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OPINION

EXPRESSO: JAMES PATTERSON

To blame for the 'wall'

April 18, 2004

Was there a "wall" between the nation's premier intelligence agencies, as the 9/11 commission was told last week, prohibiting them from sharing information that may have prevented attacks of Sept. 11, 2001? Depends on who's asked.

For instance, Attorney General John Ashcroft told the commission on Tuesday that the wall was a legal impediment that "isolated" and "handcuffed" FBI agents before 9/11.

But in April 1999, Chicago FBI Agent Robert G. Wright was rebuffed by superiors when he and a group of assistant U.S. attorneys tried to coax a Muslim FBI agent based in Dallas to wear a microphone for a meeting with a Muslim accountant who was involved in a criminal investigation linked to overseas terrorism. The agent refused to participate but was not punished.

Due to the serious nature of the terrorism investigation, a senior colleague of Wright in Chicago attempted three times to determine the best way to have the Muslim agent's refusal investigated but got nowhere with FBI bosses.

If there was a wall, it was because some folks in the FBI wanted one.

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