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## **FBI Blunders and the First World Trade Center Bombing** **by James Bovard**

As Americans continue trying to understand how the government failed to stop the 9/11 hijack conspiracy, important clues can be garnered from examining the first World Trade Center bombing in February 1993. This bombing — the most economically destructive terrorist attack ever to occur in the United States up to that time — was partly the result of mind-numbing federal incompetence.

On November 5, 1990, Rabbi Meir Kahane was giving an anti-Arab speech at a New York hotel. Kahane, founder of the radical Jewish Defense League (JDL), vigorously advocated forcible expulsion of all Arabs from Israel and the occupied territories. Israel's parliament, the Knesset, banned Kahane's political party for "inciting racism" and "endangering security."

At the end of his speech on that November 1990 night, El Sayyid Nosair, a 36-year-old Egyptian immigrant, walked up to Kahane, pulled out a .357, and fatally shot him in the neck. Nosair was part of a cabal of Muslims filled with intense hatred toward Israel and the Egyptian government of Hosni Mubarak. When police searched his residence, they carried off 47 boxes of documents, paramilitary manuals, maps, and diagrams of buildings (including the World Trade Center). But, as a 2002 congressional report on federal failures before 9/11 noted in September 2002,

The NYPD and the District Attorney's office resisted attempts to label the Kahane assassination a "conspiracy" despite the apparent links to a broader network of radicals. Instead, these organizations reportedly wanted the appearance of speedy justice and a quick resolution to a volatile situation. By arresting Nosair, they felt they had accomplished both.

The trial of "lone gunman" Nosair, beginning in late 1991, was "marked by rioting outside the courthouse, death threats against the judge and lawyers, calls for 'blood' revenge against the defendant and cries of 'Death to Jews!' from his Moslem supporters." A small band of Muslims paced the sidewalks each day in front of the court, denouncing Israel, the United States, and the

supposed persecution of Nosair. As a July 4, 1993, *Los Angeles Times* article, headlined “N.Y. Trial in Rabbi’s Death Planted an Explosive Seed” observed,

Out of those loud demonstrations of contempt for the U.S. judicial system would emerge what authorities now say was a clandestine cell of terrorists who conspired to set off the World Trade Center bomb blast, plotted an unparalleled wave of attacks on U.S. landmarks and political figures and shattered America’s image of invulnerability to terrorism.

The FBI placed an informant named Emad Salem, a 43-year-old former Egyptian military officer, in the midst of the Muslim protesters. Salem insinuated himself and became the bodyguard for Sheik Abdul Rahman, a radical Muslim cleric. The sheik had been heavily subsidized by the U.S. government while in Pakistan in the late 1980s helping to inspire Muslims to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Though the evidence that Nosair killed Kahane was stark, the jury found him not guilty on the murder charge but guilty of a firearms charge — that is, possessing the murder weapon. After the trial, Salem continued his work as an FBI informant, receiving \$500 a week, plus expenses.

Shortly after Nosair was convicted, Salem began meeting regularly with other members of the group of hard-line Muslims who coalesced during the Kahane trial. In mid 1992, Salem repeatedly warned the FBI that the Muslim group was planning to carry off a catastrophic bombing in New York City. FBI supervisors were convinced he was concocting tall tales and fired him.

### **The first World Trade Center bombing**

On February 26, 1993, a 1,200-pound bomb in a van exploded in the parking garage beneath the World Trade Center. This was the most destructive terrorist attack carried out on U.S. soil up to that time, killing six people, injuring more than a thousand, and causing half a billion dollars in damage. If the van had been parked a few feet closer to one of the pillars, it could have collapsed an entire tower of the Trade Center, killing tens of thousands.

The case was quickly cracked when Mohammad Salameh, one of the bombers, repeatedly went to the Ryder rental office in Jersey City and demanded that Ryder refund his \$400 deposit for the van, which he claimed had been stolen. Law-enforcement agents had already determined from fragments at the World Trade Center that the van was the bomb delivery device. After Salameh was arrested, the FBI quickly snared other plotters. *Time* noted that the FBI “looked supremely capable in speedily rounding up suspects in the World Trade Center bombing.” Assistant U.S. Attorney Andrew McCarthy later bragged to a New York jury that the first World Trade Center attack was one of the FBI’s finest hours: “To the rest of the world out there, the explosion in all its tragedy was actually a high-water mark for the FBI.”

Shortly after the bombing, the *New York Times* reported that FBI agents had been monitoring two mosques in the New York City area, as well as Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman, though

federal guidelines had limited their ability to tail them or conduct other close surveillance. Nothing suggesting the purchase of explosives or the assembling of a bomb was detected, the officials said. Even close surveillance might not have picked up a surreptitious act, they said.

A few months after the attack, FBI director William Sessions declared,

Based on what was known to us at the time, we have no reason to believe we could have prevented the bombing of the World Trade Center.

The FBI initially appeared to have a strong case, buttressed largely by evidence provided by informant Emad Salem. In July 1993, the media learned that Salem had been inside the conspiracy a year before the attack.

### **Secret tape recordings**

After the bombing, the FBI quickly rehired Salem and promised to pay him a million dollars to develop evidence of additional terrorist plots. Because Salem did not trust the government to pay up, he secretly recorded his conversations with FBI agents. In August, as the case was heading for trial, news leaked that Salem had made tapes of more than a hundred hours of his conversations with FBI agents and handlers. The tape transcripts were not helpful to the prosecution.

In a call to an FBI agent shortly after the bombing, Salem complained,

We was start already building the bomb, which is went off in the World Trade Center. It was built, uh, uh, uh, supervising, supervision from the Bureau [FBI] and the DA [district attorney] and we was all informed about it. And we know that the bomb start to be built. By who? By your confidential informant. What a wonderful great case. And then he [the FBI supervisor] put his head in the sand and said, oh no, no, no that's not true, he is a son of a bitch, okay.

After the bombing, Salem anguished to one FBI agent, "You were informed. Everything is ready. The day and the time. Boom. Lock them up and that's that. That's why I feel so bad." On another tape, Salem asked an FBI agent, "Do you deny your supervisor is the main reason of bombing the World Trade Center?" The agent did not deny Salem's charge. Shortly after the bombing FBI agent Nancy Floyd confided to Salem that her supervisors had botched the case:

I felt that the people on the squad, that they didn't have a clue of how to operate things. That the supervisors didn't know what was going on. That they hadn't taken the time to learn the history.

It was never clear to what extent Salem instigated the bombing, as opposed to simply reporting on the plot to his FBI controllers.

Before the bombing, he offered to do a switcheroo on the bombers, substituting a harmless powder for the deadly explosives and thereby preventing any potential catastrophe. The FBI spurned his offer. The *New York Times* October 28, 1993, article with this revelation was headlined, "Tapes Depict Proposal to Thwart Bomb Used in Trade Center Blast." Salem complained to one FBI agent that an FBI supervisor "requested to make me to testify [in public] and if he didn't push for that, we'll be going building the bomb with a phony powder and grabbing the people who was involved in it. But ... we didn't do that."

The FBI was also embarrassed by the contents of the 47 boxes it had seized from Nosair and left in storage for more than two years. The boxes were ignored in part because no one at the New York FBI office spoke or read Arabic. One note discovered in the boxes declared, "We had to thoroughly demoralize the enemies of God. This is to be done by means of destroying and blowing up the towers that constitute the pillars of their civilization, such as the tourist attractions they're so proud of and the high buildings they're so proud of." One law enforcement official told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1993 that the material "described major conspiracies and provided a road map to the bombing of the World Trade Center and the subsequent plot."

The FBI received far more credit for solving the first World Trade Center bombing than it received blame for the fact that its informant may have helped cause the bombing. In the wake of the FBI's debacle, there were no oversight hearings or investigations by Congress to find out where the feds went wrong. Instead, the FBI was riding high on the laurels of its new director, Louis Freeh, and was still collecting praise on Capitol Hill for its decisive solution to the Branch Davidian problem at Waco.

Despite the fact that Muslim terrorists came within a few feet of killing thousands of Americans, federal agencies subsequently failed to take seriously the risk of more such attacks. The 2002 congressional report into pre-9/11 failures observed,

The first attack on the World Trade Center was an unambiguous indication that a new form of terrorism — motivated by religious fanaticism and seeking mass casualties — was emerging and focused on America.... However, the strategic implications of this shift in lethality do not appear to have been fully recognized.

Because the FBI was not held responsible for its failures in the first World Trade Center bombing, the agency's incompetence actually mushroomed in the following years. As a result, the Bureau was inept at analyzing and pursuing terrorist threats at home. But at least the FBI got plenty of budget increases and new agents in the years between the first and second World Trade Center bombings.

*James Bovard is author of [The Bush Betrayal](#) as well as [Lost Rights](#) (1994) and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.*

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