As I began this book, the United States confronted its most important terrorist threat since 9/11—the attempted suicide bombing of a U.S. jetliner bound for Detroit on Christmas Day, 2009. “This was a serious reminder of the dangers that we face and the nature of those who threaten our homeland,” said President Barack Obama in his first comments on the attempt to kill three hundred passengers aboard the Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam. “This was not a failure to collect intelligence,” explained the president after conferring with his top counterterrorism officials. “It was a failure to integrate and understand the intelligence we already had.”

The intelligence lapses that had allowed twenty-three-year-old Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to board the Amsterdam-to-Detroit flight, carrying undetected explosives and a syringe in his underwear, included a CIA report indicating that the wealthy young Nigerian had recently met with al-Qaeda-affiliated rebels in Yemen known to be planning an attack on the United States. Following his arrest, Abdulmutallab told FBI agents that he was trained in Yemen by members of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) who had equipped him with the explosive device and showed him how to conceal it. AQAP instantly released a statement claiming responsibility for the operation, calling Abdulmutallab a “hero” and a “martyr” who had successfully outwitted American intelligence. Within the body of intelligence that U.S. analysts failed to “integrate and understand” was the uncomfortable fact that AQAP’s commander—a thirty-six-year-old Saudi named Said Ali al-Shihri—was a former detainee at the U.S. military garrison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Intelligence also included a statement from Shihri’s family who attributed his extremism to the five years he had spent in detention at Guantanamo. In effect, the Christmas Day plot was orchestrated by a former inmate radicalized in a U.S.-operated prison.

Apart from these intelligence lapses, the Christmas Day plot should have come as no surprise to U.S. intelligence. Five months earlier, in July 2009, following the discovery of several highly publicized terrorist plots originating from U.S. prisons, Attorney General Eric Holder told reporters, “The American people would be surprised at the depth of the [terrorist] threat,”
adding that “the whole notion of radicalization is something that didn’t loom as large a few months ago . . . as it does now. And that’s the shifting nature of threats that keep you up at night.” This threat had been worrying intelligence officials for years.

Responding to what the FBI termed a “fully operational” terrorist plot to attack U.S. army recruiting centers, Israeli government facilities, and Jewish synagogues in Los Angeles on the symbolic date of September 11, 2005—instigated by a fringe group of Sunni Muslims at California’s New Folsom Prison called Jam’iyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh (The Assembly of Authentic Islam, or JIS)—FBI Director Robert Mueller warned that “prisons are . . . fertile ground for extremists. Inmates may be drawn to an extreme form of Islam because it may help justify their violent tendencies.”

The JIS plot, too, should not have come as a complete surprise to the FBI. After all, it is well known that Folsom Prison has a long and storied radical history—one that inspired California’s “convict revolutionaries” of the 1960s.

In 2007, the Department of Homeland Security responded to the JIS threat by forming a special unit to combat the danger posed by extremists in American prisons. Congress then deliberated (but did not pass for bipartisan reasons) the Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act, calling for the formation of a national commission to study the mitigation of “violent radicalization” and “ideologically based violence in prison.” Testifying in support of the act was Charles Allen, Chief Intelligence Officer for DHS and a legendary figure in the counterterrorism community. As a CIA warnings officer in 1990, Allen predicted Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait; at DHS in 2007, Allen warned of the recruitment potential of jihadist websites; in 2008 he issued the first warning on the American-born Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki (1971–2011), who would go on to incite a U.S. Army psychiatrist, Major Nidal Hasan, to kill thirteen soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas, in November 2009 (a month before the Christmas Day plot). Now Allen advised Congress that radicalization in U.S. prisons was becoming increasingly common due to an interrelated set of factors: namely, the nature of prison environments, coupled with the social marginalization of inmates, cultivates a strong desire for bonding, group identity, and spiritual guidance. Allen warned Congress that these factors may be exploited by prisoners in pursuit of terrorist goals.

Shortly after the Christmas Day plot, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee released a report indicating that the underwear bomber represented the vanguard of an evolving terrorist threat. According to the report, thirty-six Americans who had converted to Islam while incarcerated in the United States had recently traveled to Yemen, ostensibly to study Arabic, and
had “dropped off the radar.” Some of them, it is believed, had joined AQAP. The report advised that these Americans may pose a special danger because they can travel abroad on U.S. passports, return home with “clean skin,” and operate undetected inside American cities and towns. The report said that these radicalized ex-prisoners from America may have joined forces with a group consisting of some two dozen al-Qaeda fighters who had escaped from a Yemen prison in 2000, and some thirty of Saudi Arabia’s most-wanted terrorism suspects, eleven of whom are former Guantanamo detainees. The threat of al-Qaeda and its nearby Somali affiliate, al-Shabaab (Arabic for “the youth”), is also increasing. Most worrisome is that al-Shabaab has recruited a number of Somali Americans from Minneapolis, Minnesota, who may be planning suicide attacks inside the United States. The report concluded that “the Christmas Day plot was a nearly catastrophic illustration of a significant new threat from a network previously regarded as a regional danger, rather than an international one.”

Weeks later, Saudi Arabian security forces arrested more than a hundred militants as they were planning attacks against the country’s vast southern oil fields. All of them were affiliated with AQAP. The intelligence warning on former Guantanamo detainees continued into the next year. According to a 2010 report by the Director of U.S. National Intelligence, 25 percent of released Guantanamo detainees are suspected of terrorist or insurgent activity after their discharge. Because their time at Guantanamo is seen as a badge of honor in the international jihadist community, detainees who leave the camp are treated like “rock stars” and are often elevated to leadership roles in al-Qaeda. Much the same can be said of their protégés.

On January 24, 2010, no less a figure than Osama bin Laden emerged from hiding to proclaim: “The message delivered to you through the plane of the heroic warrior Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was a confirmation of the previous messages sent by the heroes of September 11.” Although the Nigerian’s bombing attempt was a tactical failure, for bin Laden it was a strategic victory inasmuch as it created widespread fear in the West and proved that al-Qaeda was not on the ropes as many thought. In a March audio message to jihadist Internet forums, Anwar al-Awlaki applauded Abdulmutallab’s attempted bombing as a “defensive” action against U.S. aggression against Muslims, citing the abuse of detainees at Guantanamo as its primary catalyst. In October, AQAP attempted to blow up another U.S.-bound jetliner, this time concealing explosives inside a computer printer. Once again, the plot was linked to a former Guantanamo detainee. And the beat went on. Several months later, an intelligence source told me that the underwear bomber had emerged as a prayer leader among Muslim prisoners on his cellblock at the Federal
Penitentiary in Milan, Michigan. In October 2011, Abdulmutallab pleaded guilty to terrorism charges and in February 2012 he was brought before a federal court in Detroit for sentencing. Before he was given four consecutive life sentences, Abdulmutallab shouted “Allahu Akbar” (God is Great), adding that Muslims were “proud to kill in the name of God, and that is what God told us to do in the Koran.”

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The killing of Osama bin Laden by U.S. forces during a May 2011 raid in Pakistan represents a turning point for the United States in its struggle to defeat al-Qaeda. Yet as President Obama clearly acknowledged in his subsequent National Strategy for Counterterrorism, America still faces an important threat from “al-Qaeda’s affiliates, and its adherents.” The prisoner radicalization problem is intricately tied to this attempt by al-Qaeda associates to inspire individuals within the United States to conduct attacks on their own, without direct assistance from al-Qaeda Central. And not just in the United States. Great Britain, France, Spain, and Israel all have reasons for concern.

As this book will show, Islam is now sweeping across Western prisons, bringing with it both unprecedented security challenges and exceptional possibilities for progressive reform. It is no accident that the prisoner radicalization movement is taking place against the backdrop of a widespread economic meltdown. Protests, strikes, and civil unrest often rise during periods of economic turmoil as affected groups take to the streets and to the prison yards. In 2010, a year before the Occupy movement began, a flood of reports appeared on riots and disturbances in severely overcrowded and mismanaged state prisons across America. That August, guards at Folsom Prison tried to break up a major riot and opened fire on two hundred inmates, sending five convicts to the hospital with gunshot wounds. As the Golden State teetered on the brink of economic ruin, commentators began referring to California as a “failed state,” a term characteristically reserved for places like Yemen, Afghanistan, and Somalia—places that generate Islamic terrorists by the thousands. The empirical basis for this book is a two-year study I conducted for the U.S. Department of Justice, focusing on trends in prisoner radicalization in U.S. correctional institutions, including both Folsom Prison and New Folsom Prison, where I interviewed a number of prisoners who had undergone conversions to Islam during their incarceration, including members of JIS. In no uncertain terms, the research shows that these are failed prisons. And within that failure is the greater story of how America is creating terrorists within its own borders.
The financial crisis and prisoner radicalization are attributable to what criminologists call *crimes of omission*, wherein the omission of policies addressing criminality—represented here by the failures of financial regulators and prison officials to do their jobs—is at the root of “the injury, the suffering and the victimization of many.”20 There is a deeply human corollary at work in these crimes. In both cases, the criminals tend to surprise you. For years, tens of thousands of trusting investors believed that the Wall Street tycoon Bernard Madoff could defy the markets. Year after year financial statements revealed that Madoff’s investors were making money. Few wondered if it was somehow possible that all their wealth and status would vanish in a puff of smoke on a single day.21 But it did. In one fell swoop, everything was gone. Year after year passes without a terrorist attack against America. We are lulled into a sense of well-being. And then, suddenly, CNN reports breaking news about a plane in trouble over the Atlantic.