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From 9/11 to 7/7: Global Terrorism Today and the Challenges of Tomorrow

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In May of 1943, Prime Minister Winston Churchill traveled to Washington, D.C. and addressed a Joint Session of Congress. He said, "The experiences of a long life...have wrought in me the conviction that there is nothing more important for the future of the world than the fraternal association of our two peoples in righteous work both in war and peace."

It is in that same fraternal spirit that I speak to you today. The United States and the United Kingdom share a bond of friendship, forged in the fires of war and refined in times of peace. Side by side, our nations have faced down threats to our freedom, and have forced tyranny into retreat.

Today we face another threat to our freedom, and that is the threat of terrorism, imposed by violent extremists. Our nations have both seen terrorist attacks in our cities. We have both lost citizens. And we have both committed our strength to defeating the tyranny of terrorism.

In November of 2006, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, former head of MI5, gave a rare public speech, in which she explained that MI5 was investigating some 200 terrorist networks, 30 active plots, and roughly 1,600 known or suspected terrorists. In a speech this past November, MI5 Director General Jonathan Evans updated that number from 1,600 to 2,000.

As FBI Director, I am often asked to give specific numbers of plots disrupted, cases opened, and suspected terrorists we are investigating. While those numbers are classified, I can say that at any given time, we have several thousand open terrorism-related cases.

It is important to remember that any numbers we can give do not account for those persons and plots who have not come onto our radar screens. We can say with certainty that we have been able to prevent other attacks, but we take little comfort from that.

Terrorists continue to try to get past our collective defenses every day. They continue to attempt large-scale, coordinated attacks, such as the 2006 London-based plot to bomb airliners bound for the United States and Canada. Many, if not most, of the passengers would have been British, American, and Canadian citizens. This case is now being tried here in London.

And they continue to attempt smaller, less sophisticated attacks, such as the car bombings outside a London nightclub, or the plot to gun down U.S. soldiers at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

Though these plots failed, they remind us that while the terrorist threats have changed, they have not diminished.

And so today, following the examples of Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller and Jonathan Evans, I'd like to discuss the threat of international terrorism from the FBI's perspective, the challenges of intelligence, and the need for strong global partnerships.

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In the wake of the September 11th attacks, our path was clear. We knew our enemies were al Qaeda terrorists, and together, we went after them — from their training camps, to their funding, to their leadership. Working together, we diminished their sanctuary in Afghanistan, froze millions of dollars in finances, and captured or killed many top leaders.

But al Qaeda will not go quietly into the night. It is resilient. Its network is now diffuse. And it continues to adjust its strategies and tactics. We now confront a three-tiered threat.

The top tier is the core al Qaeda organization, which has established new sanctuaries in the ungoverned spaces, tribal areas, and frontier provinces of Pakistan. And new sanctuaries mean al Qaeda can reconstitute its leadership, recruit new operatives, and regenerate its capability to attack.

The middle tier is perhaps the most complex. We are finding small groups who have some ties to an established terrorist organization, but are largely self-directed. Think of them as al Qaeda franchises — hybrids of homegrown radicals and more sophisticated operatives. The July 7th bombers are an example of this middle layer. Two of them trained at camps in Pakistan, but they came back to Britain and lived among you while they plotted their attacks. The arrests last September of small terrorist cells in Denmark and Germany are other examples.

The bottom tier is made up of homegrown extremists. They are self-radicalizing, self-financing, and self-executing. They meet up on the Internet instead of in foreign training camps. They have no formal affiliation with al Qaeda, but they are inspired by its message of violence. Examples of this tier include last year's plot to blow up pipelines at JFK airport in New York, and a 2005 plot to attack military recruiting centers and a synagogue in Los Angeles.

The global intelligence and law enforcement communities are focused on all three of these threats — core al Qaeda, hybrid groups, and homegrown cells.

Our adversaries are evolving, and so are their tactics. We know that terrorists still desire to obtain Weapons of Mass Destruction, and use them to kill as many civilians as possible. But we have also seen terrorists turn cars into bombs and drive them into airports and embassies. The plot to bomb United States-bound airliners reminds us that al Qaeda's core organization still exists, and still thirsts for dramatic, mass-casualty attacks. But we have also seen unaffiliated groups plotting to kidnap a single British soldier from the streets of Birmingham, behead him, and post the video on the Internet.

And that is just the international terrorist threat. The FBI also devotes substantial resources to investigating domestic terrorist threats. We will never forget the 168 victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. And we also have to protect our citizens, our infrastructure, and our economy from attacks by animal rights and environmental extremists. We know you have experienced similar challenges here in Great Britain.

Terrorism is terrorism, no matter the motive. The global law enforcement and intelligence communities must be prepared to confront all permutations of these threats, all the time.

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The essential components to confronting these threats are intelligence and partnerships. I'll start with intelligence. But first, a quick story.

I met Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller just after the September 11th attacks. I was new to my job, and I asked her what she considered the key to MI5's success in thwarting terrorist attacks. She said, "Two things: sources and wires." That is as true today as it was the day I heard it, because sources and wires provide intelligence.

Intelligence, by its nature, is imperfect. Human sources may not be 100 percent reliable. Technology may not always be in the right place at the right time, and may not capture everything we need to hear or read. Even with the best technology, the most reliable sources, and the most talented personnel, intelligence is an art, not a science. It is a continual process of trying to determine what we know and what we don't know, and then finding ways to fill those gaps.

Dame Eliza has put it this way: "Often difficult decisions need to be made on the basis of intelligence which is fragmentary and difficult to interpret...some is gold, some dross and all of it requires validation, analysis and assessment."

We in the FBI are panning for gold. First, we have to determine in which streams we are likely to find gold. Which suspected networks? Which human sources? Which websites? Then, agents and analysts must take their pans and wade through the waters of intelligence, carefully searching for nuggets of gold amid streams of repetitive or irrelevant information.

The gold might be a phone number, or a name, or a receipt from a bank transaction. It will likely be hidden among thousands of other scraps of information. With deft, methodical sifting, we can separate the gold from the dross, as Dame Eliza would say. But as she also points out, gathering the intelligence is just the start. It then must be verified and connected to other intelligence. And even then we are only seeing part of the picture.

Our goal is to get as close as possible to having the complete picture. For the FBI, this means we often continue to collect information long after we have gathered enough evidence for prosecution. Once we have the threat under control, we use these cases as intelligence collection platforms. Our mission is not just to disrupt an isolated plot, but to thoroughly dismantle the entire network that supports it.

As Jonathan Evans has said, “Knowing of somebody is not the same as knowing all about somebody.” Once we identify a terror suspect, we need to know everything we can about him. Who are his associates? Where does his money come from? Where does he travel? With whom does he communicate? We try to exhaust every possible avenue of inquiry before making an arrest. Yet the investigation may still continue — in many cases thanks to the cooperation of the person charged.

With each unique investigation, we wrestle with the same questions. Have we struck the right balance between security and freedom? Did we take every reasonable step? What if we didn’t peel back the layer that would have revealed a connection to another terrorist network, or another terrorist plot? The FBI has learned the answers to these questions through hard experience.

And to make matters more complex, the key fragment of intelligence we need to break open a case may well come from a source in another country. We cannot afford to stop gathering intelligence once we reach our own borders.

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That brings us to the other indispensable tool, and that is partnerships. Within the United States, this includes our state and local law enforcement counterparts. But our international partners are just as important. Today, I can tell you that the vast majority of the FBI’s terrorism cases originate from information developed by our partners overseas — even those cases in which the suspected terrorists and the potential targets are all on American soil.

Let me give you an example. Last month, an individual named Hassan Abu-Jihaad was convicted in federal court in Connecticut on terrorism and espionage charges. Abu-Jihaad was a signalman in the United States Navy.

While on active duty aboard the USS *Benfold* in the Middle East, Abu-Jihaad sent classified information about the movements and vulnerabilities of his Navy battle group to an extremist website based in London. This was just months after al Qaeda had attacked the USS *Cole* in Yemen, killing 17 American sailors.

We learned about Abu-Jihaad from British law enforcement officers, who found a computer disk containing this classified information while searching a residence in London.

That's one connection — but there is another. Once we learned of Abu-Jihaad from New Scotland Yard, we began the process of learning everything there was to know about him. We discovered that he had been the roommate of a man named Derrick Shareef.

Through monitoring court-authorized wiretaps, we learned that Abu-Jihaad and Derrick Shareef discussed attacking military targets in Phoenix and San Diego. Shareef was then arrested in December 2006 and charged with plotting to detonate hand grenades at a large shopping mall outside Chicago at the height of the Christmas season. He pled guilty this past November.

This case is another illustration of both the power and the limitations of intelligence, and the need for strong partnerships throughout the global intelligence and law enforcement communities. The investigation ranged from a battleship in the Persian Gulf to a shopping mall in suburban Chicago. But the intelligence we needed to tie everything together and convict both men came from a house in London.

Without New Scotland Yard, we might not have been able to unravel these plots. Our national security might have been jeopardized. And many lives — both military and civilian — might have been lost.

Fortunately, the partnership between the United States and the United Kingdom is among the strongest in the world. I am particularly grateful for the relationship between the FBI and our British counterparts. It remains a model of international intelligence and law enforcement cooperation.

The FBI has a Legal Attaché office here in London. Our staff works every day with officials in the security services, with New Scotland Yard, and with Britain's other constabularies. FBI personnel have 20 to 30 in-person meetings every week with British intelligence and law enforcement officials. We share intelligence. We support one another's investigations.

Our information-sharing is getting faster, easier, and more detailed every day. As recently as a year ago, we had to hand-carry hard copies of classified files to each other's offices. Today the process is automated. For example, if New Scotland Yard needs to know if we have information about a suspect, an officer can electronically send a file or image over a secure system to our London office. Our London staff can then submit it in real time back to our databases in the United States for analysis.

This collaboration is the future of counterterrorism. We never know when a fragment of information uncovered in one country could unearth an entire network of terror in another.

And this is true not just for terrorism — the same can be said for all criminal threats, from transnational organized crime rings, to child pornography, to cyber attacks. The intelligence we seek often resides where our adversaries are based, not where we are based.

Our enemies live in the seams of our jurisdictions. No single agency or nation can find them and fight them alone. If we are to protect our citizens, working together is not just the best option, it is the only option.

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Like the fascism our nations defeated six decades ago, terrorism is designed to make us afraid of today, afraid of tomorrow, and afraid of each other. It is a battle based not on territory, but on ideology — on freedom versus fear, on tolerance versus tyranny.

Once again, freedom is at stake. Once again, freedom-loving nations must rise to the challenge of our time. And once again, the road ahead will not be easy. This struggle will not end in a single, decisive battle. It may persist for generations, and we may encounter many unforeseen setbacks as we go forward.

But we go forward together. For generations, our nations have stood together, have suffered together, and have triumphed together. And we will do so again.

The struggle will be hard fought, and hard won — but it will be won. Our aim, in the words of Winston Churchill, is “victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be...come then, let us go forward together with our united strength.”