

US**Exclusive excerpt from 'Courting Disaster' by Marc Thiessen: 'Sheikh Osama warned you'**

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From ["Courting Disaster:"](#)

It is the morning of September 11, 2006. President Bush wakes up at 5:00 a.m., and after breakfast with the First Lady, he walks down the colonnade past the Rose Garden to the Oval Office. There, he receives his morning briefing from the Director of National Intelligence, and then calls in his speechwriters to make final edits on his televised address that night marking the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

At 8:46 a.m.—the moment the first plane struck the North Tower—the President walks out to the South Lawn with Mrs. Bush, Vice President Cheney, and Mrs. Cheney to observe a moment of silence. The networks cover the event live, and then cut back to New York City where the families of the fallen are gathered at Ground Zero for memorial ceremonies. As bagpipes play in the background, a morning show anchor interviews former Mayor Rudy Giuliani about his recollections of the day.

Suddenly, the coverage is interrupted by a breaking news bulletin: Networks are receiving reports that air traffic controllers have lost contact with United Airlines Flight 931, bound for San Francisco from London's Heathrow Airport. The plane suddenly fell off the radar screen as it crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

Reporters scramble to figure out what has happened, when a second report comes in: Air traffic controllers have lost contact with another plane—United Flight 959 bound for Chicago, also departing from Heathrow.

Moments later, another report: Air Canada Flight 849 bound for Toronto has gone missing.

Then another: Air Canada Flight 865 bound for Montreal has disappeared.

Then another: American Airlines flight 131 bound for New York has disappeared.

Then another: United Flight 925 bound for Washington has disappeared.

Then another: American Airlines Flight 91 bound for Chicago has disappeared.

As the reports roll in, it becomes clear that the unimaginable has happened: al Qaeda terrorists have hijacked seven planes carrying at least 1,500 passengers, and blown them up as they crossed the Atlantic.

It is the second deadliest terrorist attack in history, surpassed only by the 9/11 attack itself.

The following day, as images of debris floating in the ocean fill our TV screens, the terrorists' martyrdom videos are delivered to al Jazeera and broadcast to the world.

One of the hijackers sputters: “We will rain upon you such terror and destruction that you will never know peace. There will be floods of martyrdom operations and bombs falling through your lands.”

The ringleader of the plot, a terrorist named Abdulla Ahmed Ali, pokes his finger at the camera and declares: “Sheikh Osama warned you. . . . now the time has come for you to be destroyed.”

Five years after striking the Pentagon and World Trade Towers, al Qaeda has launched another mass casualty attack to rival the destruction of September 11, 2001.

A scenario like this did not happen, in part, because the following scenario did: Just before dawn on March 1, 2003, two dozen heavily armed Pakistani tactical assault forces move in and surround a safe house in Rawalpindi. A few hours earlier they had received a text message from an informant inside the house. It read: “I am with KSM.”

Bursting in, they find the disheveled mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, in his bedroom. KSM lunges for a rifle and shoots one of the Pakistani soldiers in the foot before being finally subdued. He is taken into custody along with another senior al Qaeda operative, Mustafa al-Hawsawi, the paymaster of the 9/11 plot. In the safe house, they find a treasure trove of computers, documents, cell phones, and other valuable “pocket litter.”

Once in custody, KSM is defiant. He refuses to answer questions, informing his captors that he will tell them everything when he gets to America and sees his lawyer. But KSM is not taken to America to see a lawyer. Instead he is taken, via a third country, to a secret CIA “black site” in an undisclosed location.

Upon arrival, KSM finds himself in the complete control of Americans. His head and face are shaved. He is stripped naked, his physical condition is documented through photographs, and he undergoes a medical exam and psychological interview. He does not know where he is, how long he will be there, or what his fate will be.

Despite his circumstances, KSM still refuses to talk. He spews contempt at his interrogators, telling them that Americans are weak, lack resilience, and are unable to do what is necessary to prevent the terrorists from succeeding in their goals. He has trained to resist interrogation. When he is asked for information about future attacks, he tells his questioners scornfully:

“Soon, you will know.”

It becomes clear he will not reveal the information using traditional interrogation techniques. So he undergoes a series of “enhanced interrogation techniques” approved for use only on the most high-value detainees. The techniques include waterboarding.

His resistance is described by one senior American official as “superhuman.” Eventually, however, the techniques work, and KSM becomes cooperative—for reasons that will be described later in this book.

He begins telling his CIA de-briefers about active al Qaeda plots to launch attacks against the United States and other Western targets—information that leads to the arrest of operatives tasked to carry them out. He holds classes for CIA officials, using a chalkboard to draw a picture for the CIA of al Qaeda’s operating structure, financing, communications, and logistics. He identifies al Qaeda travel routes and safe havens, and helps intelligence officers make sense of documents and computer records seized in terrorist raids. He identifies voices in intercepted telephone calls, and helps officials understand the meaning of coded terrorist communications. He provides information that helps our intelligence community capture other high-ranking terrorists, some of whom are also taken into CIA custody and questioned—resulting in still more intelligence on the enemy’s plans for new attacks.

KSM's questioning, and that of other captured terrorists, produces more than six thousand intelligence reports, which are shared across the intelligence community, as well as with our allies across the world.

In one of these reports, KSM describes in detail the revisions he made to his failed 1994–1995 plan known as the “Bojinka plot”—formulated with his nephew Ramzi Yousef—to blow up a dozen airplanes carrying some 4,000 passengers over the Pacific Ocean.

Years later, an observant CIA officer notices that the activities of a cell being followed by British authorities appears to match KSM's description of his plans for a Bojinka-style attack. He shares this information with British authorities. At first they are skeptical, but soon they acknowledge that this is in fact what the cell is planning. Intelligence from terrorists at Guantanamo Bay provides further insight into the cell's plans for the use of liquid explosives.

In an operation that involves unprecedented intelligence cooperation between our countries, British officials proceed to unravel the plot. On the night of August 9, 2006—just over a month before the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks—they launch a series of raids in a northeast London suburb that lead to the arrest of two dozen al Qaeda terrorist suspects. They find a USB thumb drive in the pocket of one of the men with security details for Heathrow airport, and information on seven trans-Atlantic flights that were scheduled to take off within hours of each other:

United Airlines Flight 931 to San Francisco departing at 2:15 p.m.;

Air Canada Flight 849 to Toronto departing at 3:00 p.m.;

Air Canada Flight 865 to Montreal departing at 3:15 p.m.;

United Airlines Flight 959 to Chicago departing at 3:40 p.m.;

United Airlines Flight 925 to Washington departing at 4:20 p.m.;

American Airlines Flight 131 to New York departing at 4:35 p.m; and

American Airlines Flight 91 to Chicago departing at 4:50 p.m.

They seize bomb-making equipment and hydrogen peroxide to make liquid explosives. And they find the chilling martyrdom videos the suicide bombers had prepared—including those quoted above scolding Americans that “Sheikh Osama warned you” and promising “you will never know peace.”

While there is no way to know precisely what day they planned to launch the attack, American intelligence officials believe that the plot was just weeks away from execution.

Today, if you asked an average person on the street what they know about the 2006 airlines plot, most would not be able to tell you much. If pressed, they might vaguely recall it has something to do with why they can no longer bring more than 3 ounces of liquid in their carry-on luggage. But few Americans are aware of the fact that al Qaeda had planned to mark the fifth anniversary of 9/11 with an attack of similar scope and magnitude.

And still fewer realize that the terrorists' true intentions in this plot were uncovered thanks to critical information obtained through the interrogation of the man who conceived it: Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

This is only one of the many attacks stopped with the help of the CIA interrogation program established by the Bush Administration in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Information from detainees in CIA custody led to the arrest of an al Qaeda terrorist named Jose Padilla, who was sent to America on a mission to blow up high-rise apartment buildings in the United States.

Information from detainees in CIA custody led to the capture of a cell of Southeast Asian terrorists which had been tasked by KSM to hijack a passenger jet and fly it into the Library Tower in Los Angeles.

Information from detainees in CIA custody led to the capture of Ramzi Bin al-Shibh, KSM's right-hand-man in the 9/11 attacks, just as he was finalizing plans for a plot to hijack airplanes in Europe and fly them into Heathrow airport and buildings in downtown London.

Information from detainees in CIA custody led to the capture of Ammar al-Baluchi and Walid bin Attash, just as they were completing plans to replicate the destruction of our embassies in East Africa by blowing up the U.S. consulate and Western residences in Karachi, Pakistan.

Information from detainees in CIA custody led to the disruption of an al Qaeda plot to blow up the U.S. Marine camp in Djibouti, in an attack that could have rivaled the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine Barracks in Beirut.

Information from detainees in CIA custody helped break up an al Qaeda cell that was developing anthrax for terrorist attacks inside the United States.

In addition to helping break up these specific terrorist cells and plots, CIA questioning provided our intelligence community with an unparalleled body of information about al Qaeda—giving U.S. officials a picture of the terrorist organization as seen from the inside, at a time when we knew almost nothing about the enemy who had attacked us on 9/11.

Until the program was temporarily suspended in 2006, intelligence officials say, well over half of the information our government had about al Qaeda—how it operates, how it moves money, how it communicates, how it recruits operatives, how it picks targets, how it plans and carries out attacks—came from the interrogation of terrorists in CIA custody.

Consider that for a moment: without this capability, more than half of what we knew about the enemy would have disappeared.

Former CIA Director George Tenet has declared: "I know that this program has saved lives. I know we've disrupted plots. I know this program alone is worth more than what the FBI, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Agency put together have been able to tell us."

Former CIA Director Mike Hayden has said: "The facts of the case are that the use of these techniques against these terrorists made us safer. It really did work."

Former Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte has said: "[T]his is a very, very important capability to have. This has been one of the most valuable, if not the most valuable ... human intelligence program with respect to al Qaeda. It has given us invaluable information that has saved American lives. So it is very, very important that we have this kind of capability."

Former Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell has said: "We have people walking around in this country that are alive today because this process happened."

Even Barack Obama's Director of National Intelligence, Dennis Blair, has acknowledged: "High value information came from interrogations in which those methods were used and provided a deeper understanding of the al Qaeda organization that was attacking this country."

Leon Panetta, Obama's CIA Director, has said: "Important information was gathered from these detainees. It provided information that was acted upon."

And John Brennan, Obama's Homeland Security Advisor, when asked in an interview if enhanced interrogation techniques were necessary to keep America safe, replied: "Would the U.S. be handicapped if the CIA was not, in fact, able to carry out these types of detention and debriefing activities? I would say yes."

Indeed, the official assessment of our intelligence community is that, were it not for the CIA interrogation program, "al Qaeda and its allies would have succeeded in launching another attack against the American homeland."

And in his first forty-eight hours in office, President Barack Obama shut the program down.

Marc Thiessen is the author of Courting Disaster: How the CIA Kept America Safe and How Barack Obama Is Inviting the Next Attack. For more information go to: www.courtingdisaster.com