In the fall of 1973, the Syrian Army began to gather a large number of tanks, artillery batteries, and infantry along its border with Israel. Simultaneously, to the south, the Egyptian Army cancelled all leaves, called up thousands of reservists, and launched a massive military exercise, building roads and preparing anti-aircraft and artillery positions along the Suez Canal. On October 4th, an Israeli aerial reconnaissance mission showed that the Egyptians had moved artillery into offensive positions. That evening, AMAN, the Israeli military intelligence agency, learned that portions of the Soviet fleet near Port Said and Alexandria had set sail, and that the Soviet government had begun airlifting the families of Soviet advisers out of Cairo and Damascus. Then, at four o’clock in the morning on October 6th, Israel’s director of military intelligence received an urgent telephone call from one of the country’s most trusted intelligence sources. Egypt and Syria, the source said, would attack later that day. Top Israeli officials immediately called a meeting. Was war imminent? The head of AMAN, Major General Eli Zeira, looked over the evidence and said he didn’t think so. He was wrong. That afternoon, Syria attacked from the east, overwhelming the thin Israeli defenses in the Golan Heights, and Egypt attacked from the south, bombing Israeli positions and sending eight thousand infantry streaming across the Suez. Despite all the warnings of the previous weeks, Israeli officials were caught by surprise. Why couldn’t they connect the dots?

If you start on the afternoon of October 6th and work backward, the trail of clues pointing to an attack seems obvious; you’d have to conclude that something was badly wrong with the Israeli intelligence service. On the other hand, if you start several years before the Yom Kippur War and work forward, re-creating what people in Israeli intelligence knew in the same order that they knew it, a very different picture emerges. In the fall of 1973, Egypt and Syria certainly looked as if they were preparing to go to war. But, in the Middle East of the time, countries always looked as if they were going to war. In the fall of 1971, for instance, both Egypt’s President and its minister of war stated publicly that the hour of battle was approaching. The Egyptian Army was mobilized. Tanks and bridging equipment were sent to the canal. Offensive positions were readied. And nothing happened. In December of 1972, the Egyptians mobilized again. The Army furiously built fortifications along the canal. A reliable source told Israeli intelligence that an attack was imminent. Nothing happened. In the spring of 1973, the President of Egypt told Newsweek that everything in his country “is now being mobilized in earnest for the resumption of battle.” Egyptian forces were moved closer to the canal. Extensive fortifications were built along the Suez. Blood donors were rounded up. Civil-defense personnel were mobilized. Blackouts were imposed throughout Egypt. A trusted source told Israeli intelligence that an attack was imminent. It didn’t come. Between January and October of 1973, the Egyptian Army mobilized nineteen times without going to war. The Israeli government couldn’t mobilize its Army every time its neighbors threatened war. Israel is a small country with a citizen Army. Mobilization was disruptive and expensive, and the Israeli government was acutely aware that if its Army was mobilized and Egypt and Syria weren’t serious about war, the very act of mobilization might cause them to become serious about war.

Nor did the other signs seem remarkable. The fact that the Soviet families had been sent home could have signified nothing more than a falling-out between the Arab states and Moscow. Yes, a trusted source called at four in the morning, with definite word of a late-afternoon attack, but his last two attack warnings had been wrong. What’s more, the source said that the attack would come at sunset, and an attack so late in the day wouldn’t leave enough time...
for opening air strikes. Israeli intelligence didn’t see the pattern of Arab intentions, in other words, because, until Egypt and Syria actually attacked, on the afternoon of October 6, 1973, their intentions didn’t form a pattern. They formed a Rorschach blot. What is clear in hindsight is rarely clear before the fact. It’s an obvious point, but one that nonetheless bears repeating, particularly when we’re in the midst of assigning blame for the surprise attack of September 11th.

On the afternoon of October 6, 1973, their intentions, in other words, because, until a flow of emergency vehicles downtown. A wave of emergency vehicles downtown. The same argument is made by Senator Richard Shelby, vice-chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, in his investigative report on September 11th, released this past December. The report is a lucid and powerful document, in which Shelby painstakingly points out all the missed or misinterpreted signals pointing to a major terrorist attack. The C.I.A. knew that two suspected Al Qaeda operatives, Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, had entered the country, but the C.I.A. didn’t tell the F.B.I. or the N.S.C. An F.B.I. agent in Phoenix sent a memo to headquarters that began with the sentence “The purpose of this communication is to advise the bureau and New York of the possibility of a coordinated effort by Osama bin Laden.” The F.B.I. entered the country, but the C.I.A. didn’t tell the F.B.I. or the N.S.C. An F.B.I. agent in Phoenix sent a memo to headquarters that began with the sentence “The purpose of this communication is to advise the bureau and New York of the possibility of a coordinated effort by Osama bin Laden.”

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mental problem . . . is our Intelligence Community’s inability to ‘connect the dots’ available to it before September 11, 2001, about terrorists’ interest in attacking symbolic American targets,” the Shelby report states. The phrase “connect the dots” appears so often in the report that it becomes a kind of mantra. There was a pattern, as plain as day in retrospect, yet the vaunted American intelligence community simply could not see it.

None of these postmortems, however, answer the question raised by the Yom Kippur War: Was this pattern obvious before the attack? This question—whether we revise our judgment of events after the fact—is something that psychologists have paid a great deal of attention to. For example, on the eve of Richard Nixon’s historic visit to China, the psychologist Baruch Fischhoff asked a group of people to estimate the probability of a series of possible outcomes of the trip. What were the chances that the trip would lead to permanent diplomatic relations between China and the United States? That Nixon would meet with the leader of China, Mao Tse-tung, at least once? That Nixon would call the trip a success? As it turned out, the trip was a diplomatic triumph, and Fischhoff then went back to the same people and asked them to recall what their estimates of the different outcomes of the visit had been. He found that the subjects now, overwhelmingly, “remembered” being more optimistic than they had actually been. If you originally thought that it was unlikely that Nixon would meet with Mao, afterward, when the press was full of accounts of Nixon’s meeting with Mao, you’d “remember” that you had thought the chances of a meeting were pretty good. Fischhoff calls this phenomenon “creeping determinism”—the sense that grows on us, in retrospect, that what has happened was actually inevitable—and the chief effect of creeping determinism, he points out, is that it turns unexpected events into expected events. As he writes, “The occurrence of an event increases its reconstructed probability and makes it less surprising than it would have been had the original probability been remembered.”

To read the Shelby report, or the seamless narrative from Nosair to bin Laden in “The Cell,” is to be convinced that if the C.I.A. and the F.B.I. had simply been able to connect the dots what happened on September 11th should not have been a surprise at all. Is this a fair criticism or is it just a case of creeping determinism?

On August 7, 1998, two Al Qaeda terrorists detonated a cargo truck filled with explosives outside the United States Embassy in Nairobi, killing two hundred and thirteen people and injuring more than four thousand. Miller, Stone, and Mitchell see the Kenyan Embassy bombing as a textbook example of intelligence failure. The C.I.A., they tell us, had identified an Al Qaeda cell in Kenya well before the attack, and its members were under surveillance. They had an eight-page letter, written by an Al Qaeda operative, speaking of the imminent arrival of “engineers”—the code word for bombmakers—in Nairobi. The United States Ambassador to Kenya, Prudence Bushnell, had begged Washington for more security. A prominent Kenyan lawyer and legislator says that the Kenyan intelligence service warned U.S. intelligence about the plot several months before August 7th, and in November of 1997 a man named Mustafa Mahmoud Said Ahmed, who worked for one of Osama bin Laden’s companies, walked into the United States Embassy in Nairobi and told American intelligence of a plot to blow up the building. What did our officials do? They forced the leader of the Kenyan cell—a U.S. citizen—to return home, and then abruptly halted their surveillance of the group. They ignored the eight-page letter. They allegedly showed the Kenyan intelligence service’s warning to the Mossad, which dismissed it, and after questioning Ahmed they decided that he wasn’t credible. After the bombing, “The Cell” tells us, a senior State Department official phoned Bushnell and asked, “How could this have happened?”

“For the first time since the blast,” Miller, Stone, and Mitchell write, “Bushnell’s horror turned to anger. There was too much history: I wrote you a letter,” she said.”

This is all very damning, but doesn’t it fall into the creeping-determinism trap? It is not at all clear that it passes
the creeping-determinism test. It’s an edited version of the past. What we don’t hear about is all the other people whom American intelligence had under surveillance, how many other warnings they received, and how many other tips could have been definitive if they’d been taken at the time but led nowhere. The central challenge of intelligence gathering has always been the problem of noise: the fact that useless information is vastly more plentiful than useful information. Shelby’s report mentions that the FBI’s counterterrorism division has sixty-eight thousand outstanding and unassigned leads dating back to 1995.

And, of those, probably no more than a few hundred are useful. Analysts, in short, must be selective, and the decisions made in Kenya, by that standard, do not seem unreasonable. Surveillance on the cell was shut down, but, then, its leader had left the country. Bushnell warned Washington—but, as “The Cell” admits, there were both warnings in Africa all the time. Officials at the Mossad thought the Kenyan intelligence was dubious, and the Mossad ought to know. Ahmed may have worked for bin Laden but he failed a polygraph test, and it was also learned that he had previously given similar—groundless—warnings to other embassies in Africa. When a man comes into your office, fails a lie-detector test, and it was also learned that he worked for bin Laden but he failed a polygraph test, and it was also learned that he had previously given similar—groundless—warnings to other embassies in Africa. When a man comes into your office, fails a lie-detector test, and it is found to have shopped the same unassigned leads dating back to 1995.

In April of 1941, for instance, the Allies learned that Germany had moved a huge army up to the Russian front. The intelligence was beyond dispute: the troops could be seen and counted. But what did it mean? Churchill concluded that Hitler wanted to attack Russia. Stalin concluded that Hitler was serious about attacking, but only if the Soviet Union didn’t meet the terms of the German ultimatum. The British foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, thought that Hitler was bluffing, in the hope of winning further Russian concessions. British intelligence thought—at least, in the beginning—that Hitler simply wanted to reinforce his eastern frontier against a possible Soviet attack. The other way the al Hilal phone call would have been definitive would have been if the Allies had a second piece of intelligence—like the phone call between al Hilal and Es Sayed—that demonstrated Germany’s true purpose. Similarly, the only way the al Hilal phone call would have been definitive is if we’d also had intelligence as detailed as the Allied knowledge of German troop movements. But rarely do intelligence services have the luxury of both kinds of information. Nor are their analysts mind readers. It is only with hindsight that human beings acquire that skill.

“The Cell” tells us that, in the final months before September 11th, Washington was frantic with worry:

A spike in phone traffic among suspected al Queda members in the early part of the summer of 2001, as well as dispatchings of [an al Queda operative in custody] who had begun cooperating with the government, convinced investigators that bin Laden was planning a significant operation—one intercepted al Queda message spoke of a “Hiroshima-type” event—and that he was planning it soon. Through the summer, the CIA reportedly warned the White House that attacks were imminent.

The fact that these worries did not protect us is not evidence of the limitations of the intelligence community. It is evidence of the limitations of intelligence.

In the early nineteen-seventies, a professor of psychology at Stanford University named David L. Rosenhan gathered together a painter, a graduate student, a pediatrician, a psychiatrist, a housewife, and three psychologists. He told them to check into different psychiatric hospitals under aliases, with the complaint that they had been hearing voices. They were instructed to say that the voices were unfamiliar, and that they heard words like “empty,” “thud,” and “hollow.” Apart from that initial story, the pseudo patients were instructed to answer every question truthfully, to behave as they normally would, and to tell the hospital staff—at every opportunity—that the voices were gone and that they had experienced no further symptoms. The eight subjects were hospitalized, on average, for nineteen days. One was kept for almost two months. Rosenhan wanted to find out if the hospital staffs would ever see through the ruse. They never did.

Rosenhan’s test is, in a way, a classic intelligence problem. Here was a signal that skill. “The Cell” tells us that, in the final months before September 11th, Washington was frantic with worry:
dred pills. They underwent psychiatric interviews, and sober case summaries documenting their pathologies were written up. They were asked by Rosenhan to take notes documenting how they were treated, and this quickly became part of their supposed pathology. “Patient engaging in writing behavior,” one nurse ominously wrote in her notes. Having been labelled as ill upon admission, they could not shake the diagnosis. “Nervous?” a friendly nurse asked one of the subjects as he paced the halls one day. “No,” he corrected her, to no avail, “bored.”

The solution to this problem seems obvious enough. Doctors and nurses need to be made alert to the possibility that sane people sometimes get admitted to mental hospitals. So Rosenhan went to a research-and-teaching hospital and informed the staff that at some point in the next three months he would once again send over one or more of his pseudo patients. This time, of the hundred and ninety-three patients admitted in the three-month period, forty-one were identified by at least one staff member as being almost certainly sane. Once again, however, they were wrong. Rosenhan hadn’t sent anyone over. In attempting to solve one kind of intelligence problem (overdiagnosis), the hospital simply created another problem (underdiagnosis). This is the second, and perhaps more serious, consequence of creeping determinism: in our zeal to correct what we believe to be the problems of the past, we end up creating new problems for the future.

Pearl Harbor, for example, was widely considered to be an organizational failure. The United States had all the evidence it needed to predict the Japanese attack, but the signals were scattered throughout the various intelligence services. The Army and the Navy didn’t talk to each other. They spent all their time arguing and competing. This was, in part, why the Central Intelligence Agency was created, in 1947—to insure that all intelligence would be collected and processed in one place. Twenty years after Pearl Harbor, the United States suffered another catastrophic intelligence failure, at the Bay of Pigs; the Kennedy Administration grossly underestimated the Cubans’ capacity to fight and their support for Fidel Castro. This time, however, the diagnosis was completely different. As Irving L. Janis concluded in his famous study of “groupthink,” the root cause of the Bay of Pigs fiasco was that the operation was conceived by a small, highly cohesive group whose close ties inhibited the beneficial effects of argument and competition. Centralization was now the problem. One of the most influential organizational sociologists of the postwar era, Harold Wilensky, went out of his way to praise the “constructive rivalry” fostered by Franklin D. Roosevelt, which, he says, is why the President had such formidable intelligence on how to attack the economic ills of the Great Depression. In his classic 1967 work “Organizational Intelligence,” Wilensky pointed out that Roosevelt would use one anonymous informant’s information to check and challenge another’s, putting both on their toes; he recruited strong personalities and structured their work so that clashes would be certain. . . . In foreign affairs, he gave Moley and Welles tasks that overlapped those of Secretary of State Hull; in conservation and power, he gave Ickes and Wallace identical missions; in welfare, confusing both functions and initials, he assigned PWA to Ickes, WPA to Hopkins; in politics, Farley found himself competing with other political advisers for control over patronage. The effect: the timely advertisement of arguments, with both the experts and the President pressured to consider the main choices as they came boiling up from below.

The intelligence community that we had prior to September 11th was the direct result of this philosophy. The F.B.I. and the C.I.A. were supposed to be rivals, just as Ickes and Wallace were rivals. But now we’ve changed our minds. The F.B.I. and the C.I.A., Senator Shelby tells us disapprovingly, argue and compete with one another. The September 11th story, his report concludes, “should be an object lesson in the perils of failing to share information promptly and efficiently between (and within) organizations.” Shelby wants recentralization and more focus on cooperation. He wants a “central national level knowledge-compiling entity standing above and independent from the disputatious bureaucracies.” He thinks the intelligence service should be run by a small, highly cohesive group, and so
he suggests that the F.B.I. be removed from the counterterrorism business entirely. The F.B.I., according to Shelby, is given a deeply entrenched individual mindset that prize the production of evidence-supported narratives of defendant wrongdoing over the drawing of probabilistic inferences based on incomplete and fragmentary information in order to support decision-making. Law enforcement organizations handle information, reach conclusions, and ultimately just think differently than intelligence organizations. Intelligence analysts would doubtless make poor policemen, and it has become very clear that policemen make poor intelligence analysts. 

In his State of the Union Message, President George W. Bush did what Shelby wanted, and announced the formation of the Terrorist Threat Integration Center—a special unit combining the anti-terrorist activities of the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. The cultural and organizational diversity of the intelligence business, once prized, is now despised.

That is a change, but it is not exactly easy; in the wake of September 11th, to make the case for the old system. Isn’t it an advantage that the F.B.I. doesn’t think like the C.I.A.? Is it the F.B.I., after all, that produced two of the most prescient pieces of analyses—the request for Ramzi Yousef’s belongings, and the now famous Phoenix memo. In both cases, what was valuable about the F.B.I.’s analysis was precisely the way in which it differed from the traditional “big picture,” probabilistic-inference-making of the analysts. The F.B.I. agents in the field focused on a single case, dug deep, and came up with an “evidence-supported narrative of defendant wrongdoing” that spoke volumes about a possible Al Qaeda threat.

The same can be said for the alleged problem of rivalry. “The Cell” describes what happened after police in the Philippines searched the apartment that Ramzi Yousef shared with his co-conspirator, Abu Bakr al-Muraqab. Agents from the F.B.I.’s counterterrorism unit immediately flew to Manila and “bumped up against the C.I.A.” As the old adage about the Bureau and the Agency has it, the F.B.I. wanted to string Muraqab and the C.I.A. wanted to string him along. The two groups eventually worked together, but only because they had to. It was a relationship “marred by rivalry and mistrust.” But what’s wrong with this kind of rivalry? As Miller, Stone, and Miller tell us, the real objection of Neil Herman—the F.B.I.’s former domestic counterterrorism chief—to “working with the C.I.A. had nothing to do with procedure. He just didn’t think the Agency was going to be of any help in finding Ramzi Yousef.” Back then, I don’t think the C.I.A. could have found a person in a bathroom,” “Herman says. “Hell, I don’t think they could have found the bathroom.” The assumption of the reformers is always that the rivalry between the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. is essentially marital, that it is the dysfunction of people who ought to work together but can’t. But it could equally be seen as a version of the marketplace rivalry that leads to companies working harder and making better products.

There is no such thing as a perfect intelligence system, and every seeming improvement involves a tradeoff. A couple of months ago, for example, a suspect in custody in Canada, who was wanted in New York on forgery charges, gave police the names and photographs of five Arab immigrants, who he said had crossed the border into the United States. The F.B.I. put out an alert on December 29th, posting the names and photographs on its Web site, in the “war on terrorism” section. Even President Bush joined in, saying, “We need to know why they have been smuggled into the country, what they’re doing in the country.” At it turned out, the suspect in Canada had made the story up. Afterward, an F.B.I. official said that the agency circulated the photographs in order to “err on the side of caution.” Our intelligence services today are highly sensitive. But this kind of sensitivity is not without its costs. As the political scientist Richard K. Betts wrote in his essay “Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable,” “increased chatter among terrorist operatives, and the information is infuriating to us because it is so vague. What does “increased chatter” mean? We want a prediction. We want to believe that the intentions of our enemies are a puzzle that intelligence services can piece together, so that a clear story emerges. But there rarely is a clear story—at least, not until afterward, when some enterprising journalist or investigative committee decides to write one.
BRIEFLY NOTED

Repetition, by Alain Robbe-Grillet, translated from the French by Richard Howard (Grove; $23). The grand old man of the nouveau roman has published his first novel in two decades, and, faithful to its title, it is not at all new but, rather, a variation on old themes and obsessions. In fact, "Repetition" is a sort of deliberate distortion—or alteration, or rewriting, or retelling—of Robbe-Grillet's earlier books, in particular the first, "The Erasers" (1953). The plot, such as it is, concerns a French secret agent who, in 1949, is sent to Berlin, where he witnesses a murder. This leads him to search out his own past. The reader, meanwhile, is led to distrust every narrator who pops up. Robbe-Grillet's conviction that the true writer has nothing to say, only the way he says it, remains undimmed, but seldom has the nouveau roman seemed so ancien.

Any Human Heart, by William Boyd (Knopf; $24.95). Couched as the diary of one Logan Mountstuart—writer, seducer, spy, and all-around charlatan—Boyd's novel attempts a panorama of twentieth-century history with its hero constantly at the edge of the frame. Mountstuart dines with Bloomsburyites, meets Joyce in Paris, spends the Spanish Civil War hobnobbing with Hemingway and the Second World War trailing the Duke of Windsor for British Intelligence. Later, he runs an art gallery in New York, and gets mixed up in the Nigerian civil war and with the Baader-Meinhof gang. Such an antic plot should not succeed, and yet disbelief remains suspended, thanks to Boyd's skill in producing a novel that successfully mimics a diary in all its human pettiness. He allows Mountstuart's voice to age like port: the precocious schoolboy blithely speculates that the "announcement of a future fact has a tenuous hold on the present moment," while the adult reflects, "It's always hard trying to imagine the loss of something you never had."

What I Loved, by Siri Hustvedt (Henry Holt; $25). When the narrator of Hustvedt's third novel, an affable art-history professor at Columbia called Leo Hertzberg, buys a picture by Bill Wechsler, a lugubrious, handsome painter, a friendship ensues. It's 1975, admiration leads to intimacy, and the two men and their wives end up living in the same building on Greene Street. The revolver on the wall is a Swiss Army knife that Leo gives his son for his eleventh birthday: when it goes missing, the book turns from novel of art-world manners to psychological thriller. Hustvedt is terrific at evoking the milieu of the haute bourgeoisie—the house in Vermont, the wine-drenched meals, the migraines. But, as a narrator, Leo, now a reminiscence seventy, is full of orotund declarations about life and love that muffle the well-constructed plot.

A Life of Privilege, Mostly, by Gardner Botsford (St. Martin's; $24.95). The "privilege" in the title of Botsford's gruffly stylish memoir is his upbringing as the son of a Midwestern heiress; "mostly" is his dry way of alluding to the Second World War. He served in the First Infantry Division (which lost more than twenty thousand men) and saw action at Omaha Beach and the Battle of the Bulge. Though he was "damn near killed," he finished the war a heavily decorated captain. Among the many miraculous coincidences of war—a bullet dodged, an old friend randomly encountered—Botsford had the good fortune to meet A. J. Liebling at the front. This came in handy when, after the war, Botsford became an editor—and, eventually, Liebling's editor—at The New Yorker: "Although it was an article of faith with him that all editors were incompetent losers, he must have decided to be nice to me as a gesture to the First Division."