

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

---

Volume 45  
Number 2 *Parameters Summer 2015*

Article 6


---

Summer 6-1-2015

## Insider Threats and Organizational Root Causes: The 2009 Fort Hood Terrorist Attack

Amy Zegart

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

 Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), and the [National Security Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Amy Zegart, "Insider Threats and Organizational Root Causes: The 2009 Fort Hood Terrorist Attack," *Parameters* 45, no. 2 (2015), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2907.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

## Insider Threats and Organizational Root Causes: The 2009 Fort Hood Terrorist Attack

---

Amy Zegart

© 2015 Amy Zegart

**ABSTRACT:** This essay examines the 2009 Fort Hood terrorist attack with two goals in mind: illuminating the organizational weaknesses inside the Defense Department which led officials to miss the insider terrorist threat; and contributing to a growing body of theoretical research examining the connection between underlying organizational weaknesses and disasters.

Insider threats to American national security pose a potent and growing danger. In the past five years, trusted US military and intelligence insiders have been responsible for the Wikileaks publication of thousands of classified reports, the worst intelligence breach in National Security Agency history, the deaths of a dozen Navy civilians and contractors at the Washington Navy Yard, and two attacks at Fort Hood that together killed sixteen people and injured more than fifty.

Defined as those who use “authorized access, wittingly or unwittingly, to do harm to the security of the United States,” insider threats encompass an array of adversaries – ranging from mentally ill individuals who commit uncontrolled violence, to coldly calculating officials who betray vital national security secrets.<sup>1</sup> This essay analyzes a case study of one important subset of the insider threat universe – Islamist terrorists – and highlights the often overlooked organizational weaknesses that prevent the US government from detecting them. Specifically, it examines the underlying organizational shortcomings that kept the Defense Department (DOD) from detecting and collecting red flags before the 2009 Fort Hood attack, when a self-radicalized Army psychiatrist named Nidal Hasan walked into the deployment center and fired 200 rounds, killing thirteen Defense Department employees.<sup>2</sup>

Hasan’s shooting spree remains the worst terrorist attack on American soil since 9/11 and the worst mass murder at a military installation in American history. Hasan may be the best-known example of an Islamist terrorist insider but he is not the only one.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, Hasan’s

---

1 Paul N. Stockton and Eric T. Olson, Co-Chairs, *Security from Within: Independent Review of the Washington Navy Yard Shooting* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, November 2013), 2, <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Independent-Review-of-the-WNY-Shooting-14-Nov-2013.pdf>.

2 In August 2013, a military jury found Hasan guilty of murder and sentenced him to death. Hasan is currently awaiting execution while his case is on appeal.

3 In October 2000, Ali Mohamed, a naturalized American citizen who served as a Special Forces sergeant in the 1980s, pleaded guilty for his role in Al Qaeda’s 1998 bombing of US embassies in Africa. In 2011, Jason Naser Abdo, a radicalized Muslim Army infantryman, deserted his Kentucky base and was arrested in Texas for allegedly plotting to bomb a restaurant frequented by Fort Hood soldiers. In June 2012, National Public Radio reported that the FBI was investigating more than 100 Muslim extremists in the US military community. Dina Temple-Raston, “FBI Tracking 100 Suspected Extremists in Military,” *National Public Radio*, June 25, 2013. As former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Americas’ Security Affairs Paul Stockton noted, “The threat is very serious.” Paul Stockton, in discussion with author, November 9, 2011.

Dr. Amy Zegart is the Co-Director of Stanford University’s Center for International Security and Cooperation. She is also the Davies Family Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution and Professor of Political Science, by courtesy, Stanford University. She previously worked as a McKinsey & Company management consultant, served on the NSC staff, and was a Professor of Public Policy at UCLA’s Luskin School of Public Affairs.

Fort Hood attack is also a case that is empirically rich for process tracing, thanks to declassified investigations by the DOD, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).<sup>4</sup> While these investigations provide valuable new information about what happened, they still offer an incomplete understanding of why. To date, the 2009 Fort Hood attack has been attributed mostly to leadership failures, poor policy guidance, and political correctness regarding disciplining or investigating a Muslim-American in the military.<sup>5</sup> These are important parts of the story, but they are not the only important parts. Key organizational factors – structures, career incentives, and cultures inside the Pentagon – also played an essential and overlooked role. Better understanding of these silent and powerful organizational dimensions provides a fuller picture of what went wrong and the lessons to be learned.

Section one reviews a growing body of research in organizational theory and its insights for the Fort Hood case. Section two provides a narrative of Hasan’s radicalization and attack drawing from recently declassified primary sources. Section three turns to the Pentagon, examining key failures and their organizational causes. Section four offers concluding thoughts about what can be gleaned from this case and why it matters.

### Organization Theory and Disasters

Research examining the connection between organizational pathologies and disasters is wide-ranging but offers four key insights for understanding why the Army failed to prevent Hasan’s 2009 attack. The first is surprise attacks are almost never really surprises. Instead, decentralized structures are prone to scattering signals of impending attack rather than aggregating and amplifying them. Wohlstetter’s classic examination of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor found that separate intelligence units in the War, Navy, and State departments operated largely independently, without a central coordinating mechanism. The result: Vital clues of the attack were dispersed in different bureaucracies, where they became lost amidst the “noise” of false leads, irrelevant

4 Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); US Congress, *A Ticking Time Bomb: Counterterrorism Lessons from the U.S. Government’s Failure to Prevent the Fort Hood Attack*, Report of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 112th Cong., 1st sess., February 3, 2011 [hereafter cited as Senate Report]; Togo West, Jr. and Vern Clark, Co-Chairs, *Protecting the Force: Lessons from Fort Hood, Report of the DOD Independent Review* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, January 2010) [hereafter cited as West/Clark Report]; William H. Webster Commission, *Final Report of the William H. Webster Commission on the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Counterterrorism Intelligence, and the Events at Fort Hood, Texas, on November 5, 2009*, Redacted Version (Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Released July 19, 2012) [hereafter cited as Webster Report]. Each of these reports covers different terrain. The West/Clark DOD review of 2010 focused on whether Pentagon policies and leadership were adequate in the Hasan case and the lessons learned for force protection more generally. The Senate’s 2011 investigation examined both the Army and FBI, but redacted nearly all details about Hasan’s relationship with Anwar al-Aulaqi. The FBI’s Webster Commission report, released more than a year later, filled these gaps, containing an exhaustive review of the relationship and communications between Hasan and Aulqi that included verbatim contents of their emails. Together, these sources shed much light more light on what went wrong than why. This essay seeks to fill the gap.

5 Senate Report, 31; West/Clark Report; House and Senate Committees on Homeland Security, US Congress, *Homegrown Terrorism: The Threat to Military Communities Inside the United States: Hearings before the Joint Committee on Homeland Security*, 112th Cong., 1st sess., December 7, 2011. For media commentary about political correctness and Fort Hood, see Charles Krauthammer, “Medicalizing Mass Murder,” *Washington Post*, November 13, 2009; Heather Somerville, “Fort Hood attack: Did Army Ignore Red Flags out of Political Correctness?” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 3, 2011; Frank Rich, “The Missing Link from Killeen to Kabul,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 2009.

information, and deception.<sup>6</sup> Examinations of 9/11 found similar coordination deficiencies half a century later.<sup>7</sup> As noted by Richard Betts, even if warning eventually occurs, decentralization often ensures the gears will grind slowly, giving the attacker an advantage.<sup>8</sup>

The second insight emphasizes the hidden hazards of routines, which lead individuals in bureaucracies to continue doing things the same old way even when they should not, and to channel information in rigid formats and mechanisms that make red flags harder to detect. Graham Allison, for example, first pinpointed the unintended consequences of standard operating procedures during the Cuban missile crisis, noting American reconnaissance planes discovered the missile sites because the Soviets were building them literally by the book, using exactly the same telltale fencing and construction specifications – without camouflage – used in the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> Charles Perrow, Scott Sagan, and other “normal accident” theorists have found standard operating procedures in complex, tightly coupled organizations to be key causes of chemical plant disasters, nuclear power plant accidents, and a chilling number of Cold War nuclear weapons near-misses.<sup>10</sup>

The third insight is career incentives and organizational cultures often backfire, rewarding the wrong behavior at the wrong times. Several researchers find that misaligned incentives and cultures played major roles in undermining safety before the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster, contributed to the 1994 friendly fire shutdown of two US Black Hawk helicopters over the Iraqi no-fly zone, and ensured the FBI’s manhunt for two 9/11 hijackers just nineteen days before their attack received a low priority and was handled by one of the least experienced agents in the New York office.<sup>11</sup>

The fourth insight from this literature is organizations matter more than most people think: like “dark matter,” organizational weaknesses lurk invisibly in the background but profoundly affect the workings of the policy universe.

As discussed below, evidence suggests Hasan slipped through the cracks not only because individuals made mistakes or fell victim to political correctness, but also because defense organizations worked in

6 Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962).

7 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004); and Amy B. Zegart, *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

8 Richard K. Betts, “Surprise Despite Warning: Why Sudden Attacks Succeed,” *Political Science Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (Winter 1980-1981): 551-572. See also Jonathan Bendor and Thomas H. Hammond, “Choice-Theoretic Approaches to Bureaucratic Structure,” in Robert F. Durant, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010), 638-665.

9 Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

10 Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living with High Risk Technologies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Scott D. Sagan, “The Problem of Redundancy Problem: Why More Nuclear Security Forces May Produce Less Nuclear Security,” *Risk Analysis* 24, no. 4 (2004): 935-946.

11 Scott A. Snook, *Friendly Fire: The Accidental Shootdown of US Black Hawks over Northern Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Diane Vaughan, *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risk Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Zegart, *Spying Blind*, 157-160.

their usual ways. Robust structures, processes, and cultures that were effective in earlier periods for other tasks proved mal-adaptive after 9/11. As the new insider terrorist threat grew, Defense Department officials unwittingly clung to visions of force protection, personnel policies, and interagency staffing arrangements designed for an earlier time, raising the likelihood that Hasan would go unnoticed.

### Portrait of an Insider Threat

Nidal Hasan was born and raised in Virginia to Palestinian immigrants who ran an upscale Middle Eastern restaurant and convenience store.<sup>12</sup> He was known as “Michael” to his friends in high school, graduated from Virginia Tech in 1992, attended medical school at the military’s Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, and spent his entire medical career as an Army psychiatrist.<sup>13</sup>

In retrospect, Hasan’s transformation from Army officer to fratricidal terrorist was neither sudden nor secret. In 2003, Hasan began defending Osama bin Laden, justifying suicide bombing, and declaring his devotion to Sharia law over the US Constitution to his peers and supervisors in conversations, classes, and presentations spanning several years.<sup>14</sup> He examined violent Islamist extremism in several off-topic assignments during his medical training, charging that US military operations were at war against Islam, and that Muslim-Americans in the military could be prone to fratricide.<sup>15</sup> One presentation so alarmed and offended Hasan’s classmates the instructor had to stop it. Colleagues described Hasan as having “fixed radical beliefs about fundamentalist Islam” that he shared “at every possible opportunity.”<sup>16</sup> The Director of Walter Reed’s Psychiatric Residency Program thought Hasan was a “religious fanatic.”<sup>17</sup> Hasan’s views were so troubling, several colleagues reported him to superiors and one supervisor tried twice to convince Hasan to leave the military and explored whether he qualified for conscientious objector status.<sup>18</sup> In late 2008, nearly a year before his attack, Hasan captured the attention of the FBI when he began emailing Anwar al-Aulaqi, an American, English-speaking radical cleric in Yemen; al-Aulaqi was under FBI investigation and widely viewed as one of the most influential “virtual spiritual sanctioners” of terrorism in the world. Hasan’s initial email was alarming: he asked whether a Muslim US soldier who committed fratricide would be considered a martyr in the eyes of Islam.<sup>19</sup>

---

12 “Times Topics: Nidal Malik Hasan,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 2014.

13 Mitchell Silber, “Radicalization in the West Revisited: Confirming the Threat,” PowerPoint Presentation, New York Police Department Intelligence Division, November 14, 2011; and Senate Report, 27.

14 For Hasan’s 2007 Power Point presentation on Islam and threats emanating from Muslims conflicted over US military operations in Muslim countries, see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/gallery/2009/11/10/GA2009111000920.html>.

15 Senate Report, 29-31.

16 *Ibid.*, 29.

17 *Ibid.*, 28.

18 *Ibid.*, 28-30.

19 Webster Report, 41, 75. Over the next twelve months, Hasan sent Aulaci a total of eighteen emails while the FBI’s investigation stumbled. See Webster Report 63, 68.

Hasan was also considered a poor performer at work.<sup>20</sup> Rated in the bottom 25 percent at Walter Reed and the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Hasan was known to show up late or not at all, oversaw a patient load ten times lower than most of his peers, proselytized inappropriately to patients, and even allowed a homicidal patient to escape from the emergency room.<sup>21</sup> According to a memo written by his supervisor, Major Scott Moran, Program Director of Walter Reed's Psychiatric Residency Program, Hasan "demonstrate[d] a pattern of poor judgment and a lack of professionalism."<sup>22</sup>

Despite these outward signs of radicalization and inadequate performance, supervisors consistently gave Hasan good reviews and promoted him, claiming in Officer Evaluation Reports (OERs) that his off-topic presentations on violent Islamist extremism gave him "unique skills" and his "keen interest in Islamic culture and faith" could "contribute to our psychological understanding of Islamic nationalism and how it may relate to events of national security..."<sup>23</sup> As the Senate investigation concluded, "These evaluations bore no resemblance to the real Hasan, a barely competent psychiatrist whose radicalization toward violent Islamist extremism alarmed his colleagues and his superiors."<sup>24</sup> Aside from one negative mark for failing to take a physical training test, Hasan received no negative grades in any of his Officer Evaluation Reports, which were part of his permanent file and used as the basis for promotion.<sup>25</sup> When the FBI discovered Hasan was emailing Anwar al-Aulaqi about fratricide and opened an investigation, the Joint Terrorism Task Force investigator who reviewed Hasan's OERs found nothing amiss.

## Organizational Weaknesses

Hasan's Fort Hood attack signaled the emergence of a new adaptation challenge for the Defense Department: rethinking what "force protection" meant. Throughout the Cold War, force protection involved providing physical protection against external security threats. This was true even in counter-terrorism, where the most serious and well publicized terrorist attacks, the bombing of the Beirut Marine barracks in 1983 and the Khobar Towers attack of 1996, involved foreign terrorists parking trucks near US military installations and blowing them up. For decades, force protection meant higher fences, tougher checkpoints, and other perimeter security measures to prevent outsiders from attacking US installations.<sup>26</sup>

After 9/11, adapting to new force protection realities required two shifts in thinking. The first was Islamist-terrorist enemies could be Americans, including Americans operating inside the military. The second was protection meant taking measures to catch potential

---

20 Senate Report, 27-35.

21 Senate Report, 33; and Daniel Zwerdling, "Hasan's Supervisor Warned Army in 2007," *National Public Radio*, November 18, 2009.

22 Scott Moran, Memorandum to Credentials Committee at National Capital Consortium Psychiatry Residency Program regarding Nidal Hasan, May 17, 2007, obtained by *National Public Radio*, <http://www.npr.org/documents/2009/nov/hasanletter.pdf>.

23 *Officer Evaluation Report, Nidal Hasan, Covering Period from July 1, 2008-June 30, 2009* (July 1, 2009), Hasan US Department of Defense File, Stamp 20100108-330, cited in Senate Report, 33.

24 Senate Report, 33.

25 *Ibid.*

26 West/Clark Report, 26; and Stockton, discussion, November 9, 2011.

perpetrators, not just hardening targets.<sup>27</sup> As Paul Stockton, the former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Americas' Security Affairs, noted, "There was an insider threat that DOD had never had to prepare against in the past."<sup>28</sup> In short, DOD started from a position of weakness: for half a century, the department's structure, systems, policies, and culture had been oriented to think about protecting forces from the outside, not the inside.

More specifically, the Defense Department had three systems offering opportunities to identify Hasan as a growing threat and to take action: the disciplinary system, the performance evaluation system, and the counter-terrorism investigatory system run jointly with the FBI through Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs). How and why each failed is reviewed below.

### *Disincentives in the Disciplinary System*

Hasan did not have to commit a terrorist act or even threaten to do so to be disciplined or discharged from the military. Stating beliefs that his loyalty to the Koran took precedence over his loyalty to the Constitution and his duties as an officer constituted sufficient grounds for discharge. His poor performance also should have led to disciplinary actions, according to both the Senate and Pentagon reviews.<sup>29</sup> Yet this never happened. Although several of Hasan's superiors were aware of his radical views and job performance, all chose to take no formal action. Why?

The Senate and Pentagon investigations point fingers in different directions. The Defense Department faulted failures of leadership. "We conclude that although the policies we reviewed were generally adequate," the report notes, "several officers failed to comply with those policies when taking actions regarding the alleged perpetrator."<sup>30</sup> The review strongly suggested individuals be held accountable, and the Secretary of the Army ordered disciplinary action against nine officers in Hasan's chain of command.<sup>31</sup> The Senate, by contrast, found the key failure was the military's unwillingness to name, detect, or defend against violent Islamist extremism. "We are concerned," said the report, "that...worries about 'political correctness' inhibited Hasan's superiors and colleagues who were deeply troubled by his behavior from taking the actions against him that could have prevented the attack."<sup>32</sup>

Yet evidence suggests individual leadership and political correctness were not the only causes of failure. Indeed, when many individuals fail in the same way, something systemic is usually at work. In this case, that systematic factor was the Army's organizational incentives for promoting and disciplining subordinates, which led nine people in Hasan's chain of command to make the same incorrect call. Incentives also suggest political correctness only went so far: Hasan's superiors had powerful reasons

---

27 West/Clark Report, 26.

28 Stockton, discussion, November 9, 2011.

29 Senate Report, 45-47; and West/Clark Report, 9.

30 West/Clark Report, 9.

31 Jim Miklaszewski, "Nine Officers Face Disciplinary Action in Fort Hood Shooting," *NBC News*, March 10, 2011.

32 Senate Report, 31.

to avoid initiating disciplinary proceedings against anyone in their unit, Muslim or otherwise.

Organizational incentives mattered in two respects. First, Hasan's rank and medical specialty were both in extremely short supply. Army supervisors knew it would be nearly impossible to deny him promotion, much less dismiss him. Due to cutbacks after the Cold War, the Army had a significant shortage of captains and majors at the time (Hasan was a captain for several years before being promoted to major in May of 2009). This shortage was pronounced in the Army's medical corps and particularly acute for psychiatrists. In 2008, the Army had a fill rate of just 83 percent for captains in the medical corps.<sup>33</sup> A Defense Department mental health task force underscored the seriousness of shortages in uniformed mental health professionals, calling manpower and resource shortages the "single finding that underpins all others" in its report about the urgent need to improve mental health care for service members and their families.<sup>34</sup> Of the Army's 27 medical specialties, psychiatry suffered some of the worst and most chronic shortages.<sup>35</sup> While Hasan was failing to show up for work and espousing radical beliefs, the Army was fighting two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, dealing with mounting cases of post-traumatic stress disorder, and struggling to keep mental health professionals in the service. Incentives to promote, were "huge," as one official admitted, and the institutional emphasis was on transferring rather than eliminating problems.<sup>36</sup> Transfer Hasan is exactly what they did. As the officer who assigned Hasan to Fort Hood told a colleague there, "You're getting our worst."<sup>37</sup>

There were also strong disincentives for supervisors to take action against any subordinate because doing so involved high opportunity costs, draining time and resources away from other activities in a military stretched thin by two long-running wars.<sup>38</sup> As one government official put it, "50 percent of every manager's time is spent managing the 3 percent of the people in the office who shouldn't be there."<sup>39</sup> Another former government official estimated that even if a military officer committed a crime, dismissing him would take six months to a year. Getting rid of poor performers would take even longer. The danger posed by Hasan's radicalization for the military was new, but the larger organizational incentives that failed to stop it were not.

---

33 US Government Accountability Office, *Military Personnel: Army Needs to Focus on Cost-Effective Use of Financial Incentives and Quality Standards in Managing Force Growth*, Report to the Subcommittee on Military Personnel, House Committee on Armed Services, GAO-09-256 (Washington, DC: US Government Accountability Office, 2009).

34 US Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health, *An Achievable Vision: Report of the Defense Task Force on Mental Health* (Falls Church, VA: Defense Health Board, 2007), 41, <https://archive.org/details/AnAchievableVisionReportOfTheDepartmentOfDefenseTaskForceOnMental>.

35 US Government Accountability Office, *Military Personnel: Status of Accession, Retention, and End Strength for Military Medical Officers, and Preliminary Observations Regarding Accession and Retention Challenges*, Briefing for Congressional Committees, GAO-09-469R (Washington, DC: US Government Accountability Office, 2009).

36 Interview with former government official, November 18, 2011.

37 Senate Report, 34.

38 In 2008, *Foreign Policy* and the Center for a New American Security jointly surveyed more than 3,400 active duty and retired military officers. The survey found widespread concern that the military, particularly the Army, was severely strained. "The US Military Index," *Foreign Policy*, February 19, 2008, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2008/02/19/the\\_us\\_military\\_index](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2008/02/19/the_us_military_index).

39 Interview with government official, July 29, 2004.



Hasan's religion, to be sure, exacerbated these incentives. The military had poor guidelines and training about the threat posed by Islamist extremism. As a result, some of Hasan's supervisors knew little about the Muslim faith and could not differentiate between legitimate religious expression and outward displays of extremism incompatible with the teachings of Islam and military service.<sup>40</sup> Religion also played a more subtle role, raising the political and legal stakes for any supervisor taking disciplinary action against one of the Army's few Muslim officers.<sup>41</sup> Politically, disciplining a service member for religious beliefs may have been particularly sensitive given the context of US wars against the predominantly Muslim countries of Iraq and Afghanistan. Hasan's supervisors also may have wanted to tread carefully to avoid any potential charges of religious discrimination.

In sum, incentives worked against disciplining or dismissing Hasan despite his public displays of violent extremist ideology and poor job performance. Hasan was an Army major and a psychiatrist at the exact moment the Army sorely needed both and the disciplinary system required supervisors to expend substantial effort with a low probability of success. Against this backdrop, Hasan's religion raised potential political and legal costs of being perceived as targeting Muslims unfairly. Political correctness made taking action difficult; the broader incentives to promote and avoid disciplinary hassles made it even more so.

### *The Performance Evaluation System: Making Red Flags Invisible*

Supervisors not only failed to take action against Hasan, they failed to note their concerns in Hasan's Officer Evaluation Reports. Consequently, when the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force investigator learned Hasan was communicating with a well-known foreign terrorist and reviewed Hasan's OERs, he found no red flags. Instead, Hasan's records showed a well-respected military officer who had received positive reviews from superiors. Some even sanitized his obsession with Islamist extremism as praiseworthy research.<sup>42</sup>

Here, too, political correctness and individual leadership failures played a part, though it is clear red flags did not go unnoticed. One of Hasan's instructors and one of his colleagues each referred to him as a "ticking time bomb."<sup>43</sup> A memo from the head of Hasan's residency program noted serious concerns about Hasan's performance and religious activities.<sup>44</sup> The question, then, is not why red flags were never raised, but why so many never made it into Hasan's official evaluation reports where they would have been seen by the FBI.

Much of the answer lies in the OER system itself. The Army's personnel evaluation system was designed to improve the performance of individuals within a command, ensure efficient promotions throughout the service, and identify traditional violence-related problems such as domestic violence or gang activities. What the personnel evaluation

---

40 Senate Report, 31-32, 47-49; and West/Clark Report, 16-18.

41 In 2008, Muslims accounted for less than half a percent of active duty forces. Yochi J. Dreazen, "Muslim Population in the Military Raises Difficult Issues," *Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 2009.

42 Senate Report, 33.

43 *Ibid.*, 8.

44 Moran, Memorandum, 2007.

system was *not* designed to do was identify counterintelligence risks or insider terrorist threats.

*Personnel Files: The Trouble with Fresh Starts*

The supervisor's personnel file system was, above all, temporary and local. When a new service member arrived on a base or installation, he came alone: no OERs, files, information, or notes from other supervisors accompanied him. Instead, each supervisor started with almost no visibility into a service member's prior performance. The system ensured individual service members "started fresh" with each posting. This policy also reflected a deeply held cultural norm about what leadership means in the Army. Good commanders motivate and mold the men and women under their command, whatever their individual faults or development needs.

This personnel file system had its benefits, but by design it also prevented the accumulation of red flags. Because every commander started his records of a subordinate anew, there was no way to obtain a dynamic picture of a service member's performance or an integrated view of supervisor concerns. All but the most serious red flags rose and fell *within* each command, disappearing as soon as the service member moved onto his next posting.

In earlier times, the Army's preference for a localized evaluation system encouraged commanders to develop subordinates and deal with their problems. In the post-9/11 context, however, the cost-benefit calculus of this system became more problematic. The personnel file system significantly raised the odds of failure in Hasan's case because it isolated the signals of his radicalization rather than concentrating them. Evidence of Hasan's radicalization toward violence spanned six years and three postings. Although different supervisors expressed misgivings, nowhere did these misgivings converge. Each time Hasan got his "fresh start," his radicalization toward violent extremism continued unchecked. As intended, OERs were used for promotion purposes, which meant they were short and standardized, creating little opportunity for reporting concerns across commands.

In Hasan's case, his secret security clearance only made matters worse, raising the high threshold for reporting derogatory information about him even higher. The Pentagon review found that once a service member obtained a security clearance, supervisors were generally averse to reporting any potential negative information about him short of criminal activity.<sup>45</sup> In short, the very design of the Army's systems to evaluate personnel made it likely that red flags about Hasan would remain invisible. Concerns that appeared at the local level lived and died in the supervisor's filing cabinet. Ironically, the forms used to track personnel inhibited the Army's ability to learn about threats inside its ranks.

This problem is not unique to the Army. Sociologists have found that businesses and government agencies usually develop standardized ways of communicating as they grow larger and more diversified. The problem is these standardized communication forms keep the

---

45 West/Clark Report, 13.

organization from learning and adapting to new challenges.<sup>46</sup> Issues that cannot be reported routinely are not routinely reported. With Hasan, the Army's personnel evaluation system worked smoothly into failure.

### *Joint Terrorism Task Forces: The Wrong Personnel*

The DOD's third chance to stop Hasan rested in the FBI's inter-agency Joint Terrorism Task Forces, which drew members from a number of federal and local agencies to facilitate information sharing and coordination.

On January 7, 2009, ten months before the attack, the Washington, DC Joint Terrorism Task Force received an electronic communication from the San Diego JTTF relaying that Hasan had sent two emails to Anwar al-Aulaqi. They provided the text of both emails, and noted that Hasan was believed to be a military service member stationed at Walter Reed. The case was handed to the Defense Department member on the Washington JTTF to follow up. He did, but only in the barest sense, as his entire investigation took only four hours. The DOD official verified Hasan's position in a DOD personnel database, checked the FBI's investigative databases to see whether Hasan had been the subject of any investigations (he had not), and obtained Hasan's OERs, which praised his research and gave no hint of concern about his performance or radicalization. The official decided not to interview Hasan or any of his coworkers in part because he worried – wrongly – that interviews would jeopardize the FBI's investigation of Aulaqi. He believed – again, wrongly – that Hasan's use of his real name on the communications with Aulaqi suggested the relationship must be part of legitimate research. He focused the inquiry very narrowly, on whether Hasan was actively engaged in terrorist activities at that moment, not whether he was in the process of radicalizing and could pose an emerging threat. An FBI agent in San Diego found the investigation so “slim,” he thought Hasan might be confidential FBI informant.<sup>47</sup>

At first glance, it appears a single person made serious mistakes. However, a closer look reveals the slipshod investigation had less to do with individuals, and more to do with organizations: the most important reason this investigator did his job poorly was because he was the wrong man for the job.

Like most detailees sent from the Defense Department to Joint Terrorism Task Forces, the DOD official investigating Hasan had no meaningful counter-terrorism or counter-intelligence expertise or experience. Rather than coming from one of the military's counter-intelligence units, analytic shops, or special forces, he came from the Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS), which is part of the Inspector General's office used to investigate cases of waste, fraud, and abuse.<sup>48</sup> A review of DCIS press releases from 2009 to 2011 finds that the entire office handled just two cases per year with any counter-terrorism connection during this three-year period. By contrast, DCIS handled an average of 52 cases per year involving fiscal waste, fraud, and

---

<sup>46</sup> Vaughan, *Challenger Launch Decision*; Barbara Levitt and James G. March, “Organizational Learning,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 14 (1988): 319-340.

<sup>47</sup> Senate Report, 36-38; and Webster Report 41-62.

<sup>48</sup> Senate Report, 36.

abuse issues such as false travel claims, kickbacks, embezzlement, theft of military supplies, and military export control violations.<sup>49</sup>

The Pentagon had strong incentives to send detailees from DCIS to Joint Terrorism Task Forces: DCIS employees were relatively plentiful; they were least mission-critical to the military; and they satisfied the FBI's demand for personnel with federal investigative authorities. DCIS, said one former government official, "sent people to JTTFs because they had the bodies at the time and the other units in the Pentagon did not."<sup>50</sup> Finding people for any joint duty assignment was always a challenging task, and this particular joint duty assignment was far afield from core military operations. "There was resistance by Army and Air Force to sending people out there," said another former government official.<sup>51</sup> Finally, precisely because Joint Terrorism Task Force work fell outside the scope of core military activities, the Pentagon deferred to the FBI about who was best suited for the job. To the FBI, "best" meant "most like an FBI agent," not someone with relevant domain or intelligence analysis expertise. According to a former government official, the FBI requested DOD personnel who were sworn federal law enforcement officers, which meant they could carry guns, wear badges, and were authorized to enforce all federal laws just like the FBI. In fact, the Pentagon had tried sending more skilled analysts and personnel with counter-terrorism experience from the Army and Air Force years earlier. But because they were active duty personnel and not sworn federal law enforcement officers, Army and Air Force detailees were often relegated to clerical work on the task forces. By 2006, the Army and Air Force were resisting sending anyone, so the Pentagon and FBI agreed on using DCIS to fill those manpower needs.<sup>52</sup> In short, staffing FBI Joint Terrorism Task Forces with DCIS detailees made good bureaucratic sense for the Pentagon, even though it made JTTFs less likely to succeed.

Given DCIS's mission and expertise, any detailee sent from there to a Joint Terrorism Task Force would have had a hard time catching Hasan. This particular DCIS detailee did not find a potential terrorist or counterintelligence threat in large part because nothing in his work experience taught him how to look for one. He believed Hasan's use of his real name while communicating with a well-known terrorist leader was proof that nothing nefarious was afoot.<sup>53</sup> One can see why: in his experience, crimes involved covering up identities and activities, not revealing them. His investigative experience also led him to approach Hasan as a criminal case, not an intelligence threat. He sought information only about the existence of past investigations and the immediate

---

49 Author analysis of press releases from 2009, 2010, 2011 at "Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS)," *Office of Inspector General, United States Department of Defense*, <http://www.dodig.mil/inv/dcis/>.

50 Interview with government official, November 14, 2011.

51 The official noted that the Navy took a different view, largely because of the way that counter terrorism and counterintelligence are handled organizationally. The Army and Air Force used active duty personnel to investigate counter terrorism and counterintelligence cases. The Navy used a civilian Navy Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS). In the Navy, NCIS personnel have full law enforcement authorities, which put them on par with FBI special agents in terms of the activities they are allowed to perform. Active duty Army and Air Force personnel, by contrast, are not sworn law enforcement officers and as a result have not been considered equal partners in the JTTFs. Interview with former government official, November 18, 2011.

52 Interview with former government official, November 18, 2011.

53 Senate Report, 37.

threat, rather than future possibilities.<sup>54</sup> Notably, the DCIS investigator's FBI supervisory agent shared this narrow approach and approved his memo closing the inquiry. In addition, the Senate investigation's narrative leaves the impression the DCIS investigator (along with several FBI agents and supervisors) failed to recognize the importance of Anwar al-Aulaqi, and may have not really understood the danger he presented.<sup>55</sup> Said one former DOD official: "They [the DCIS detailees] didn't have the training, experience, or skill set to do counterintelligence and anti-terrorism because their expertise was in the area of fraud investigations. They share the same basic qualifications of an FBI agent but do not have the specialized capabilities of an FBI Counterintelligence/Antiterrorism agent."<sup>56</sup>

### Conclusion

Organizational factors played a significant role in explaining why the Pentagon could not stop Nidal Hasan in time. Despite 9/11 and a rising number of homegrown Jihadi terrorist attacks, the Defense Department struggled to adapt to insider terrorist threats. DOD continued to view force protection as guarding against external dangers, not internal ones. Faced with substantial manpower shortages, Pentagon officials responded to incentives and promoted Hasan while his performance remained sub-par and his public expressions of extremism grew. Red flags emerged within Hasan's units but were never put on paper because the performance evaluation systems were never designed to collect them. Rather than concentrating warning signals, the personal file and OER systems scattered them, giving Hasan a critical advantage. The Defense Department's JTTF member who investigated Hasan saw nothing amiss because he was trained to ferret out waste, fraud, and abuse, not to look for signs of radicalization or counterintelligence risk. Perverse organizational incentives led the Defense Department to place him on an FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force because of his expendability, not his expertise. In sum, the Pentagon's force protection, discipline, promotion, and counter-terrorism investigatory systems all missed this insider threat because they were designed for other purposes in earlier times, and deep-seated organizational incentives and cultures made it difficult for officials to change what they normally did.

Learning lessons from failure is never easy. People and organizations often remember what they should forget and forget what they should remember. The Fort Hood case suggests that learning lessons is also hindered by a levels-of-analysis problem. Policymakers naturally attribute failure to individuals and policies. While these are important factors, key causes also lie deeper within organizations – namely, in the structures, processes, and cultures that make them tick. From NASA space shuttle accidents to nuclear near-misses, surprise attacks, and terrorism, a growing body of research finds that the organizational roots of disaster are often less visible and more important than we think. Unless the Pentagon's organizational weaknesses in confronting insider threats are better understood, only some lessons of Fort Hood will be learned, and future failures will be inevitable.

---

<sup>54</sup> Senate Report, 36; and Webster Report, 81.

<sup>55</sup> Senate Report, 36-38.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with a former DOD official with detailed knowledge of, and experience working with, DCIS operations who represented DOD on JTTF governance questions, November 18, 2011.