

# **Bush's repetition of 9-11 fallacy to justify NSA warrantless spying program presents media with another opportunity to challenge the claim**

During his January 25 [speech](#) at the headquarters of the National Security Agency (NSA), President Bush repeated the debunked claim -- previously articulated by [Vice President Dick Cheney](#) and [Gen. Michael V. Hayden](#), a deputy director for national intelligence and former head of the NSA -- that had the Bush administration's [warrantless domestic spying program](#) been in place before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the NSA might have identified some of the hijackers in the United States. When several media outlets uncritically reported this claim -- as advanced by Hayden -- *Media Matters for America* [noted](#) that the 9-11 Commission and congressional investigators reportedly reached a very different conclusion: that the Bush administration had information on two of the 9-11 hijackers well over a year before the attacks occurred, and it was primarily bureaucratic problems -- rather than a lack of information -- that were responsible for the security breakdown.

According to a January 24 *Washington Post* [article](#), Cheney and Hayden "did not mention that the NSA, CIA and FBI had significant information about two of the leading hijackers as early as January 2000 but failed to keep track of them or capitalize on the information, according to the Sept. 11 commission and others." The article went on to note that Hayden "also did not mention NSA intercepts warning of the attacks the day before, but not translated until Sept. 12, 2001." The *Post* [reported](#) January 5:

According to the Sept. 11 commission's report, released in 2004, the NSA first identified [Nawaf] Alhazmi and [Khalid] Almihdhar [two of the 9-11 hijackers] in December 1999, passing the information to the CIA but conducting no further research.

In 2000, the CIA failed to place Alhazmi and Almihdhar on a watch list despite their ties to a terrorist summit in Malaysia. The CIA also mishandled efforts to follow them after the summit and failed to share information about them with the FBI, including the crucial fact that both men had U.S. visas, the commission found.

By late August 2001, the FBI finally had information that Almihdhar had recently entered the United States. But the search for the suspected al Qaeda operative was treated as routine and assigned to a rookie agent, according to the commission report.

Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism expert who heads Rand Corp.'s Washington office, said it is unclear what communications could have been intercepted if the FBI and other agencies did not know where Alhazmi and Almihdhar were.

Hoffman also said Cheney's comments ignore the breadth of the government failures before the attacks, which were due to structural problems rather than a single missed lead.

"It's not that legislation was lacking; it was a systemic failure," he said.

Now that Bush has articulated the same debunked claim as Cheney and Hayden, will the media take the opportunity to examine it critically in their reporting?

From President Bush's January 25 [speech](#):

BUSH: Here's what General Mike Hayden said -- he was the former director here at NSA. He's now the deputy director of the national intelligence -- deputy director of national intelligence -- and here's what he said earlier this week: "Had this program been in effect prior to 9-11, it is my professional judgment that we would have detected some of the 9-11 Al Qaeda operatives in the United States, and we would have identified them as such." The 9-11 Commission made clear, in this era of new dangers, we must be able to connect the dots before the terrorists strike so we can stop new attacks. And this NSA program is doing just that. General Hayden has confirmed that America has gained information from this program that would not otherwise have been available. This information has helped prevent attacks and save American lives.