

# A NATION CHALLENGED: THE PLOT; Unpolished Secret Agents Were Able to Hide in Plain Sight

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After 11 days of intensive investigation, a collective portrait has begun to emerge of the men who guided three planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and crashed a fourth in an empty field in Pennsylvania.

It is sketchy and incomplete, but its disparate pieces show a group of seemingly well-educated young men who slipped into the country and settled into bland suburban lives while they gained just enough training as pilots to take control of a passenger jet in midair.

While American officials have blamed Osama bin Laden for the attacks, they are still struggling to connect him directly to the plot. Investigators believe there were many more conspirators, but despite the efforts of thousands of law enforcement and intelligence agents, the authorities have arrested only a handful of suspects in the United States.

From interviews and confidential law enforcement documents, it appears that the hijackers lived at once secretly and in the open, taking advantage of the anonymity and freedom of a society they despised.

They arrived in the country alone or in pairs, using legitimate documents and sometimes false identities. None were known to have had criminal records, and only two appear to have come to the attention of the C.I.A. The rest, intelligence officials would say, were "clean."

They got post office boxes and e-mail accounts, driver's licenses and A.T.M. cards. Although some of them spoke little English, they barely stood out in a landscape that has grown increasingly diverse.

The men stayed away from strangers and communicated discreetly among themselves, officials said, sometimes using prepaid cellular telephones and going online at public libraries. Midlevel drug dealers might have scoffed at their tradecraft, but their security was as effective as it was low-tech.

As secret agents, they were unpolished. Two of the suspected hijackers had their Visa accounts blocked, forcing them to buy their plane tickets with cash at a crowded airport. Another was stopped for driving without a license and eventually had a warrant issued for his arrest.

In the end, though, there was a chilling focus to the madness that left thousands dead on Sept. 11. If the hijackers knew how their operation was to end, they managed to keep their resolve for months even as they strolled through malls, shopped for groceries and went to the gym.

"They'd just look right through you," recalled Gail North, 41, a longtime resident of the Valencia Motel in Laurel, Md., where five of the hijackers shared a single room the week before the attacks.

The terrorists left a spotty trail. In Laurel, an F.B.I. document indicates, agents found a duffel bag containing pilot headsets and other aviation items. Another bag recovered at Logan International Airport in Boston held a video about commercial aircraft and a will, one official said. Tracking the hijackers' finances, investigators have concluded that the operation probably did not cost much more than \$200,000.