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Panel: '98 meeting foresaw 9/11 attack

By Kathy Kiely, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON ♦ Three years to the day before the attacks that leveled the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon, U.S. spymasters concluded they must improve surveillance on terrorists or the nation would face a catastrophic assault, a congressional panel will report today.

The eerily prophetic account of a meeting on Sept. 11, 1998, among the unidentified U.S. intelligence officials is cited in Congress' first official postmortem on September's terror attacks. Members of the House Intelligence Committee's terrorism subcommittee will release a 30-page executive summary of a 9-month investigation into the state of the nation's counterterrorism defenses. The full report, which runs to several hundred pages, will stay classified.

Sources familiar with the document confirm that it criticizes the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency for failing to devote enough attention and resources to counterterrorism before the Sept. 11 attacks. The sources said the CIA is criticized for spending too much money on its Virginia headquarters and not enough on spies in the field.



Chambliss AP

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Among the problems the panel identified at the three agencies:

- Too few linguists capable of translating and interpreting intercepted data.
- Too little sharing of information among the agencies.
- Too little flexibility for the CIA to recruit informants with the kind of connections that might help the United States obtain information about terrorist plans.

"We've had ... systemic problems in each different agency that participated in the deficiencies ... that did allow Sept. 11 to happen," said Rep. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., who heads the subcommittee.

Congress already has passed legislation to remove some restrictions on CIA recruitment. The Intelligence subcommittee recommends other changes, including the hiring more translators and the development of an improved "watch list" to track potential terrorists.

The report is far from Congress' final word on the terrorist attacks. The Senate and House intelligence committees are in the midst of an unusual joint investigation into what went wrong Sept. 11.