

# CIA MISSED SIGNS OF INDIA'S TESTS, U.S. OFFICIALS SAY

By **R. Jeffrey Smith**

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A U.S. spy satellite clearly depicted activity last week at India's remote desert nuclear test site, but U.S. intelligence officials scrutinizing the images failed to discern that India was preparing to conduct the three nuclear blasts it set off on Monday, several sources said yesterday.

Even when "clear-cut" evidence of the nuclear test preparations was recorded by a satellite at midnight in Washington on Sunday, six hours before the tests, no CIA warning was issued because the U.S. analysts responsible for tracking the Indian nuclear program had not expected the tests and were not on alert, several officials said.

They were, according to one senior official, asleep at their homes and did not see the pictures until they arrived at work in the morning. As a result, President Clinton and other White House officials did not learn of the preparations until after the blasts had occurred, when news services carried accounts of a public acknowledgment by India's Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

When the White House subsequently asked the CIA for details, the agency's top officials had none to offer, several sources said.

The intelligence community's failure to predict the three nuclear blasts ignited fierce criticism from U.S. policymakers yesterday, and prompted two congressional oversight committees and the CIA itself to launch probes of the agency's conduct during the preceding weeks and months.

Key U.S. policymakers yesterday said they do not know whether the new Indian government -- which had repeatedly broadcast its desire to "induct" nuclear weapons into the country's arsenal -- would have called off the tests in response to any U.S. appeals. But they decried the fact that the missed signals had deprived the Clinton administration of an opportunity to attempt such an intervention.

Sen. Richard C. Shelby (R-Ala.), who chairs the Intelligence Committee, condemned the intelligence community's conduct in unusually strong terms, calling the episode "a colossal failure" that betrayed a "dreadfully inadequate job" of detecting what India's intentions were. "We cannot and simply must not tolerate such failure on the part of the intelligence community," he said.

Shelby and Rep. Porter J. Goss (R-Fla.), a former CIA officer who chairs the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, each promised oversight hearings in coming weeks to try to determine the cause of the mistake. Goss avoided any direct criticism and said instead that his June 1 hearing would try to discover "whether key intelligence capabilities have eroded and what is needed to reverse the trend."

CIA Director George J. Tenet announced yesterday that he had appointed a team to examine the episode and "determine what lessons can be learned," according to a statement issued by CIA spokesman William Harlow. The team is to be headed by retired Vice Adm. David E. Jeremiah, a former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and report its findings within 10 days.

Among the issues to be examined, sources said, are whether the CIA's regional political and military analysts overlooked clues to India's true intentions, whether the National Security Agency missed any telltale information collected through its worldwide electronic eavesdropping, and how spy satellite operators and photo analysts failed to catch such activities as the burial of nuclear devices and the attachment of cables to transmit scientific data.

"This was a mistake from the top to the bottom, from the policy community to intelligence community," said a senior policymaker, who asked not to be named. "It was a failure not only of tactical but strategic intelligence," because government analysts not only missed the actual test site preparations but failed to predict even that such a move was likely.

Several officials credited India's new government, which was elected less than two months ago, with a shrewd campaign of disinformation designed to put Washington off the scent of a nuclear test.

"The Indians lulled us into thinking that they were not going to undertake any precipitous action in the nuclear area without a careful review of their options," one official said. "The context of the intelligence community's error was complacency."

John Holum, the acting undersecretary of state for arms control and international security affairs, told reporters yesterday that India had promised restraint in the nuclear area until it completed its strategic review late this year.

"They undoubtedly kept this decision to a really small circle, but there were discussions {by top U.S. officials} with people who had to know" and did not tell, said one U.S. official.

The Indians were apparently trying to avoid repeating their experience of December 1995, when Washington sighted preparations for a blast at the Pokharan test site and forcefully expressed its alarm. Those protests led then-Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao to halt the preparations and cancel the test.

"They knew from the 1995 experience that we were watching them very closely," and this time kept their activities at the site to a minimum while U.S. satellites passed overhead, the official said. "No one saw anything out of the ordinary," asserted another official, even when last week's satellite images depicted activity at the "well-heads" atop deep holes where the explosive devices were eventually detonated.

Pakistan's test of a medium-range ballistic missile one month earlier had led CIA analysts to suspect that India would orchestrate a demonstration of its own military prowess. But the analysts bet, wrongly, that India was more likely to respond in kind with a missile launch instead of a nuclear blast.

"It's just not fair to look at this at the narrow perspective of why someone was not awake looking at pictures of the Pokharan site. They would have been more vigilant if the policy community believed this was likely," an official said.