

What the Boston Manhunt Says About the FBI

By [David Wise](#)

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In the end, it was a high-tech gadget that allowed the FBI to identify the first Boston bomber in the video — the man agents called "Black Hat."

This gadget, and the story of how the name of one bomber ended up in an FBI database, has revealed a great deal about the inner workings of the bureau, as well as its relations with an extensive network of countries in the pursuit of terrorism suspects. A wide variety of information is now exchanged internationally.

The gadget was used about 1 a.m. on Friday, April 19, eight hours after the FBI released photos and video of the bombing suspects. The images were of two men with backpacks strolling through the crowd at the Boston Marathon. One was wearing a black hat, the other a white hat turned backward.

It was three days after the two explosions at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, and the FBI still did not know the identities of the two suspects.

A high-tech gadget connected the dots between a carjacking and the Boston bombings.

Then, in the Boston suburb of Watertown, a furious firefight broke out between police and the two men. About 200 rounds of ammunition were exchanged, and explosive devices were thrown at the police by the suspects. "Black Hat" was felled by the bullets and rushed to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead. The second man escaped in the Mercedes SUV that the two had carjacked earlier.

"We put out the photos on Thursday at 5:15," said an FBI official familiar with the sequence of events. "The shootout was a few hours later. At this point, we still don't know who they are. Only after the shootout did we know."

At the hospital, an FBI agent readied the gadget. "Just as he arrived," said the FBI official, "we used a device to take a 'quick capture' of his fingerprints."

As the official explained, "We can send them remotely. The prints were sent to the FBI fingerprint facility in West Virginia, and we identified him for the first time."

The man killed in that Friday firefight was Tamerlan Tsarnaev, of Chechen background, who had been brought to the U.S. from Kyrgyzstan by his parents, refugees from the turmoil in the Caucasus region of southern Russia.

His younger brother, Dzhokhar, who was "White Hat," was captured Friday evening as he hid, badly wounded, in a boat in Watertown. He is now in a Boston hospital, where FBI agents have begun interviewing him, and on Monday he was formally charged.

Once the FBI had Tamerlan's name on Friday, they were able to find out important information. "Sometime during the night," the FBI official said, "we were able to see he was in the database."

Unknown to the FBI, until it could identify Tamerlan, was a 2011 request from Russian authorities for information about him. "Once you ID him," the official explained, "we would quickly get the one hit: the request in 2011."

The FBI, in a statement issued on Friday night, said "a foreign government" had asked the bureau for information about Tsarnaev. "The request stated that it was based on information that he was a follower of radical Islam and a strong believer, and that he had changed drastically since 2010, as he prepared to leave the United States for travel to the country's region to join unspecified underground groups."

Russian foreign intelligence clearly suspected Tamerlan might be linked to Chechen terrorists waging guerrilla attacks against Moscow. This request from the Russians was not unusual,

the FBI source explained. "It is very routine," he said, "for all countries — as many as 200 that we interact with — to ask them to assist our country, and at same time those countries often ask us for assistance. It's a normal part of international law enforcement today and indispensable. About 75 percent of our cases have an international aspect to the investigation that may require something from another country. It could be telephone toll records or a request for interviewing a citizen."

The FBI interviewed several family members in response to Moscow's request. Agents also interviewed Tamerlan's parents, who were then living in the United States.

"Ultimately, we met with him [Tamerlan]," the agent said. "We simply didn't develop anything derogatory. We sent that back to them [the Russians] and said if you develop any new information, we can look at it again. Otherwise under law, because he was a U.S. person, we could not go further. He was a permanent resident with a green card."

The FBI had responded to the Russian request in the summer of 2011. Then, last year, Tamerlan traveled abroad for six months. U.S. intelligence is now particularly interested in knowing whether he met with any terrorist groups during that time or received any training. They are hoping his younger brother can provide some answers to those questions.

Once the request came in from Russia, an FBI official said, "we began an 'assessment,' as we call it. We checked databases, whether he ever came into our radar for any reason. He had not. We checked his possible visits to extremist websites, all negative."

Unless he had managed to conceal all evidence of extremist views, something must have changed inside the mind of Tamerlan between 2011 and last Monday at 2:50 p.m, when chaos and death rained down on a beautiful sunny day in Boston.

All this had been caused by the two brothers, who the FBI were finally able to identify by a high-tech gadget from the prints on a dead man's hand.

David Wise, the author of "Tiger Trap: America's Secret Spy War with China" and "Spy: The Inside Story of How the FBI's Robert Hanssen Betrayed America," is a columnist for Reuters, which published this comment.

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