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Dec. 19, 2002 — -- Two veteran FBI investigators say they were ordered to stop investigations into a suspected terror cell linked to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network and the Sept. 11 attacks.

In a dramatic interview with ABCNEWS, FBI special agents and partners Robert Wright and John Vincent say they were called off criminal investigations of suspected terrorists tied to the deadly bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa. U.S. officials say al Qaeda was responsible for the embassy attacks and the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States.

"September the 11th is a direct result of the incompetence of the FBI's International Terrorism Unit. No doubt about that. Absolutely no doubt about that," Wright said. "You can't know the things I know and not go public."

In the mid-1990s, with growing terrorism in the Middle East, the two Chicago-based agents were assigned to track a connection to Chicago, a suspected terrorist cell that would later lead them to a link with Osama bin Laden. Wright says that when he pressed for authorization to open a criminal investigation into the money trail, his supervisor stopped him.

"Do you know what his response was? 'I think it's just better to let sleeping dogs lie,'" said Wright. "Those dogs weren't sleeping. They were training. They were getting ready."

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The FBI says its handling of the matter was appropriate at the time.

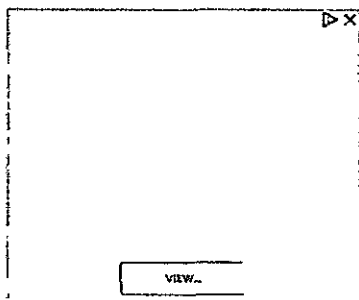
"Truthfully, if 9/11 had not occurred, we wouldn't be here [giving the interview]," said Vincent, a 27-year veteran at the bureau until he retired a few days after being interviewed by ABCNEWS. "Because of 9/11, we're here because we see the danger."

pp. 2

The suspected terrorist cell in Chicago was the basis of the investigation, yet Wright, who remains with the FBI, says he soon discovered that all the FBI intelligence division wanted him to do was to follow suspected terrorists and file reports — but make no arrests.

"The supervisor who was there from headquarters was right straight across from me and started yelling at me: 'You will not open criminal investigations. I forbid any of you. You will not open criminal investigations against any of these intelligence subjects,'" Wright said.

Even though they were on a terrorism task force and said they had proof of criminal activity, Wright said he was told not to pursue the matter.



In 1998 al Qaeda terrorists bombed two American embassies in Africa. The agents say some of the money for the attacks led back to the people they had been tracking in Chicago and to a powerful Saudi Arabian businessman, Yassin al-Kadi. Al-Kadi is one of 12 Saudi businessmen suspected of funneling millions of dollars to al Qaeda and who had extensive business and financial ties in Chicago.

Yet, even after the bombings, Wright said FBI headquarters wanted no arrests.

"Two months after the embassies are hit in Africa, they wanted to shut down the criminal investigation," said Wright. "They wanted to kill it."

The move outraged Chicago federal prosecutor Mark Flessner, who was assigned to the case despite efforts Wright and Vincent say were made by superiors to block the probe. Flessner said Wright and Vincent were helping him build a strong criminal case against al-Kadi and others.

"There were powers bigger than I was in the Justice Department and within the FBI that simply were not going to let it [the building of a criminal case] happen. And it didn't happen," Flessner said.

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He said he still couldn't figure out why Washington stopped the case — whether it was Saudi influence or bureaucratic ineptitude.

"I think there were very serious mistakes made," said Flessner. "And I think, it perhaps cost, it cost people their lives ultimately."

PP. 3