

# A Reconsideration of Imaginative Points of Resistance: 9/11 and surprise attacks

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**Editorial review:** This article has been subject to an editorial review process



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## Abstract

*In this short piece, I want to explore the idea that limits of imagination, that I refer to here as to 'points of resistance', can play an essential role in certain imaginative tasks. To show how points of resistance can be carriers of crucial information, I focus here on the analysis of 9/11. Leaving aside personal and political implications, I investigate the possible plausibility of some statements of the US Secretary of the Defense at the time of the attacks, attributing the cause of 9/11 to imagination. I propose that, despite being dismissed as an outrageous analysis of responsibilities involved in the success of the terroristic attacks, there could be a role that a failure of imagination might have played.*

**Keywords:** imagination; resistance; constrains; surprise attacks; security; epistemology

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## **Introduction**

We tend to think of something opposing resistance as something generating friction, an obstacle, or, even, a problem. The idea of resistance is associated with an opposition to a state of things, a situation or an (unwanted) scenario to which somebody or something draw a limit to. Resisting is to refrain from, to create borders around, to draw limits, to oppose. On one hand there are cases in which resisting is synonymous to a brave, independent choice aimed at defending values such as freedom and equality, as for example in historical cases of resistance to regimes, dictatorships, invasions, etc. The resistance to fascism implemented by partisans in Italy during Second World War, for example, represents one (of possibly many) cases where resistance is welcomed with a positive attitude and gratitude. Resisting here is synonymous of standing up, defending something perceived as precious and valuable, and being and behaving in a certain way against impositions. On the other hand, though, there are contexts in which resistance is perceived as a negative force. Let's consider for example a patient with an infection that is resisting antibiotic treatment. Discovering that that infection is resisting treatments is very bad news for the patient whose life is at stake. A criminal putting up resistance while being arrested is going to receive further punishment because of their resistance to comply with societal rules, standards of conduct, and penal procedures.

In the philosophical literature, a quite large debate has been generated around cases of the so-called phenomenon of 'imaginative resistance' or resistance to imagination. In philosophy, 'imaginative resistance' refers to problems that otherwise competent and able imaginers (people able to imagine and consider made-up scenarios) encounter in envisioning fictional or somehow hypothetical (counterfactual) scenarios (**Tuna, 2020**). It is an inability to imagine, to visualise, to envision, to transport themselves into a made-up scenario (**Weatherson, 2004**). Cases of imaginative resistance occur in narratives where the world appears very different from how we know it. These scenarios might present unusual life conditions or entities. Time travels, for example, challenge our standard understanding of the passage of time and of basic logical principles and are difficult to imagine. Biological entities different from animals and plants, as we know them, might resist our ability to envision them. Human characters who possess special abilities might also be impossible for some people to grasp. Other cases of this phenomenon might involve challenges to less material elements. For example, it might be difficult to imagine scenarios with implications that challenge moral values. It might be impossible, for example, to imagine committing ferocious crimes against harmless babies or imagine performing acts of brutal violence.

In this paper, I want to suggest a philosophical reconsideration of limits of imagination that I am going to refer to as *points of resistance*. I want to show how these limits to the exercise of imagination, rather than being merely negative, can be carriers of interesting information. The presence of points of resistance to imagination, I want to suggest, might be essential for specific contexts and tasks. Particularly, I am going to work on the context of security, intelligence and surprise attacks. I am going to look at analyses and post-hoc explanations of 9/11, in order to show the interesting role that salient, identified points of resistance to imagination can make. In this critical reflection, I am not interested in taking a side with regard to the honesty of some statements that I am going to use about 9/11, nor do I aim here at providing a complete, rounded explanation about the use of imagination in preventing surprise attacks. Here, my aim is merely to provide a provocation, that I hope would feed further discussions on the role of limits, borders and points of resistance of imagination and imaginative capacities.

### **Rumsfeld and 9/11**

In the aftermath of 9/11, Donald Rumsfeld, US Secretary of Defence at the time of the attack, attributed the inability of the Americans to foresee, predict and prevent the terroristic episode to a failure of imagination. He referred specifically to ‘unknown unknowns’, as to those risks that people cannot imagine existing. In the documentary *The Unknown Known*, filmed by Errol Morris in 2013, Rumsfeld states:

*In my confirmation hearing, when I was nominated to be Secretary of Defence, the best question I was asked was: what do you worry about when you go to bed at night?*

*And my answer was in effect: intelligence. **The danger that we can be surprised because of a failure of imagining what might happen in the world.***

*There are known-knowns: things that we know we know. There are known-unknowns: things we know we do not know. **There are also the third category of unknown-unknowns things that we do not know we do not know. You can only know more about those things by imagining what they might be.** [emboldened text by author] (Rumsfeld, 2013: 00:00:02)*

In the same documentary, Rumsfeld proceeds in his reasoning, drawing a comparison between 9/11 and the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor during Second World War. In both cases, he states, Americans did not know what they did not know. They could not imagine that those attacks were going to happen, and they did not know how those attacks were going to be carried out. In other words, they did not know what they did not know.

They did not just fail in imagining how something was going to happen; they did not even imagine that something like that could happen at all. In short, Americans were not vigilant enough because they did not expect, they did not imagine that something of that sort (type, scale, procedure, etc.) of attack was going to occur.

Nonetheless, was it really a matter of poor imagination that led to 9/11 events and is it really the role of imagination to tackle 'unknown unknowns'?

### **Reactions to and Problems in Rumsfeld's take**

Reactions to Rumsfeld's reading of the reasons behind the America's inability to prevent 9/11 and Pearl Harbor, have generally been quite sceptical. Scholars, journalists, writers and even the public opinion at times have been quite opposed to Rumsfeld's reconstruction of the motivations that made US intelligence unable to foresee something as big as 9/11 (**Romney 2014, Graham 2014**).

It seems legitimate to react to Rumsfeld's suggestion about what went wrong in 9/11 with doubts. His reading of the situation can be questioned in light of his personal and professional involvement, namely the position from which he is speaking, as a person covering a role in the first line of the US security system and as responsible for key decisions in that context. Blaming imagination could sound as an ad-hoc justification, which puts some distance between Rumsfeld himself, his work, and the work of intelligence.

In the documentary quoted above, the interviewer pushes back to Rumsfeld's point which could be interpreted as unsatisfactory, and they ask:

*...as a failure of imagination or a failure to look at the intelligence that was available? (Rumsfeld, 2013: 00:00:57)*

On one side, it is easy to see where the interviewer scepticism against Rumsfeld's statements comes from. They consider it hard to believe that American intelligence was not able to collect appropriate information before the attack. After all, 9/11 was not the first case of hijacked planes used in terroristic attacks. So, the method used for it was not new. Furthermore, there are currently available details concerning the attacks and the hijackers, that make the question asked by the interviewer sound natural and on point. Could the failure be a failure in paying attention to some quite relevant information, rather than a failure in imagining a certain scenario? In the publicly available 9/11 commission report, it is possible to find, for example, the following information:

*Other instructors who worked with Hazmi and Mihdhar [two of the 9/11 hijackers] remember them as poor students who focused on learning to control the aircraft in flight but took no interest in take-offs or landings (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, 2011: 222)*

For someone who finds difficult to agree with Rumsfeld statements, this information would corroborate the idea that Intelligence failed to pay attention to relevant details. It is the fact that it was known and ignored that there were people suspiciously disinterested in landing safely while learning how to pilot a plane that made an impact. There was not a failure in imagining a possible scenario, rather a failure in taking into account details and connecting the dots.

On the other side, a sceptic can also think that it is hard to believe that imagination could play a role in this particular context, as from Rumsfeld's statements. If we think about places strictly related to the employment of imagination, what comes to mind are creative contexts. This could be related to the production of different types of artifacts, narrations, story-telling, etc., or to the creation of new technologies, devices, or remedies. Writing different types of stories, as well as producing artefacts such as paintings, sculptures movies and theatrical performances seem to be the type of actions which require the use of imagination. In a similar way, imagination might have a role to play in scientific research and endeavours when it comes to the creation of something that did not exist before such as new technologies or types of devices. Imagination is largely employed in creating new worlds, new possibilities, new scenarios. How could it be the linked to a national security context?

In one sense, imagination seems to possess a too broad, too large scope to be useful in scenarios of surprise attacks. Using imagination to create a possible world where aliens commit a terroristic attack could be a great idea for a movie or a science fiction best-seller. To someone in disagreement with Rumsfeld's statements though, imagination of this type does not seem appealing as a tool to be used in the context of intelligence and security. Imagination, in other words, gives us such a broad range of possibilities, or possible scenarios, that it might seem useless when we are trying to prepare ourselves for something to happen, or prevent something that could cause harm. The range of possibilities that imagination is able to produce is not going to be informative enough for security contexts. Taking into account endless options about a virtually infinite range of threats to security could just lead to a life of fears, rather than providing a helpful tool to tackle security risks.

## **A Conciliating Reading Between Overlooked Information and the Role of Imagination**

At the time of Rumsfeld's statements, his appeal to the lack of imagination as a cause of the failure in preventing terroristic attacks was perceived, among other interpretations, as a way to avoid taking accountability for the happenings on 9/11. It is far from my intention to provide a defence of Rumsfeld's declaration or of his actions at the time and in the aftermath of the terroristic attack. I do not intend to discuss his statements here, or to try to understand whether he was merely trying to save himself, his work and the work of his institution. I want to leave the implication of responsibility aside from my discussion. Being his statements a way to justify his decisions and actions, and the ones of its team, does not take away from the soundness of their core idea. I want to take his suggestion about the causes of 9/11 and examine the role of imagination. I recognise in this case an interesting opportunity to reflect on how imagination might work in the specific contexts where selecting, valuing and considering the right points of resistance could be the decisive factor of using imagination in a helpful way. In other words, I want to propose that it might be right to think that in order to understand how 9/11 was possible, we need to consider both: the role of the overlooked information that several agencies possessed before the attack and the role of imagination.

As we said above, imagination on its own can create a nearly endless set of possible scenarios. Through imagination we could consider any kind of risk for security, any kind of method for carrying out an attack, any type of threats and any type of rivals and enemies. If taken in isolation, imagination seems just 'too productive'. It might present too many scenarios that are not realistic, or even possible in the actual world. It is imagination, indeed, that allows us to think and visualise things that do not exist. We can, for example, imagine unicorns without making unicorns more real or likely to exist in nature.

Yet, without imagination we would not be able to foresee anything, until the new scenario is actualised. Our ability to project into the future is the ability to be able to 'see', to visualise, to envision, ultimately, to imagine a situation that has not been actualised yet. On the basis of our imagined scenario, we can then prepare for what will come. When we commit to paying 30 years mortgages, when we decide to buy a house and live there for a number of years, when we commit to a certain career path, when we decide to accept a permanent job, and so on, we base our decisions on how we imagine these things to feel like, look like or continue to be over a certain period of time in the future. We subscribe insurances, and we are willing to pay money for something that might never happen, because we

fear situations that we can imagine, namely we are scared of the possibility of something negative (that we can imagine) to happen<sup>1</sup>.

How can imagination be, simultaneously, the right and the wrong answer explaining the happenings of 9/11? The solution of the conundrum resides in the nuances of the situation. It is not just imagination taken in isolation that should be considered. The historical context, the information collected by the American intelligence on the hijackers, the signs and threats sent by Al Qaeda, are the missing bits of this puzzle. Imagination is the essential element here that allows the intelligence to create hypotheses. Hypotheses, nonetheless, can be varied and many. Thus, the issue that arises from the employment of imagination concerns the ability to select the right hypothesis among the ones generated.

Imagination in the context of security and prevention of surprise attacks covers an essential role, but needs to be used in accordance with the points of resistance. The limits that we impose on imagination are what makes the difference in this context. Considering scenarios such as ones implying aliens, for example, is not going to make us any more ready to deal with a terroristic attack perpetrated by organisations that we already know and who have already declared their hostile intentions. The point is not then that imagination is not relevant in this context or that imagination is not part of the arsenal of tools that the intelligence should use. The point is the ability to guide imagination selecting the relevant limits.

Overlooking salient information, not recognising certain knowledge as valuable, not connecting the dots between the threads and the details about the hijackers, and so on, are all elements that play a part in the story of how 9/11 could happen. Missing out and overlooking details lead to the inability to guide imagination effectively. In other words, imagination was left ranging on possibilities that were not anchored and informed by factual data. US intelligence was pondering scenarios that were unlikely to happen and irrelevant to their situation. The information that was available to US intelligence and the security agencies was not valued enough to be considered as a guidance in the creation of the possible scenarios. It was not used as a constraint to select in and out the possibilities to be rightly worried about. 9/11 can be read as failure of imagination, in the sense in which imagination was not used with the appropriate boundaries and appropriate points of resistance. It was a failure of using the information possessed and collected as milestones, as check points, in mapping out the range of possibilities that should have been considered and for which US intelligence should have prepared itself.

Factual information should have worked as anchors and limits to the range of possibilities to explore. The points of resistance, the information about reality collected by the intelligence and shared in the 9/11 report, would

have restricted the number of imaginative scenarios considered, grounding the speculation in the real world. Points of resistance to imagination in this type of cases are the points that produce what some authors call *epistemic friction* (see Sher 2013). They allow, in grounding imagination in reality, to create limits to the infinite possibilities imaginable by human capacities. In creating frictions and obstacles, they make the content of their envisioned situations relevant to the here and now, to the challenges at hands and they avoid endless wonder and pointless debating. It is the role of constraints to imagination (see also Kind & Kung 2016), the points of resistance to it, that allow for the use of imagination in real world situations, such as the one of security, to provide useful, or even crucial information on what we should be vigilant about.

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**To cite this article:**

Lorenzi, G., 2024. A Reconsideration of Imaginative Points of Resistance: 9/11 and surprise attacks. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 12(1), 113-121. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v12i1.1704>.

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**Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> See Williamson (2016) for a more extensive analysis of how imagination helps alerting humans to both dangers and favourable opportunities.