



Erik Dahl reviews Amy Zegart,  
*Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI,  
and The Origins of 9/11*

By Erik Dahl

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Dahl, Erik. Review of *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11* by Amy Zegart. *Homeland Security Affairs* 18, Article 6 [hsaj.org/articles21379](https://hsaj.org/articles21379)

Amy Zegart is one of America's most perceptive commentators on intelligence and homeland security, and her *Spying Blind* remains today the most comprehensive academic study available of the intelligence failures that led to 9/11. But the book's value extends beyond intelligence studies, because it is a great example of clearly written, policy-relevant academic work.

As with much of the best research in homeland security and security studies, the book tells an interesting story about how the FBI and CIA unsuccessfully tried to deal with the changing nature of the terrorist threat in the 1990s, and ultimately failed to prevent the 9/11 attacks. But it also makes a fascinating argument about the cause of that failure, which Zegart attributes to the inability of complex, secretive organizations such as the FBI and CIA to be able to change. As she puts it, the primary cause of 9/11 was "the stunning inability of U.S. intelligence agencies to adapt to the end of the Cold War" (3).

Not all experts accept Zegart's argument about organizations and bureaucracies as the primary explanation for 9/11. The 9/11 Commission, for example, focused instead on the broader failure of American government and society to respond to the many warnings that had been available—what it called a failure of imagination. But Zegart's point about the failure of our intelligence and security organizations to adapt to change resonates today, as evidenced by the inability of the Department of Homeland Security to understand the rise of domestic terrorism—until the January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol put that threat front and center on every television screen in the country.

Homeland security students, educators, and practitioners hoping to understand the future of American intelligence may also wish to read Zegart's more recent work.<sup>1</sup> But *Spying Blind* will long be an important book to help us understand the seminal events that led to the creation of the American homeland security system and shaped the study of homeland security.

## About the Author

**Erik J. Dahl** is an Associate Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, where he teaches in both the National Security Affairs Department and the Center for Homeland Defense and Security. He is the author of *Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond* (Georgetown University Press, 2013), and *The COVID-19 Intelligence Failure: Why Warning Was Not Enough* (Georgetown University Press, forthcoming). The views in this review are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Naval Postgraduate School or the United States Government.

## Note

1. Especially her latest book, *Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).
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