None of the terrorist attacks studied here should have surprised analysts and policy makers. By the 1990s, the intentions and tactics of terrorists had been studied in detail by American analysts for more than two decades, and top policy makers were briefed frequently on new developments. However, in each case, the surprise was genuine, if not total, because psychological bias and poor threat assessments prohibited policy makers from recognizing the attacks as consistent with existing knowledge and expectations of terrorist activities. The relative degree of surprise did vary among these cases, with perhaps Oklahoma City and 9/11 being the "most" surprising of the five because of their origin and/or destructiveness.

The cases also included both behavioral and technical surprises. Oklahoma City was probably the biggest behavioral surprise, because few expected the Patriot movement to produce such a violent act. Khobar Towers was the least surprising from a behavioral perspective, since terrorist threats against U.S. military installations in the Middle East were well known. The other cases fall in between those two, though the first and second World Trade Center attacks fall close behind Oklahoma City, because policy makers and the public were surprised at terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. Such behavioral surprises are inevitable. Policy makers are not going to admit "we should have seen this coming," and terrorist attacks inevitably cease to be a vivid image in the public's consciousness as time passes.

The intelligence community was persistently surprised on technical grounds at the increasing complexity and lethality of the attacks. Analysts were surprised at the size of the truck bombs used at Oklahoma City and at Khobar Towers, at the coordination of the Embassy attacks, and at the careful planning that went into 9/11. These surprises may have been due to analytical bias, a failure to learn from past experience, or a failure to credit the terrorists with the strategic thinking and requisite skills for such attacks.

As suggested in the first chapter, we should not lose sight of the fundamental nature of surprise as it relates to terrorism. Even if one believes that terrorist attacks should be "predictable surprises," one must still acknowledge both that the initiative is always in the hands of the attacker and that the victim cannot be on the defensive everywhere all the time. Yet in each case we have studied, there were opportunities for intelligence and law enforcement authorities to either interrupt the initiative of the attackers or to defend more carefully a clear strategic target.

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A. INTELLIGENCE FAILURES

In this study we have used the following definition of intelligence failure: Policy makers or analysts knew, or reasonably should have known under the circum­stances, and relative to the complex decision-making environment and prior­ities of policy makers, enough information to assess accurately the probability and consequences of the eventual action or incident. Under the circumstances in each case, policy makers wrongly underestimated both the probability of attack and its consequences. In some cases, at least, such as Oklahoma City and 9/11, analysts had predicted with absolute certainty that terrorist attacks would occur on U.S. soil. But even with that certainty, policy makers did not appropriately marshal and allocate resources to prevent or deter such an attack. Where analysts were less sure of the timing or target of an attack, such as at Khobar Towers and the East African embassies, policy makers had less to go on but still failed to comprehend the likelihood of attack. The consequences of terrorist attacks had long been underestimated, as long as attacks occurred overseas and resulted in little loss of money or life to the United States. With the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, perhaps the lim­ited loss of life (six dead) allowed Americans to ignore the potential disaster that would be shockingly perpetrated on September 11, 2001. The Oklahoma City bombing, however, which killed 168 people, should have revealed the potentially catastrophic consequences of terrorist attacks in the United States. Not only should policy makers have confronted the initial physical consequences of an attack, they should have considered what effect any attack would have on U.S. national interests, as well as on U.S. foreign and national security policy, intelli­gence, and domestic policy. An appropriate understanding of the probability and consequences of an attack is a key element of an accurate assessment of the threat environment, which in turn permits intelligence analysts to search for potential warning indi­cators. The degree to which policy makers failed to perceive accurately the strate­gic threat environment, and the impact that had on intelligence collection, are discussed in the following sections of this chapter. Here we are concerned with answering the guiding question that attempts to identify each case as either an intelligence failure or a policy failure. In the end, this is perhaps a false dichotomy. Each case generally is more than just an “intelligence failure,” in the con­ventional understanding of analysts failing to provide policy makers with suffi­cient warning that an attack was likely to take place. In every mass casualty terrorist incident, we saw a combination of intelligence failure and policy failure. 1

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