

Who's to Blame for September 11?

The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States

Thomas H. Kean, Chair
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By Matthew Rothschild

On page 340 of *The 9/11 Commission Report* is this sentence: "If the government's leaders understood the gravity of the threat they faced and understood at the same time that their policies to eliminate it were not likely to succeed any time soon, then history's judgment will be harsh."

Let's call the roll.

Bill Clinton

The much-maligned former President comes out pretty well in the report. It shows that President Clinton recognized that "terrorism was a national security problem" and was "deeply concerned about bin Laden." Clinton issued three Presidential Decision Directives about the threat. He received "a special daily pipeline of reports" about bin Laden and authorized his capture or killing. But the report faults Clinton for not responding to the October 12, 2000, attack on the USS *Cole*, which killed seventeen and wounded forty. It said he was more interested in brokering a peace between Israel and the Palestinians in his last few months in office.

Eerily, Clinton received warnings similar to those that Bush later got. On December 4, 1998, he received a Presidential Briefing that said, "Bin Laden Preparing to Hijack U.S. Aircraft and Other Attacks." It added that "two members of the operational

team had evaded security checks during a recent trial run at an unidentified New York airport."

Sandy Berger

Clinton's National Security Adviser also comes off well. He was alert to the risk of terrorism earlier than most. He deputized counterterrorism expert Richard Clarke and gave him wide authority, placing him on an equal footing with cabinet members involved in national security. Berger and Clarke worked admirably together to prevent the Millennium Plot from coming to fruition at the end of 1999, the report says. And Berger urged aggressive action against Al Qaeda after the *Cole* attack. "According to Clarke, Berger upbraided DCI [Director of Central Intelligence] Tenet so sharply after the *Cole* attack—repeatedly

demanding to know why the United States had to put up with such attacks—that Tenet walked out of a meeting of the principals." Berger also stressed to the Bush transition team, and especially Condoleezza Rice, the gravity of the Al Qaeda threat.

William Cohen and the Joint Chiefs

Clinton's Defense Secretary William Cohen was exceptionally cautious. Relying on the advice of Joint Chiefs of Staff head General Hugh Shelton, Cohen scorned the idea of attacking bin Laden and his operations. Together, Cohen and Shelton concluded that the 1998 cruise missile retaliation against Al Qaeda for the embassy bombings in Africa was a waste of million-dollar weapons that hit only "jungle gym" equipment, in Shelton's words. And



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they repeatedly dragged their feet on any plans until the intelligence was clearly actionable, the report notes, a standard that was never met.

For instance, after the *Cole* bombings, when all the intelligence was pointing toward Al Qaeda, the Pentagon still doubted it. A State Department counterterrorism official exclaimed, "Does Al Qaeda have to attack the Pentagon to get their attention?"

Richard Clarke

He is the one consistent voice in the report who recognized the danger

of bin Laden early on and tried to grab everyone by the lapels to listen to him. Like a modern-day Cassandra, he repeatedly underscored to his superiors in both Administrations the urgency of the problem. Frustrated by the lack of seriousness on the part of the Bush crowd, he ultimately asked to be reassigned. When the Bush principals finally got around to holding their first meeting on Al Qaeda on September 4, 2001, Clarke sent Rice some advice: "Decision-makers should imagine themselves on a future day when the CSG [Counterterrorism Security Group] has not succeeded in stopping Al Qaeda attacks and hundreds of Americans lay dead in several countries, including the U.S. What would those decisionmakers wish that they had done earlier? The future day could happen at any time." He also urged the Administration to respond to the *Cole* bombing by attacking Al Qaeda's camps. He wrote that he could not understand "why we continue to allow the existence of large scale Al Qaeda bases where we know people are being trained to kill Americans." It wasn't the first time he used such language. On May 29, 2001, he wrote to Rice and her deputy, Stephen Hadley, "When these attacks occur, as they likely will, we will wonder what more we could have done to stop them." (The report does criticize Clarke, rather peevishly, for failing "to persuade these agencies to adopt his views, or to persuade his superiors to set an agenda of the sort he wanted.")

George Tenet and the CIA

If there is one official who bears the most culpability, it is former CIA Director George Tenet, the report suggests. Tenet and the CIA were tardy in coming to grips with bin Laden's role and with Al Qaeda in general. Though bin Laden issued a *fatwa* against the United States as early as 1992, he wasn't taken seriously until 1996, when "the CIA set up a special unit of a dozen officers" to analyze intelligence about him and plan operations against

him. By March of 1998, the bin Laden unit at the CIA had run four complete rehearsals for a capture operation that had a decent chance of success. But Tenet and his operations deputy deep-sixed the plan. The report notes: "It was the duty of Tenet and the CIA leadership to balance the risks of inaction against jeopardizing the lives of their operatives and agents."

The staff at the bin Laden unit at the CIA "felt that they were viewed as alarmists even within the CIA," and Tenet did not synthesize their work or share it with other agencies of government, the report notes. Tenet did issue a directive on December 4, 1998, saying: "We are at war. I want no resources or people spared in this effort, either inside CIA or the Community." But he didn't ride herd on this. "The memorandum had little overall effect on mobilizing the CIA or the intelligence community." Most amazingly, even though Tenet said in the summer of 2001 that "the system was blinking red" and he was receiving reports about imminent, "spectacular" attacks that could be catastrophic, he failed to recognize the huge clue that was Zacarias Moussaoui. "On August 23, DCI Tenet was informed about the Moussaoui case in a briefing entitled 'Islamic Extremist Learns to Fly.' Tenet was also told that Moussaoui "wanted to learn to fly a 747, paid for his training in cash, was interested to learn the doors do not open in flight, and wanted to fly a simulated flight from London to New York. . . . Tenet told us that no connection to Al Qaeda was apparent to him at the time."

Condoleezza Rice

Briefed during the transition that "Al Qaeda had sleeper cells in more than forty countries, including the United States," Rice comes across as stolid and bureaucratic in her response. On January 25, 2001, Clarke sent her a memo that stated, "We urgently need . . . a Principals level review on the Al Qaeda network." He warned that Al Qaeda "is

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not some narrow, little terrorist issue that needs to be included in broader regional policy.” But Rice did not heed his alarm. “The national security adviser did not respond directly to Clarke’s memorandum,” the report notes. “No Principals Committee meeting on Al Qaeda was held until September 4, 2001.” After she briefed the President in August of 2001 about the bin Laden threat, there is no evidence that she knocked heads together to prevent an attack.

Donald Rumsfeld

“At no point before 9/11 was the Department of Defense fully engaged in the mission of countering Al Qaeda, though this was perhaps the most dangerous foreign enemy then threatening the United States,” the report notes. Rumsfeld was not interested in retaliating for the *Cole* attack. “Rumsfeld thought that too much time had passed.” Rumsfeld’s priorities were elsewhere, the report says. “His time was consumed with getting new officials in place and working on the foundations of a new defense policy. . . . He did not recall any particular counterterrorism issue that engaged his attention before 9/11, other than the development of the Predator unmanned aircraft system.” On the afternoon of 9/11, Rumsfeld wanted to expand the proposed response to Iraq. Like the man who loses his keys in a dark alley but insists on looking under the lamppost because the light is better there, Rumsfeld said “he was not simply interested in striking empty training sites” in Afghanistan. “He thought the U.S. response should consider a wide range of options and possibilities. The Secretary said his instinct was to hit Saddam Hussein at the same time.”

Paul Wolfowitz

The neoconman shows poorly in these pages. Like Rumsfeld, he was not interested in responding to the attack on the *Cole*, since he thought the October attack was “stale,” the report notes. And he repeatedly

downplayed the risks of Al Qaeda. Embarrassingly, Wolfowitz “questioned the reporting” about the severity of the Al Qaeda threats in the summer of 2001, the report notes. Once the attack happened, “Wolfowitz made the case for striking Iraq,” the report stated, and argued that Iraq “was ultimately the source of the terrorist problem,” according to Secretary of State Colin Powell.

John Ashcroft

On May 9, 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft testified to Congress that protecting citizens from terrorist attacks was “one of the nation’s most fundamental responsibilities.” But the very next day, when he submitted his budget, he highlighted “gun crimes, narcotics trafficking, and civil rights as priorities,” the report notes. The FBI’s counterterrorism expert, Dale Watson, told the commission that “he almost fell out of his chair when he saw this memo because it did not mention counterterrorism.” Acting FBI Director Thomas Pickard asked for more counterterrorism money, “an appeal the Attorney General denied on September 10,” the report notes. Ashcroft was repeatedly apprised of the terrorism warnings by Tenet and Pickard, who testified that “Ashcroft told him that he did not want to hear about the threats anymore. Ashcroft denies Pickard’s charge.”

Dick Cheney

Among his many duties, the Vice President in May of 2001 got another one: “President Bush announced that Vice President Cheney would himself lead an effort looking at preparations for managing a possible attack by weapons of mass destruction and at more general problems of national preparedness.” Cheney barely did anything on this, however. “The next few months were mainly spent organizing the effort and bringing an admiral from the Sixth Fleet back to Washington to manage it. The Vice President’s task force was just getting under way when the 9/11 attack occurred.” After the attack, the

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report details how Cheney lived out Al Haig's "I'm in charge here" fantasy. The report notes that Cheney gave the order to the military to shoot down hijacked aircraft. "In most cases, the chain of command authorizing the use of force runs from the President or the Secretary of Defense and from the Secretary to the combatant commander," says the report. But in this case, Cheney made the order, after, he says, calling the President for approval. "There is no documentary evidence for this call," however, the report notes. After Cheney had authorized a shutdown, White House Deputy Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten urged him to call the President to confirm the order, whereupon Cheney did so.

George W. Bush

Unlike Clinton, Bush was not attending to the problem in a hands-on manner, even though he had plenty of warnings. In September 2000, during the election campaign, Bush was told by a CIA counterterrorism official that "Americans would die from terrorism during the next four years." Clinton himself said he told Bush during the transition, "I think you will find that by far your biggest threat is bin Laden and the Al Qaeda." And the warnings kept coming, one after another, in the Presidential Daily Briefing (PDB). "There were more than forty intelligence articles in the PDBs from January 20 to September 10, 2001, that related to bin Laden," the report notes. The infamous PDB, "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S.," was number thirty-six. Bush's reaction was amazingly blasé. "The President told us the August 6 report was historical in nature," and that he already knew that bin Laden was dangerous. "He did not recall discussing the August 6 report with the Attorney General or whether Rice had done so. . . . We have found no indication of any further discussion before September 11 among the President and his top advisers of the possibility of an Al

Qaeda attack in the United States."

That is hardly the kind of response you would expect from a competent commander in chief.

While *The 9/11 Commission Report* provides enough information to set the record straight about which individuals bear responsibility for not preventing this attack, the report is lacking when it gets down to the policies of the United States that continue to promote terrorism.

The report recognizes some of the root causes of terrorism and the various reasons why bin Laden and Al Qaeda appeal to people in the Arab and Muslim world. It properly understands that the United States faces a two-fold enemy: not just Al Qaeda but "a radical ideological movement in the Islamic world." And it concludes that Islamic fundamentalism "will menace Americans and American interests long after Osama bin Laden and his cohorts are killed or captured." But it does not adequately address how the United States can prevail "in the longer term over the ideology that gives rise to Islamist terrorism."

And that's because it fails to come to grips with two costly policies: the U.S. war against Iraq and the U.S. backing of the Israeli occupation.

The report notes that "support for the United States has plummeted" in the Islamic world after its height in the days after 9/11. But its explanation for this is weak.

First, it seems to point a finger at Edward W. Said, the Palestinian American scholar who even in death still rankles U.S. policymakers. Anti-American "views are at best uninformed about the United States and, at worst, informed by cartoonish stereotypes, the coarse expression of a fashionable 'Occidentalism' among intellectuals who caricature U.S. values and policies." Then, it blames the lack of U.S. support on Al-Jazeera and other Arab media outlets.

Taking a broader view, it does discuss the problems of illiteracy and

poverty in the Middle East (though its answer is a Middle East Free Trade Area). And it notes the history of Muslim resentment at their lost power and prestige in the world.

But when the report examines U.S. policy, it is painfully agnostic. "America's policy choices have consequences," it says. "Right or wrong, it is simply a fact that American policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and American actions in Iraq are dominant staples of popular commentary across the Arab and Muslim world. This does not mean U.S. choices have been wrong. It means those choices must be integrated with America's message of opportunity to the Arab and Muslim world."

This is a huge cop-out.

At this late date, it takes willful blindness for the Commission not to recognize how counterproductive the Iraq War has been on the war on terror. Bush's blunder has diverted intelligence and military assets from going after Al Qaeda, it has alienated other countries (not just our allies) that were cooperating with the United States, and it continues to provide recruiting footage for the next Al Qaeda video.

And as far as the U.S. embrace of Ariel Sharon goes, nothing could be more harmful in the effort to win what the report calls "the struggle of ideas." There is simply no way to incorporate Israel's ongoing occupation into a "message of opportunity" for Arabs and Muslims. You can't square the circle. Until the United States requires Israel to come to a just peace with the Palestinians, or until the United States stops uncritically supporting Israel's occupation, the well of resentment against America will only deepen.

The authors of *The 9/11 Commission Report* evidently found it easier to lay out the shortcomings of U.S. intelligence, to hint at the failings of the particular individuals at the helm, and to offer recommendations for bureaucratic change than to fully come to terms with the ongoing policies of our government that are reproducing terrorists every day. ♦