NO PREP

The Hunt for the Planners

Investigating 9/11

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

The Hunt for the Planners: Investigating 9/11

The Largest Investigation in History

Within hours of the attacks, the Federal Bureau of Investigation opened the case it code-named PENTTBOM — and threw more than 7,000 agents at it, over half the agents the FBI had. It became the largest investigation in the bureau's history, and it moved with astonishing speed. The hijackers had not used aliases on their tickets: flight manifests gave investigators nineteen names almost immediately, and within days the FBI had published the identities, photographs,

Name: Period: Date:

The Hunt for the Planners: Investigating 9/11

The Largest Investigation in History

Within hours of the attacks, the Federal Bureau of Investigation opened the case it code-named PENTTBOM — and threw more than 7,000 agents at it, over half the agents the FBI had. It became the largest investigation in the bureau's history, and it moved with astonishing speed. The hijackers had not used aliases on their tickets: flight manifests gave investigators nineteen names almost immediately, and within days the FBI had published the identities, photographs, and movements of all nineteen men. Physical evidence multiplied the leads. Mohamed Atta, the operation's lead hijacker, had checked luggage in Portland, Maine that missed his connecting flight in Boston; inside, agents found training videos, flight simulator manuals, and a handwritten document of final instructions. A rental car at the airport yielded more names and addresses. Flight schools in Florida, Arizona, and Minnesota confirmed that several of the men had trained there, sometimes showing strange disinterest in learning how to land. Agents traced apartments, bank accounts, gym memberships, and phone records, reconstructing how nineteen men had lived quietly inside the country they intended to attack — renting rooms in ordinary suburbs, shopping at ordinary stores, waiting. The picture that emerged was of a plot years in the making, directed from abroad by al-Qaeda, the terrorist network led by Osama bin Laden. Identifying the dead hijackers, however, was the easy half of the assignment. The harder question would consume American intelligence for a decade: finding the men who had planned, funded, and ordered the operation — the planners who were still alive, and still hiding.

Following the Money

Terror plots run on money, and money leaves footprints. Investigators reconstructed the 9/11 operation's finances almost transaction by transaction, and the totals surprised the public: the entire plot — flight training, apartments, cars, tickets — cost al-Qaeda somewhere between 400,000 and 500,000 dollars. The funds moved through unremarkable channels: wire transfers from facilitators overseas, cash deposits, and everyday bank accounts opened with real identification. In the days before the attacks, the hijackers even wired leftover money — several thousand dollars — back to a coordinator in the United Arab Emirates, a thrifty detail that became one of the investigation's strongest threads, because every transfer named an account, and every account pointed toward the network's financial architecture. Following those threads identified paymasters and facilitators and mapped relationships no interrogation had revealed. The lesson permanently changed counterterrorism. The Treasury Department built an entire apparatus for tracking terrorist financing: freezing assets, sanctioning front charities, and monitoring international transfer systems, while banks worldwide were enlisted to flag suspicious movement. Financial intelligence proved to have a quality unique among spy tools — money records do not misremember, and they cannot lie under interrogation. A ledger entry is a fact, timestamped and signed. In the years after 9/11, some of the most significant captures began not with a dramatic tip but with an analyst noticing that funds touched two accounts that should never have met. The hunt for the planners was, as much as anything, an accounting problem pursued with subpoenas — proof that in modern intelligence work, the decisive weapon is sometimes a spreadsheet.

The Mastermind

The investigation's central target soon had a name: Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, known in intelligence files simply as KSM. A Pakistani engineer educated at an American university, he had first pitched bin Laden in 1996 on what he called the 'planes operation' — a plan to crash hijacked airliners into American landmarks. Al-

Qaeda supplied the money, recruits, and authorization; KSM supplied the obsessive management, selecting targets, moving funds, and directing the hijackers' training and travel like the plot's obsessive chief executive. Investigators pieced together his role from interrogations, captured computers, and financial trails, and the hunt for him stretched across Pakistan's cities for eighteen months. It ended on March 1, 2003, when Pakistani forces working with the CIA burst into a house in Rawalpindi and dragged the most wanted man in counterterrorism out of bed. The capture was a turning point — and the beginning of one of the era's fiercest controversies. In secret CIA custody, KSM was subjected to what the government called enhanced interrogation techniques, including being waterboarded 183 times; critics, and later official investigations, called it torture and questioned both its morality and the reliability of what it produced. The legal consequences persist decades later: transferred to the military prison at Guantanamo Bay in 2006, KSM was charged with murdering nearly 3,000 people, yet pretrial hearings have dragged on for years, tangled in disputes over evidence obtained through his treatment. The mastermind was caught. Delivering a verdict on him proved to be a problem America is still solving, decades after the towers fell.

Learning from Failure

Even as agents chased the living plotters, a painful question demanded an answer: why had the attack succeeded at all? Congress created an independent, bipartisan panel — the 9/11 Commission — to find out, and its 2004 report became a rare thing, a government document that was also a bestseller. Its verdict was unsparing. The catastrophe reflected, above all, 'a failure of imagination': institutions had possessed pieces of the puzzle but never conceived the full picture. The report catalogued the missed chances. The CIA knew two future hijackers had attended an al-Qaeda meeting and later entered the United States, but the information reached the FBI too slowly to matter. An agent in Phoenix warned headquarters that suspicious Middle Eastern men were enrolling in American flight schools; the memo went unread by decision-makers, because no system existed to connect it

with anything else. Minneapolis agents arrested Zacarias Moussaoui, a flight student uninterested in takeoffs or landings, but could not get approval to search his laptop. Behind each miss stood a structural problem investigators called 'the wall' — legal and cultural barriers that kept intelligence agencies and criminal investigators from sharing what they knew. The Commission's reforms redrew the government: the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 created a Director of National Intelligence to force the sixteen-agency intelligence community to act as one, and a National Counterterrorism Center where analysts from rival agencies sit in the same room, staring at the same data — so that the next scattered clues might, this time, be assembled in time.

The Ten-Year Hunt

The man who ordered the attacks outran the war launched to catch him. Osama bin Laden slipped through the mountains of Tora Bora in December 2001, and for years the trail went almost completely cold — he released occasional recordings, but electronic surveillance found nothing, because he had abandoned phones and internet entirely. The thread that finally unraveled him was human, not electronic: intelligence officers assembled fragments from detainee interrogations about a trusted courier known by an alias, a man said to carry bin Laden's messages by hand. It took years to learn his real name, and years more to find him. In 2010, surveillance finally tracked the courier to a compound in Abbottabad, a Pakistani military town — and the compound itself became the evidence. Analysts studied it obsessively: walls up to eighteen feet topped with barbed wire, no phone or internet service, residents who burned their trash rather than setting it out, and a tall man who walked daily circles in the courtyard but never left. No one could prove bin Laden lived there; analysts gave probabilities, not certainty. President Obama ordered the raid anyway. On May 2, 2011, two helicopters of Navy SEALs crossed into Pakistan in darkness, assaulted the compound, and killed bin Laden in a third-floor bedroom. Crowds gathered that night outside the White House and at Ground Zero. The hunt had taken nine years and eight months — a monument to

patience, teaching intelligence officers that the decisive clue is often a small human detail, pursued for a decade.

Key Information: The Investigation of 9/11

Detail	Information
PENTTBOM	Largest FBI investigation ever — over 7,000 agents assigned
Hijacker identification	All 19 named within days via manifests and evidence
Plot cost	Estimated $400,000-$500,000, traced through bank records
Khalid Sheikh Mohammed	9/11 mastermind, captured in Pakistan, March 2003
9/11 Commission (2004)	Blamed a 'failure of imagination' and 'the wall'
Key reform	Director of National Intelligence created in 2004
Bin Laden found	Tracked through his trusted courier to Abbottabad
Bin Laden's death	Killed by Navy SEALs on May 2, 2011

Case Study: The Analyst and the Nickname

Dana Whitfield, 33, spent her days at a counterterrorism center reading interrogation summaries — thousands of pages, most of them dead ends. Her assignment sounded impossibly small: catalog every reference to couriers, the trusted men who carried messages for terrorist leaders who feared phones. One alias kept surfacing in scattered reports, spelled three different ways, attached to contradictory descriptions. "Some days I felt like I was studying a ghost's nickname," she told a colleague. Two detainees claimed the man had retired. Another insisted he was unimportant. But Dana noticed the denials themselves formed a pattern — senior prisoners seemed to steer questioners away from him, which suggested he mattered. Her team's file on the courier grew for years: a real name, a family history, a region, then a distinctive white SUV. She was at her desk the morning surveillance followed that SUV to a walled compound with no phone lines and burn-barrel trash. Dana's name appears in no history book, and she likes it that way. "We didn't find him with a thunderbolt," she says. "We found him with filing."

1. How does Dana's work illustrate why the bin Laden hunt succeeded where electronic surveillance failed?

_____

_____

2. Dana treated the detainees' denials as evidence. Using the reading, explain why that reasoning was sound.

_____

_____

Multiple Choice

1. How were the nineteen hijackers identified so quickly after the attacks?
    a) An accomplice confessed all details to the FBI directly
    b) Flight manifests and evidence they left behind
    c) Security camera facial recognition software at airports
    d) Anonymous tips from overseas governments and agencies

2. What did the 9/11 Commission identify as the government's deepest failure?

a) A shortage of federal agents

b) Outdated airport screening machines

c) A lack of military funding

d) A failure of imagination

3. What finally led investigators to bin Laden's hiding place?

a) Tracking his trusted courier

b) Intercepting his cell phone calls

c) A reward claimed by a neighbor

d) Documents captured at Tora Bora

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ PENTTBOM	A) Post created in 2004 to unify America's intelligence agencies
2. ___ Khalid Sheikh Mohammed	B) Trusted messenger who carried communications by hand
3. ___ The wall	C) Code name of the FBI's massive 9/11 investigation
4. ___ Director of National Intelligence	D) Architect of the 'planes operation,' captured in 2003
5. ___ Courier	E) Barriers that kept agencies from sharing intelligence before 9/11

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The FBI's 9/11 investigation was code-named _____.

2. Osama bin Laden was found in Abbottabad, _____.

3. The 9/11 Commission called the core failure one of _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why did financial records prove so valuable in unraveling the 9/11 network?

_____

_____

_____

2. Explain how 'the wall' contributed to the missed warnings before September 11.

_____

_____

_____

3. What does the ten-year bin Laden hunt teach about how intelligence work actually succeeds?

_____

_____

_____