

CIA HAD WARNING ON KHOST ATTACK, WILL NOT HOLD ANYONE RESPONSIBLE

Jordanian intelligence warned the CIA that Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, the Khost bomber, might be working for al Qaeda three weeks before al-Balawi killed 7 CIA people in the attack. But because the CIA still suffers from the same information sharing shortcomings problems that prevented it from finding out about 9/11, the CIA still allowed al-Balawi onto their forward operating base.

Three weeks before a Jordanian double agent set off a bomb at a remote Central Intelligence Agency base in eastern Afghanistan last December, a C.I.A. officer in Jordan received warnings that the man might be working for Al Qaeda, according to an investigation into the deadly attack.

But the C.I.A. officer did not tell his bosses of the suspicions – brought to the Americans by a Jordanian intelligence officer – that the man might try to lure Americans into a trap, according to the recently completed investigation by the agency.

But the CIA is not holding anyone responsible for this horrible lapse, partly because the station chief killed in the attack would have received much of the blame.

Mr. Panetta said that the report did not recommend holding a single person or group of individuals directly accountable for “systemic failures.”

“This is a war,” he said, adding that it is important for the C.I.A. to continue

to take on risky missions.

[snip]

Current and former C.I.A. officials said that the decision not to hold officers directly responsible for the bombing was partly informed by an uncomfortable truth: some of them might have been among those killed in the bombing.

The officials said there was particular sensitivity about how much fault to assign to Jennifer Matthews, a Qaeda expert who was the chief of the Khost base.

Before you accept that explanation, re-read the piece that Bob Baer wrote on the Khost killing in April. He attributes the lapses to the de-professionalization of operations within CIA, and argues that Matthews (whom he calls Kathy) was set up to fail.

On January 10, 2010, CIA director Leon Panetta wrote a *Washington Post* op-ed in which he disputed that poor tradecraft was a factor in the Khost tragedy. Panetta is wrong.

An old operative I used to work with in Beirut said he would have picked up Balawi himself and debriefed him in his car, arguing that any agent worth his salt would never expose the identity of a valued asset to a foreigner like the Afghan driver. I pointed out that if he'd been there and done it that way, he'd probably be dead now. "It's better than what happened," he said.

One thing that should have raised doubts about Balawi was that he had yet to deliver any truly damaging intelligence on Al Qaeda, such as the location of Zawahiri or the plans for the Northwest bomb plot. Balawi provided just enough information to keep us on the hook, but

never enough to really hurt his true comrades. And how was it that Balawi got Al Qaeda members to pose for pictures? This should have been another sign. These guys don't like their pictures taken. So there were a few clear reasons not to trust Balawi, or at least to deal with him with extreme caution.

But the most inexplicable error was to have met Balawi by committee. Informants should always be met one-on-one. *Always.*

The fact is that Kathy, no matter how courageous and determined, was in over her head. This does not mean she was responsible for what happened. She was set up to fail. The battlefield was tilted in Al Qaeda's favor long ago—by John Deutch and his reforms, by the directors who followed him, by the decision to drop the paramilitary course from the mandatory curriculum (which would have made Kathy a lot more wary of explosives), and by two endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have worn the CIA down to a nub. Had Kathy spent more time in the field, more time running informants, maybe even been stung by one or two bad doubles, the meeting in Khost probably would have been handled differently—and at the very least there would have been one dead rather than eight.

And while two of the recommendations Leon Panetta offered in response to the investigation was to provide more training on counterintelligence and to make sure veterans are involved in the most critical counterterrorism operations, that doesn't address what Baer, at least says needs to happen: fixing the entire career path of CIA professionals out in the field.

Is not holding anyone responsible for this horrible mistake about protecting a CIA officer

who died after being set up to fail? Or
protecting her superiors who put her in that
position?