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## Cover Story: Is the FBI Up to the Job 10 Years After 9/11?

By Barton Gellman

*This story originally appeared in the May 9, 2011, issue of TIME. On May 12, the White House announced that President Obama will seek a two-year extension of Mueller's 10-year term as FBI director, which is set to expire in September.*

FBI Director Bob Mueller glanced at the black chronograph he wears Marine-style, the face inside his wrist. It was 7:38 a.m. Not quite time. He reviewed his inbox. Drummed a four-fingered staccato on the desk. Consulted his wrist again: 7:39.

Mueller had already slashed through the red leather briefing book that headquarters dispatched to his Georgetown home before dawn. The title embossed on the cover was simply "Director," above the words "Top Secret/Contains Codeword Material." Yellow highlights flagged the points Mueller wanted to probe.

An al-Qaeda affiliate was evading surveillance with a new covert channel of communication. Cyberintruders had breached a defense contractor's firewall. The Tucson, Ariz., shooting of Representative Gabrielle Giffords had become a grotesque recruiting tool for antigovernment extremists. Turmoil in Bahrain had left FBI agents unable to serve a fugitive warrant. Egypt's meltdown was causing trouble for a valuable counterintelligence source. One of three deputy U.S. marshals shot in West Virginia had succumbed to his wounds. Two more federal officers, from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, had been ambushed in northern Mexico, one fatally. Mexican authorities wanted access to FBI files, and Mueller had to decide how much to share.

[\(See pictures of a Mexican drug gang's "holy war."\)](#)

Something more pressing was on Mueller's mind on Feb. 17, when TIME shadowed him through much of his day. The director had locked his sights on Lubbock, Texas, and Spokane, Wash., where his agents were closing in on a pair of unrelated terrorist plots. Mueller stood up abruptly at 7:40, five minutes ahead of schedule, and swept into conference room 7074. His division chiefs had learned by now, some of them the hard way, to assemble early. More analysts beamed in from the National Counterterrorism Center in suburban Virginia, linked by secure video to 61-in. plasma displays on three walls. Said Mueller: "We'll spend 15, 20 minutes going through what happened overnight."

As he nears the end of a 10-year term, Mueller, 66, is easily the longest-serving of his peers atop the

national-security establishment. His anonymity in the role is almost a parlor trick. He remade the bureau in his image, pushed out the old guard and hired more than half its present cohort. Behind the scenes, he fought historic battles with the White House, twice compelling George W. Bush to change course under threat that Mueller would resign. Yet he is so careful to dodge the spotlight, so rigorously bland when caught onstage, that he could drink unrecognized at any bar in America.

It is a revelation to see Mueller in his own domain. There, he is a charismatic figure, level-voiced and seldom profane, who keeps his staff off balance with deadpan remarks that may or may not be jokes. He played ice hockey long past college, until his knees gave out, and he runs operations briefs as a contact sport. "I tend to be impatient," Mueller says. "Sometimes that's good. Sometimes that is not good. A certain degree of impatience is necessary to get decisions made and implemented and to move a group of individuals in a certain way."

Mueller inherited 56 field offices, each a distant fiefdom run by a special agent in charge. Old-school SACs (pronounced S-A-C, never sack) measured progress by arrests, kept their files to themselves and lived by the motto "Real agents don't type." They were accountable to no one but the director, and even those chains were loose.

[\(Read "FBI Broke Privacy Laws, Says Justice Department Probe."\)](#)

Then came the searing failure of Sept. 11, 2001, seven days after Mueller's swearing-in. It was the worst hour in the FBI's 93-year history. "You talk about a learning curve," recalls Art Cummings, who worked alongside him. "He's barely been on the job, hasn't met many of his senior executives" and suddenly is faced with "the 'oh, crap' moments." Field offices in Phoenix and Minneapolis had important clues to the plot long before the attacks. Neither knew what the other knew, and no one put the pieces together. Critics began to say the FBI was irreparably broken, ill equipped to collect intelligence and disinclined to share it anyway. The labor force — heavily white and male, with a blue collar culture that prized physical courage over book smarts — lacked the language and technical skills to adapt. Other agencies took their lumps after 9/11, not least the CIA, but the FBI was on the chopping block when Congress began carving up government agencies.

To avoid dismemberment, Mueller made bold promises to cure what ailed the FBI from within — rebuilding it into a modern, intelligence-driven enterprise. His departure in September will mark the end of an era and another big change to an Obama team that will soon see Leon Panetta heading to the Pentagon and General David Petraeus succeeding him at the CIA.

Mueller put his money where his mouth was, doubling the agent force on national security and tripling the number of analysts. The FBI built a trip-wire system of early warnings that pre-empted some serious plots. But even a decade's reform has not changed J. Edgar Hoover's gangbusters into a 21st century counterterrorist force. The FBI lumps together in one superagency domestic law-enforcement tasks (such as fighting kidnapping, bank fraud and organized crime) with domestic intelligence roles (such as countering terror and espionage plots). But nearly every U.S. ally — the U.K., for instance, with Scotland Yard and MI5 — keeps them separate. It is far from clear that any agency can do a good job at both. "The problem with the FBI is that it has a fundamental institutional culture that does not mesh well with the needs of intelligence," says Judge Richard Posner of the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals. Police do their work in a world of known crimes and criminals, while an intelligence service must devote years to "looking assiduously and

competently for something that may not exist."

[From TIME's Archives: The Truth About J. Edgar Hoover.](#)

Tearing down old folkways in an FBI grown sclerotic with tradition called for a shift of power from autonomous field offices to the big blue chair in the director's conference room. That suited Mueller fine. He was an outstanding Marine officer candidate in 1966, author Garrett Graff reports in *The Threat Matrix*, but he earned a D for delegation. He is not a man who suffers attempts to chauffeur him around a briefing. "He's a perpetual-motion machine," says Thomas J. Harrington, who holds the FBI's third highest post, associate deputy director. "He likes to drive the thing the whole time." Among Mueller's disconcerting habits is a gesture with a cupped right hand that beckons a briefer to quit talking and slide over his notes. Mueller scans them and skips to cross-examination.

Two men, 1,300 miles apart, had Mueller's attention when he convened his operations brief on Feb. 17. Khalid Ali-M Aldawsari, a 20-year-old Saudi national, studied chemical engineering at Texas Tech University. Kevin William Harpham, 36, an unemployed Army veteran and avowed white supremacist, lived in a small town near Spokane. On this day the FBI's interest was a closely guarded secret, but indictments to come would allege that the two men were behind separate plots to set off powerful homemade bombs. Until recently, the FBI had not heard of either man.

[\(See the top 10 inept terrorist plots.\)](#)

The Spokane attack struck without warning on Jan. 17. Shortly before the start of Spokane's Martin Luther King Jr. Day parade, city workers found an abandoned backpack along the route. Inside was an explosive core laced with rat poison — an anticoagulant — and surrounded by lead fishing weights. A remote car starter and cell-phone parts were mated in a detonation circuit. The FBI lab in Quantico, Va., recovered DNA, but there was no suspect to test for a match.

Good luck and shoe leather led the FBI to Aldawsari, the Saudi student. One of the trip-wire programs rolled out after 9/11 invited vendors of hazardous goods to report unusual purchases to the feds. Aldawsari went undetected at first as he acquired the ingredients of TNP, an explosive used in World War I artillery shells. Amazon.com filled an order for 3 gal. of concentrated sulfuric acid, and the Georgia-based QualiChem Technologies shipped 10 boxes of nitric acid to a FedEx mail drop. Neither reported the buys. Aldawsari also dodged a student-visa review after flunking out of Texas Tech. Only on Feb. 1, when he ordered phenol, his last ingredient, did Aldawsari trip an alarm. Carolina Biological Supply tipped the FBI's Charlotte, N.C., field office, and Con-Way Freight, where Aldawsari planned to take delivery, sent word to the Dallas field office by way of the Lubbock police.

In Mueller's FBI 2.0, Dallas and Charlotte alerted headquarters, which put the leads together and took command.

Mueller had every reason to believe his term as director would end long before this day. He had written his resignation letter on March 12, 2004, and fully expected to deliver it. At issue was a highly classified surveillance program, called Stellar Wind, that President Bush approved after 9/11. For the first time since

Congress forbade the practice in 1978, the National Security Agency was spying on domestic communications traffic without a warrant. In the second week of March 2004, Attorney General John Ashcroft's Justice Department ruled that Stellar Wind was illegal. The next day, Ashcroft fell gravely ill with acute pancreatitis. Bush sent two top aides to George Washington University Hospital, where the Attorney General lay in critical condition. White House counsel Alberto Gonzales and chief of staff Andrew Card Jr. asked the semiconscious Ashcroft to sign a document reversing the Justice Department's ruling. Mueller arrived at the hospital just after Card and Gonzales retreated in defeat. His notes described Ashcroft as "feeble, barely articulate."

A close associate says Mueller saw the visit as a "cowardly and outrageous" attempt to take advantage of a sick man. The next afternoon, Mueller learned that Bush had reauthorized Stellar Wind over formal Justice Department objections. That night, he shut down the FBI's part in it and stayed up until 1:30 a.m. composing a letter: "Should the President order the continuation of the FBI's participation in the program, and in the absence of further legal advice from the AG, I would be constrained to resign as Director of the FBI."

[\(See TIME's photo-essay "Double Agents: A Photo Dossier."\)](#)

Mueller knew the stakes. Acting Attorney General James Comey, together with nearly the whole top cadre at Justice, was also preparing to leave — a meltdown that would have dwarfed Richard Nixon's Saturday Night Massacre.

"I remember it all very well," says Valerie Caproni, then and now the FBI general counsel. "From my perspective, there was a very real likelihood of a collapse of government."

Early on Friday, March 12, Mueller stood with Comey in a foyer outside the Oval Office. "We knew this was our last morning," Comey recalls. "We both were just staring out, looking at the Rose Garden, thinking, This is the last time I'll ever see this." Mueller, Comey says, "wasn't rattled, but I could tell he was just very sad."

In the private dining room abutting the Oval Office, Mueller told Bush one-on-one that he would not carry out the President's order. He offered his resignation. Bush pulled back from the brink, submitting to the Justice Department's legal ruling.

Mueller will not speak of the episode, but when asked, he offers an indirect reply. "There are days that go by, but not many, that you're not balancing national security against civil liberties when you're addressing terrorism," he says. "So they are not easy decisions."

[Read "Counterterrorism: A Role for the FBI, Not the CIA."](#)

"But there's a place where you draw a black-and-white line and say, 'I can't do that?'" I ask.

"Yes," Mueller replies.

"If I'm ordered to do that, I can't?"

"Yes. Yes."

The Stellar Wind confrontation was a rare moment in presidential history, an act of defiance that turned the Commander in Chief in his tracks. "You can only do that once, threaten to resign," says Frances Fragos Townsend, who was then Bush's counterterrorism adviser. "The second time you do it, you're going to be told, 'Accepted.'"

That was not how it turned out for Mueller. He did it again two years later, with much the same result.

On May 18, 2006, with Justice Department backing, Mueller obtained a search warrant for the legislative office of Representative William Jefferson. The seizure of documents there, in a corruption probe, touched off a furious protest on Capitol Hill, where members of both parties accused the Bush Administration of crossing a constitutional line. Separation of powers, Jefferson's lawyers argued, forbade executive intrusion into the protected spaces of the House.

In tense negotiations, aides to Bush instructed the FBI to return Jefferson's papers. Mueller — again joined by top Justice Department officials — passed word that he would leave before handing back evidence obtained by a lawful court order. A standoff ensued. Finally, Bush withdrew the instruction. He asked the FBI to seal Jefferson's papers temporarily while the Congressman made a constitutional challenge. Mueller agreed, the search warrant was upheld, and Jefferson was convicted of bribery, racketeering and money laundering. He remains free pending appeal.

[\(See a photographic farewell to George W. Bush.\)](#)

Mueller has never spoken publicly of this episode either. I ask him what issue of principle was at stake.

"I think you've perhaps hit on a —" Mueller says, then stops. "I'm just going to stay away from it. I was close, but I've just got to stay away from it."

When Mueller convened his executive team on Feb. 17, Aldawsari had been under a microscope for two weeks. Four shifts of agents watched the Saudi engineering student 24 hours a day. Vehicles equipped with StingRay transceivers followed him around greater Dallas, recording his cell-phone calls. Agents had slipped secretly into Aldawsari's apartment, armed with a warrant from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court. They inventoried his chemicals, cloned his computer drive and copied a journal handwritten in Arabic.

Hours before that morning's briefing, Aldawsari had published a blog post alluding to a special celebration of his upcoming 21st birthday. One of his handwritten journal entries, according to a hasty FBI translation, said, "And now, after mastering the English language, learning how to build explosives and continuous planning to target the infidel Americans, it is time for jihad."

Meanwhile, in the Spokane operation, investigators had caught a break. Harpham, a former member of the neo-Nazi National Alliance, was already a suspect, but until now he could not be linked forensically to the bomb plot. Hundreds of agents, canvassing retail purchases that matched bomb components, finally found a debit-card transaction in Harpham's name. The card had been used to buy a quantity of fishing weights at

Walmart, the same brand and batch used as shrapnel in the backpack bomb.

[\(See "Spies and Spooks: The \(Mis\)Adventures of the CIA."\)](#)

As criminal cases, Lubbock and Spokane were well in hand. By now, the FBI of old would have placed the suspects under arrest. Waiting raised the risk that they might slip surveillance and flee or launch an unexpected attack. But Mueller has changed this way of thinking. Moving in too soon would tip the FBI's hand, risking the loss of valuable intelligence. Harpham and Aldawsari looked like classic lone wolves, but investigators could not yet rule out accomplices. Were there opportunities to trace a network of support — financial, operational or ideological — that might lead to plotters of otherwise unrelated attacks?

This new way of thinking "is wickedly important to him," says Tracy Reinhold, the FBI's assistant director for intelligence. "You want to make sure that you gather all the intelligence you can possibly get before you decide to disrupt."

Mueller dug in, detail by granular detail. Did Harpham have offline contacts with his online correspondents in the Vanguard News Network, where he posted messages calling for race war? Had his Army service at Fort Lewis, Wash., overlapped with soldiers there who provoked a scandal with white-supremacist tattoos? What was holding up delivery of Harpham's Army DNA records?

In Lubbock, the team that searched Aldawsari's apartment had been interrupted and did not have time to learn whether he had unpacked his chemicals or whether he had the makings for a high explosive that required no phenol. The hasty retreat also left a gap in electronic surveillance, which nowadays has to include not only phone taps and pinhole cameras but voice-over-Internet, social-network messaging and online-gaming consoles. The Texas plot was unfolding across three e-mail addresses, which sent one another lists of "targets" and "nice targets" and directions for handling TNP. Was it one man? Two? Three?

[See pictures of car bomb discovered in Times Square.](#)

The search team had to get back in. Mueller had no patience for explanations that agents were doing "pattern-of-life analysis" to find an opening. "You're not getting it done," Mueller said. "What are you going to do about it?" Later that day, the sneak-and-peek squad got it done. Then the investigators solved the mystery of the three e-mail addresses: Aldawsari was using all of them, they concluded, to send notes to himself.

One week later, on Feb. 24, agents placed Aldawsari under arrest. On March 9 the FBI's elite tactical force, the Hostage Rescue Team, moved in on Harpham. Both men were charged with attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction, which the law defines broadly enough to cover any kind of bomb. Both have pleaded not guilty, and their lawyers note they are entitled to a presumption of innocence.

Harpham's plot, if the allegations prove true, turned out to be the more advanced. He had built a powerful bomb and placed it, for maximum carnage, atop a metal bench with a brick wall behind it to focus the blast. The half-complete work of Aldawsari, an Arab whose jihadi aims fit the popular image of a terrorist, received far more public attention. More than a year ago, Mueller raised some eyebrows when he testified

that "homegrown and lone-wolf extremists pose an equally serious threat." But that message did not take root in the body politic or even in the national-security establishment. As the FBI chased the twin terrorist plots all through February, President Obama's team heard daily reports about Aldawsari's case but not Harpham's. Some of Mueller's lieutenants marveled at the contrast.

[\(Read "Times Square Bomb Arrest Raises U.S. Security Question."\)](#)

Domestic plots are not routinely included in the President's daily briefing or the interagency threat matrix, an FBI official says, even though "the degree of harm is often greater" than in jihadi terrorist plots.

"Any questions? We've got a couple of minutes," Mueller says to me between meetings, eyes drifting to his wrist. "Actually, about one minute."

Well, sure. Any tough decisions lately? But Mueller is already trotting down the hall and two flights of stairs to the FBI headquarters' innermost sanctum. Minutes later, at 8:30, Attorney General Eric Holder Jr. arrives for his own daily briefing. The two of them disappear into an area labeled "Restricted Access" and "Authorized Personnel Only."

Unlike the White House Situation Room and other pale shadows of a Hollywood command post, the FBI's Strategic Intelligence Operations Center has the flash to live up to its name. It covers just under an acre in a profusion of sealed rooms and internal corridors. An elevated communications pod, walled in glass, overlooks doors with signs like "Ops H" and "Intel Watch 24/7." Large maps compete for wall space with expanses of flat-screen monitors and a bank of clocks labeled with the four U.S. time zones, Greenwich Mean Time and local times in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The SIOC filled to capacity on 9/11 and remained that way through PENTTBOM, the FBI cryptonym for "Pentagon," "Twin Towers" and "Bombing." From a standing start, Mueller ran the largest criminal investigation in FBI history and an equally massive intelligence effort to ward off the next catastrophe. FBI agents swarmed dive shops on a scuba-bomb tip and rural airfields on a crop-duster tip. They traced every long-haul truck that crossed one Canadian border post, some of which had since traveled thousands of miles, when the Energy Department reported a nuclear-weapon signature on a sensor it had started testing that day.

Only in retrospect, says a former Mueller lieutenant, did anyone treat as humorous another hunt that began with a source who overheard talk in a restroom in Ukraine of a stolen warhead. The resulting operation — which came to be known as Ukrainian Urinal — took on added urgency when then governor Tom Ridge called the White House and said, "I've just heard a report about a nuclear device in Pennsylvania." It turned out to be nothing. Ten years later, says Vahid Majidi, who runs the FBI's WMD directorate, the terrorist nuclear scenario is "very exciting, always good to see in a movie setting ... but we haven't seen a credible approach."

[\(See TIME's photo essay "When Lawmakers Attack: Ukrainian Edition."\)](#)

On average, since 9/11, the FBI reckons that just over 100,000 terrorism leads each year have come over the transom. Analysts and agents designate them as immediate, priority or routine, but the bureau says every

one is covered. Leads from the Stellar Wind program were so vague and voluminous that field agents called them "Pizza Hut cases" — ostensibly suspicious calls that turned out to be takeout food orders. "In a year, we'll do, I don't know, 500 white powders, but you don't know which of those white powders in envelopes may contain something that kills somebody," Mueller said. "And so, yes, is it time-consuming? Absolutely. Do 99% of them wash out? Yes, but it's that other 1% that we've got to be concerned about."

By 2:30 p.m., Mueller was back in the big blue chair at the helm of his conference room. Four big-city special agents in charge, linked in from their offices, faced the director on his wall-size plasma screens.

For the next two hours, Mueller interrogated the SACs in Baltimore, Newark, N.J., Boston and Philadelphia about their records. TIME sat in on the first half hour, before the talk turned classified.

Mueller has made strikingly public events of these reviews: not only could each man see and hear the others, but each was surrounded by subordinates. Few SACs emerge unscathed from the ritual, which is intended to spread Mueller's message quickly through the ranks. Nobody missed the point last year when the SAC in Albany, N.Y. — whose convictions produced half the FBI's average prison term — retired early. Mueller concluded he had been choosing easy targets.

In 2008, when Mueller unveiled the new reviews, he rated only 1 in 7 SACs as "good." Another 20% earned a "fair," and the rest were deemed deficient.

[Read "The Myth of Homegrown Islamic Terrorism."](#)

Before the Feb. 17 session, each SAC reported his assessment of top threats and accomplishments in counterterrorism, counterintelligence, cyber- and criminal operations. Baltimore ranked "al-Qaeda/Sunni" extremists as its most lethal threat, while Newark put down "homegrown Sunni extremists" and Boston the "self-radicalized, globally inspired." Philadelphia foresaw emerging threats from foreign spies looking to steal nanotechnology research. Mueller hammers on his SACs to justify these assessments and share the evidence with other agencies. If a field office has been stingy with intelligence-information reports (IIRs), which circulate around the government, former assistant FBI director John Miller says, the SAC will face relentless questioning. Mueller, he says, asks: "Is it that your sources don't have much information ... or is it that you're getting good information and your agents aren't bothering to write up IIRs?"

At that, Miller says, "you see that SAC sit there uncomfortably and try to decide what he wants to admit."

Mueller says later, poker-faced, that "it's probably been a growth experience for some SACs."

That afternoon Mueller directed an opening shot at Philadelphia "because I don't like the Phillies' pitching rotation." A Red Sox fan, Mueller has been known to consult Major League Baseball's At Bat app on his iPad during lunch.

Harrington, the FBI's No. 3, says softly, "Get ready." Mueller had spent hours reviewing line graphs and pie charts of results against resources for each field office. His jokes were often a barometer of mood.

[\(Read "New York's Biggest Mafia Bust: FBI Arrests More Than 100 Gotham Mobsters."\)](#)



SAC George Venizelos described a gang-control initiative in Camden, N.J., across the Delaware River from Philadelphia. Already there had been 58 arrests. Mueller's left eyebrow climbed.

"How are you measuring positive community impact?" he asked. Venizelos kicked the question to John Cosenza, his No. 2. "Initially, when you go in and make arrests, you can create more crime — territorial, people coming in and trying to take over," Cosenza said. "Hopefully, some of the crime statistics will get lower."

Hopefully. Mueller turned away. Boston (gang violence) and Baltimore (armed robbery) sounded much the same.

Michael Ward in Newark had results. He had come to the aid of local police when carjackings spiked 2,000% in Newark and Trenton, N.J., and his measure of impact was "a reduction in the carjacking rate." He threw 30 to 40 agents at the problem and brought the numbers back down.

Mueller's fingers drummed. He shifted in his seat. Carjackings? Weeks later, Ward says he doesn't know "how it registered at headquarters," but he defends his work as a model of "how you're supposed to deal with emerging threats." Mueller, looking back, says, "I learned a lot that day in terms of what was happening in Trenton." It is good to lend a hand to local police, but carjacking "is not one of the top priorities." Mueller says he is still "trying to drive out ... the usual metric of arrests, indictments and convictions by numbers."

[\(Read "Report: FBI and ATF Rivalry May Affect War on Terrorism."\)](#)

In the moment, there was nothing Mueller wanted to say to Ward with a reporter in the room. Shortly afterward, Mueller looked at his watch, looked at me and looked pointedly at the door.

"O.K.," he said. "We're going to turn to national security in 15 seconds."

Mueller's interrogation of SACs, according to David Schlendorf, the FBI's assistant director for resource planning, arose from a frustrated question: "How do I, as one person, pull the levers so that 35,000 people do what I want them to do?" Schlendorf embodies a startling invasion of private-sector managers into Mueller's FBI. He arrived as a special assistant in 2003 with a Harvard MBA and was amazed to discover that he had to walk down the hall to find the Internet. Within five years, he had leapfrogged a generation of agents to the FBI's top executive ranks.

Mueller wants more like him and makes regular recruiting trips to business schools. Their graduates have brought modern office tools to an FBI that still cannot buy a box of pencils without filling out Form FD 369 in quintuplicate — using carbon paper. They also brought exotic business jargon and a four-color FBI strategy map of arrows chasing ovals. Outsiders displaced agents with badges and guns as assistant directors in charge of finance, human resources, information technology and the directorate of weapons of mass destruction.

Mueller spurred the change of guard with an up-or-out rule for field supervisors. Hundreds retired, quit or

were removed from their posts, an enormous loss of collective memory. "These were people who knew their craft very well," says Konrad Motyka, president of the FBI Agents Association. "There are certain things the field knows and certain things headquarters knows, and sometimes they don't exactly mesh." The old guard calls Mueller's rising stars the "blue flammers," which is not a compliment. Schlendorf was equally undiplomatic. "To use a loaded term, the legacy employees — sometimes we've had an issue where they might be threatened by the younger, newer generation, more tech-savvy," he says. "So that's been a challenge. But we need to be competing with Google, with GE, for the best talent."

[See TIME's Pictures of the Week.](#)

And then there is Mueller himself. Years ago, when he ran the Justice Department's criminal division, subordinates dubbed him Bobby Three Sticks. The Mob-style sobriquet made sport of his Brahmin demeanor and fancy Philadelphia name, Robert Swan Mueller III. Only one old friend, Associate Deputy Attorney General David Margolis, "has ever used that name to my face," Mueller says. In the FBI, it is not pronounced with affection. Michael Mason, who retired in 2007, says Mueller's Princeton diploma and prep-school pedigree gave agents an excuse to oppose reforms: "People tend to look for 'How are you not like me? Why is it O.K. for me to not like this?'"

Mueller's occasional efforts to show a softer side tend to be awkward. One legendary example, recounted fondly by former counsel Chuck Rosenberg, began with a phone call before 6 a.m. at the office.

"Yes, sir," Rosenberg said.

"How are you?" Mueller asked.

"Fine."

"Everything O.K.?"

"Yes, sir. Everything's fine. Do you need anything?"

"Nope," Mueller said.

The line went dead, and the phone rang next door. A moment later, Mueller's special assistant told Rosenberg, "I just got the strangest call from the director."

[\(See "The 2011 TIME 100: The World's Most Influential People."\)](#)

After 9/11, Bush summoned Mueller and Ashcroft to brief him daily in the Oval Office. He scaled back eventually to twice a week. Obama convenes a weekly Terror Tuesday to review threats and operations with a large cast of Cabinet and agency chiefs. Mueller likes to use visual aids. When he met President-elect Obama in Chicago, he and Michael Leiter, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, brought an al-Qaeda map so large they call it the "horse blanket." But Mueller drew the line at showing Obama a staff-produced model of the underwear bomb — explosives stuffed into the crotch — that Umar Farouk

Abdulmutallab wore aboard a flight to Detroit in the failed Christmas bombing attempt of 2009. "Not a good idea," he said. Instead he showed a video clip of the basketball-size hole blown through the fuselage of a test aircraft when FBI technicians set off a replica of Abdulmutallab's bomb. Says Holder of Mueller: "The President relies on him, has faith in him, is anxious to hear from him."

Under Obama as under Bush, many of the tough calls fall to Mueller. One of the toughest began on Sept. 9, 2009, when a shuttle-bus driver named Najibullah Zazi set out from Denver to New York City. A multiagency intelligence effort had identified him as an al-Qaeda operative on his way to a suicide bombing, but crucial details were unknown. He was thought to be carrying detonators and the explosive TATP. The case, Holder says, "literally developed as Zazi was driving across the country. How far are you going to let him go? If the concern is that he's bringing explosive material in the car, how do you deal with that?" Surveillance, hampered by weather, could not be guaranteed.

As Zazi neared the Hudson River, Leiter says, the question was, "Do we let him go into New York City? You're approaching the Sept. 11 anniversary. You know he's talking to al-Qaeda. You don't know who he's going to meet, what he's going to do."

The stakes were high for New York, and for Mueller, if Zazi decided to set off his charges on the George Washington Bridge. Arresting him would prevent a disaster like that, but Mueller held back, intent on identifying confederates. He arranged for ruses to search Zazi's rental car at a fake drug-screening checkpoint and then an impoundment lot, where traffic police towed it on a trumped-up infraction. Only when New York City detectives spooked Zazi did Mueller's agents move in.

[\(See pictures of Najibullah Zazi in Aurora, Colo.\)](#)

By then, the FBI and National Security Agency had enough in hand to unravel the plot. Zazi and two high school friends, all trained in Pakistan, planned to detonate backpack bombs simultaneously aboard subway trains in Times Square and Grand Central Station. Threats to prosecute his parents for immigration fraud induced Zazi to give up the details. He pleaded guilty to conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction and two other charges. Sentencing is expected in June.

The threat stream since 9/11 has brought perhaps a dozen plots as grave and near at hand as Zazi's. It is no small victory that all of them failed, even if a balky shoe-bomb fuse and other gifts of fortune played their roles. But the FBI has expended great effort too against less obvious threats, using controversial undercover tools. In case after case, agents or informants have fanned loose talk of violence by angry Muslims into FBI-led plots — recruiting participants, selecting targets, teaching tradecraft, providing cash or matériel and then swooping in with arrests. The Liberty City Seven in Miami were said to be conspiring to destroy the Willis (then Sears) Tower, but the consensus among trial observers was that they "probably couldn't have found their way to Chicago," as Posner puts it with only mild hyperbole. Six men aroused suspicion when they tried to copy a video about jihad. An informant, recruited under threat of deportation, offered weapons and drove them on surveillance routes, culminating in charges that they planned an attack on New Jersey's Fort Dix. Thus far, prosecutors have fought off entrapment defenses, but the *Mutt and Jeff*-style cases raise doubts about the FBI's priorities. "If we don't, someone else may very well help them," says David Kris, who oversaw national-security cases at Justice. "We can't afford to ignore them."

[Read "An Enemy Within: The Making of Najibullah Zazi."](#)

The director's unmarked Gulfstream jet rolled into a fast descent, corkscrewing to avoid potential ground fire. The U.S. embassy in Yemen had come under mortar attack three days earlier, on April 6, 2008, and the threat stream in Sana'a was surging. Mueller turned to Ed McCormack, chief of his security detail, shortly after landing. "Got a spare set of handcuffs?" he asked. McCormack obliged with a well-scuffed pair that had seen hard use on bank robbers in his street-agent days. Mueller stuffed them under his belt and set off for the presidential palace.

Some hours later, Mueller's meeting with President Ali Abdullah Saleh was ending badly. The FBI chief pressed for the extradition of convicted al-Qaeda terrorist Jamal al-Badawi, who kept making unlikely escapes from Yemeni prison. Saleh dodged. He would need an act of parliament. He had personally obtained al-Badawi's promise to give up terrorism.

Mueller was unmoved. Saleh turned to bluster. "He flared his arms, raised his voice, made it clear this was his country," recalls Carlos Fernandez, then the FBI's legal attaché in Yemen. The President stood and escorted his visitors to the door, past a gold-plated Kalashnikov rifle sent by Saddam Hussein. Mueller stopped and reached for the small of his back. He pulled out the 10-oz. Peerless cuffs and plunked them into Saleh's hand. "Next time I'm here, I'd like to see these on Mr. Badawi," Mueller said. Saleh's eyes widened as the translator caught up. Then Mueller cracked a smile and clapped the smaller man on the shoulder. Saleh threw back his head and laughed.

[\(See pictures of clashes in Yemem.\)](#)

The encounter highlighted a remarkable expansion of the FBI's global role. The bureau has more legal attachés — 60 full-time overseas posts in countries ranging from Saudi Arabia to Sierra Leone — than domestic field offices. Mueller has traveled to 40 countries in 110 visits overseas.

To admirers, the Yemen trip showed off Mueller as an effective diplomat. "Saleh is very much a man's man in his own mind," says former U.S. ambassador Stephen Seche, who witnessed the stunt. "Mueller's strategy was to play to this element of his character." Saleh stood firm on extradition, but he gave Mueller a quiet guarantee "that Badawi was going to stay behind bars forever," Fernandez says.

But the episode could equally be said to show the limits of Mueller's reach. This was his ninth unsuccessful attempt to persuade Saleh to extradite a man on the FBI's most-wanted-terrorists list. Two months ago, Saleh released several dozen al-Qaeda fighters from jail. The FBI will not say whether it knows al-Badawi's whereabouts. Meanwhile, Saleh himself is fighting for survival in Yemen and may soon be heading out the door.

Mueller has had his share of failures, including missteps in the lead-up to the Fort Hood, Texas, shooting, disregarded warnings about the abuse of national-security letters and an epochal investigation of the 2001 anthrax letters that concentrated for years on the wrong man. Not least of the black marks is the serially disastrous effort to build a modern information system for the FBI. Mueller struggled throughout his term to replace what the Government Accountability Office called an "antiquated, paper-based, legacy system" for managing intelligence and case files. The first attempt, Virtual Case File, spent \$104 million over three

years on a project so badly broken that it had to be discarded altogether. He has promised delivery of the replacement project, called Sentinel, nearly every year since 2006. Mueller's most recent projection calls for "full operability" in September, the month he steps down.

[\(See pictures of the troubled journey of Major Hasan.\)](#)

Yet even Glenn Fine, who dogged the FBI for 10 years as the Justice Department inspector general, gave a watchdog's grudging endorsement. "They haven't done everything perfectly. They've made mistakes," he says. "By and large, he has moved the FBI in the right direction."

Mueller's goal of an agile, intelligence-driven service may spill the banks of plausible ambition, but there is not much doubt that important change is under way. "Our organization historically has been criticized for collecting a lot and either not doing anything with it or not sharing it," says Shawn Henry, who oversees the criminal and cyber divisions. When he sees valuable intelligence shared with other agencies, "it astounds me because I still expect some reluctance," but field agents increasingly accept that "if I can't action this, somebody else might be able to action it. If it's sitting in my drawer, or worse, sitting in my head, shame on me."

Mueller maintains that the FBI's police role complements intelligence gathering. "Because of the cooperation we get in just about every case, because of plea bargains, we get a substantial amount of intelligence," he says. The hardened terrorists of myth, he says, "are like everybody else. There are very few that have not in some way cooperated for some period of time."

Most people inside the bureau believe that the blown opportunities to head off 9/11 would not recur today. Even among the FBI's doubters, few disagree that the bureau has come a long way. Comey, whom Mueller has described privately as his preferred successor, says it will take another generation to reach the goals that Mueller set. "I think he has started the turning of the cultural battleship," Comey says. "I don't know if it's a quarter-turn or a half-turn, but the job of the next director is to keep pushing."

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