What if? Re-imagined Scenarios and the Re-virtualisation of History

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"Oklahoma State Highway Re-imagined." CC BY-SA 4.0 2015 by author, using Wikimedia *image by* Ks0stm (CC BY-SA 3 2013)*.*

Introduction

This article is divided in three major parts. First a scenario, second its context, and third, an analysis. The text draws on ethnographic research on security practices in the United States among police and parts of the intelligence community from 2006 through to the beginning of 2014. Real names are used when the material is drawn from archival sources, while individuals who were interviewed during fieldwork are referred to by their position rank or title. For matters of fact not otherwise referenced, see the sources compiled on "The Complete 911 Timeline" at History Commons.

First, a scenario.

I. Oklahoma, 2001

It is 1 April 2001, in far western Oklahoma, warm beneath the late afternoon sun. Highway Patrol Trooper C.L. Parkins is about 80 kilometres from the border of Texas, watching trucks and cars speed along Interstate 40. The speed limit is around 110 kilometres per hour, and just then, his radar clocks a blue Toyota Corolla going 135 kph. The driver is not wearing a seatbelt.

Trooper Parkins swung in behind the vehicle, and after a while signalled that the car should pull over. The driver was dark-haired and short; in Parkins's memory, he spoke

English without any problem. He asked the man to come sit in the patrol car while he did a series of routine checks—to see if the vehicle was stolen, if there were warrants out for his arrest, if his license was valid. Parkins said, "I visited with him a little bit but I just barely remember even having him in my car. You stop so many people that if […] you don't arrest them or anything […] you don't remember too much after a couple months" (Clay and Ellis). Nawaf Al Hazmi had a valid California driver's license, with an address in San Diego, and the car's registration had been legally transferred to him by his former roommate. Parkins's inquiries to the National Crime Information Center returned no warnings, nor did anything seem odd in their interaction. So the officer wrote Al Hazmi two tickets totalling $138, one for speeding and one for failure to use a seat belt, and told him to be on his way.

Al Hazmi, for his part, was crossing the country to a new apartment in a Virginia suburb of Washington, DC, and upon arrival he mailed the payment for his tickets to the county court clerk in Oklahoma. Over the next five months, he lived several places on the East Coast: going to the gym, making routine purchases, and taking a few trips that included Las Vegas and Florida. He had a couple more encounters with local law enforcement and these too were unremarkable. On 1 May 2001 he was mugged, and promptly notified the police, who documented the incident with his name and local address (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 139). At the end of June, having moved to New Jersey, he was involved in a minor traffic accident on the George Washington Bridge, and officers again recorded his real name and details of the incident.

In July, Khalid Al Mihdhar, the previous owner of the car, returned from abroad, and joined Al Hazmi in New Jersey. The two were boyhood friends, and they went together to a library several times to look up travel information, and then, with Al Hazmi's younger brother Selem, to book their final flight. On 11 September, the three boarded American Airlines flight 77 as part of the Al Qaeda team that flew the mid-sized jet into the west façade of the Pentagon. They died along with the piloting hijacker, all the passengers, and 125 people on the ground. Theirs was one of four airplanes hijacked that day, one of which was crashed by passengers, the others into significant sites of American power, by men who had been living for varying lengths of time all but unnoticed in the United States.

No one thought that Trooper Parkins, or the other officers with whom the 9/11 hijackers crossed paths, should have acted differently. The Commissioner of the Oklahoma Department of Public Safety himself commented that the trooper "did the right thing" at that April traffic stop. And yet, interviewed by a local newspaper in January of 2002, Parkins mused to the reporter "it's difficult sometimes to think back and go: 'What if you had known something else?'" (Clay and Ellis).

II. Missed Opportunities

1781			Alshehhi	christening of the carrier RONALD				
	4/1/2001	TR		Nawaf Alhazmi received a speeding ticket and a summons for failure to wear safety belt from Oklahoma State Highway Patrol. AL-HAZMI was driving 1988 blue Toyota Corolla..	04/01/2001 at 6:59 pm vehicle is queried and at 7:03 pm N. Alhazmi is queried by OK Highway Patrol, Clinton, OK (Per NCIC Offline Search, CJIS)			265A-NY-280350-W Serial : 693 Item k2453 and k2454 and OC Serial : 1541 and 302 Serial : 58753 and 302 Serial : 58757
1782			Nawaf Alhazmi					Passport B559583-

"Hijackers Timeline (Redacted)." CC BY-SA 4.0 2015 by author, using the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)'s "Working Draft Chronology of Events for Hijackers and Associates".

In fact, several of the men who would become the 9/11 hijackers were stopped for minor traffic violations. Mohamed Atta, usually pointed to as the ringleader, was given a citation in Florida that spring of 2001 for driving without a license. When he missed his court date, a bench warrant was issued (Wall Street Journal). Perhaps the warrant was not flagged properly, however, since nothing happened when he was pulled over again, for speeding.

In the government inquiries that followed attack, and in the press, these brushes with the law were "missed opportunities" to thwart the 9/11 plot (Kean and Hamilton, Report 353). Among a certain set of career law enforcement personnel, particularly those active in management and police associations, these missed opportunities were fraught with a sense of personal failure. Yet, in short order, they were to become a source of professional revelation.

The scenarios—Trooper Parkins and Al Hazmi, other encounters in other states, the general fact that there had been chance meetings between police officers and the hijackers—were re-imagined in the aftermath of 9/11. Those moments were returned to and reversed, so that multiple potentialities could be seen, beyond or in addition to what had taken place. The deputy director of an intelligence fusion centre told me in an interview, "it is always a local cop who saw something" and he replayed how the incidents of contact had unfolded with the men. These scenarios offered a way to recapture the past. In the uncertainty of every encounter, whether a traffic stop or questioning someone taking photos of a landmark (and potential terrorist target), was also potential.

Through a process of re-imagining, police encounters with the public became part of the government's "national intelligence" strategy. Previously a division had been marked

between foreign and domestic intelligence. While the phrase "national intelligence" had long been used, notably in National Intelligence Estimates, after 9/11 it became more significant. The overall director of the US intelligence community became the Director National Intelligence, for instance, and the cohesive term marked the way that increasingly diverse institutional components, types of data and forms of action were evolving to address the collection of data and intelligence production (McConnell).

In a series of working groups mobilised by members of major police professional organisations, and funded by the US Department of Justice, career officers and representatives from federal agencies produced detailed recommendations and plans for involving police in the new Information Sharing Environment. Among the plans drawn up during this period was what would eventually come to be the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative, built principally around the idea of encounters such as the one between Parkins and Al Hazmi.

Map 1: Map of pilot sites in the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Evaluation Environment in 2010 (courtesy of the author; no longer available online).

In an interview, a fusion centre director who participated in this planning as well as its implementation, told me that his thought had been, "if we train state and local cops to understand pre-terrorism indicators, if we train them to be more curious, and to question more what they see," this could feed into "a system where they could actually get that information to somebody where it matters."
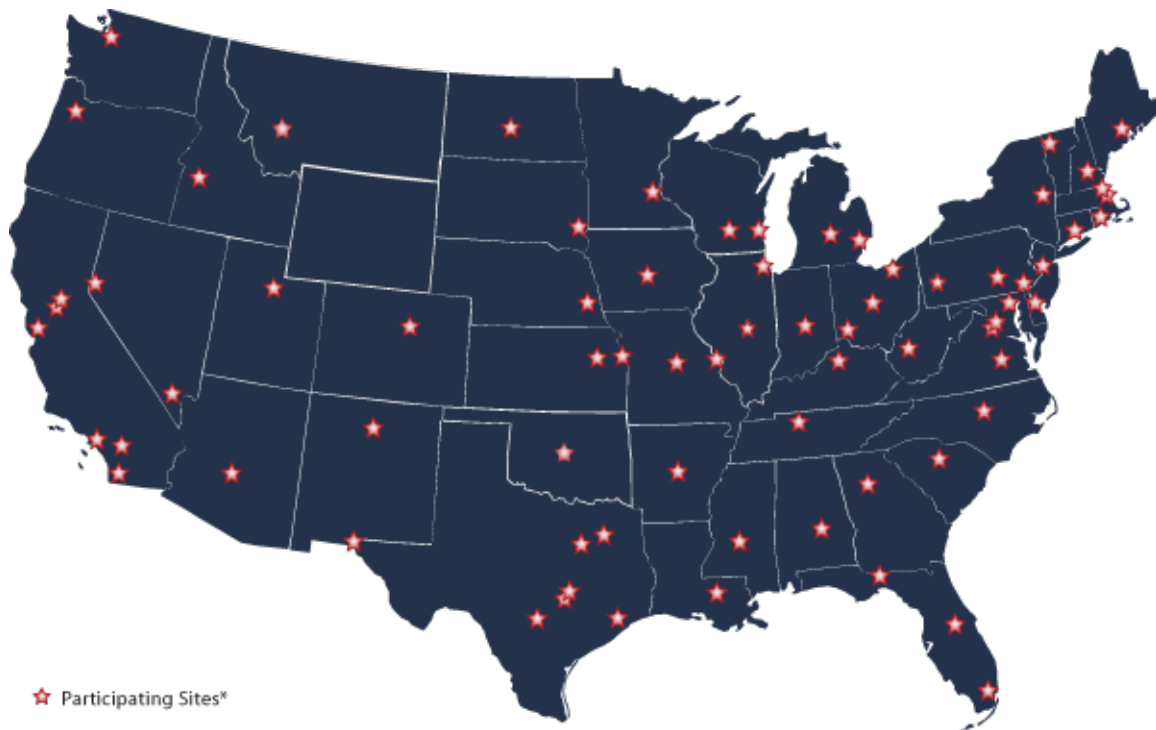
Map 2: Map of participating sites in the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative, as of 2014.

In devising the reporting initiative, the working groups counter-actualised the scenarios of those encounters, and the kinds of larger plots to which they were understood to belong, in order to extract a set of concepts: categories of suspicious "activities" or "patterns of behaviour" corresponding to the phases of a terrorism event in the process of becoming (Deleuze, *Negotiations*). This conceptualisation of terrorism was standardised, so that it could be taught, and applied, in discerning and documenting the incidents comprising an event's phases.

In police officer training, the various suspicious behaviours were called "terrorism precursor activities" and were divided between criminal and non-criminal. "Functional Standards," developed by the Los Angeles Police Department and then tested by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), served to code the observed behaviours for

sharing (via compatible communication protocols) up the federal hierarchy and also horizontally between states and regions. In the popular parlance of videos made for the public by local police departments and DHS, which would come to populate the internet within a few years, these categories were "signs of terrorism," more specifically: surveillance, eliciting information, testing security, and so on.

"The Seven Signs of Terrorism (sometimes eight)." CC BY-SA 4.0 2015 by author, using materials in the public domain.

If the problem of 9/11 had been that the men who would become hijackers had gone unnoticed, the basic idea of the Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative was to create a mechanism through which the eyes and ears of everyone could contribute to their detection. In this vein, "If You See Something, Say Something™" was a campaign that originated with the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and was then licensed for use to DHS. The tips and leads such campaigns generated, together with the reports from officers on suspicious incidents that might have to do with terrorism, were coordinated in the Information Sharing Environment. Drawing on reports thus generated, the Federal Government would, in theory, communicate timely information on security threats to law enforcement so that they would be better able to discern the incidents to be reported. The cycle aimed to catch events in emergence, in a distinctively anticipatory strategy of counterterrorism (Stalcup).

III. Re-imagination
A curious fact emerges from this history, and it is key to understanding how this initiative developed. That is, there was nothing suspicious in the encounters. The soon-to-be terrorists' licenses were up-to-date, the cars were legal, they were not nervous. Even Mohamed Atta's warrant would have resulted in nothing more than a fine. It is not self-evident, given these facts, how a governmental technology came to be

designed from these scenarios. How—if nothing seemed of immediate concern, if there had been nothing suspicious to discern—did an intelligence strategy come to be assembled around such encounters?

Evidently, strident demands were made after the events of 9/11 to know, "what went wrong?" Policies were crafted and implemented according to the answers given: it was too easy to obtain identification, or to enter and stay in the country, or to buy airplane tickets and fly. But the trooper's question, the reader will recall, was somewhat different. He had said, "It's difficult sometimes to think back and go: 'What if you had known something else?'" To ask "what if you had known something else?" is also to ask what else might have been.

Janet Roitman shows that identifying a crisis tends to implicate precisely the question of what went wrong. Crisis, and its critique, take up history as a series of right and wrong turns, bad choices made between existing dichotomies (90): liberty-security, security-privacy, ordinary-suspicious. It is to say, what were the possibilities and how could we have selected the correct one? Such questions seek to retrospectively uncover latencies—systemic or structural, human error or a moral lapse (71)—but they ask of those latencies what false understanding of the enemy, of threat, of priorities, allowed a terrible thing to happen.

"What if…?" instead turns to the virtuality hidden in history, through which missed opportunities can be re-imagined.

"[The Cholmondeley Sisters and Their Swaddled Babies](#)." Anonymous, c. 1600-1610 (British School, 17th century) CC BY-SA 4.0 2015 by author, using materials in the public domain.

Gilles Deleuze, speaking with Claire Parnet, says, "memory is not an actual image which forms after the object has been perceived, but a virtual image coexisting with the actual perception of the object" (150). Re-imagined scenarios take up the potential of memory, so that as the trooper's traffic stop was revisited, it also became a way of imagining what else might have been. As Immanuel Kant, among others, points out, "the productive power of imagination is […] not exactly creative, for it is not capable of producing a sense representation that was never given to our faculty of sense; one can always furnish evidence of the material of its ideas" (61). The "memory" of these encounters provided the material for re-imagining them, and thereby re-virtualising history.

This was different than other governmental responses, such as examining past events in order to assess the probable risk of their repetition, or drawing on past events to imagine future scenarios, for use in exercises that identify vulnerabilities and remedy deficiencies (Anderson). Re-imagining scenarios of police-hijacker encounters through the question of "what if?" evoked what Erin Manning calls "a certain array of recognizable elastic points" (39), through which options for other movements were invented. The Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative's architects instrumentalised such moments as they designed new governmental entities and programs to anticipate terrorism.

For each element of the encounter, an aspect of the initiative was developed: training, functional standards, a way to (hypothetically) get real-time information about threats. Suspicion was identified as a key affect, one which, if cultivated, could offer a way to effectively deal not with binary right or wrong possibilities, but with the potential which lies nestled in uncertainty. The "signs of terrorism" (that is, categories of "terrorism precursor activities") served to maximise *receptivity* to encounters. Indeed, it can apparently create an oversensitivity, manifested, for example, in police surveillance of innocent people exercising their right to assemble (Madigan), or the confiscation of photographers's equipment (Simon).

"What went wrong?" and "what if?" were different interrogations of the same pre-9/11 incidents. The questions are of course intimately related. Moments where something went wrong are when one is likely to ask, what else might have been known? Moreover, what else might have been? The answers to each question informed and shaped the other, as re-imagined scenarios became the means of extracting categories of suspicious activities and patterns of behaviour that comprise the phases of an event in becoming.

Conclusion

The 9/11 Commission, after two years of investigation into the causes of the disastrous day, reported that "the most important failure was one of imagination" (Kean and

Hamilton, *Summary*). The iconic images of 9/11—such as airplanes being flown into symbols of American power—already existed, in guises ranging from fictive thrillers to the infamous FBI field memo sent to headquarters on Arab men learning to fly, but not land. In 1974 there had already been an actual (failed) attempt to steal a plane and kill the president by crashing it into the White House (Kean and Hamilton, *Report* Ch11 n21). The threats had been imagined, as Pat O'Malley and Philip Bougen put it, but not how to govern them, and because the ways to address those threats had been not imagined, they were discounted as matters for intervention (29).

O'Malley and Bougen argue that one effect of 9/11, and the general rise of incalculable insecurities, was to make it necessary for the "merely imaginable" to become governable. Images of threats from the mundane to the extreme had to be conjured, and then imagination applied again, to devise ways to render them amenable to calculation, minimisation or elimination. In the words of the 9/11 Commission, the Government must bureaucratise imagination.

There is a sense in which this led to more of the same. Re-imagining the early encounters reinforced expectations for officers to do what they already do, that is, to be on the lookout for suspicious behaviours. Yet, the images of threat brought forth, in their mixing of memory and an elastic "almost," generated their own momentum and distinctive demands. Existing capacities, such as suspicion, were re-shaped and elaborated into specific forms of security governance. The question of "what if?" and the scenarios of police-hijacker encounter were particularly potent equipment for this re-imagining of history and its re-virtualisation.

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