NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

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Fumbling Bureau Of Incompetents

BEHIND the facade of cooperation following the Sept. 11 attacks, less than amicable relations between Mayor Giuliani and the FBI have further deteriorated. According to New York City sources, the mayor has engaged in more than one shouting match with FBI Assistant Director Barry Mawn.

It's the same old problem because it's the same old FBI. Newly appointed Director Robert Mueller makes little difference. The Bureau refuses to share information with local police agencies. It won't permit security clearances for high local officials. Law-enforcement officers around the country say that attitude lent itself to catastrophe Sept. 11 and could permit further disasters.

Last Friday in Washington, Mueller — amiable and agreeable — sat down with big-city police chiefs and promised things will get better. The chiefs doubt whether Mueller or Tom Ridge, the new Homeland Security director, can change the Bureau's culture, described to me by one police chief as "elitist and arrogant." Efforts to enlist members of Congress into pressing for reform find politicians awed by the FBI mystique.



The FBI's big National Security section in New York City long has grappled with the New York Police Department. "The FBI's attitude has been that if you need to know, we'll tell you," one NYPD source told me. That "need" never occurs, with the FBI adamant against any local anti-terrorism activity. The locals, in turn, complain about the feds failing to follow important leads.

Giuliani is not venting his outrage in a time of national crisis, but sources report a high private decibel level by the mayor. The complaint to Mawn is that the NYPD is out of the loop, its senior officers not even granted security clearances.


Giuliani: Outraged.

Such complaints are common nationally, but only a few police chiefs speak publicly — notably Baltimore's Edward Norris (who complained in congressional testimony), Michael Chitwood of Portland, Me., and Dan Oates of Ann Arbor, Mich.

Chitwood was infuriated to learn that the FBI knew of a visit to Portland by two Sept. 11 hijackers but did not inform him. When his police pursued a witness of that visit, the FBI threatened to arrest the chief. "I ignored them," Chitwood told me. Has bureau cooperation improved? "Not a bit," he said. Only Tuesday, he learned from reading his local paper about a plane under federal surveillance parked at the Portland airport for seven weeks.

Oates is familiar with the FBI, having tried to work with the feds over 21 years with the NYPD before retiring this year to go to Ann Arbor. As former commanding officer of NYPD intelligence, he describes the FBI as "obsessed with turf."

Closing doors to police officers particularly infuriates Oates. "The security clearance issue is a tired old excuse that allows the FBI not to share," he told me. "They should hand out 10,000 security clearances to cops around the country." Oates and other police chiefs believe Sept. 11 might have been averted had the FBI alerted local police agencies about a Minnesota flight school's report of an Arab who wanted instructions for steering a big jet but not for landing or taking off.

Police chiefs would open the FBI to the same probing of decisions and actions that they routinely perform after the fact. They'd also like the same rules for the Bureau that govern most of the nation's police departments. In the FBI, nobody takes the fall for blundering.

A promise that things will change in the FBI was implicit in Director Mueller's remarks to city police chiefs last Friday. Philadelphia Police chief John Timoney, an NYPD veteran more cautious in his criticism of the feds than his former colleague Oates, sounded skeptical after the meeting. "I'm hopeful," he told me, but would make no predictions.

What he hopes for is the safety of the American people. The police chiefs of America want a top-to-bottom cleansing of the FBI that will require leadership from the Oval Office. If President Bush doubts the urgency, he should ask Rudy Giuliani.

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