

Missed Opportunities: The 9/11 Commission Report and US Foreign Policy

Ted Galen Carpenter

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (better known as the 9/11 Commission) released its report to much media fanfare in late July 2004.¹ The massive (567-page) report covered an array of issues and offered extensive recommendations to reform the bureaucratic apparatus responsible for intelligence gathering, intelligence evaluation, and counterterrorism measures. It was cautious, thoughtful, and eminently bipartisan. Many of the organizational reforms were soon widely endorsed, although Senator John Kerry, the Democratic Party's 2004 presidential nominee, went much further than most members of the political establishment when he pledged to implement all of the recommendations in the report if he became president. President George W. Bush praised the commissioners and expressed general support for their product but refrained from committing to a wholesale adoption of the recommendations.

Much of the document analyzes the failures of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, and other agencies to anticipate and thwart the devastating attacks that al Qaeda launched on 11 September 2001. Some of the criticisms (the lack of communication between key agencies, the absence of effective screening mechanisms at the borders, and the missing of key clues that a major attack on American soil was imminent)

1. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004).

Ted Galen Carpenter is vice president for defense and foreign policy at the Cato Institute and is the author or editor of sixteen books on international affairs, including *Peace and Freedom: Foreign Policy for a Constitutional Republic*.

were warranted. Other criticisms were classic exercises in twenty-twenty hindsight. Bits of intelligence data that stand out in retrospect were just a small portion of a barrage of data at the time, and the commissioners failed to adequately take that inherent problem in intelligence gathering and evaluation into account.

Most of the media and public scrutiny of the report focused on the recommendations for bureaucratic reform—especially the proposal to create a Cabinet-level intelligence czar to bring more order to the disparate components of the US intelligence community. Although that recommendation attracted considerable political support, some intelligence professionals argued that such a reform might make the intelligence rigidities and failures that led to 11 September and the miscalculations about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction even worse.² In particular, centralizing intelligence evaluation threatened to exclude dissenting views even more than they are now, leading to an exacerbation of the groupthink phenomenon that plagued the analysis of both the al Qaeda threat and the Iraq crisis.

The most serious deficiency in the report, though, has nothing to do with the analysis of intelligence and law-enforcement failures before 11 September or with the dubious nature of some of the proposed reforms. Rather, it was the failure of the commission to adequately address the most crucial foreign policy issues pertaining to the threat that radical Islamic terrorism poses to the security of the American people.

Iraq and al Qaeda

In fairness, the commission did examine some of the larger policy issues, and most of its judgments were reasonably judicious rather than inflammatory. For example, the report examined a series of contacts between the government of Iraq and al Qaeda operatives since the early 1990s. Its conclu-

2. A group of former officials from the State Department, Defense Department, and CIA, as well as former members of Congress, signed a statement warning of these dangers. See "Guiding Principles for Intelligence Reform," statement released by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, www.csis.org/0409_intelreformprinciples.pdf. See also the testimony of Henry Kissinger before the Senate Appropriations Committee, 21 September 2004, appropriations.senate.gov/releases/hearings-sep21-22.pdf, 3–24.

sions did not fully support the case of those who have argued that there was no connection between the government of Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. But neither did the analysis and conclusions support the charges leveled by neoconservative activists that Baghdad and al Qaeda had a close relationship and may even have jointly plotted the 11 September attacks.

The commissioners document that there were a number of contacts between Iraqi officials and al Qaeda operatives during the 1990s but conclude that those contacts were sporadic and mostly low level. It was notable that Saddam's regime apparently rebuffed Osama bin Laden's request for space to establish training camps as well as assistance in acquiring weapons.³ The members of the commission concluded that "reports describe friendly contacts and indicate some common themes in both sides'" hatred of the United States. "But to date we have seen no evidence that these or earlier contacts ever developed into a collaborative operational relationship. Nor have we seen evidence indicating that Iraq cooperated with al Qaeda in developing or carrying out attacks against the United States."⁴

Although the commission studiously avoided discussing the merits of the Iraq war (to avoid controversy and make it possible to have a unanimous report), those conclusions should make the prowar faction uneasy. After all, President Bush and his advisors cited two major reasons for attacking Iraq: the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction and the alleged connections between Baghdad and al Qaeda. The first allegation was discredited long ago, and the commission report largely undermined the second.

Iran and al Qaeda

An equally pertinent issue that the commission discussed is the relationship between Iran and al Qaeda. That relationship seems more substantive and intriguing than the minimal one between Iraq and the terrorist group. The commission noted that "[Sudanese hard-line leader Hassan al] Turabi sought to persuade Shiites and Sunnis to put aside their divisions and join against the common enemy. In late 1991 or 1992, discussions in Sudan between al Qaeda and Iranian operatives led to an informal agreement to cooperate in

3. *9/11 Commission Report*, 61

4. *Ibid.*, 66.

providing support—even if only training—for actions carried out primarily against Israel and the United States.”⁵ Shortly after that agreement was reached, senior al Qaeda operatives traveled to Iran for training in explosives.

Even more troubling, the commission implicated both Iran and al Qaeda in the attack on the Khobar Towers US Air Force barracks in Saudi Arabia. According to the report, the attack was “carried out principally, perhaps exclusively, by Saudi Hezbollah, an organization that had received support from the government of Iran. While the evidence of Iranian involvement is strong, there are also signs that al Qaeda played some role, as yet unknown.”⁶

Most troubling of all, the commission cited that Iranian officials allowed at least eight, and perhaps as many as ten, of the 11 September hijackers to transit their country from Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia, “taking advantage of the Iranian practice of not stamping Saudi passports.” The report stressed, however, that there was “no evidence” that Tehran “was aware of the planning for what later became the 9/11 attack,” much less had anything to do with it.⁷

The relationship between Iran and al Qaeda appears to have been more extensive—and is certainly more troubling—than the relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda. Yet even in this case there are odd features. For example, the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan was at least loosely allied with Iran. But the goal of the Northern Alliance was to topple Afghanistan’s Taliban government—the regime that was the close ally of al Qaeda and made the country a safe haven for the terrorist group.⁸

Predictably, neoconservatives oversimplify the Iran–al Qaeda relationship and ignore the various caveats in the report. They cite the document as justification for a US policy to topple the fundamentalist Islamic regime in Tehran.⁹ The ties between al Qaeda and Iran are deeply troubling and need to

5. *Ibid.*, 61.

6. *Ibid.*, 60.

7. *Ibid.*, 241.

8. *Ibid.*, 139.

9. See Michael Ledeen, “The 9/11 Vision: Better, but Not There Yet,” *National Review Online*, 23 July 2004, www.nationalreview.com/ledeen/ledeen200407230840.asp; Max Boot, “Bush Can’t Afford Inaction on Iran,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 September 2004, A17.

be examined further, but the evidence is sufficiently murky that it should not be used as a justification for an overt or covert US strategy of forcible regime change in that country. It is pertinent to note, though, that the Bush administration could have made a stronger case for US military action against Iran than it was able to do for action against Iraq.

Distractions Are Mentioned but Not Highlighted

At least as important as the issues the report addressed are the issues it skirted. The failure to discuss the Bush administration's argument that the Iraq war was a crucial part of the war on terror was an obvious omission, but there were others. For example, although the commission properly chastised both the Bush and Clinton administrations for not taking the al Qaeda threat seriously enough, there was only a modest amount of discussion about what either administration was doing instead of focusing on bin Laden.

The Clinton administration certainly was not inactive on the foreign policy front during the mid and late 1990s. That was the period in which the United States invaded and occupied Haiti, intervened in the Bosnian civil war, enforced rigorous sanctions against Iraq and periodically bombed that country, and wrested Serbia's province of Kosovo away from Belgrade's jurisdiction through a North Atlantic Treaty Organization air war. In exonerating President Clinton from not doing more to neutralize al Qaeda after the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the commission observed that "the US policy response to al Qaeda before 9/11 was essentially defined following the embassy bombings in August 1998. . . . It is worth noting that they were made by the Clinton administration under extremely difficult domestic political circumstances. Opponents were seeking the President's impeachment. In addition, in 1998–9 President Clinton was preparing the government for possible war against Serbia, and he had authorized major air strikes against Iraq."¹⁰ In an especially significant passage, the commission stated that the operations in the Balkans were "orders of magnitude" greater than the effort against al Qaeda.¹¹

10. *9/11 Commission Report*, 348–9.

11. *Ibid.*, 340.

But the connection between the humanitarian interventions of the Clinton years and important American security interests was tenuous, at most. It appears that the bulk of our attention, as well as our intelligence and military and resources, was focused on those matters instead of the very real terrorist threat that was emerging.

The Bush administration's early foreign policy priorities—especially the desire to oust Saddam (which may even have predated the 11 September attacks)—reflected similar myopia. For example, the new administration's first two National Security Council meetings (30 January 2001 and 1 February 2001) reportedly concentrated on how to implement the US policy of regime change in Iraq.¹² The administration's focus during its initial months on conventional foreign policy issues, such as relations with Russia, China, and Mexico, also detracted from the pursuit of al Qaeda.

Although the Clinton administration had been working to tie al Qaeda to the 1998 embassy attacks and the 2000 attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen to create a case for a major counterattack, the Bush administration put that effort on the back burner. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld thought that “too much time had passed,” and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, thought that the attack on the *Cole* was a “stale” issue.¹³ The White House, the State Department, and the Defense Department gave policy toward Iraq and Sudan higher priority than they did policy regarding al Qaeda. In an especially damning passage, the report concluded, “At no point before 9/11 was the [DoD] fully engaged in the mission of countering al Qaeda, though this was perhaps the most dangerous foreign enemy then threatening the United States.”¹⁴

Given the mentality of the administration, it was not all that surprising that in the immediate aftermath of the 11 September attacks, prominent officials, most notably Wolfowitz, lobbied for action against Iraq instead of—or at least in addition to—al Qaeda. As Secretary of State Colin Powell recalled the discussions during that period, “Paul was always of the view that Iraq

12. Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 70–6, 82–6.

13. *9/11 Commission Report*, 202.

14. *Ibid.*, 351.

was a problem that had to be dealt with” and sought to use the 11 September attacks “as a way to deal with the Iraq problem.”¹⁵

The bottom line is that the Clinton administration regarded al Qaeda as a threat but had a significant number of higher priorities, especially its missions in the Balkans. During its initial months in office, the Bush administration did not give al Qaeda even the modest priority that its predecessor had. Events from the mid-1990s to 11 September 2001 showed that US officials had dangerously misplaced priorities. The commission report documents that problem but generally fails to draw the appropriate conclusions.

The Report and US Middle East Policy: Reasonable Diagnosis, Faulty Prescriptions

An even more serious deficiency was the commission’s tepid treatment of the crucial issue of how US foreign policy in the Middle East creates resentment that strengthens the forces of radical Islamic terrorism. In fairness, the report presented a more sophisticated treatment than the Bush administration’s argument that the terrorists hate America because of its values. In a speech on 4 October 2002, President Bush stated flatly: “They hate us for what we love. They hate us because we love freedom. They hate us because we love the idea that people can worship an Almighty God any way he or she sees fit. They hate us because we love political discourse and a free society. They hate us because of our free press. They hate everything about us, because of our freedom.”¹⁶

Instead, the commission acknowledged that there is a great deal of anger in the Muslim world at US *policies*: “America’s policy choices have consequences. 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.”¹⁷

The report even acknowledged that bin Laden and his adherents emerged

15. *Ibid.*, 335.

16. See www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/10/print/20021004-3.html.

17. *9/11 Commission Report*, 376. This is a point also emphasized by a senior CIA official. See Anonymous, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 2004).

largely because of opposition to the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia, the economic sanctions that had such a devastating effect on the people of Iraq (especially children), and Washington's reflexive support for Israel's policies.¹⁸ Indeed, bin Laden wanted to move up the date for the attacks on America specifically to help sustain support for the *intifada* in the Palestinian territories and to maintain active opposition to the US troop presence in Saudi Arabia.¹⁹

Although the commission's diagnosis of America's foreign policy problems in the Middle East was reasonably sound, its policy prescriptions were either contradictory or anemic. An example of the former was the call for a greater commitment to democracy, freedom, and human rights throughout the Middle East juxtaposed with proposals for close cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, two of the least democratic governments in the region.²⁰ An example of the latter was the admission that US support of Israel antagonizes large swaths of Muslim opinion without calling for any meaningful change in US policy toward Israel.

Instead of addressing such sensitive matters, the commission merely called for a greater effort at public diplomacy to win the hearts and minds of Muslims: "If the United States does not act aggressively to define itself in the Islamic world, the extremists will gladly do the job for us." Although it is certainly true that the United States can do a better job at public diplomacy in the Muslim world (and most other parts of the world, for that matter), the commission's emphasis misconstrued the core of the problem.

The main problem is the substance of US policy in the Middle East, not the perception of that policy. In most cases, the United States would be better off changing its policy instead of trying to come up with new and creative ways to justify it. Some US policies have been heavy-handed and even cruel. Others have been profoundly hypocritical. Not surprisingly, such policies have drawn fire, and deservedly so, from a variety of Muslim critics, not just Islamic radicals.

An example of an insensitive policy was the US-led economic embargo

18. *9/11 Commission Report*, 49, 51, and 59.

19. *Ibid.*, 251.

20. *Ibid.*, 371–4, 376–8.

against Iraq during the twelve years before the overthrow of Saddam. That measure devastated the Iraqi economy and greatly degraded the living standards of the Iraqi people while barely inconveniencing Saddam and his political cronies. According to reports from the United Nations, at least five hundred thousand children perished from the direct and indirect effects of the embargo. To most people in the Islamic world, the policy was appallingly cruel, and no amount of US propaganda will convince those populations otherwise.

Evidence of hypocritical US policies abounds, especially with regard to Washington's position on democracy in the Islamic world. The Bush administration promotes democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq. President Bush also called upon the Palestinian people to replace Yasser Arafat and the corrupt, authoritarian leadership of the Palestinian Authority with new, democratic leaders. Such policies are bound to be controversial in the Islamic world, but they at least might be respected if the United States was consistent in its enthusiasm for democracy. But the United States has a long record of hypocrisy on that topic. It was true even during the early years of the Cold War. In 1953 the CIA orchestrated the overthrow of Iran's democratically elected prime minister Mohammed Mossedegh to put the pro-United States shah back on the throne. The United States then looked the other way while that autocrat looted and brutalized the Iranian people for a quarter of a century.

The more recent US record is not much better. Washington voiced almost no criticism in the early 1990s when the government of Algeria suspended elections to prevent a certain victory by an Islamist political party. US officials murmured meager protests in 1997 when the Turkish military command ordered the elected prime minister to leave office or be overthrown. And the United States has had cozy relationships for decades with corrupt, authoritarian governments in such countries as Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Matters did not improve under the Bush administration. Washington has forged an exceedingly close relationship with Pakistani dictator Pervez Musharraf. Calls for the restoration of democracy in Pakistan have virtually disappeared from America's diplomatic discourse. US officials now routinely refer to Musharraf as "president" rather than "general," even though he acquired the presidency in a military coup and has no democratic legitimacy whatsoever.

Public diplomacy has its place, but image is no substitute for substance. Members of the 9/11 Commission and most US officials have not understood that point. The worrisome tendency to try to substitute image for substance was apparent early in the comments of then under secretary of state for public diplomacy, Charlotte Beers, a former Chicago advertising executive. Beers suggested that America should be “branded” in the global information media, much as commercial products were identified with desirable attributes.²¹ The notion that US foreign policy can be sold to a skeptical global public as though it were a new and improved brand of Corn Flakes shows clearly that the Bush administration has never understood the real problem. Unfortunately, the 9/11 Commission did not do much better.

The reservoir of hatred in the Middle East toward the United States that has been building for decades is not the result of a failure of Muslims to understand US policy. They understand it all too well. And they are not going to be won over by a slick, Madison Avenue public relations campaign, however well intended, or well funded. The problem is the content of US foreign policy, not its packaging.²²

By failing to address such vital issues, the 9/11 Commission missed a historic opportunity. It chose to play it safe and issue a bland, comfortable report that focused on secondary matters rather than Washington’s intrusive, misguided, and dangerous policy in the Middle East. That approach may suit the Bush administration and the warhawk faction, but it does little to advance the security and well-being of the American people.

21. See Ted Galen Carpenter, “America Cannot Successfully Market Flawed Policies with a Sophisticated Propaganda Campaign,” *Insight*, 30 September 2002.

22. For a discussion of that distinction, see *ibid.*