

Inside Sandy papers

Revealed lack of Arab translators

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WASHINGTON — Urgent complaints that the FBI could not decipher bugged conversations between members of a Brooklyn mosque and Afghan terrorists because it lacked translators were included in the documents former National Security Adviser Sandy Berger removed from the National Archives. The Post has learned.

In the latest twist to the document scandal, investigators said the revelation about translators was among several criticisms of America's ability to deal with the looming al Qaeda threat contained in the "after action" memo on the millennium terror plot that is at the center of the Berger probe.

Officials said an appeal to hire more translators familiar with Arabic, Pashto and other key "counterterrorism" languages at the FBI, CIA and National Security Agency was among 29 proposals to tighten security contained in the report.

The report written by former White House counter-terrorism chief Richard Clarke also warned of the presence of al Qaeda cells inside the United States. It urged increased surveillance on Arab students coming into the United States and called for increased security at U.S. ports and other points of entry, investigators said.

The Clinton administration is reported to have only adopted one of its proposals.

Government officials said the FBI had been conducting electronic surveillance of a mosque in

Brooklyn frequented by Afghans in 1999 after developing information from the investigation of the U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa.

Sources said the FBI had "hours" of taped conversations between people associated with the unidentified mosque and suspected terrorist leaders.

But despite the potential intelligence value of the intercepted communications, stacks of tapes languished on the shelves at the FBI counter-terrorism center in downtown Manhattan because there were not enough translators.

The problem of the lack of capable translators persisted right up to the 9/11 attacks and has been frequently cited as a key weakness.

The FBI reported to Congress in January 2002 — two years after the Clarke memo to Berger — that it had backlogs of "thousands of unreviewed and untranslated materials."

Berger, who stepped down as an adviser to Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry's campaign last week, has called the removal of the National Archives documents an honest mistake. He said he was taking notes to prepare for testimony before the 9/11 commission.

Congressional committees are investigating whether Berger's real interest may have been handwritten notes on the margins of each copy of the report. Those notes could potentially contain responses from Berger and other top Clinton aides to the memo's recommendations.

SOCKS DOCS SCANDAL



The case against Sandy Berger

1. In October 2003, National Archive's officials tell the FBI they caught former National Security Adviser Sandy Berger (right) removing top-secret counterterrorism documents.
2. News of the FBI probe leaks earlier this month.
3. Reports say Berger walked off with copies of highly classified memos on homeland security and U.S. counterterrorism strategy, possibly stuffed in his socks.
4. Berger claims he accidentally walked off with the papers while preparing 9/11 Commission testimony.
5. Berger steps down as a John Kerry campaign adviser.

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