day airline bombing attempt | • | | • | | |
| | Plot against U.S. embassy in Yemen | | • | • | | |
| | Northern Virginia men arrested in Pakistan | | • | • | | |
| | Boston area shopping mall plot (Mehanna) | • | | • | | |
| | Brooklyn man arrested in Kosovo (Kaziu) | | • | • | | |
| | Dallas skyscraper plot (Smadi) | • | | • | | |
| | Springfield, IL courthouse plot (Finton) | • | | • | | |
| | Najibullah Zazi plot | • | | • | | |
| | Kuwait plot to attack U.S. military base (Camp Arifjan) | | • | • | | |
| | North Carolina arrests (Boyd) | • | | • | | |
| | Tunisian arrests of 9 men planning to kill U.S. servicemen | | • | • | | |
| | Newburgh, NY bomb plot | • | | • | | |
| 2008 | Dirty bomb plot (Cummings) | • | | | • | |
| | Long Island Rail Road possible plot | • | | • | | |
| | Obama assassination plot (Cowart and Schlesselman) | • | | | • | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yemen mortar attack on Westerners' housing complex (April) | | • | • | |
| | Yemen embassy mortar attack (March) | | • | • | |
| | Manila embassy bomb plot (March) | | • | • | |
| 2007 | JFK Airport plot | • | | • | |
| | Fort Dix plot | • | | • | |
| | Abujihaad (ex-U.S. sailor) charged with plotting attacks | • | | • | |
| | Ramstein Air Base plot | | • | • | |
| | Arms dealer caught in DEA sting (Kassar) | | • | | • |
| | Casablanca consulate suicide bombing | | • | • | |
| | Christopher Paul charged with plotting overseas attacks | | • | • | |
| | Al Qaeda plot to insert operatives using student visas | | • | • | |
| | U.S. and British embassies in Tunis targeted for attack | | • | • | |
| 2006 | Rockford, IL shopping mall (Derrick Shareef) | • | | • | |
| | Houston men charged with seeking to joint Taliban | | • | • | |
| | NY Tunnels plot (Hammoud and others arrested in Beirut) | | • | • | |
| | Miami/Sears Tower | • | | • | |
| | Atlanta casing (Ahmed and Sadequee) | • | | • | |
| | Toledo, OH conspiracy (Amawi, El-Hindi, Mazloum) | | • | • | |
| | Jordanian men plotting against President Bush | | • | • | |
| | Oslo men plotted against U.S. and Israeli embassies | | • | • | |
| | British airplane plot (liquid bomb plot) | | • | • | |
| | Amman airport attack plot | | • | • | |
| 2005 | Gas refineries (Michael C. Reynolds) | • | | • | |
| | LA prison plot (JIS, Kevin James) | • | | • | |
| | Lodi, CA plot (Hayat) | • | | • | |
| | Support to al Qaeda (Shah and Sabir) | • | | • | |
| | Support to al Qaeda (Grecula) | • | | | • |
| | Plot against President Bush (Abu Ali) | • | | • | |

*(Continued on next page)*

Unsuccessful plots and attacks against American targets *(Continued)*

| Year | Name of plot | Domestic | Overseas | Radical Islamist | Domestic extremist | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Zarqawi tasked to form cell for attacking U.S. and other targets | | • | • | | |
| | Plot to attack American tourists in Jordan using cyanide | | • | • | | |
| | Rocket attack on Navy ships in Jordan (USS Ashland, Kearsarge) | | • | • | | |
| 2004 | Financial institutions plot | • | | • | | |
| | Tennessee extremist (Van Crocker) | • | | | • | |
| | Former National Guardsman arrested (Braden) | • | | | • | |
| | NY subway plot (Herald Square, Siraj and Elshafay) | • | | • | | |
| | Albany, NY surface to air missile sale sting (Aref, Hossain) | • | | • | | |
| | Attempt to bomb Chicago Federal Building (Nettles) | • | | | • | |
| | Government and tourist sites tasking (White House list of casings) | • | | • | | |
| | Birmingham, AL, planned attacks (Hemphill) | • | | | • | |
| | Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, consulate attacked | | • | • | | |
| | Islamabad embassy targeted; foiled by Pakistani arrests | | • | • | | |
| | UK urban targets (gas limos plot) | | • | • | | |
| | NATO summit in Istanbul, Turkey (NATO bomb plot) | | • | • | | |
| | Amman, Jordan, chemical bomb plot | | • | • | | |
| | British bomb plot (“Operation Crevice”) | | • | • | | |
| 2003 | Planned abortion clinic bombings in Miami area (Jordi) | • | | | • | |
| | East Coast airline plot (al-Azki) | • | | • | | |
| | Suicide bomber turned away at O’Hare Airport (Banna) | • | | • | | |
| | Brooklyn Bridge plot (Faris) | • | | • | | |
| | Virginia “paintball terrorists” | • | | • | | |
| | Planned attack on Coast Guard base in Bellingham, WA (Revak) | • | | | • | |
| | Antigovernment extremist plot (Noster) | • | | | • | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Texas militia couple arrested (Krar and Bruey) | • | | | • |
| | Malike arrest in NY City (said he wanted to conduct attacks) | • | | • | |
| | Columbus, OH shopping mall (Abdi) | • | | • | |
| | Planned abortion clinic bombings in Pennsylvania (Hull) | • | | | • |
| | Washington state assassination plot (Brailey) | • | | | • |
| | 2003 tasking (White House list of 5 casings) | • | | • | |
| | Gas station tasking (White House list) | • | | • | |
| | Southeast Asian cell (Hambali cell) | • | | • | |
| | Beirut embassy bombing attempt (Dec 2003) | | • | • | |
| | NATO base plot (Trabelsi) | | • | • | |
| | Anti-aircraft missile sting (Lakhani) | • | | • | |
| | Camp Lemonier, Djibouti, suicide truck bomb plot | | • | • | |
| | Saudi Arabia housing compound plan | | • | • | |
| | Nairobi embassy attack plot (truck bomb, airplane) | | • | • | |
| | Beirut embassy plot (9 militants arrested in Lebanon, May 2003) | | • | • | |
| | Karachi consulate plot using explosives-laden aircraft | | • | • | |
| | Ricin plot against U.S. troops (Afghanistan, Kuwait) | | • | • | |
| | 2003 tourist site plot (on White House list) | | • | • | |
| 2002 | Library Tower (West Coast Airliner plot) | • | | • | |
| | Portland Seven | • | | • | |
| | Lackawanna Six | • | | • | |
| | Drugs for Stingers ring (Shah, Afridi, Ali) | | • | • | |
| | Florida power station bomb plot (Mandhai) | • | | • | |
| | Florida Muslim center bomb plot (Goldstein) | • | | | • |
| | Seattle, WA cell (Ujaama; bly training camp) | • | | • | |
| | North Carolina Klan leader arrested (Barefoot) | • | | | • |
| | Montana militia arrests (Burgert; Project 7) | • | | | • |
| | Pennsylvania militia leader arrested (Hertzog) | • | | | • |

*(Continued on next page)*

Unsuccessful plots and attacks against American targets *(Continued)*

| Year | Name of plot | Domestic | Overseas | Radical Islamist | Domestic extremist | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Jose Padilla (originally the "dirty bomb" plot) | • | | • | | |
| | Milan cell disrupted, plotting attacks on U.S. targets | | • | • | | |
| | Arabian Gulf shipping plot (on White House list of 10 foiled plots) | | • | • | | |
| | Strait of Hormuz plot (White House list) | | • | • | | |
| | Saudi air base attack (Sudanese man captured after the fact) | | • | • | | |
| | Strait of Gibraltar shipping plot | | • | • | | |
| | Sarajevo embassy bomb plot | | • | • | | |
| 2001 | Badat shoe bombing attempt | • | | • | | |
| | Richard Reid shoe bombing attempt | • | | • | | |
| | California Mosque plot (Rubin and Krugel) | • | | | • | |
| | Singapore plot to attack U.S. and other targets (Operation Jibril) | | • | • | | |
| | Eagle Base, Bosnia and Herzegovina, attack plot | | • | • | | |
| | Manila embassy | | • | • | | |
| | al-Marri tasking (White House list of 5 casings) | • | | • | | |
| | Paris embassy suicide bomb plot (Beghal) | | • | • | | |
| | New Delhi embassy bomb plot | | • | • | | |
| | Plot to attack G-8 summit in Genoa, kill President Bush | | • | • | | |
| | Sanaa embassy plot to attack using hand grenades | | • | • | | |
| | U.S. ship visiting Indonesia targeted (al-Faruq) | | • | • | | |
| | U.S. ship in Malaysia targeted by local jihadist group | | • | • | | |
| | Rome embassy targeted by Afghanistan-trained militants | | • | • | | |
| 2000 | Houston Federal Building plot (McCool) | • | | | • | |
| | Jakarta embassy cased by Omar al-Faruq | | • | • | | |
| | U.S. ship in Malaysia attack planned | | • | • | | |
| | U.S.S. *The Sullivans* failed attack | | • | • | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1999 | LAX/Millennium plot (Ressam) | • | | • | | |
| | Florida militia leader arrested (Beauregard) | • | | | • | |
| | California propane storage facility plot (Patterson, Rudolph) | • | | | • | |
| | Ricin threat against judges (Gluck) | • | | | • | |
| | Alaskan oil pipeline plot Reumayr) | • | | | | • |
| | Colorado mosque targeted (Modig) | • | | | • | |
| | Aryan Nation bombing plot (Kelly) | • | | | • | |
| | Jordan al Qaeda cell broken up (Hijazi) | | • | • | | |
| | Indian embassy, consulates targeted (Sayed Abu Nasir) | | • | • | | |
| 1998 | East coast airliner hijack plot to free “blind sheik” Rahman | • | | • | | |
| | Washington, DC bombing threat (Bazarte) | • | | | • | |
| | Republic of Texas militia arrests (Grebe, Wise) | • | | | • | |
| | Threatened chemical attack (Maltz) | • | | | | • |
| | Michigan militia arrests (Carter) | • | | | • | |
| | White supremacist arrests (McGiffen) | • | | | • | |
| | Uganda embassy bombing thwarted | | • | • | | |
| | Albania embassy bombing planned | | • | • | | |
| 1997 | New York City subway plot (Mezer, Khalil) | • | | • | | |
| | Fort Hood, TX planned attack (Glover) | • | | | • | |
| | Planned Florida armored car plot (Orns) | • | | | • | |
| | Texas armored car plot (True Knights of the KKK) | • | | | • | |
| | Kalamazoo, MI arrest (Blasz) | • | | | • | |
| 1996 | Phineas Priesthood arrests in Oregon | • | | | • | |
| | Mountaineer Militia (Looker) | • | | | • | |
| | Arizona militia arrests (Viper Team) | • | | | • | |
| | Washington State militia arrests (Pitner) | • | | | • | |
| | Singapore plot against Western targets called off by Al Qaeda | | • | • | | |

*(Continued on next page)*

Unsuccessful plots and attacks against American targets *(Continued)*

| Year | Name of plot | Domestic | Overseas | Radical Islamist | Domestic extremist | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1995 | Reno, NV failed IRS building bombing (Bailie) | • | | | • | |
| | Oklahoma militia leader arrested (Lampley) | • | | | • | |
| | Antigovernment extremist arrested (Polk) | • | | | • | |
| | Bojinka plot to bomb American airplanes over Pacific | | • | • | | |
| | Plot to kidnap and kill U.S. diplomats in Pakistan | | • | • | | |
| 1994 | Minnesota ricin plot (Minnesota Patriots Council) | • | | | • | |
| 1993 | Skinhead plot disrupted in Southern California (Fisher and Boese) | • | | | • | |
| | Day of terror plot against New York City monuments, landmarks | • | | • | | |
| | Plot against President Bush during visit to Kuwait | | • | • | | |
| 1992 | Bombing of hotels in Aden housing U.S. troops | | • | • | | |
| 1991 | Attack on U.S. ambassador's residence in Jakarta | | • | | | • |
| | Attempted bombing of cultural center in Manila | | • | | | • |
| | Plot against U.S. embassy in Zimbabwe | | • | | | • |
| 1988 | Japanese Red Army terrorist arrested in New Jersey (Kikumura) | • | | | | • |
| 1987 | Syrian terrorists arrested attempting to enter Vermont from Canada | • | | • | | |
| | Militia leader arrested (F. Glenn Miller Jr.) | • | | | • | |
| | **Totals** | **103** | **73** | **126** | **42** | **8** |