

On September 11, 2001, the United States of America suffered one of the bloodiest — if not actually the bloodiest — terrorist attacks in the post-World War II history of our planet. A version of the official report said: "Nearly 3,000 people died in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In lower Manhattan, on a field in Pennsylvania, and along the banks of the Potomac, the United States suffered the single largest loss of life from an enemy attack on its soil". Fourteen months later, in November 2002, President George W. Bush, supported by the American Congress, established the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, otherwise known as the 9/11 Commission. The commission was directed to "examine the facts and circumstances surrounding the September 11 attacks, identify lessons learned, and provide recommendations to safeguard against future acts of terrorism".

In its report, officially published some months ago, the Commission announced that America was a victim, not of terrorism in general, but of global "Islamist terrorism". It warned that the threat of further attacks remains, and can be removed only through the application of a "broad political-military strategy that rests on a firm tripod of policies, namely, to attack terrorists and their organisations, prevent the continued growth of Islamist terrorism, and protect against and prepare for terrorist attacks". The regions to watch include Pakistan and Afghanistan; Saudi Arabia and Yemen; Somalia and Kenya; Southeast Asia, from Thailand to Southern Philippine's to Indonesia; West Africa, including Nigeria and Mali; and "European cities with expatriate Moslem communities, especially cities in central and eastern Europe where security forces and border controls are less effective". I think Nigerians ought to take note of the inclusion of their country.

What actually happened on Tuesday, September 11, 2001? I base my reconstruction on the "authorised edition" of the

What happened on September 11?

Commission's Report. You may need a map of the United States to assist you here. In the morning of Monday, September 10, 2001, two men drove from Boston to Portland. The following morning, September 11, they did the reverse journey, that is, from Portland to Boston by air. At the Portland airport, one of the men was "fingered" by a computerised security system. The airport security weighed the level of the "fingering" and decided that the "fingered" passenger should board the plane before his luggage was put on board. The man did not complain. He and his colleague boarded the plane, and arrived in Boston at 6.45 a.m. Seven minutes later, the "fingered" man took a call from someone at another terminal of the same airport. They spoke for three minutes. The two men, who had arrived from Portland, were then joined by three others and they all boarded a flight scheduled to depart for Los Angeles at 7.45 a.m.

After the telephone discussion the man at the other end was joined by four other men, and the five men boarded another flight bound for Los Angeles. This second flight, from the same airport, was scheduled to depart at 8.00 a.m. Some of the five men, although not nervous, appeared not conversant with air travel: "They had trouble understanding the standard security questions". The ticket agent had to go through the questions slowly "until they gave the routine, reassuring answers". But some of them were actually armed; so were their colleagues in the other flight. They were all cleared. They entered the planes and took their seats: some in the first-class cabins, others in the business cabins.

The scene now moves hundreds of kilometres southwest of Boston, to the Dulles International Airport, in Washington, where a plane was preparing to fly to Los Angeles, the same Los Angeles. Between

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7.15 a.m. and 7.35 a.m., five men, including two brothers, boarded the flight. All the five were "selected" by the security system for "extra scrutiny". Their passage through the checkpoints had set off alarms. They were subjected to extra screening. The brothers, in particular looked "suspicious", with one of them unable to communicate in English. According to the Commission's Report, "the only consequence of their selection was that their checked bags were held off the plane until it was confirmed that they had boarded the aircraft". In short, the five men passed the security tests and were allowed to enter the aircraft. Some sat in the business cabin, others in first-class.

Finally to Newark Airport. Between 7.03 a.m. and 7.39 a.m., four men checked into an aircraft bound for San Francisco. Two of them carried luggage, the other two did not. One was "fingered", his bag was screened for explosives, but nothing unusual was found in it. The four men successfully passed through the security check-points, entered the plane, and sat in first-class, as the plane had no business-class section. Thus, by 8.00 a.m. on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, according to the Commission's Reports, 19 men, distributed into four transcontinental flights, "had defeated all the security layers that America's civil aviation security then had in place to prevent a hijacking". Outside the planes everything was normal, the weather was fine, and people were going about their normal businesses.

The hijacking of the first airplane started at about 8.14 a.m. that is, 15 minutes into the flight. It ended at 8.46 a.m. when it crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre in New York City. All on board, including the hijackers and "an unknown number of people in the tower" were killed. The hijackers had overpowered the pilot, the crew and the other passengers.

They then took over the plane and steered it to New York City. The second flight took off at 8.14 a.m. just as the first one was being hijacked. At about 8.42 a.m. that is, about 28 minutes into the flight, the flight crew reported to the ground control that as their plane was taking off they heard a "suspicious transmission" from another plane. The hijacking started shortly after this report. At about 9.03 a.m. the second hijacked plane struck the South Tower of the World Trade Centre. "All on board, along with an unknown number of people in the tower, were killed instantly".

The third aircraft was scheduled to take off at 8.10 a.m. but it took off 10 minutes behind schedule. The hijacking started about 30 minutes later that is, a couple of minutes after the crash of the first plane. It ended at 9.37 a.m. when it crashed into the Defence Ministry, the Pentagon, in Washington, "travelling at approximately 530 miles per hour". All on board, "as well as many civilian and military personnel in the building were killed".

The fourth plane took off from Newark (New Jersey) Liberty International Airport at 8.42 a.m. more than 25 minutes behind schedule. The hijacking started at about 9.28 a.m. There ensued a long and bitter struggle between the hijackers and the passengers. According to the Commission's Report, the objective of the hijackers was to crash the plane into "symbols of the American Republic, the Capitol or the White House". But this was defeated by the "alerted, unarmed passengers". In the event, the aircraft "plowed into an empty field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania at 580 miles per hour, about 20 minutes' flying time from Washington D.C.". We note that it was this fourth plane which had four hijackers, instead of five, that failed to reach its objective.

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks and the United States naturally

blamed the airport security systems in the country — both the equipment and the personnel. We have seen some of the very obvious lapses. But then the Commission conceded that the various security agencies and air defence systems operated on certain national security presumptions, including the belief that a hijacked plane would be "readily identifiable and would not attempt to disappear", and that hijacking "would take the traditional form: that is, that it would not be a suicide hijacking designed to convert the aircraft into a guided missile". The Report covered what happened, how it happened, what could have happened if some human errors had been eliminated, and what should be done to prevent future attacks. The report took about 350,000 words spread into 567 pages.

I conclude with three of the Commission's recommendations: One: "The US government must identify and prioritise actual or potential terrorist sanctuaries. For each, it should have a realistic strategy to keep possible terrorists insecure and on the run, using all elements of national power. We should reach out, listen to and work with other countries that can help". Two: "A comprehensive US strategy to counter terrorism should include economic policies that encourage development, more open societies, and opportunities for people to improve the lives of their families and to enhance prospects for their children's future". Three: "The United States should engage other nations in developing a comprehensive coalition strategy against Islamist terrorism. There are several multilateral institutions in which such issues should be addressed.

My feeling after reading this report was that of depression: caused by the conviction that the rulers of America do not understand the world in which they wield so much power. In particular, they do not understand the cause and depth of the anger of the peoples of the world against American imperialism.