



Missed Signals

The Roadmap to 9/11

Wake Up Calls

The U.S. Got a Look at the Future from the 1990s Terrorism Trials

By Emily Fancher

Special Agent Brian Parr of the Secret Service and Special Agent Charles Stern of the FBI arrived in Islamabad, Pakistan about 7a.m. on Feb. 8, 1995. They had taken the long flight from Dulles Airport near Washington to pick up one of the FBI's 10 most wanted, a man with a \$2 million bounty on his head. Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, the mastermind behind the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, had been arrested by Pakistani police the previous day.

Parr and Stern were on the ground for only a few minutes when a vehicle approached. Several men stepped out onto the tarmac. An FBI officer and Pakistani agents escorted a lean, six-foot tall man with a hawk-like nose who was blindfolded and dressed in a mustard-colored jumpsuit.

The U.S. government had spent two years hunting him.

American authorities took Yousef into custody, brought him aboard the plane, handcuffed him, put him in belly chains and leg irons and took photos of him. In the back of the plane, Parr and Stern had created a small 6 foot by 6 foot

interview room with facing airline seats. The make-shift room was cordoned off by blankets.

The men sat down.

"Why should I talk to you?" Yousef asked. Parr told him that the bureau had amassed a significant case against him but that the agents were interested in hearing Yousef's story.

"There were still many things we were curious about," Parr said in testimony during Yousef's 1995 trial in federal district court in Manhattan.

The men spent the next six hours interviewing Yousef, who spoke fluent English.

"He was friendly, he seemed relaxed and he actually seemed eager to talk to us," Parr testified.

Yousef agreed to talk if they did not take notes or tape his remarks and the agents had to scribble down notes about the conversation during breaks every hour or so. The story of Yousef's life of terrorism came tumbling out during the interview. His battle scars were evident: a damaged hand and eye, now slightly glassy, that he had injured while mixing lead azide, a detonating agent, for a bomb the year before.

He told them about his six months of explosives training in a camp in Afghanistan and how he had arrived in New York in September of 1992, linked up with other Muslim militants and attempted to topple one World Trade Center tower onto the other. He told them that he had hoped to kill 250,000 people. But the misplaced bomb that went off on Feb. 26, 1993, killed six, though it injured more than

1,000 and caused \$500 million in damage.

The night of the bombing, Yousef boarded a flight from New York to Karachi, Pakistan. From there he would go on to Quetta, near the Afghanistan border.

Though Yousef had trained in rough terrorist camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, he was also cosmopolitan and charming. "My impression of Mr. Yousef is he's extremely bright, he speaks and understands many languages," said his lawyer, Steven Legon, who added that Yousef is "very Westernized" and "blends well" into American culture. His sophistication and charm enabled him to evade suspicion because he—like the Sept. 11 hijackers—did not fit the stereotype of a terrorist. Yousef, who had studied electrical engineering in Wales, was an explosives genius who could fashion a tiny bomb by storing liquid nitroglycerine in a contact lens case, using a wrist watch as a timer. Always the charismatic bon vivant, Yousef had traveled, lived well and enjoyed himself during his two-year terror spree following the World Trade Center bombing.

When the agents finally got around to asking Yousef why he had criss-crossed the world spreading chaos, he had a simple answer. His actions, he said, were retaliation for America's aid to Israel and its policies in the Middle East.

* * *

Three weeks earlier, Filipino authorities had almost caught Yousef. He and an associate were mixing chemicals in their room in Manila, preparing to blow up 12 American passenger planes in a 48-hour period. The smoke from their experiments alerted a security guard who called the police. Yousef escaped, but his friend, Abdul Hakim Murad, was arrested after authorities found timers,

chemicals and other suspicious items in the room.

Over the next three months, authorities interrogated Murad, who later said he had been tortured, about his terrorist activities. "I have a lot of planning in the U. S.," he said on tapes made by Filipino authorities that were later presented as evidence at his 1996 trial in the United States. "I enjoy it, killing the people there. You can kill by gas. You can kill by gun. You can kill by knife. You can kill by explosion."

Murad said he had studied at four U.S. flight schools in the early 1990s. He added that a friend was planning to go America to learn to fly, but he did not specify for what purpose or his friend's name. Then he told of another friend, who asked him where to study flying and where to buy an airplane in the United States.

Murad's most frightening confession was that he personally had planned "to crash a plane into CIA headquarters," adding he had thought of that idea "because in the United States it's very easy to get maybe on private airline... from any big flying school. ...in the United States there is a thousand flying school. Very easy."

Some politicians, law enforcement officials and pundits have said that Sept. 11 constituted a failure of the American imagination. But the attack possibly reflected a failure of much more. Interviews with law enforcement sources and an examination of trial transcripts in the Yousef case and other terrorist cases in the mid-1990s show that the intelligence community may have mishandled terrorist investigations. Yousef's plan to topple the towers revealed the symbolic importance and vulnerability of the buildings. Murad's plan—it sounded like the plot of a bad movie—to fly a plane into CIA headquarters foretold of terrorists using aircraft as suicide bombs to destroy significant American structures.

Had the intelligence community and the U.S. government heeded the chilling words of these men, could they have prevented Sept. 11? Had they listened more intently to all the tapes, interviews and testimony in this trial as well as several others would things be different now? Had they analyzed the material, dissected it and dug deeper into it, would thousands of lives have been lost?

* * *

Mary Jo White, who led six major terrorism trials as U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York from shortly after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing until she retired in January, talked about the government's broad response to terrorism in an interview in her Manhattan office in April of 2002. White said that "the highest levels of government recognized the dangers posed by terrorism."

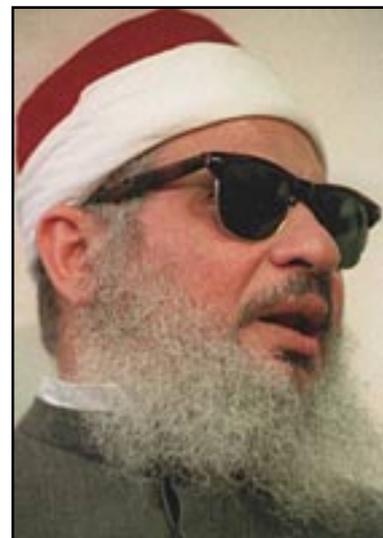
She said that Murad's idea of flying a plane into the CIA was among "thousands of things mentioned as possible scenarios" by terrorists. "Some," she said, "were more apocryphal than others." According to White, the government investigated Murad—and other alleged terrorists who trained at flight schools—though his training in particular "didn't stick out at all" because Middle Eastern men training at American flight schools was common.

White said that Sept. 11 happened for complex reasons, and that pointing the finger at government and law enforcement does not take into account their extraordinary success in fighting terrorism. She said that over the years law enforcement foiled many terrorist plots—such as the "day of terror" plot to blow up New York city landmarks and the millennium plot to blow up Los Angeles

airport—which were made public. But, she added, numerous thwarted plots, some of which were al Qaeda-directed, were not publicized. She would not name them.

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In 1989, the FBI was monitoring New York area followers of Sheik Omar Ahmad Ali Abdel Rahman, a blind Egyptian cleric who rose to prominence throughout the Muslim world during the 1980s as the leader of Gama'a al-Islamiya (the Islamic Group). Sheik Rahman's group wanted to replace the secular Egyptian government with an Islamist state.



Sheik Rahman arrived in the United States in the autumn of 1990 on a tourist visa. "The Sheik had very strong overseas ties and was a very important overseas figure," said Andrew McCarthy, who prosecuted Sheik Rahman in 1995. McCarthy was referring to the Sheik's links to Osama bin Laden, Sheik Turabi in the Sudan and other militant groups from Egypt to Afghanistan. Even after Rahman moved to New Jersey, there was "a lot of international contact." In fact, the Sheik and Yousef were calling the same number in Pakistan from their respective New Jersey apartments in 1992. Prosecutors never explained whose number Yousef and the Sheik were calling, but the calls show that terrorist networks were global and well connected by the early 1990s.

Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, shown in this April 6, 1993 photo. (AP Photo/ Mark Lennihan, file)

Sheik Rahman began preaching at the El Salaam Mosque in Jersey City, drawing radical muslims to his fiery sermons. Most of the terrorists involved in the World

Trade Center bombing were connected to the Sheik, and some had received paramilitary training through the mosque.

During three weekends in July 1989, the FBI "observed and photographed" Sheik Rahman's followers, who were seen "shooting weapons, including Ak-47s at a public rifle range on Long Island," according to court documents. Five of the men who participated in the training were convicted in subsequent terrorist conspiracy trials. El Sayyid Nosair and Clement Hampton-El were convicted on Oct. 1, 1995, in the "day of terror" plot for attempting to blow up various New York landmarks, including the F.B.I. office in Manhattan, the George Washington Bridge, the East River tunnels and the United Nations. Mahmoud Abouhalima, Mohammad Salameh and Nidal Ayyad were convicted on March 4, 1994, for conspiring to blow up the World Trade Center.

Fifteen months after Rahman's followers trained on Long Island, one member of the group, Nosair, shot and killed Rabbi Meir Kahane, the founder of the Jewish Defense League in New York and a former member of the Israeli parliament. The case was difficult for law enforcement officials. The lack of information sharing between local and federal law enforcement, which resurfaced after Sept. 11, hindered the investigation, according to John Mullally, a former New York Police Department Sergeant who investigated Kahane's murder.

On Nov. 5, 1990, Nosair, an Egyptian-born maintenance worker, pulled out a .357 caliber magnum revolver and shot Kahane in a packed room at a midtown hotel where the rabbi had just given a speech. "There were two shots fired," testified Ari Gottesman, a Kahane follower, at Nosair's second trial for conspiracy in 1995. "It sounded like two firecrackers. Two very loud bangs. There were sparks and

fire flying from the gun."

Nosair's friend Mahmoud Abouhalima, a red-haired Egyptian taxi driver, was allegedly waiting outside the hotel in a getaway car, but drove the car around the block just before Nosair exited. Nosair fled the hotel and was arrested after he was wounded by a postal police officer.

Kahane, a controversial figure who was reviled by both Arabs and Jews for his anti-Arab platform and bile-filled rhetoric, was an obvious target for a political assassination. According Mullally, he and other NYPD officers searched Nosair's Cliffside Park, N.J. apartment the day after Kahane's assassination, filling a file cabinet with documents about landmarks in New York, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's assassination and manuals on bomb-making and close-combat techniques. The items seized also included "terrorist paraphernalia" and "one document in particular called upon the group to destroy the enemies of Allah by blowing up the pillars and the tourist places, and the statues and the buildings where people meet," according to the transcript from the 1995 "day of terror" trial.

The day after the NYPD seized the documents, the FBI took them without explanation. But by accident the FBI had not taken from the NYPD one piece of evidence from Nosair's house, a federal firearms license issued to a former Waterbury, Ct. police officer named Raymond Murteza. Mullally quickly learned that Murteza, an Albanian Muslim whose brother had fought in the war in Afghanistan, had been training dozens of men from the Sheik's mosque in police combat tactics. These techniques were similar to the ones used by Nosair to kill Kahane, according to Mullally.

"We knew at that point there was something else there," said Mullally. "This was not a lone gunman." He added, "We definitely felt this was a conspiracy." But the NYPD investigators were told by lead investigator Joseph Borelli to treat the case as a straight homicide rather than a political conspiracy, according to Mullally.

The FBI left the boxes of Arabic writings seized from Nosair's house untranslated for another three years. "I don't think the FBI went through the documents as thoroughly as they should have," said Mullally. A former NYPD commander said "there is no excuse for the FBI not translating the documents" and added that the "underlying current is that the FBI was incompetent."

Mary Jo White admitted that the FBI could have done a "better, faster and more thorough" job translating the documents, but added that it is not clear that had the materials been translated earlier that law enforcement could have prevented the 1993 bombing.

But Oliver "Buck" Revell, former associate deputy director for investigations at the FBI, testified before the House Committee on International Relations on October 3, 2001 about the FBI's negligence in connecting the dots between the Kahane assassination and the 1993 bombing:

"I was in charge of Bureau operations at the time and I never received any information that the assassin of Meir Kahane was connected with any sort of organization that might have a terrorist agenda. As it turns out later, as we see after the World Trade Center, there was substantial information available that if it had been properly translated, processed, authenticated and analyzed, [it] would have led to a direct association between the assassin of Meir Kahane and the group that conspired and eventually did bomb the World Trade Center, and was

conspiring to carry out a number of other heinous acts of terrorism. A proper analysis of the Kahane assassination was not conducted. By-and-large the reason it didn't get done was because of the political climate and the fact that FBI agents were loathe to undertake anything that had any appearance of being involved in the political process. That includes religious activity, free speech, etc., that are obviously protected under our Constitution. It had become very difficult to assess how to deal with those issues."

Joseph Valiquette, an FBI spokesman in New York, declined to comment on the Kahane murder investigation.

The Kahane murder trial began in late October, 1991, attracting supporters and opponents of the rabbi. Tension escalated inside and outside the courthouse. The trial had global reverberations. A group of Nosair supporters raised hundreds of thousands of dollars from around the Muslim world to pay for his elite defense team, William Kunstler and Ronald Kuby.

Despite what was going on outside the courthouse, the case was prosecuted as a straight homicide rather than a political assassination. The FBI watched the trial closely. One of its informants, Emad Salem, a retired Egyptian army colonel, was asked to infiltrate Nosair's circle. By early November, Salem befriended Nosair's cousin, Ibrahim El-Gabrownny, and others who were close to the Sheik.

During a break in the Kahane murder trial one day, Salem saw El-Gabrownny talking to members of the JTTF, Agent John Anticev and Det. Louis Napoli, according to Salem's testimony at the 1995 "day of terror" trial. El-Gabrownny, having no idea that Salem already worked for Anticev and Napoli, introduced

Salem to the two agents.

"Brother Emad, he is one of the good brothers," El-Gabrownny told the agents.

"Why don't you find me a job with you guys?" he asked jokingly.

Salem thought he would also make a joke to diffuse the awkwardness of the situation: "Yes, I am an ex-army—I'm an explosives expert. Why don't you find me a job as well?"

El-Gabrownny immediately squeezed Salem's shoulder, pushed him away and excused himself and Salem. "Are you crazy?" asked El-Gabrownny when they were out of earshot. "You telling the FBI that you are an explosive expert."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Salem. "I am U.S. Citizen. It's a free country."

"They're going to monitor you," El-Gabrownny said. "They are going to spot you. And if something happened, they will come to pick you up first."

Abouhalima joined the conversation, warning Salem about Anticev and Napoli, who, he said, regularly monitored their group and would try to recruit Salem as a spy. Salem's clumsiness worked to his advantage as an informant, though. Before the end of the Kahane trial, Salem had won El-Gabrownny's trust, dined at his house and taken a trip to Detroit with Sheik Rahman.

The group was emboldened by the unpredictable outcome of the six-week trial: on Dec. 21 Nosair was acquitted of murder charges. However, Nosair was convicted on related gun charges and was sentenced to 7 1/3 to 22 years and sent to Attica in upstate New York. (He was later sentenced to life in prison for conspiracy in the "day of terror" plot.)

While the FBI had its eyes trained on Nosair and his circle, the Immigration and Naturalization Service let Yousef, who entered the country with another terrorist, slip by. On Sept. 1, Yousef flew from Pakistan to New York with his friend Ahmed Ajaj, a Palestinian who had been living in the United States for six months before leaving Houston in April 1992. Ajaj and Yousef had met in Camp Khaldean, a terrorist training camp in Peshawar, according to court documents.

At JFK airport, Yousef used a real Iraqi passport to request political asylum, claiming he was persecuted by the Iraqi regime. Martha Morales, the INS agent who interviewed Yousef, testified in 1993 at the first World Trade Center bombing trial that she remembered him as a dapper man in a colorful three-piece Middle Eastern outfit. Morales was suspicious of Yousef's claim, but her supervisor decided to let Yousef go, pending a hearing, because the holding facility was full.

Ajaj was not as lucky. Once INS inspectors determined he had doctored a real Swedish passport, they searched his luggage and found explosives manuals, terrorist videos, fake passports and two plane tickets originating in Peshawar, a known hotbed of terrorist activity. Ajaj, who was immediately jailed, repeatedly claimed he was traveling alone, and the FBI apparently believed him even though airline records presented at the 1993-1994 trial showed that Ajaj and Yousef had bought their tickets together and sat together for the first leg of the flight.

A month after he was jailed for passport fraud, Ajaj pleaded guilty. Though prosecutors argued in federal district court in New York that Ajaj was a terrorist, Judge Reena Raggi was not convinced and sentenced him on Dec. 22 to six months with time served.

A few days after arriving at JFK with Ajaj, Yousef made contact with Sheik Rahman's followers. He met up with two men who had trained at the rifle range on Long Island in 1989, Abouhalima and Salameh. Yousef moved into a Jersey City apartment with Salameh, who was in the country on an expired tourist visa. By mid-October, 1992, two other men joined Yousef and his gang in planning the World Trade Center bombing: Abdul Yasin, an American-born engineering student of Iraqi descent, and Nidal Ayyad, a Kuwaiti-born naturalized American citizen, who had studied chemical engineering and worked at Allied Signal in Morristown, N.J. In addition to opening bank accounts with more than \$16,000, the men began trying to order chemicals, with varying success. By early February, Yousef asked Eyad Ismoil, a childhood friend who lived in Dallas, to fly to New York to help, prosecutors claimed in the trial.

The plotters continued their work throughout the winter, storing chemicals at Space Station Storage and mixing them at a "safe house" in Jersey City. On Feb. 23, Salameh rented a Ryder van under his own name in Jersey City. Two days later, Salameh reported the stolen van to the police so that if the van was traced back to him, he could claim the vehicle was not in his possession at the time of the bombing.

Feb. 26 was a gray, snowy day. Eyad drove the van with the bomb into the B-2 level parking garage of Tower 1 of the World Trade Center, according to prosecutors. Yousef ignited the four fuses, and, as Yousef would later tell federal agents, it was "just like a movie" as the men escaped in the getaway car just a few minutes before the explosion. The men drove to the Jersey City waterfront and watched smoke billowing from downtown Manhattan. The mission had failed. The towers still stood.

The bomb contained 1,500 pounds of explosives, a mix of nitroglycerin, hydrogen, urea, nitric acid, newspapers and paper bags. The blast caused the entire B-2 level to collapse. Six people were killed, including a pregnant woman, and more than 1,000 were injured.

"Literally the entire area in a millisecond just vaporized," testified Secret Service agent Jan Gilhooly at the 1993 trial. "Everything completely turned bright orange and a massive fireball just spread in a second through the entire area."

The wall that kept out the Hudson River almost gave way. The heat, water, lighting and communication systems were destroyed. The bombing was, at that time, the most destructive act of domestic terrorism in the country's history.

The bombing "woke up" the intelligence community, according to Robert Martin, a former NYPD commanding officer who supervised the JTTF and other police squads from 1992 to 2000. Martin said in an interview in his Manhattan office in April of 2002 that before the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, he doubted the efficacy of the JTTF, but after the bombing he realized the importance of this elite counterterrorism unit.

"I think all of us had been operating under the assumption that terrorism was something that happened in Belfast, Beirut and the Rome airport and Israel and Lebanon, and we were kind of immune to it," said Martin.

Calling themselves "the Fifth Battalion Liberation Army," the bombers took credit for their act in a manifestos mailed to local newspapers and later found on Ayyad's computer. The letters said the bombing "was done in response for the

American political, economical, and military support to Israel, the state of terrorism, and to the rest of the dictator countries in the region." Demanding the United States stop Middle East policies, the group threatened to target nuclear facilities as well as civilians and added "our army has more than hundred and fifty suicidal soldiers ready to go ahead."

In their letters, the bombers claimed to be unified, well organized and prepared for another assault. But the reality was quite different. After the bombing, Yousef, Ismoil and Abouhalima fled the country leaving behind Salameh and Ayyad—who lacked the money for a plane ticket—to take the fall. The night of the bombing, Yousef flew to Quetta, Pakistan, on the Afghanistan border, and Ismoil flew to Jordan, according to documents from their 1996 trial. The way the terrorists scattered around the globe revealed the nature of their organization. Stanley Bedlington, a retired CIA counterterrorism analyst, described Yousef's gang as "a loose network of people who had come together informally, like the Aryan nation in this country. Their fear of penetration meant they dismantled the usual cell process to become a very amorphous group that would make it very difficult to find."

The day of the bombing, Salameh returned to the Ryder rental agency to get back his \$400 deposit, which he needed to buy a plane ticket out of the country, and was told to come back the following week. When he returned to the rental agency, the FBI, which had traced the vehicle identification number of the van found in the wreckage, apprehended him.

After Salameh's arrest, agents immediately went to his apartment where they found Abdul Yasin, who was released after questioning because the FBI thought

he was not involved. A few hours later, Yasin boarded a flight to Amman and then he made his way to Baghdad. As of mid-May 2002, he was still at large. On March 2, Abouhalima flew to Jidda, Saudi Arabia, then moved on to Egypt where he was caught and extradited about three weeks later.

There were two trials for the World Trade Center bombers. Judge Kevin Duffy presided over the first trial of Ayyad, Salameh, Ajaj and Abouhalima from late September, 1993, to early March, 1994. And, after Yousef and Ismoil were extradited from abroad, Duffy presided over their trial—from early August to mid-November 1996.

The bombing was the "starting point" when the public, the intelligence community and prosecutors began taking terrorism seriously, according to Mary Jo White. The prosecutors argued in both trials that the bombers were part of a loose band of terrorists, motivated by religious zealotry and a particularly intense hatred of America and its support of Israel. Prosecutors did not mention possible state sponsorship or funding sources, and White said there is still a lot about the bombers' funding and support that the government does not know.

Evidence in both trials about Afghanistan's terrorist training camps revealed that these sites were no longer military training grounds for anti-Soviet fighters, but terrorist universities that taught young men everything from bomb building to hand-to-hand combat and sent them back to their own countries and Western nations to wage jihad. The terrorist materials seized from Ajaj's suitcases in 1992 included information on explosives, grenades, improvised weapons, shooting techniques and killing soldiers and police officers. One book was entitled "Celebrating Islamic Jihad" while another magazine said that "terrorism is a

religious duty."

Ajaj also had letters from the House of Martyrs, a bin Laden-funded guesthouse in Peshawar, apparently for gaining entry to Camp Khaldean, a terrorist camp. One letter directs the camp to give Ajaj training in M-16 explosives and Uzi machine guns. Another letter refers to "Brother Taysir's Flight Company" with an 800 number. "Taysir" was an alias used by Muhammad Atef, bin Laden's military commander in al Qaeda, who was reportedly killed last November in an American bombing raid in Afghanistan. Though there may not be a link between Atef and "Brother Taysir's Flight Company," the letter suggests that as early as 1992, men from Afghanistan's terrorist camps were training in American flight schools.

In addition to letters, Ajaj had terrorist training videos, one of which showed a suicide bomber detonating a truck bomb in a U.S. embassy. The video is an eerie foreshadowing of the 1998 embassy bombings in East Africa.

On March 4, 1994, after 1,000 exhibits and hundreds of witnesses, the first World Trade Center bombing trial came to a close. The jury found the four defendants guilty of every charge. When the jury forewoman announced the verdict, the young men erupted in a barrage of cursing and shouting.

"They were behaving very politely and then to see this explosion of rage and protest—at that moment they seemed to be like terrorists," said Robert Precht, Salameh's defense attorney, in a telephone interview. "They had been young men, sitting placidly. That kind of Jekyll and Hyde display was very disturbing."

Salameh, Abouhalima, Ayyad and Ajaj were sentenced to life in prison without parole. At their sentencing, the bombers angrily vented their political beliefs,

attacking the United States and praising the mujahadeen in Afghanistan, as well as the militants in Egypt, Algeria and Palestine.

A little less than a year after his friends were convicted, Yousef was caught in Pakistan. Yousef's confession to agents Parr and Stern on the flight back from his extradition was presented at his trial. The shadowy architect of terror finally revealed himself. He told the agents his name was Abdul Basit Mahmud Abdul Karim and he was born in Kuwait on April 27, 1968. He said he had studied electrical engineering at West Glamorgan Institute in Wales and returned to Kuwait in 1989. During the war with Iraq, he left Kuwait for Pakistan. Yousef told the agents he was originally from Baluchistan, a remote, lawless area of Pakistan. Tony Lamantia, a JTTF agent who investigated Yousef and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, said he believed Yousef was Baluchi, though Yousef's identity was never settled in court.

Yousef admitted he had "masterminded the explosion" and that bomb cost less than \$20,000, which came from friends in Pakistan. Parr said Yousef had wanted to use more hydrogen tanks and had considered a poison gas attack, but lacked enough money.

During the plane ride, Parr asked Yousef to sketch the route the van took into the Trade Center tower. After Yousef finished the sketch, Parr took the notepad back.

"You promised me no notes," said Yousef.

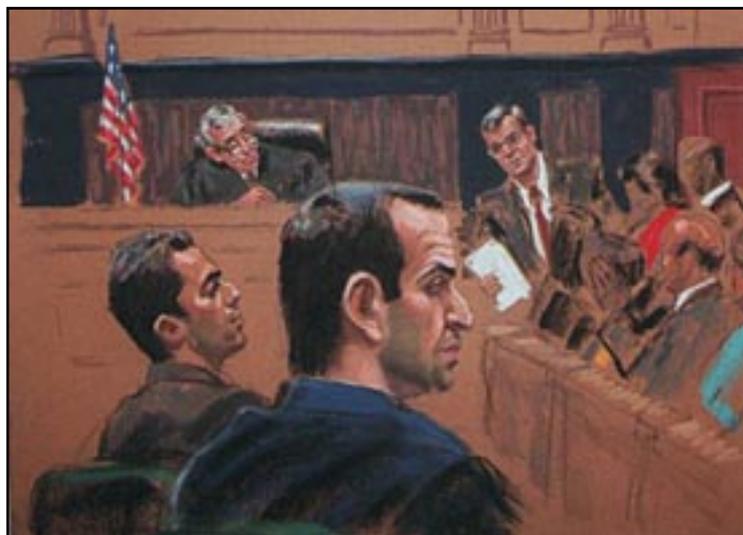
"I'm not taking any notes," said Parr.

"But that diagram," said Yousef.

"You can hold on to this," said Parr, who tore off the diagram from the pad and handed it back to Yousef because he wanted his captive to keep talking. Parr said Yousef began to slowly fold the diagram and then tore off a piece of the diagram, bent over, put it in his mouth and ate it.

Yousef's attempt to destroy incriminating evidence didn't help him. He and Ismoil were found guilty on all counts on Nov. 12, 1997 and were sentenced on Jan. 8, 1998. At his sentencing, Yousef railed against the American government's support of Israel and the despots in the Middle East: "Yes, I am a terrorist and I am proud of it. And I support terrorism so long as it was against the United States Government and against Israel, because you are more than terrorists, you are the one who invented terrorism and using it every day. You are butchers, liars and hypocrites."

Duffy listened and then passed judgment: "The harm caused by the World Trade Center bombing cannot be calculated even though almost five years have passed." He then returned Yousef's screed in kind before sentencing the mastermind to a life sentence in solitary confinement. "Ramzi Yousef, you are not fit to uphold Islam. Your God is death. Your god is not Allah," said Duffy, adding,



World Trade Center bombing suspects Eyad Ismoil, left, and Ramzi Yousef, foreground, watch the jury in this artist's rendering as the guilty verdict is read Nov. 12, 1997, in New York. U.S. District Judge Kevin Duffy looks on in background. (AP Photo/Jane Rosenberg)

"you just kill for the thrill of killing human beings."

While the World Trade Center bombing was unfolding, followers of Sheik Rahman organized a related conspiracy, called the "day of terror" plot by prosecutors. But had the FBI learned the lessons of the Kahane investigation? Looking back at that time, John Dew, a former FBI agent who worked on the JTTF during the investigation, said in a March 2002 phone interview that the bureau was too cautious in pursuing terrorism. He remembered that often FBI lawyers became managers who frustrated regular investigators discouraging them from conducting surveillance on suspected terrorists.

Emad Salem, the FBI's informant, would later claim that he had told the FBI that Nosair's friends were building bombs and that the World Trade Center was a possible target. But according to Joseph Valiquette, the FBI spokesman in New York, Salem only told the FBI that the conspirators were building pipe bombs, but did not specify any targets.

Salem's credibility was tarnished after he failed bureau polygraph tests and later admitted during the "day of terror" trial that he often lied about his background. "I made myself the big shot," he said.

In May of 1992 Salem had made his first trip to visit Nosair in prison and in subsequent visits they discussed plans for future bombings. In early July 1992, Carson J. Dunbar, began supervising Salem's case agents. According to a source with knowledge of the case, Salem insisted on total confidentiality as an informant and met with Dunbar to discuss his demands. Dunbar explained to Salem that FBI policy forbade promising an informant total confidentiality. Salem

allegedly quit the case in anger, saying he had to protect his family, according to the source. Valiquette of the FBI confirmed that Salem had chosen to stop acting as an informant.

FBI agent Nancy Floyd, one of Salem's case agents, was very critical of Dunbar's supervisory style, which she called "extremely unprofessional," in transcripts of recordings made by Salem of his conversations with all FBI agents. Floyd said in another conversation that FBI supervisors were "not thinking the way they should. ... They're trying to live in a past that doesn't exist."

Salem was outraged that he had been forced to leave the case after his demands were not met, and he said he felt he might have been able to prevent the Trade Center bombing had he stayed on it. In a transcript of a taped conversation, Salem complained to his case agent, John Anticev: "I told you they will blow bombs in New York City and you didn't do nothing about it... you drop me out of the case."

Anticev explained that he "gets blocked at every turn" by management and that "administrative and bureaucratic bullshit" stopped him from doing his job properly.

"Nobody is giving any damn shit about the United States of America," said Salem.

"Please that's the truth. I'm willing to say it to Bill Clinton himself. Everybody is just concerned about his chair and his job and nobody give a shit about the United States of America."

Salem worried about the Sheik and his followers, who organized in mosques in Brooklyn and Jersey City and at the Alkifah Refugee Center in Brooklyn, but were in contact with jihad groups around the globe. Through the Alkifah Center, Nosair,

Abouhalima and others had trained and sent local Muslim to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan since the mid-1980s. Many in Sheik Rahman's circle, and those in the World Trade Center bombing group, had paramilitary training both in Afghanistan and at suburban American rifle ranges. Both Ajaj and Yousef trained in terrorist camps in Peshawar. Abouhalima fought in Afghanistan along with the CIA-backed mujahadeen, which had close ties to Sheik Rahman.

Members of both groups were in close contact by phone during the fall of 1992 and both groups visited Nosair in prison. In December and January, 1993, as the World Trade Center bombers were gearing up, phone records show Abouhalima, Yousef and Salameh frequently called Nosair's cousin El-Gabrownny and Sheik Rahman. Salameh visited Nosair in Attica just two weeks before the bombing and listed El-Gabrownny's address on the rental form for the van that held the bomb.

After the World Trade Center bombing at the end of February, Salem called the FBI and was rehired to monitor the Sheik's group. The "day of terror" plot took shape over the next few months in the spring of 1993. While Nosair was directing the plot from his cell in Attica, Siddig Ali, a Sudanese national, began plotting, with the help of an Egyptian official in the U.N, the assassination of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, who was due to visit New York in March. However, another Egyptian plotter in Rahman's group secretly told the Egyptian government about the assassination plan, and Mubarak cancelled his visit. The group also started choosing bombing targets, such as the United Nations, the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels, the George Washington Bridge and the FBI's New York offices, in what would be simultaneous attacks on multiple targets, like the 1998 embassy bombings in East Africa and the Sept. 11 attacks.

By early May Salem rented a Queens "safe house" for constructing bombs out of fuel and fertilizer—with video cameras installed courtesy of the FBI. With video footage and tapes from body wires that Salem had been wearing, the FBI had amassed a strong case and finally arrested the bombers at the "safe house" early on the morning of June 24.

In the nine-month "day of terror" trial, which began on January 9, 1995, Sheik Rahman and nine other defendants, including Nosair, who was allegedly orchestrating the plans from his jail cell, were accused of plotting multiple political assassinations and bombings of New York City landmarks. In his opening statement, prosecutor Robert Khuzami argued that the conspirators were waging war: "The enemy in this war was the United States of America. The battlefield in this war was the streets and the buildings and the tunnels of New York City."

The issue of Sudan sponsoring jihad surfaced during the trial. "We put in a lot of evidence in our trial about the links between the de facto government in Sudan and U.S.-based terrorism," said Andrew McCarthy, who led the prosecution, in a phone interview. The Sudanese mastermind Ali, who was a cooperating witness, testified that the Sudanese representatives stationed at the U.N. had helped him plan the attack, promising him use of their diplomatic license plates to gain access to the area. Ali had also told Salem about "good facilities" at training camps in Sudan and that "the brothers from Afghanistan have been going to the Sudan and they have made a great impact." Ali was close to Sudan's leader Sheik Turabi, who had close ties to bin Laden since the early 1990s, according to court documents from the 2001 East Africa embassy bombings trial.

Sheik Rahman, Nosair and eight other defendants were found guilty on almost all

charges, including seditious conspiracy, on Oct. 1, 1995. Though prosecutors conceded that the Sheik's role was "limited to overall supervision" they argued that his fatwas or religious edicts sanctioning jihad made him guilty of conspiracy. Rahman and Nosair received life imprisonment and solitary confinement, the other eight defendants received sentences from 25 to 57 years.

While the Sheik and his followers were waging jihad in New York, Yousef, having fled New York after the bombing, was in Asia planning his own daring acts of destruction. By the fall of 1994, Yousef was in Pakistan for explosives training with his associates, Abdul Murad and Wali Khan Amin Shah, according to trial transcripts from Yousef's 1995 airline bombing trial. In November, Shah repeatedly called Mohammad Khalifa, bin Laden's brother-in-law, while Yousef bought chemicals, according to an affidavit by Robert Walker, a Chicago FBI agent, given in the U.S. Eastern District of Illinois in March and April of 2002.

On Dec. 11 Yousef boarded a Philippine Airlines flight from Manila to Cebu and placed his pocket-size bomb—a timer made from a Casio watch, a nine-volt battery and liquid nitroglycerine stored in a contact lens case—under seat 26K. He had tested his bomb 10 days earlier by blowing up a seat in a Manila movie theater. Yousef got off the plane in Cebu, and on the flight to Tokyo the bomb exploded, ripping a Japanese man in half and shearing a hole in the plane, which made an emergency landing in Okinawa, Japan. The bombing was a test run for Yousef's larger plot—code name "Project Bojinka"—to detonate bombs on 12 jumbo jets headed to the United States and kill approximately 4,000 passengers, according to court documents.

By early January, Yousef, Shah and Murad were in Manila. It was a bright moonlit

night on Jan. 6 when Murad and Yousef were burning chemicals in their room at the Dona Josefa apartment building. A security guard noticed the plumes of acrid smoke floating out the window and called the police. Yousef escaped, but Murad was caught after Yousef sent him back to retrieve their laptop computer, which was full of incriminating information.

The police found a trove of terrorist accessories in room 603, including chemicals, false identification, timers, explosives and a notebook explaining how to make bombs. There were also bibles and pictures of the Pope, whom, the men later confessed, they hoped to assassinate. A map of Manila with the French, Pakistani and Israeli embassies marked was found, and Murad would later confess to Filipino authorities that he and Yousef had discussed using a "helicopter to drop a bomb on U.S. or Israeli embassy."

Documents found on Yousef's laptop included a detailed plan for Project Bojinka and a letter threatening to assassinate Filipino officials, bomb airplanes and poison the water supply unless an imprisoned militant was freed. The letter was signed "the Fifth Battalion Liberation Army," the group that had taken credit for the World Trade Center bombing.

Over the next three months, police interrogated Murad, who said he studied flying in the United States from November 1991 through July of 1992. Two of the four flight schools where he studied confirmed the FBI investigation, but the schools would not comment further. Ironically, six days after Murad was arrested, the FAA sent him a replacement commercial pilot's certificate.

After the raid on room 603, authorities knew they were getting close to Yousef. Three weeks later, Pakistani police captured Yousef and 10 months later

Malaysian authorities arrested Shah. (Another co-conspirator in the plot, Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, was indicted on Jan. 8, 1998, and as of mid-May 2002 was still a fugitive.)

Yusef, Murad and Shah's trial began in federal court in Manhattan in May, 1996. Yusef represented himself despite Judge Duffy and his court-appointed lawyer arguing that he was sealing his own conviction. The men were found guilty on Sept. 5, 1996.

Though prosecutors ultimately convicted every defendant in these four separate terrorism trials in the mid-1990s the question of missed signals that emerged from the cases, resurfaced after Sept. 11.

"All of us [the defense lawyers] felt that these four young men were the tip of the iceberg and there was a much deeper story and menace than what was coming out at trial," said Robert Precht, Salameh's defense lawyer, in a telephone interview about the first World Trade Center bombing trial. He added, "we felt there were unseen actors behind this. Neither defense lawyers or government knew who it was."

Mary Jo White remembered these terrorism trials as "excruciatingly difficult" because of the intricacies of translating documents and the challenge of collecting evidence from abroad. She said there was a "significant amount of evidence" she would have liked to present, but which would have compromised the security of intelligence sources.



By 1996, White had added a terrorism unit to the Southern District's organized crime unit to investigate and prosecute cases. "I didn't want to lose the learning curve, even if we never prosecuted another case, we would continue to investigate," she said. White, who spent roughly 30 percent of her nine years in office on terrorism, worked with the attorney general, FBI, CIA and high-ranking officials to coordinate counterterrorism efforts.

Former New York U.S. Attorney Mary Jo White is shown during an AP interview on Jan. 5, 2002. (AP Photo/Suzanne Plunkett, File)

On the fifth anniversary of the bombing, the Senate subcommittee on terrorism held hearings on fighting domestic terrorism. Retired Assistant U.S. Attorneys Henry DePippo and J. Gilmore Childers, who had prosecuted the Trade Center case, cautioned that the conspirators had "proclaimed that the World Trade Center bomb did not do as much damage as had been intended because their 'calculations were not very accurate at this time.' They warned, however, that they would be more precise in the future and would continue to target the World Trade Center if their demands were not met."

Dale Watson, then chief of the FBI's International Terrorism Section and now the executive assistant director of the FBI's Counterterrorism Division, testified that Yousef and other loose networks of transnational terrorists backed by state sponsors "pose a real and significant threat to our security and a particular challenge to law enforcement."

But Watson was optimistic. "The World Trade Center bombing heralded a new era," he said, "but not one of increased numbers of foreign-directed terrorist acts

in the United States. Rather, it has led to a renewed and enhanced focus on responding to the international terrorist threat confronting the American people."

Others who testified were less sanguine. Ben Jacobson, a private investigator, who testified about efforts to disrupt fraud by terrorists, said after five years investigating a scheme in New York that involved Abouhalima, one of the convicted bombers, Jacobson was unable to get help from the prosecutors or law enforcement due to understaffing.

Nor was the issue of state sponsorship addressed during these hearings. By 1994, James Fox, who was director of the FBI's New York office during the investigation, believed that Iraq's President Saddam Hussein had sponsored the attack. In her book "Study of Revenge," Dr. Laurie Mylroie, an Iraq expert, details Fox's theory that Yousef was an Iraqi intelligence agent carrying out Hussein's revenge on America for Iraq's humiliating defeat in the Gulf War.

John Dew, the former FBI agent, said he found Mylroie's argument compelling at the time and still does. "I thought it [the bombing] was state sponsored and was verbal about it, but I was a minority. I thought this is ridiculous that a small group does this because it takes money" to carry out this kind of operation.

Mylroie said in a February of 2002 interview that most agents at F.B.I. headquarters and in the CIA rejected the Iraqi sponsorship theory that she, Fox and CIA Director James Woolsey, supported. Thomas Twetten, who was third in command in the CIA under Woolsey, said in a telephone interview he never saw any evidence that Hussein was behind the bombing. When Yousef first arrived in New York he told acquaintances at the mosque that he was Iraqi, but "the people in the mosque scene didn't think Yousef was Iraqi," said Ronald Kuby. "His accent

wasn't Iraqi and he didn't know anything about Iraq." Yousef's sentencing statement repeatedly mentioned Hussein, who he denounced for killing thousands of Kurdish women and children with chemical weapons in the early 1990s.

There may be no link between Yousef and Hussein, but there is a connection between Yousef and bin Laden. Yousef and his group were trained and funded in part bin Laden's brother-in-law, Mohammad Khalifa, who was associated with terrorist groups in the Philippines and had been convicted for bombings in Jordan, according to the affidavit by Robert Walker, a Chicago FBI agent, given in the U. S. Eastern District of Illinois in March and April of 2002.

According to the affidavit, Khalifa "has been closely linked to terrorist operatives who carried out the 1993 World Trade Center bombing" and was involved in Yousef's Project Bojinka. Khalifa's business card was found in Sheik Rahman's apartment when it was searched by federal agents after his arrest. Khalifa's alias was written on one of Ajaj's manuals seized when he entered the country in 1992. He admitted to American and Jordanian authorities that he trained and sponsored Yousef and Wali Khan Amin Shah. Khalifa's contact information was in both Yousef's and Shah's address book and in Yousef's computer.

Mary Jo White said the link between Yousef and bin Laden was investigated and funds were traced back to bin Laden, but that "nothing of great significance" was uncovered. Bin Laden's name was among hundreds of co-conspirators mentioned in the Sheik Rahman trial, according to White.

Bin Laden was close to Shah, whom he called a "good friend" in a 1998 interview with ABC News reporter John Miller. Shah is also linked in the affidavit to another U.S.-based al Qaeda operative, Enaam Arnaout. Arnaout ran the Benevolence

International Foundation, a front organization that helped move money to fund al Qaeda's terrorist activities. Another U.S.-based al Qaeda operative, Wadih El Hage, who was convicted of conspiracy in the 1998 East African embassy bombings, had links to the World Trade Center bombers. El Hage was charged with perjury during the embassy bombing trial in 2001 in connection with his 1997 grand jury testimony about his relationship with al Qaeda. In the grand jury testimony from Sept. 24, 1997, El Hage admitted he had met Nosair and Abouhalima at the "services office in New York." The services office or Mekhtab al Khidemat, was founded by bin Laden, and would eventually become al Qaeda. Mekhtab al Khidemat maintained offices in Peshawar, Pakistan and Afghanistan and in several cities in the United States.

Ronald Kuby suggested that whoever carried out the Sept. 11 attacks surely studied what went wrong in the 1993 bombing and made sure not to repeat the same errors and miscalculations. As prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald pointed out in the "day of terror" trial, the 1993 bombers made "some knucklehead mistakes along the way" but "the frightening part isn't that it was such an unprofessional job. The frightening part is that people can make such knuckle headed mistakes and go ahead with it, and in the end you can have a bomb that can be utterly devastating."

Just as America's enemies no doubt analyzed the terrorist attacks of the early 1990s, which showed that even a bumbling group could wreak havoc, many in the intelligence community who studied the events concluded other attacks were inevitable. "All of us said we expected more attacks and made clear further terrorism attacks were intended," said White. "We made every effort to fight

terrorism for five or six years knowing 'it' would come, but no one envisioned [an attack] on this scale."

Martin, who supervised the JTTF during the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, said since he joined the Terrorism Committee of the International Association of Police Chiefs in 1996, he has "been hearing about when the next strike happens not if the next strike happens." Martin said that the 1993 World trade Center bombing was not an aberration. "The people in the know have known that we are target-rich country and that a lot of people really hate us with a hatred that's hard to fathom. The kind of hatred caused [terrorists] to drive planes into buildings killing 3,000 innocent people." The Terrorism Committee is still mourning the loss of two of its 32 members in the Sept. 11 attacks.

On Sept. 10, Martin says he got a call from a friend in the FBI who told him that another committee member, John P. O'Neill, the former head of the FBI's counterterrorism section who had coordinated the extradition of Yousef, had accepted a new job at the World Trade Center after recently retiring.

"I said to my friend, O'Neill's a lucky guy," remembered Martin. "Because that's probably the safest building in New York. He said, 'Why?' I said they already bombed the Trade Center and lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place."

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