



Not Worth a Blue Ribbon

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

The 9/11 Commission report fails to offer effective solutions to problems in American intelligence, concentrating on new bureaucratic structures rather than on revitalizing the clandestine service to infiltrate and destroy terrorist organizations.

The 9/11 Commission says it wants to have a national debate about its report. Actually, that's not quite true. It would prefer that the Bush administration and Congress, feeling the heat of its bipartisan mandate, submit quickly and completely to its collective and deliberate judgments. The Bush administration apparently would rather not fold so quickly. Yet Senator John Kerry's immediate embrace of the lengthy document and its recommendations, and the commissioners' intention to turn themselves into a continuing, nationwide road show, have made this report, like the commission's televised hearings, into a political drama with possible repercussions on the elections in November. Senator Kerry would love to berate the president, as well as the Republican-controlled Congress, for dallying with America's security and the war against terrorism, which will probably be the decisive issue in the presidential campaign. The administration is running for cover. It has embraced the core recommendations of the commission—the creation of a new national intelligence director and a new National Counterterrorism Center—without accepting all the bureaucratic rewiring and fiscal and hiring-and-firing authority that the commission wants to give to this intelligence czar.

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“Failures of Imagination” in the Report

It might not be politically astute to play hardball with the 9/11 Commission, but the Bush administration would be on solid intelligence ground in doing so. Though one can find sound criticisms and recommendations among those made by the commission, the report overall is quintessential blue-ribbon Washington: conventional, conservative, and exuberantly bureaucratic in its analysis and solutions. Like so many earlier post-Cold War commissions and think-tank reports about the state of American intelligence, it tackles the intelligence community—particularly the Central Intelligence Agency—from the top down, not the bottom up. If we can just get the bureaucracy, ever bigger and more centralized, married to the right management, better intelligence will follow. Operationally, the commission's report simply does not address the principal problem of America's intelligence effort against Islamic extremism—the failure of the CIA to develop a clandestine service with a methodology and officers capable of penetrating the Islamic holy-warrior organizations in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere. And analytically, the report's bureaucratic recommendations are unlikely to improve the quality of the U.S. government's thinking about counterterrorism—indeed, they could make intelligence analysis more monochromatic and defined by groupthink than it already is.

Worst of all, the report fails to tackle seriously the overarching policy lesson from 9/11—the need to strike first. The failure to preempt—and after al Qaeda’s attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, the failure to provide self-defense—is the underlying theme of the historical narrative of the 9/11 report. The stark gravity of this theme and the general merit of the narrative—which is well written, incisive, and politically damning (vastly more so of the Clintonites’ eight years than of the Bushies’ eight months)—make the conventional and sometimes sophomoric quality of the recommendations that follow all the more off-putting.

Overcoming the Reluctance to Use Force

The 9/11 Commission dutifully recites all of the domestic and international circumstances conducive to the American government’s failure to use military intimidation and force as indispensable counterterrorist tools before 9/11. And it is hard to say which characters in the commission’s story are the most enthusiastic in underscoring why the United States could not have confronted Osama bin Laden more aggressively before 9/11. Former defense secretary William Cohen, former Central Command chief General Anthony Zinni, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs Hugh Shelton, the former chief analyst at the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center Paul Pillar, President Clinton’s national security adviser Sandy Berger and Attorney General Janet Reno deserve honorable mention. Two exceptions are the counterterrorist chief in the Clinton administration, Richard Clarke, and the CIA case officer Gary Schroen (with whom I once worked), who was always free of operational deceit and professional bravado. They are notable for their willingness to use force when most around them thought it unwise.

The layers of resistance to the use of military power in the American government are a constant in the years leading up to 9/11. Overcoming that resistance—clearly identifying this timidity and rallying America’s political class to a greater willingness to use force in foreign affairs—should have been a primary, clearly articulated aim of the 9/11 report. It is not, of course, because the report is “bipartisan,” and to have made that case might possibly have been to justify President Bush’s preemptive war against Saddam Hussein or some preemptive attack in the future against a state with a terrorist track record and a proven hunger for weapons of mass destruction. Thus, the antiproliferation recommendations in the 9/11 report read

as if they could have been written at the close of the Cold War, before the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Pakistan’s favorite “rogue” scientist A. Q. Khan, North Korea, and others made mincemeat of international-treaty regimes.

Truth be told, the historical narrative of the 9/11 report, like that of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report on prewar intelligence on Iraq, is pretty powerful ammunition for the Bush administration to use against Clintonite critics of its wars against Islamic terrorism and Saddam Hussein. Whether the Bush administration and pro-war Republicans are agile enough to make that argument against the more rhetorically skilled Senator Kerry and the bipartisan 9/11 Commission is a different question.

Right after 9/11, the Bush administration chose not to undertake a sustained historical critique of its predecessor’s counterterrorist policies and actions—or a sustained defense of its own first eight months in office. Conscious of having failed to act decisively against bin Laden (and it is distressing to learn that Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz considered the al Qaeda attack on the *USS Cole* in October 2000 “stale” just months later, and not a *casus belli* demanding a full-frontal assault against al Qaeda in Afghanistan), members of the Bush administration did not loudly point out that they were actually developing a plan against bin Laden when the hijackers struck. It certainly was not enough. The lengthy transition at the Pentagon and Secretary Rumsfeld’s overriding concern with the threats likely to face us twenty years from now unquestionably retarded the administration’s early response to al Qaeda. Yet its performance was better than the administration gave itself credit for, and better than that of the Clinton administration in any eight-month period.

When President Bush remarked to the 9/11 Commission that even before 9/11 he had been “prepared to take on” the possibility of an American invasion of Afghanistan—“an ultimate act of unilateralism,” the president thought some would have called it—his words cannot be easily dismissed as retrospective bravado. Such an action is conceivable from the president who led us into Iraq. It certainly could not have come from President Clinton. And it is utterly unimaginable from John Kerry, had he been president before 9/11. Honest Democrats might as well admit this difference in vision and will, since, after all, it is the reason many Democrats want Bush retired as a menace to a peaceful, multilateral international order.

Clandestine Service Deficiencies

But let us leave the spirit and politics of 9/11 aside, and look at the nuts-and-bolts of the commission's report. There are two principal issues with American intelligence vis-à-vis al Qaeda before 9/11. One is that the CIA's Directorate of Operations, also known as the clandestine service, had no human sources inside the organization's command structure. A foreign agent in the inner circles of al Qaeda would have given us a heads-up on the embassy attacks in Africa, the botched torpedoing of the *USS The Sullivans* in the port of Aden in January 2000, the near-sinking of the *USS Cole* nine months later, and the 9/11 suicide dive-bombings. The Operations Directorate, wedded to the heavy use of officers with diplomatic and military cover and culturally and operationally averse to developing training and methods to seed either foreign agents or case officers into foreign organizations, never even tried to develop John Walker Lindhs to use against al Qaeda or the Taliban. Yet even one such source could have obviated any need for Washington to "connect the dots."

According to active-duty CIA case officers, the Near East Division of the clandestine service still has not developed new programs for secreting officers or agents into radical Islamic groups. This is considered too unorthodox, difficult, and dangerous by clandestine-service management. So what is the 9/11 Commission's recommendation? "The CIA Director should emphasize . . . (b) transforming the clandestine service by building its human intelligence capabilities; (c) developing a stronger language program, with high standards and sufficient financial incentives; (d) renewing emphasis on recruiting diversity among operations officers so they can blend more easily in foreign cities; (e) ensuring a seamless relationship between human source collection and signals collection at the operational level; and (f) stressing a better balance between unilateral and liaison operations."

That's it. In a 447-page report on the intelligence failings of 9/11, the clandestine service gets nine lines. The important bit—"transforming the clandestine service . . ."—is a ten-word platitude. You can find the same recommendations in numerous internal CIA reviews from the Casey era forward. Numerous external reviews, which did not have the 9/11 Commission's extensive access to classified information or its incomparable mandate, have said the same things for fifteen years. A meaningful exercise for the 9/11 Commission would have been to compare

and contrast Langley's clandestine human-intelligence collection efforts against other terrorist targets. What has the Operations Directorate been doing, say, against the Islamic Republic of Iran? How does it deploy its officers? How have Iranian agents been recruited? How good has the intelligence been? Have there been problems?

One can think of other terrorist organizations to add to the review. None is exactly like al Qaeda, the first ecumenically inclined, globally motivated, anti-American Sunni holy-warrior organization. Nonetheless, the comparisons would have allowed Americans, especially senior officials who usually know little about Langley's world, to see the CIA's track-record against all the terrorist targets in the Middle East. The Iranian parallel would have been particularly disturbing, since the clerical regime, with its nuclear ambitions and affection for terrorism, is a growing problem for the United States. Such comparisons would have shown the shortcomings to be systemic.

Bureaucratic Restructuring

The commission was somewhat more detailed in recounting the failures of American counterterrorist analysis—the "connect-the-dots" episodes, which if they had gone in our favor might have uncovered the 9/11 plot. Dozens of pages tell the story of the snafus. This discussion is undoubtedly worthwhile, but the recommendations that follow do not make much sense. The primary issue at stake analytically was the failure of the U.S. intelligence and security agencies to share their information in a timely and illuminating manner. This failure is the reason for the commission's two largest bureaucratic recommendations—the creation of a National Counterterrorism Center, built on the foundation of the current Terrorist Threat Integration Center at Langley; and a new intelligence czar, the national intelligence director, who would supercede the director of central intelligence as the most important intelligence official in the government. With considerably more power than the DCI over the national intelligence budget, and the ability to hire and fire, in consultation with the president, the key office heads below him, he would be able to corral and focus the intelligence community. The new center would gather in all the bright, essential counterterrorist minds to ensure that nothing slipped through the cracks and that analytical and operational contingencies were better foreseen.

Sounds okay in theory. However, on the key issue of sharing information, all of this is probably unnecessary.

Since 9/11, personnel of different agencies have been working together at the Terrorist Threat Integration Center and elsewhere in the intelligence and law-enforcement communities. Dissemination codes on cable slug lines more or less guarantee that the electronic and paper traffic is automatically shared among the agencies and among personnel from different agencies in the same organization. One can surely refine this process further. Still, the sharing problem has largely been solved.

Undeterred, the commission would have us create a big intelligence bureaucracy associated with its new director. Count on it: the ethos that would develop under him would be no more competitive than it was collegial. Differing opinions within America's intelligence community would tend to diminish, not multiply, as a new bureaucratic spirit radiated downward from the man who controlled all the purse strings and wrote the performance reports of the most important players in the intelligence community. American intelligence could well become more focused on the bureaucratic gaming that would be intense as the new structure solidified. It is hard to see how the quality of American intelligence analysis would improve through this reorganization. Competitive analysis is likely to be better in organizations that are truly independent of one another. The commission appears to be in love with synergies and economies of scale. But this is not the way the intelligence business works, operationally or

analytically. Five hundred analysts do not necessarily do a better job than fifty. Fifty case officers deployed correctly will certainly do a better job than five hundred deployed as they are now.

As the commission has detailed well, American intelligence is in poor shape. It would be a good idea to shock it. But trying to do to intelligence gathering and analysis what General Motors did to car production is not the way to make American counterterrorism more effective against an enemy who is crafty and adaptable and going to come at us in small platoons. The great medieval historian Ibn Khaldun wrote in his masterpiece of cyclical history, the *Prolegomena*, that barbarian invasions were the key to revitalizing societies and their stale bureaucracies. In a sense, we had our barbarian invasion on 9/11. The commission's response to that invasion is to hurl wiring diagrams. These are not likely to kill al Qaeda. America's military might, combined with a determination to push political reform in the Middle East—that is, to break the deadly nexus between Middle Eastern tyranny and Islamic extremism—is the formula essential to our eventual success. Intelligence will matter along the way. September 11, however, seems not to have been the event that will shock the Washington establishment into serious reform of the intelligence community. For that, we will have to wait for other barbarians to come through the gate.