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The Special Agent

By [AMANDA RIPLEY AND MAGGIE SIEGER](#)

Coleen Rowley became enamored with the FBI's fictionalized ideal long before she heard of the real thing. Her favorite show was *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, a spy spoof about two debonair agents who work to save the world from evil. In the fifth grade, Rowley wrote to the show's producers, asking to join the cadre of supersecret spies. She got a rejection letter. "They said it didn't exist," Rowley remembers. "But they told me that in the United States, we had something called the FBI. And they gave me the address." So Rowley wrote to the bureau and received a pamphlet titled "99 Facts About the FBI." One question was, "Does the FBI employ women as special agents?" The answer was no. Even then, she did not scare easily. "I thought to myself, That's stupid. I figured that would change eventually."

Last May, when Rowley upbraided her beloved FBI in a secret 13-page memo, she thought she was on a private rescue mission. In her view, it was not a reprimand but an act of redemption. It was not about speaking truth to power, because people like Rowley don't see much difference between the two. Truth is power — that's how you catch the bad guys.

So the memo — the one that leaked and landed her on the front pages of newspapers, that brought her to Washington to face cameras and Congressmen and that helped set off the debate over how to reinvent the FBI — was not meant to be a memo at all. It came tumbling out, almost by accident, because she couldn't hold the words inside anymore.

Since Sept. 11, the 48-year-old had muzzled her grief about the bureau's failures — specifically, about how it ignored cries from her office to take seriously the case of Zacarias Moussaoui, a French-Moroccan who spoke poor English and had signed up at a local flight school, keen to fly a 747. Eight months after the attacks, Rowley and others got a chance to tell what they knew. Staff members of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees joint inquiry into the attacks invited her and others to come to Washington for a private interview.

"Initially, I just started writing down points that I didn't want to miss when I was going to do my interview," she says. "I went to bed Wednesday night and was up all night, saying, 'Oh! I've got to remember to say this, got to remember that.' Thursday night I went to bed thinking, man, am I tired. Well, I couldn't sleep all night long. The same type of thing. I've got to remember this and remember that." About 2:30 a.m. Friday, Rowley had had enough. I said, "This is ridiculous. I'm on 36 hours without sleep. If I jot it down, first of all I won't forget it. And I won't have to keep reminding myself of things to say. I'll get it out of my system, and I'll be able to sleep."

So she went to the office and sat at her desk writing until her husband Ross called 16 hours later, Around 7 p.m. By Monday morning, she had written 13 pages. This is more than just my own notes to myself, she decided. And she knew the memo was explosive enough for her to need some protection. Just 2 1/2 years from retirement and her family's sole breadwinner, she tacked on two sentences of self-preservation at the last minute, asking for federal whistle-blower protection. At the time, she did not know exactly what it was — nor that the legislation offered FBI employees a weak shield. The next day, in Washington, she dropped the memo off with receptionists for FBI director Robert Mueller and two members of the Senate Committee on Intelligence. Surely, they were too far above the fray to want to punish her. She had no appointments; she

just wandered around until she found their offices, getting lost at least once. Then she walked outside and hailed a cab. "I went, 'Whew!' and collapsed in the back seat," Rowley remembers. She headed back to the airport, secure in the comfort that comes from taking a steaming load of worry and shifting it onto the boss's lap. Says her husband: "I remember her saying, 'I hope somebody reads it.'"

The next evening Rowley was back in the Minneapolis FBI office, working late. The designated representative had gone home, so Rowley got the call from CNN. A reporter had heard that someone from the office had written some kind of letter. Rowley, a 22-year veteran of the bureau, says she had never imagined that her name or her letter would get out, and was uncharacteristically speechless. "It was like 'Ohmigosh! Ohmigosh!'" She remembers. "I said, 'well, I can't help you. I don't know what you're talking about. Click! And I ran out of the office.'"

And so it was that Rowley became the FBI's public conscience. Two weeks later, she was called back to Washington to testify in the open, her Coke-bottle glasses slipping down her nose, her circa-1985 hand-me-down plaid suit crying to be put back into the closet. She issued damning indictments — agents were drowning in paperwork and lived in fear of offending the higher-ups. "There's a certain pecking order, and it's pretty strong," she said. "It's very rare that someone picks up the phone and calls a rank or two above themselves." And in the next breath she offered specific solutions: Can you give us a computer system that allows us to search phrases like "flight schools"? She was quick to admit what she did not know. When Senator Maria Cantwell asked her what advice she would give the President, she demurred. "I really can't presume to give advice at such a high level," she said. In short, she made the Congressmen look like interns on the set of the Coleen Rowley show. The only time she seemed perplexed during her D.C. visit was when a horde of reporters followed and shouted at her as she tried to hail a cab.

For Americans watching this odd display, the message was clear: This mid-level lawyer at a field office in the Midwest had higher expectations for the FBI than its top leaders. The bureau could be great, was her message, if only it put the goal of protecting Americans above the goal of protecting itself, if only agents were not rewarded for sitting still.

Seven months later, Rowley is still campaigning, albeit more warily. She talked to TIME, her first interview, with great trepidation. She is afraid of being fired and afraid of appearing self-serving. "I don't want to be famous," she says. "I will not stand up in front of people unless I have something important to say." Visiting FBI headquarters after the hearing, she was popular with clerks and secretaries. "I'd get elbows in my ribs and winks," she says. In the Capitol building, janitors and police darted across the hall to thank her.

But the tough Rowley — the Rowley who packs a gun and takes it everywhere, who moves coatless through Minnesota winters and runs triathlons, who made a habit of correcting her science teacher — has been stung by a nasty backlash within the FBI. In early June, an associate called to say high-level FBI agents in Washington had been overheard discussing possible criminal charges against her. Some fellow agents, retired ones in particular, crucified her. Charles George, then president of the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI, compared her to convicted spy Robert Hanssen, calling her behavior "unthinkable" in the society newsletter; instead of going to the Russians, she went to Congress.

And then there was the riff on loyalty from an old Elbert Hubbard essay, which Rowley received from a number of retired agents. A paraphrased version of Hub-bard's words used to hang on the walls of FBI headquarters while J. Edgar Hoover was director. It read, in part: "If you work for a man, in heaven's name work for him; speak well of him and stand by the institution he represents. Remember — an ounce of loyalty is worth a pound of cleverness ... If you must growl, condemn, and eternally find fault, why — resign your position and when you are on the outside, damn to your heart's content." The copies she received had "resign your position" heavily underlined. "It wasn't even anonymous!" she says. "They signed their names! Even though that is not on the walls anymore, that is still in the hearts and minds."

The backlash bit. "I'm not the most sensitive female in the world," Rowley says. "And the people who are closest to you matter most. But you can't help having your feelings hurt when the retired agents are lumping [you] with Hanssen, who betrayed everything we stand for." She knows the culture of loyalty is a defense mechanism, but she does not excuse it. "Loyalty to who-ever you work for is extremely important. The only problem is, it's not the most important thing. And when it comes to not admitting mistakes, or covering up or not rectifying things only to save face, that's a problem."

So how did Rowley get so tough? There's a certain kind of Midwesterner who looks across the long, flat plains and doesn't see any obstacles or vertical structures because, in fairness, there aren't any. In this part of America — the tiny town of New Hampton, Iowa, where Rowley grew up the daughter of a mailman who never graduated from high school and walked 14 miles a day to make his rounds — the socioeconomic topography mirrors the geographical one. Everybody is on the level because there is only one. In the Iowa where she was raised and in the Apple Valley community outside Minneapolis where she moved with her family, hierarchy never had much of a chance. Most people drive the same kind of car, have the same kind of yard behind the same kind of weatherboard house. The houses are spread equally across the expanse, not clustered in some pecking order around a town center. The status symbol is not to have one, to invest in public life, to treat everyone like the fellow next door.

So the girl who was informed at age 11 that she could not join the FBI went ahead and started the "World Organization of Secret Spies" with friends. She became known as someone who quietly righted small wrongs from the sidelines of the school. Her close friend Jane David was her lab partner all the way through high school, when Rowley would have occasional dustups with the science teacher over his inaccuracies, but always after class. "I'd see her shaking her head, and I knew he was going to get a talking-to," David remembers. Rowley would point out errors not to embarrass him but to make sure he corrected himself the following day, David says. "She wanted to make sure the rest of us understood it correctly for our college entrance exams. She wasn't trying to show off. She wanted to help us."

Most of Rowley's friends have a story about her bullying them into doing something they didn't want to do. In eighth grade, she became convinced that David should run for student-council president against the most popular boy in the class. David recoiled at the thought, but "you don't get into many arguments you can win with Coleen." Rowley wrote her speech and made her practice it again and again. David won.

In New Hampton, the community pool was the gathering place for students in summer, and when Rowley was in junior high, she wanted to learn the jackknife dive. "But of course there was no one to teach her," recalls her friend Vicki Kennedy. "The rest of us, we didn't want to try because ... there were boys and everything." But Rowley "worked and worked and worked all summer, and she belly-flopped a lot," Kennedy says. "By the end of the summer, she could do a real pretty dive where the rest of us had been too embarrassed to try."

Her bluntness tripped her up when she applied for a generous scholarship to Wartburg College in nearby Waverly, Iowa, a liberal-arts four-year institution founded by a Lutheran pastor, where German Lutherans like Rowley's parents sent their working-class kids. One of several finalists for the Regents Scholarship, a four-year ride, she answered honestly when the panel asked her about her major. "I haven't thought much about it. I'm keeping it open," she said. The students who eventually won declared they planned to be missionaries, doctors and lawyers. "I tracked them," she says. "And within a few months, not one of them was doing what they said." Then she laughs. "Yes, I've always been a little bitter." Denied the scholarship, Rowley relied on an Iowa tuition grant designed for future teachers. Rowley quickly became a French major because those students got a free year in France. "She said what she thought and always had a firmness of opinion," remembers Moira McCluney, her French professor at Wartburg College. "And compared to the usual Iowa girls...well, I suspect she was born like that."

After she put herself through college, Rowley — the first in her family to get a degree — went to law school at the University of Iowa, where she met her future husband Ross. And that's another tale of Rowley willfulness. He was balking at getting married, so Rowley told him she was joining the FBI and it was now or never. Two weeks later, they were wed, and soon after she was at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Va. Ross abandoned his studies in art history to follow her to Washington, and he has followed her around the world ever since, from New York City to Paris to Mississippi.

Friends say Rowley was the top marksman in her class. And she wanted to set the two-mile running record for women. During her first days at Quantico, Rowley heard that a woman can run it faster when she isn't on the pill. So she stopped taking birth control — and quickly became pregnant. She kept the news to herself for three months, even when she had to throw herself on the ground, belly first, from a dead run during weapons training. She didn't set the record then. "I was worried about pushing too hard because I was pregnant," she said. But she and a friend did set it in 1984 and held it for several years.

Rowley quickly made a mark. In 1984 she escorted Colombo crime-family boss Gennaro Langella on his "perp walk" in front of the news cameras, and she helped keep tabs on other big-time mafiosi in New York City. In the '90s she won an FBI award for her work on the Andrew Cunanan case, a shooting rampage that started with two deaths in Minnesota and ended with the death of Gianni Versace in Miami. When Minneapolis agents nabbed longtime Symbionese Liberation Army fugitive Kathleen Soliah, Rowley handled questions from the press.

Her hyperactivity at work is mirrored in her personal life. She walks fast with the long strides of a runner; she speaks without a filter — just a few words will set her off on a discourse about heart disease or what's wrong with the criminal-justice system. Her fiercest exclamations are "Well, heck!" and "Oh, my gosh!" She often leaps to her feet to make a point, waves her arms, pounds her fist and attempts impersonations of the characters in her stories, practically dancing in place while Ross lies on the turquoise leather sofa and the kids go about their business. When imitating FBI higher-ups, she lowers her voice several octaves, tucks her chin in, squares her shoulders and sways side to side. Her routine imitating her mother Doris Cheney involves a higher pitch. A sure sign that Rowley is uneasy is when she becomes still and her hands start gripping each other.

During one interview, Ross stood beside a reporter so he could signal Coleen when to stop talking. Other times he interrupted. "Are you sure you want to say that, Coleen?" he'd say. Or the more direct "No! Stop! Don't say any more!" Her memo reflects her stream-of-consciousness narrative style. "No wonder why the FBI headquarters is mired in mediocrity!" she wrote in a footnote. "That may be a little strong, but it would definitely be fair to say that there is unevenness in competency among Headquarters personnel."

Rowley doesn't like to keep track of her keys, her purse or her four children. "I'm such a Type A," she admits. "I have no patience. It's hard for me to do homework. Ross is so much better." Ross has been a stay-at-home dad ever since Coleen was in training at Quantico and someone had to stay home with the baby. He takes care of every detail of the household. He's the one the four kids — Tess, 21, a student at the University of Minnesota; Bette, 17, a high school senior; and grade-schoolers Meg, 9, and Jeb, 7--come to when they need their homework checked or pears sliced. He pays the bills, fixes meals, sets the alarm clock and does the Christmas shopping. They've collaborated every year of their 22-year marriage on the homemade Christmas card. She does the drawings; he does the deadpan humor.

Behind the wheel of the family's beige Windstar minivan, Rowley is the first to admit, she is an aggressive driver, passing slower-moving cars on a two-lane highway at every chance. It's hard to tell her exact speed, since the speedometer is broken. The needle swings between 70 and 100 m.p.h., even when she's braking. Every now and then, Rowley pounds the dashboard above the gauges. "This is what Ross does," she says with a shrug.

The night Rowley got the call from CNN, Ross had been watching a TV interview with a Senator. He could tell the man had read her memo from the comments he was making. "I said, 'Oh, my gosh, he's read it!'" Ross recalls. As Coleen drove up the driveway, Ross ran down to meet her.

If Rowley is willing to take on the big questions about the FBI, she remains a stickler about its smallest rules. Because FBI employees cannot accept gifts valued over \$20, she refused to accept a ride in a rental car paid for by Time, and she handed over \$30 to cover her dinner. She forwarded a check to ABC correspondent John Miller when he sent her his book on terrorism, paying the full \$24.95 retail price. Her frugality is legendary. She wanted to take the subway to testify on Capitol Hill but finally relented and accepted a ride from friends. When she inadvertently bought a Vanilla Coke recently, she took one sip, declared it awful, then drank it all because she could not bear to pour it out. She has two business suits — one that she bought for her FBI interview in 1980 and the one, given to her by her mother-in-law more than 15 years ago, that she wore to testify in June. "Stuff doesn't wear out," she explains. Her daughter Bette feigns outrage: "She used red yarn to patch my jeans! Red on the butt, red on the pockets!"

In the days after the hearing, Rowley received a flurry of concerned letters from fashion consultants, hairdressers and ophthalmologists who yearned to make her over. These she disregarded effortlessly. "It wasn't loud!" she says in response to a letter from a designer criticizing her plaid suit. "It was black and gray. How can that be loud?" Rowley's friends have recently succeeded in a longstanding crusade: they persuaded her to replace her oversize glasses, telling her that lightweight lenses would save her time and energy while running because she wouldn't need to keep pushing them up.

But in the months that have passed, so much has not happened. What if Rowley was wrong about the FBI's potential? What if no one at headquarters is capable of the kind of imagination the times demand — the kind of fearlessness that she has shown them? Rowley has so far refused to accept this possibility.

But she has been "a little disillusioned," says her friend Jane David. And she has had some reason to be. When Rowley walked into her office on the morning of Sept. 11 and saw the Twin Towers burning on TV, she immediately thought of Moussaoui. For three weeks her office had been trying — and failing — to get FBI headquarters to allow a request for a search warrant of his computer. Agents had had him arrested for overstaying his visa while they looked into his past. As Rowley wrote in her memo, French officials and other intelligence sources established that Moussaoui was affiliated with radical fundamentalist Islamic groups and activities connected to Osama bin Laden. Minneapolis agents pushed headquarters for approval to dig deeper, fearing — before Sept. 11—that he might be part of a larger scheme to hijack commercial jetliners. He has since been indicted as a co-conspirator.

It will never be known whether the agents could have prevented the attacks if they had received the green light earlier, Rowley is quick to point out. "[But] it's at least possible we could have gotten lucky and uncovered one or two more of the terrorists in flight training prior to September 11th," Rowley wrote in her memo. And yet, three days after the attacks, Director Mueller expressed his shock that terrorists were training on U.S. soil: "The fact that there were a number of individuals that happened to have received training at flight schools here is news, quite obviously." Six days after the attacks, the rhetoric became even bolder. Said Mueller: "There were no warning signs that I'm aware of that would indicate this type of operation in the country." Worrying that the new director had not been well briefed on the Moussaoui case, Rowley and her colleagues repeatedly tried to get a message to Mueller so he could modify his statements. But they received no response. After more information about the Moussaoui investigation became public, along with a memo from a Phoenix agent who had noted a pattern of Arab men signing up at flight schools, Mueller still insisted that the FBI could not have done anything to limit or prevent the destruction. Only after Rowley's memo was made public did Mueller revisit his assessment, with a feeble double negative: "I cannot say for sure that there wasn't a possibility we could have come across some lead that would have led us to the hijackers."

The experience may have cut into her faith, but it did not extinguish it. Rowley remains devoted to the FBI and is in many ways a dream employee. "Honestly, I would not want to do anything else," she says. She has no tolerance for whining and, she says, "I hate the term whistle-blower." She wakes up early in the morning, drinks a pot of coffee and goes running — in Minneapolis, in December. She flatly rejects any suggestion that her memo has anything to do with her gender. "There are plenty of women who have been co-opted, who don't do the right thing. And there are plenty of men who do," she says. Unlike other gun-toting officials, she doesn't swagger or puff up in unsettling circumstances. And she has no illusions about her own perfection. "Oh, boy, I have made mistakes," she says, in her flat Midwestern accent.

Rowley half-jokingly asks everyone, from fellow agents to college students, if they'll come buy a burger from her one day if she gets fired. But she cannot seem to stop herself from going on to pitch those students on the job opportunities at the bureau. And she continues to send e-mails to headquarters suggesting investigative and legal strategies. She has sent about a dozen since her notorious memo. None have received a substantive response. "I'm sure they think I'm crazy Coleen Rowley," she says.

Since her public testimony, she has received hundreds of phone calls at her Minneapolis office from every kind of person who feels wronged by the criminal-justice system. Most have dubious claims. The few legitimate gripes do not generally fall under the bureau's jurisdiction. It is an enormous distraction, and it's clear she wishes the calls would stop. And yet Rowley feels obligated to check out every story. After all, she says, "they might have a point."

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