

Whistleblower Coming In Cold From the F.B.I.

by Gail Sheehy

Sibel Edmonds says she was shocked at the lack of security in the F.B.I.'s counterintelligence squad when she went to work there shortly after Sept. 11. But when she spoke up, she was canned. **Gail Sheehy** tells her story.

Last Friday, the four women from New Jersey who have faced down the F.B.I. on its failures in preventing the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that claimed their husbands' lives were personally invited to the bureau's Hoover Building offices in Washington, D.C., for a second visit. Their host was none other than F.B.I. director Robert Mueller.

Cordial and fully engaged, Mr. Mueller introduced the newly appointed head of the Bureau's Penttbom investigation (*Pent* for Pentagon, *Pen* for Pennsylvania, *tt* for the Twin Towers and *bom* for the four planes that the government was forewarned could be used as weapons—even bombs—but ignored).

The new Penttbom team leader, Joan-Marie Turchiano, politely suggested the widows present their questions.

"O.K." said Kristin Breitweiser, the group's hammerhead, "have you solved the crime yet?"

The Penttbom leader said they had been investigating the 19 hijackers and had run down every connection. Ms. Breitweiser recalls her next words indelibly: "As far as our investigations are concerned, we can say the hijackers had no contacts in the United States."

But the scathing 800-page report on intelligence failures produced by a joint congressional investigation had already revealed that the F.B.I. had open investigations on four of the 14 individuals who allegedly had some kind of contact with the hijackers while they were in the U.S.

The Four Moms from New Jersey, or "the girls" as they refer to themselves, waste little time on niceties these days. They were the firecrackers behind the creation of the 9/11 commission, which after a year of meager progress, is finally ready to call key administration officials to testify in public hearings on some of the most important questions we have before us as a nation.

But White House delays and circumventions have hampered the effort, and the four moms see the commission flagging in its use of subpoena power to call in key Clinton and Bush administration officials for their testimony. Personal connections between commission members—like executive director Philip Zelikow and national security advisor Condoleezza Rice—undermine the commission's purported independence. As the commission's work draws close to its May dissolution, it appears the main question they were tasked to answer will remain unanswered: Did our guardians of national security have enough information to prevent 9/11? Why did all of our officials who swore an oath of office to lead, protect, and serve, fail to do so on the morning of 9/11?

Last Monday Ms. Breitweiser, along with three other members of the Family Steering Committee, met with commissioner John Lehman about the need for an extension of the Commission's May deadline—after House Speaker Dennis Hastert had already declared such an extension dead in the water. Exiting the meeting, the family members were hopeful that he would join the majority of commissioners—all five Democrats, chairman Thomas Kean and one other Republican, Slade Gorton—in supporting a postponement. More recently, as Democratic presidential candidates burnish their credentials in intelligence and national security issues against Bush's 2004 campaign, the extension of that deadline is becoming a heated issue.

While fighting a mostly losing battle for a transparent investigation, the Moms are winning on another score: Whistleblowers from agencies culpable in the failures of 9/11—long silent—are being attracted to their mission.

Sibel Edmonds read an article published in these pages last August about the 9/11 widows' bold confrontation with Director Mr. Mueller in a private meeting last summer, and recognized kindred spirits.

"This was the first time I'd heard anybody ask such direct questions to Mr. Mr. Mueller," said Ms. Edmonds, a Turkish-American woman who answered the desperate call of the F.B.I. in September, 2001 for translators of Middle Eastern languages. Hired as contract employee a week after 9/11, without a personal interview, Ms. Edmonds was given top-secret security clearance to translate wiretaps ordered by field offices in New York, Los Angeles, and other cities by agents who were working around the clock to pick up the trail of Al Qaeda terrorists and their supporters in the U.S. and abroad. Working in the F.B.I.'s Washington field office, she listened to hundreds of hours of intercepts and translated reams of e-mails and documents that flooded into the bureau. In a series of intimate interviews, she told her story to this writer.

When she arrived, her enormous respect for the F.B.I. was initially confirmed.

"The field agents are wonderful, but they were terribly exasperated with the D.C. office," she said.

While the news was full of reports of heaps of untranslated material languishing inside the F.B.I.'s counterterrorism unit, Ms. Edmonds has claimed that translators were told to let them pile up. She said she remembers a supervisor's instructions "to just say no to those field agents calling us to beg for speedy translations" so that the department could use the pileup as evidence to demand more money from the Senate. Another colleague she recalls saying bitterly, "This is our time to show those assholes we are in charge."

F.B.I. translators are the front line for information gathered by foreign-language wiretaps, tips, documents, e-mails, and other intercepted threats to security. Based on what they translate and the dots they connect, F.B.I. field agents act against targets of investigation-or fail to act-in a timely manner. As an agent later told the Judiciary Committee which oversees the F.B.I., "When you hear a suspect say 'The flower will bloom next week,' you can't wait two weeks to get it translated."

During her six months of work for the Bureau, Ms. Edmonds said she grew increasingly horrified by the lack of internal security she saw inside the very agency tasked with protecting our national security.

In papers filed with the F.B.I.'s internal investigative office, the Department of Justice, the Senate Judiciary Committee, and most recently with the 9/11 Commission, she has reported serious ongoing failures in the language division of the F.B.I. Washington Field Office. They include security lapses in hiring and monitoring of translators, investigations that have been compromised by incorrect or misleading translations sent to field agents; and thousands of pages of translations falsely labeled "not pertinent" by Middle Eastern linguists who were either not qualified in the target language or English, or, worse, protecting targets of investigation.

Nothing happened. Undaunted, Ms. Edmonds took her concerns to upper management. Soon afterward she was fired. The only cause given was "for the convenience of the government." The F.B.I. has not refuted any of Ms. Edmonds' allegations, yet they have accounted for none of them.

On the morning Ms. Edmonds was terminated, she said, she was escorted from the building by an agent she remembered saying: "We will be watching you

and listening to you. If you dare to consult an attorney who is not approved by the F.B.I., or if you take this issue outside the F.B.I. to the Senate, the next time I see you, it will be in jail." Two other agents were present.

"I know about my constitutional rights, but do you know how many translators would be intimidated?"

Shortly after her dismissal, F.B.I. agents turned up at the door of the Ms. Edmonds' townhouse to seize her home computer. She was then called in to be polygraphed—a test which, she found out later, she passed. A few months after her dismissal, accompanied by her lawyer on a sunny morning in May 2002, Ms. Edmonds took her story to the Senate Judiciary Committee. As her high heels glanced off the marble steps of Congress she sensed two men ascending right behind her. Turning, she recognized the agent walk, the Ray-Bans, the outline of a weapon, and the deadest giveaway of all—a cell phone pointed straight at her, transmitting. "They weren't secretive about it, they wanted me to know they're there," she said. After being shadowed in plain sight many more times, she said with dark humor, "I call them my escorts."

After her meeting, Senator Chuck Grassley, the Republican vice-chair of the Judiciary Committee to whom Ms. Edmonds appealed, had his investigators check her out. Then they, along with staffers for Senator Patrick Leahy, called for a joint briefing in the summer of 2002. The F.B.I. sent a unit chief from the language division and an internal security official.

In a lengthy, unclassified session that one participant describes as bizarre, the windows fogged up as the session finished; it was that tense, "None of the F.B.I. officials' answers washed, and they could tell we didn't believe them." He chuckles remembering one of the Congressional investigators saying, "You basically admitted almost all that Sibel alleged, yet you say there's no problem here. What's wrong with this picture?"

The Bureau briefers shrugged, put on their coats, and left. There was no way the F.B.I. was going to admit to another spy scandal only months after being scorched by the Webster Report on one of the most dangerous double agents in F.B.I. history, Robert Hanssen.

"I think the F.B.I. is ignoring a very major internal security breach," said Grassley, "and a potential espionage breach."

Unlike those whistleblowers whose cause is redress of personal grievances, Ms. Edmonds impressed Grassley as passionately patriotic.

"The basic problem is, heads don't roll," Sen. Grassley said. "The culture of the F.B.I. is to worry about their own public relations. If you're going to change that culture, somebody's got to get fired." He is not optimistic, however, that Congress will act aggressively. "Nobody wants to take on the F.B.I."

The translator had filed a complaint with the Inspector General of the Department of Justice on March 7, 2002. She was told then that an investigation would be undertaken and she could expect a report by the fall of 2002. Twenty-one months later, she is still waiting. She also filed a First Amendment case against the Department of Justice and the F.B.I. And a Freedom of Information case against the F.B.I. for release of documents pertaining to her work for the Bureau, to confirm her allegations. The F.B.I. refused her FOIA request. Their stated reason was the pending investigation by Justice, which, her sources in the Senate tell her, will probably be held up until after the November election.

When Ms. Edmonds wouldn't go away or keep still, F.B.I. Director Mueller asked Attorney General John Ashcroft to assert the State Secrets Privilege in the case of Ms. Edmonds versus Department of Justice. Mr. Ashcroft obliged.

The State Secrets Privilege is the neutron bomb of legal tactics. In the rare cases where the government invokes it to withhold evidence or to block discovery in the name of national security, it can effectively terminate the case. According to a 1982 Appeals Court ruling. "Once the court is satisfied that the information poses a reasonable danger to secrets of state, even the most compelling necessity cannot overcome the claim of privilege ._"

In interviews conducted over recent weeks with a senior F.B.I. agent who worked closely with Ms. Edmonds, former F.B.I. counterterrorism agents, and with current and former members of Congress involved in national security issues, a picture emerged of the dark undercurrents that run beneath our best counterterrorism efforts, and the punishments meted out to those who dare to expose it.

Does Ms. Edmonds pose a danger to secrets of state? Or do the secrets buried in the nerve center of the F.B.I.'s counterterrorism squad pose a danger to Americans living under the politics of dread?

Edmonds was seen as a jewel when the F.B.I. found her only a week after September 11, 2001. With reports of stacks of untranslated "chatter" from Middle Eastern suspects and their supporters, the embarrassed Bureau couldn't wait to hire this Turkish-American graduate student who speaks four

languages, not only Turkish, Farsi (the Iranian language) and Azerbaijani, but perfect American-English. The graduate student was carrying five courses in preparation for her Master's degree and was in mourning for her father's recent death. "But I felt like I was being called to duty."

Inside the F.B.I.'s Washington field office roughly 200 translators sit hip to hip in one large room that is a linguistic cacophony of chatter from 185 different countries. The few Arabic translators may be flanked by a Farsi speaker on one side, an Urdu speaker on the other, and a translator of Chinese chatter behind them.

In a security briefing she was told that any documents marked "Top Secret" had to be locked up when employees went to lunch. Laptops had to be kept in a safe. Any contacts with foreign people, even social, had to be reported. She also signed a document promising to report any suspicious activities of other translators. She was impressed with the stringency of F.B.I. rules.

The Translation Department is treated by the F.B.I. as highly sensitive. Yet her badge allowed her and other translators to enter and exit the building without passing through security, and within the sanctum itself they could pass freely from floor to floor and to any agent's office. Ms. Edmonds saw several different individuals leave the building with documents or audio tapes in their gym bags. When she called security to report it, nothing was done.

She was one of three Turkish translators working on real time wiretaps, e-mails, and documents related to 9/11 investigations. One of her colleagues was an unassuming immigrant whose first employment on entering the U.S. was as a busboy. Ms. Edmonds was dismayed to learn that he had been hired despite failing to pass the English equivalency exam. When he was chosen to go to Guantánamo Bay, to translate interrogations with the half-dozen Turkish detainees in America's war on terror, she remembers with both compassion and disgust hearing her colleague wail, "I can't do this!"

But it was her other colleague who gave her the greatest cause for concern-and her reports to her superiors as well as an alphabet soup of government commissions and agencies remain unanswered.

Melek Can Dickerson was a very friendly Turkish woman, married to a major in the U.S. Air Force. She liked to be called informally "Jan."

The account that follows, which comes from extended interviews with Ms. Edmonds, was related in testimony to the Senate Judiciary committee.

"I began to be suspicious as early as November, 2001" said Ms. Edmonds. "In conversation Jan mentioned these suspects and said 'I can't believe they're monitoring these people.'"

"How would you know?" Ms. Edmonds remembers saying. She said Dickerson told her she had worked for them in a Turkish organization; she talked about how she shopped for them at a Middle Eastern grocery store in Alexandria.

Ms. Edmonds has told the Judiciary Committee that soon after, Ms. Dickerson tried to establish social ties with her, suggesting they meet in Alexandria and introduce their husbands to each other.

When Sibel invited the visitors in for tea, she said, Major Dickerson began asking Matthew Edmonds if the couple had many friends from Turkey here in the U.S. Mr. Edmonds said he didn't speak Turkish, so they didn't associate with many Turkish people. The Air Force officer then began talking up a Turkish organization in Washington that he described, according to the Edmondses, as "a great place to make connections and it could be very profitable."

Sibel was sickened. This organization was the very one she and Jan Dickerson were monitoring in a 9/11 investigation. Since Sibel had adhered to the rule that an F.B.I. employee does not discuss bureau matters with one's mate, her husband innocently continued the conversation. Ms. Dickerson and her husband offered to introduce the Edmondses to people connected to the Turkish embassy in Washington who belonged to this organization.

"These two people were the top targets of our investigation!" Ms. Edmonds said of the people the Dickersons proposed to introduce them to.

"My husband keeps thinking he's talking about promoting business deals," Ms. Edmonds later said of the encounter. "He has no idea the man is talking about criminal activities with some semi-legitimate front."

These are classic "pitch activities" to get somebody to spy for you, according to a Judiciary Committee staffer who investigated Ms. Edmonds' claims.

"You'd think the F.B.I. would be jumping out of their seats about all these red flags," the staffer said.

The targets of that F.B.I. investigation left the country abruptly in 2002. Later, Ms. Edmonds discovered that Ms. Dickerson had managed to get hold of

translations meant for Ms. Edmonds, forge her signature, and render the communications useless.

"These were documents directly related to a 9/11 investigation and suspects, and they had been sent to field agents in at least two cities." By accident, Ms. Edmonds discovered the breach—up to 400 pages of translations marked "not pertinent"—and insisted that those classified translations be sent back so she could retranslate them

"We discovered some amazing stuff," she remembered.

The first half-dozen translations were transcripts from an F.B.I. wiretap targeting a Turkish intelligence officer working out of the Turkish embassy in Washington, D.C. A staff-member of the Judiciary committee later confirmed to this writer that the intelligence officer was the target of the wiretap Ms. Dickerson had mistranslated, signing Ms. Edmonds' name to the printouts. Ms. Edmonds said she found them to reveal that the officer had spies working for him inside the U.S. State Department and at the Pentagon—but that information would not have reached field agents unless Ms. Edmonds had retranslated them. She only got through about 100 more pages before she was fired.

"I didn't go out and blow the whistle," Ms. Edmonds said. She said she first reported these breaches both verbally and in writing to a supervisor, who assured her that the F.B.I. had done a background check on Ms. Dickerson, and the matter was put to an end.

Her further inquiries to counterintelligence agents raised a small alarm. Ms. Edmonds was told that Ms. Dickerson hadn't disclosed any links to the Turkish organization in her employment application. But nothing happened. Ms. Edmonds, despairing to another superior in the counterintelligence squad, remembers the agent saying: "I'll bet you've never worked in government before. We do things differently. We don't name names, and we usually sweep the dirt under the carpet."

She said another special agent warned: "If you insist on this investigation, I'll make sure in no time it will turn around and become an investigation about you."

The F.B.I., contacted with these allegations, would not comment; Ms. Dickerson could not be reached for comment, but has previously dismissed Ms. Edmonds' story as "preposterous." The F.B.I. has also previously said that it

did not believe that Ms. Dickerson acted maliciously, though members of the Judiciary committee have expressed dissatisfaction with the F.B.I.'s investigation.

Going by the book was not without personal sacrifice for Ms. Edmonds. She remembered her erstwhile tea companion, Ms. Dickerson, threatening: "Why would you make such a fuss over translations? You're not even planning to stay here. Why would you put your life and your family's lives in danger?"

Ms. Edmonds said that after she reported this threat to Dale Watson, then executive assistant director of the F.B.I., she learned from friends in Turkey that plainclothes agents went to her sister's apartment in Istanbul with an interrogation warrant.

Ms. Edmonds had already brought her sister and mother to Washington in anticipation of such reprisals by Turkish intelligence. But her younger sister, a totally apolitical airline employee, hasn't spoken to her since.

After two years of futile efforts as an F.B.I. whistleblower, Ms. Edmonds figured the widows were her last resort. The former translator had information relevant to the commission that nobody else seemed to want to hear. Shortly after the Christmas holidays, in the leer of a nationwide orange alert based on a "sustained level of intelligence chatter," she contacted Mindy Kleinberg, the only mom whose telephone number is listed. Kleinberg rallied her cohorts, Kristen Breitweiser and Patty Casazza (their fourth member, Lori Van Aucken, was taking a brief "sabbatical"). The three moms jumped in an S.U.V. and gunned it down the Garden State to meet up with Ms. Edmonds halfway to D.C. at an anonymous roadside hotel. She gave them the outlines of her story, and asked "the girls" if they could get her an audience with the 9/11 commission. Her letter and follow-up calls to Tom Kean, the chairman, had gone unanswered for a year. The moms were so disturbed by all the security lapses she described, they slipped back into the sleepless agitation that was so familiar from the months after watching on TV while their husbands were turned to ash by terrorists in the World Trade Center attack. But they eagerly agreed to help.

Last week, Ms. Edmonds met with a New York attorney, Eric Feiff, a veteran of both the New York District Attorney's office and the State Department. He finds her case extraordinary.

"We're familiar with people in big bureaucracies putting job security over doing the right thing, but not at this dramatic level—putting job security above

national security," said Feiff. He is appalled at the invocation of State Secrets Privilege "It's the Attorney General saying to the judiciary, 'Not only don't we answer to Ms. Edmonds, we don't answer to you.'"

The last resort, Ms. Edmonds concluded, was the federal 9/11 commission. Maybe they would live up to their mandate to do a truly independent investigation of the security lapses that allowed our country to be invaded by terrorists supported by foreign powers, who have yet to be exposed or held accountable.

She sent a full report to one of the Democratic commission members. When this writer asked him about the commission's interest in the issues raised by Ms. Edmonds' report, he said: "It sounds like it's too deep in the weeds for us to consider, we're looking at broader issues."

It has not deterred her. And neither snow nor sleet nor mini child disasters could deter the moms from keeping their dates in Washington last Friday to do battle for Ms. Edmonds. When the 9/11 commission seemed close-minded, they met with Judiciary Committee staffers, echoing Sibel's pleadings that Senator Grassley hold his own hearings. Senator Grassley had told this writer that his hands were tied, because, "Senator Hatch is now chairman of the Oversight Committee." The staffers said they had written to both Mueller and Ashcroft several times, asking them to come in and talk about Ms. Edmonds' allegations. No reply. Sibel was surprised to hear them admit, 'Senator Hatch has been an obstacle on everything we've tried to do.'

Then a brainstorm. What if the Senate Intelligence Committee held a joint hearing with the Judiciary Committee? Breitweiser enthused, "Great, we've already talked to Senators Roberts and Rockefeller [co-chairs of the Senate Intelligence Committee]. We were told by Senator Roberts that the translation issue remains 'a serious problem.' They said they would like to hold hearings in February of this year."

The moms' final meeting was their hour-and-a-half private session at the J. Edgar Hoover Building. Ms. Edmonds was not welcome there. But Director Mueller, said Breitweiser, seemed genuinely interested in what the moms had to say. Asked about the Ms. Edmonds case, Mueller said he had handed it over to the Inspector General's office. Pressed, he said, "I can't investigate myself." Yes, but, the Moms nudged, had he looked into problems in the translation department? Mueller appeared to brush off the matter as anything but important.

"Then, I don't understand why you asked that State Secrets Privilege be asserted here?" Kleinberg piped up. "If her case was that important, why isn't it important enough to deserve a report?"

For the first time, the director did not look cordial. So Breitweiser switched back to an earlier subject - his cooperation with a Senate hearing on the translation issue. "So, Director Mueller, I just want to get you on the record," said Breitweiser. "If the Senate asks you to testify, we have your word you'll go?"

The square-jawed chief spook smiled at the girls' grasp of strategy. "You have my word," they all remember his saying, "if Senator Hatch invites me to testify, absolutely I will be there."

Now all they have to do is move the immovables. But they've done it before. And there is one motto shared by the Four Moms from New Jersey and the translator from Turkey: We're not going away.