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COMMENTARY

Tuesday, May 28, 2002

Editorial

Americans deserve to know the truth behind warnings of terrorist acts

With charges flying against the way the Federal Bureau of Investigation treated pre-Sept. 11 threats, Americans are concerned about our government's role in the terrorist attacks, and rightly so. While we don't believe any government official would deliberately and consciously withhold information about a homeland terrorist attack, we don't understand why certain terrorism warnings were ignored.

Congressional lawmakers are demanding additional answers to what happened to FBI correspondence from agents in Phoenix and Minneapolis prior to Sept. 11. Minnesota FBI Agent Colleen Rowley wrote a whistle-blower letter to the head of the FBI, charging her own agency with obstruction of justice. And it was recently revealed that Attorney General John Ashcroft thought hijacking warnings were valid enough for him to switch to flying on private chartered jets instead of commercial planes during the three months prior to Sept. 11. It is instances such as these that provide evidence that the government should have been anticipating a terrorist attack.

Rowley wrote a 13-page memo accusing the FBI of hindering the Zacarias Moussaoui investigation, among other obstruction charges. A congressional inquiry is now reviewing Rowley's allegations against the FBI's handling of the Moussaoui case and why Minnesota field officers were denied a warrant to check the so-called 20th hijacker's computer records. FBI Director Robert Mueller defended the denial to Congress, citing insufficient probable cause to grant the warrant.

Americans may want to take Rowley's comments with a grain of salt. But the FBI needs to give us an explanation nevertheless — we need to find out why certain information was ignored, to prevent the same mistakes from happening in the future.

We also need an explanation of why Attorney General John Ashcroft began flying on a chartered government jet in July 2001 because of an undisclosed "threat assessment" by the FBI. Normally all Bush Cabinet appointees fly on commercial airlines, with the exception of Interior and Energy nominees. And Ashcroft's predecessor, Janet Reno, routinely flew on commercial airlines.

If Ashcroft's FBI security detail knew something was brewing in the skies, they should have warned the American people, not just the attorney general. Although we don't know all of the special circumstances surrounding Ashcroft's situation, the FBI needs to define what it saw as a "threat assessment."

The FBI and the Justice Department need to be as forthcoming as possible with information about the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. To squelch rumors and conspiracy theories, the government should honestly tell the Americans why field reports from FBI agents were ignored, why the warrant to search Moussaoui's computer was denied and why Ashcroft chose to fly on a chartered jet.

After so much heartache in the wake of Sept. 11, Americans deserve to know the truth.

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So much for GOOD intentions

Lately I've been thinking: If I had a nickel for all the bonehead things done out of good intentions at public schools across the nation, I'd be a millionaire. A female vice principal at one high school in Poway, Calif., orders all women going to the prom to raise their skirts in front of her to make sure they're not wearing thongs. Nine-year-olds across the nation are being removed from school when they, in the same spirit of children since time immemorial, play "cowboys" or "cops and robbers"



Pat
 Payne
 Columnist

on the playground and point at another student as if they had a gun. A high-school junior in Fort Worth, Texas, is nearly expelled because he forgot to remove a bread knife from his truck after helping take some of his grandmother's belongings to Goodwill.

Now there is yet another addition to my "nickels from numbnuts" account. District C, a sub-school district of the Los Angeles Unified, has enacted a new policy, which again was made with the best of intentions. They have said that from now on, if students in high schools in Van Nuys, Woodland Hills and parts of the San Fernando

Valley want to participate in their graduation ceremony, they must declare that they're going on to college, trade school or the military.

This is social engineering, pure and simple. In effect, District C is saying: "If you're not going to college, you are less of a person than those who are, and even if you are the valedictorian of your class, you're not worthy to participate in commencement."

This is not subtle, nor is it encouragement. This is punishing students because they're not acceding to the wishes of the administrators who wrote up this policy. I find this sort of manipulation, even for such a worthy cause, unacceptable. Telling students that they won't be able to celebrate one of the seminal moments of their lives with friends and family if they don't "play ball" is horrendous.

Look at it this way: Let's say the voluntary eco-responsibility pledge here at the University goes ahead. So far, everything's kosher. But let's say a few years down the road, the college says either students sign the pledge, or they don't participate in commencement. If you don't care too much about the pledge, wouldn't you feel angry about being denied your day just because you exercised your freedom of choice?

District C would like to point to the

results: Before the policy, only about half the students in the district were going to college. Now, they brag that 95 percent have decided to go. My, the way they advertise this you'd almost think they were gunning for some sort of special bonus for having large amounts of students go to college. All this shows is that the administrators manipulate well, and doesn't show how many students actually wanted to go to college instead of being goaded into it.

I think this bespeaks to a problem in education more than any triumph. Students don't care about education in this country, and nobody is showing them why they should care. Jocks are routinely "waved through" classes with good grades at the insistence of coaches who want to win the season. Parents are often MIA, either too busy or indifferent to help their children succeed.

If District C really wanted to make an impact, maybe it, and every other school across the nation, ought to make sure that all high school graduates can read before trying to ramrod them all into college.

E-mail columnist Pat Payne at patpayne@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the Emerald.

Letter to the editor

Environmental issues need to be prioritized

Most Oregonians might agree that water is one of our most precious natural resources. We need water to irrigate crops, to wash our dishes, to drink — and we enjoy water sports as recreation. Our fresh water provides habitat for countless native species of fish, birds and other animals.

The Willamette River — where 70 percent of Oregonians live and upon which tens of thousands of Oregonians rely as a source of drinking water — is unfortunately the most polluted river west of the Mississippi.

In December 2000, the Environmental Protection Agency declared Portland Harbor — where the Willamette meets Oregon's other mighty river, the Columbia, in the midst of our state's largest city — a Superfund site, identifying it as one of the country's most dangerous and polluted areas.

Fish found in this area and up and down the Willamette have been shown to contain toxins such as mercury, arsenic and cadmium.

It's time Oregon took these threats to public health and safety and these insults to the natural wonders and resources in our backyards seriously.

Oregon, led by Gov. McCall, restored the Willamette from a similar state 30 years ago, and we can do it again — I urge the next governor of Oregon to make cleaning up the Willamette a top priority, to set an example for other parts of this nation dealing with similar issues and to acknowledge that it is unacceptable in every way to treat our homes in this way.

Lea Goodrich
 junior
 environmental science

Poll Results:

Every week, the Emerald prints the results of our online poll and the poll question for next week. The poll can be accessed from the main page of our Web site, www.dailyemerald.com. We encourage you to send us feedback about the poll questions and results.

This week's poll question: How will alcohol-free greek houses affect the University?

Total votes: 108

No effect — 8.3 percent, or 9 votes

Eventual alcohol-free campus — 7.4 percent, or 8 votes

Parties will move further off campus — 59.3 percent, or 64 votes

Decrease in binge/underage drinking — 10.2 percent, or 11 votes

Don't know — 4.6 percent, or 5 votes

Don't care — 10.2 percent, or 11 votes

Next week's poll question: What is your favorite song by Erik Brashers, the campus "banjo man"?

The choices:

"Stairway to Heaven"

"Year of the Witch"

"Desperado"

"Layla"

"Freebird"

Don't know/Don't care