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Are We Safer? An Epilogue

By [David Cole](#)

On Thursday, February 9, shortly after my article "Are We Safer?" [*NYR*, March 9] went to press, and as criticism of his National Security Agency spying program mounted within his own party, President Bush delivered a speech to the National Guard Association in Washington, D.C., that offered new details about a foiled al-Qaeda plot aimed at flying an airplane into the Library Tower, a skyscraper in Los Angeles. President Bush presented the details as an illustration that the "war on terror" has been successful in keeping us safe. He did not explain why new details about a four-year-old plot were being made public now, but they appeared to be part of a concerted effort to dampen the increasing criticism of the NSA spying program. (The next day, CIA Director Porter Goss published an Op-Ed article in *The New York Times* making broad claims about how "leaks" about government initiatives in the war on terrorism—presumably including the one that disclosed the existence of the NSA spying program—had endangered American lives.)

The President's assertions about the Library Tower plot again underscore the need for close scrutiny in assessing the administration's claims. The President described a plan in 2002 to use shoe bombs to break down the cockpit door, overpower the pilots, and then fly the hijacked plane into the tower. The alleged planners, described only as Southeast Asians, were captured in early 2002 in Asia. As far as we know, no one has been charged, much less convicted, of any crime in connection with the alleged plot. Intelligence officials told *The Washington Post* that there was "deep disagreement within the intelligence community over... whether it was ever much more than talk."^[1] A senior FBI official said that "to take that and make it into a disrupted plot is just ludicrous."^[2] Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism expert at the RAND Corporation, said of Bush's latest account: "It doesn't really give us any more indication of whether this was a plot that was derailed or preempted, or a plot that was more in the realm of an idle daydream."^[3]

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that when the plot was first publicly disclosed, authorities "said that, at best, the alleged plot was something that had been discussed but never put into action." Moreover, while US officials reportedly learned about some of the plot's details by interrogating captured al-Qaeda leader Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, he was captured in 2003, long after the planners had been arrested. As the *Los Angeles Times* put it, "By the time anybody knew about it, the threat—if there had been one—had passed, federal counter-terrorism officials said."^[4]

President Bush offered no hints of the disagreement within the US intelligence community about this incident. His account seemed designed to serve one purpose only—to shore up the administration's image. Candid expression of doubt has never been the President's strong suit. But without candor, trust is not possible.

—February 22, 2006

Notes

^[1] Peter Baker and Dan Eggen, "Bush Details 2002 Plot to Attack L.A. Tower," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2006, p. A4.

[\[2\]](#) Josh Meyer and Warren Vieth, "Scope of Plots Bush Says Were Foiled Is Questioned," *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 2005, p. A15.

[\[3\]](#) Baker and Eggen, "Bush Details 2002 Plot to Attack L.A. Tower."

[\[4\]](#) Meyer and Vieth, "Scope of Plots Bush Says Were Foiled Is Questioned."