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By Anthony H. Cordesman

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The 9/11 Commission Report: Strengths and Weaknesses
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The United States needs to be very careful about rushing to act upon the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission. This may seem to be a desirable instant solution to a difficult political problem in an election year. At the same time, the Commission report has more weaknesses than strengths.

The report of the 9/11 Commission does have a number of strengths:

- Its analysis of the sequence of events leading to the hijackings, and the related FAA, airline, and NORAD coordination and C4I/BM problems is excellent.

- The chapter on the "Foundation of the New Terrorism" is well balanced and objective and one of the best summaries of the rise of Bin Laden and Al Qaida around.

- The description of the problems in the FBI, FAA, Intelligence Community, other federal agencies', White House and Congressional approaches to counterterrorism in Chapter 3 clearly describes key problems in priorities, coordination, and bureaucratic culture that need to be changed.   (It does not, however, address the problem of collection processing, intelligence analysis, IT systems, or limits to clandestine collection.)

- The analysis of the risks and benefits of the options for attacking Bin Laden and al Qaida before 9/11 is objective and informative and provides a balanced description of the role of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

- The analysis of the structure of the 9/11 plot, the nature of the plotters, their financing needs, and the role of the Saudi and other governments are equally good. The fact that the operation was to some extent franchised by Al Qaida, rather than planned by it and that many non-Saudis were associated with it is clearly outlined and described. The relatively low cost of Al Qaida operations ($30 million/year), and the 9/11 attacks in particular ($300,000-$400,000 total) is made clear.

- The problems in the U.S. policy level response from Al Khobar through the *U.S.S. Cole* attack to 9/11 are well laid out, although the analysis of policy level analysis and studies is largely omitted.

- Chapter 7 tends to be bogged down in detail, but provides a good description of Al Qaida ties to Iraq, the motivation of the Saudis involved in the attack and the fact Al Qaida chose them largely for ease in obtaining visas. The chapter also has a good description of Iran's pre-9/11 contacts with Al Qaida.

- Chapters 10 and 13 do a good job of debunking many of the conspiracy theories relating to the Bush Administration, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, and describing Pakistani cooperation. It badly understates the role of the ISI in Pakistan, however, and makes largely feel good proposals.

- The recommendations for improved Congressional oversight in Chapter 13 (pp. 420-422) are solid and useful.

At the same time, the report of the 9/11 Commission has important weaknesses. It also repeats many of the flaws common to the Senate and House committee reports on both the Iraqi WMD issue and 9/11:

- **Failure to Analyze Problems in Context**: It is yet another exercise in tunnel vision with no explicit analysis of how the problems affecting 9/11 relate to the overall weaknesses in the intelligence community. The analysis of 9/11 is decoupled from the analysis of weaknesses in analyzing Iraq WMD capabilities. More importantly, the analysis of counterterrorism issues is decoupled from an analysis of the overall strengths and weaknesses of the U.S. intelligence and policy communities. (See Chapter 11 as perhaps the worst example).

- There is no analysis of intelligence problems relating to stability operations, nation building, or counterinsurgency in Iraq, and no mention of the serious intelligence problems in military operations during the Iraq War reported by the GAO, USAF, U.S. Army, etc.

  While the report does cover some aspects of terrorism and counterterrorism affecting Islamist extremism on a global basis, it does not cover these issues except as they relate to 9/11. The report generalizes too much on the basis of one case example.

  It also suggests a long list of technical and itemized "fixes" in areas from transportation

security to civil liberties to homeland security funding without an assessment of the time required, cost, necessary talent pool, and required IT systems. The rationale for what may be good ideas is so limited in scope that each recommendation requires separate follow-on analysis.

- **Ignoring the Policymaker and the "User"**: The report analyzes how senior policy makers reacted to intelligence, but it does not examine the flow of documentation and advice provided by the policy level community or does enough to analyze how the policy level uses intelligence.

  This understates the responsibility of the policy level user in dealing with terrorism and counterterrorism. It also tacitly assumes the intelligence community is responsible for all intelligence, although the policy level has access to much of the same data and performs extensive analysis on its own. As a result, policy staffs, contract research centers, and FCRCs are excluded from any analysis or responsibility, although they have done a great deal of work in these areas and have significantly larger cumulative analytic staffs and capability than the formal intelligence community.

- **Failure to Use Complexity Theory and Analyze Inevitable Uncertainties**: Like virtually all of the previous U.S. reports on intelligence performance in Iraq, the report makes another key tacit assumption: All failures to provide warning or correct analysis are failures in intelligence. This repeats mistakes made in nearly all past warning studies. From the Pearl Harbor studies onwards, such studies have concluded that if the intelligence community had properly used all of its indicators and had foreseen the right pattern, it would have provided the correct warning and/or analysis.

  In practice, intelligence collection is filled with vast amounts of contradictory information on a wide range of subjects. The result is the equivalent of massive amounts of "noise." The number of possible patterns also is almost infinite. The report ignores these realities -- particularly in Chapter 8 -- where "The System Was Blinking Red" analysis ignores all of the conflicting priorities and intelligence issues, and focuses practically exclusively on the limited indicators that could have been used to constitute warning. The same problems occur in the analysis in Chapter 11, particularly in the section on surprise attack in pages 344-351.

  Well established methods in complexity theory would have provided a reasonably good picture of whether given methods and resources do have any hope of sorting out the proper information from the vast amounts of collection the community receives and of providing the right pattern.

  Even without such analysis, the report should have explicitly looked far more deeply at the limits of what intelligence collection and analysis can actually do. Instead, it proposes "fixes" that almost certainly will not solve an inherently unsolvable problem. The intelligence community and USG will always be "surprised" by many aspects of real world events.

- **Uncertain Rationale and Justification for Integration: The National Counterterrorism Center:** The proposals for a National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) have somewhat better conceptual justification but do not address the efforts since 9/11 and can only work if there is a massive further reorganization of the agencies supporting the new NCTC (See Chapter 13, pp.403-406).

  A national counterterrorism center sounds great -- conceptually, all perfect central integration does. However, the practical problems in actually implementing this concept are largely ignored, as is the inevitable bureaucratic impact in terms of "group think" versus the need for multiple centers, dissenting views, and agency-by-agency fixes that actually work in the field. The statement in Chapter 11 calling for "routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination" is more a prayer than a plan (See Chapter 11, p. 344).

- **Fixing the Organization Chart Rather than the Quality of Intelligence - The National Intelligence Director**: Like many USG reports, the Commission places a heavy tacit emphasis on integrating intelligence collection and analysis into central structures, while simultaneously creating a better flow to all agencies and analysts.

  A new leader or czar may or may not make things better; this is more a matter of personality than organization. Like other comparable reports, however, the 9/11 Commission fails to explain why a series of complex collection and analytic processes are going to be made better simply by changing the top of the organization chart. The recommendation seems as likely to produce a future scapegoat as look at solutions (See Chapter 13, pp. 400-406, 411-415).

  There is also no analysis of:

  - The kind of major new IT, budgeting and management subsystems that would be required.

  - Why re-hatting the same bureaucratic elements will not lead to similar or new bureaucratic rivalries under the new hat.

  - How the Deputy NIDs will interface with their primary users and particularly why making the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence the Deputy NID for Defense Intelligence will do anything other than create a dual-hatted head of DIA, NSA, the NGA, NRO, etc. that will perform his tasks in virtually the same way he does now.

  - How the Deputy NID who is to be the head of the CIA will interface with the other NIDs in ways that do not actually increase the problems in coordinating collection and analysis, since the Deputy NID for Defense Intelligence will now control DIA, NSA, the NGA, NRO and report separately to both the NID and Secretary of Defense.

  - What the suggested new National Intelligence Centers are really supposed to do and what the rationale was for creating illustrative titles like WMD Proliferation,

International Crime and Narcotics, China/East Asia, Middle East, and Eurasia. (The suggested system ignores Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and much of South Asia.)

Intelligence needs to be improved qualitatively, not simply in terms of organization and coordination. This often requires competing centers of analysis, and systematic efforts to improve the development of dissenting views and the reporting of risk and uncertainty. The Commission report does not really address these issues, and implementing many of its recommendations could simply substitute a more centralized intelligence community "group think" for the problems that already exist.

- **Budget Control**: It is always critical to "follow the money," and to examine how it is allocated and controlled The practical problem with the intelligence budget, however, is that control over today's intelligence budget(s) would essentially mean review of line item budgets that cannot be tied to the nature of tasking, quality of effort, effectiveness of spending, methods of analysis and reporting, user needs and satisfaction, or the other problems raised in the 9/11 Commission and other recent reports (See Chapter 13, pp. 410-411).

There may well be a need for much greater transparency in allocating resources and evaluating effectiveness. Budget and program control, however, is only part of the task, and the practical value is often exaggerated.

- **Decoupling Intelligence Budgeting (and Architecture?) from Warfighting:** This same set of problems in the Commission's recommendations problem is greatly complicated by the fact that much of the budget goes to National Technical Means, whose value lies as much in assisting warfighting as intelligence. There are functional reasons that much of the intelligence budget is under the control of the Department of Defense, and the Commission does not address these issues and tradeoffs.

It is acutely dangerous to assume that control over funds that are so closely tied to National Technical Means that must be directly integrated into the C4I/BM and "net centric" systems of the Department of Defense should be decoupled from DoD. Other reports reveal serious problems in all these areas during the Iraq War that the Commission did not examine or address.

- **Share Intelligence Information; "Bring major national security institutions into the information revolution."** In broad terms, these are good recommendations, particularly as they apply to the pointless overclassification within the Intelligence Community, over compartmentation, and the resulting lack of integration in the IT systems necessary to make this recommendation work.

There is no explicit analysis, however, of the problems in overclassification that do as much to block information flow as bureaucratic compartments, or of the acute problems that already exist in virtually all of the related IT systems and analytic tools for netting and using sensitive classified and intelligence data (See Chapter 13).

Useful as IT is, it is not a magic wand, and the IC -- and the USG as a whole -- suffer from serious problems in basic architecture, system design, over-classification and security problems that delay or block IT modernization, as well as a lack of analytic tools to properly use and sort the necessary information.

Moreover, it is dangerous to suboptimize integration without an IT architecture tied to the overall needs of intelligence, and without a clear picture of the user interface with Homeland Defense, DoD, and other users. Layering new IT tasking over systems already in the process of change with conflicting and unresolved objectives is not going to help (See Chapter 13, pp. 416-419).

- **Strengthening the CIA:** A recommendation to fix so many things at once, with no specifics, costs, and timelines, is really no recommendation at all (See Chapter 13, p. 415).

- **Removing Paramilitary Capability from the CIA:** The Commission seems to ignore the fact that some of the CIA's successes in Afghanistan and elsewhere were linked to its ability to manage paramilitary operations in working with the U.S. military, and to blame the CIA for a climate hostile to operations that the Commission says elsewhere is largely the result of Congressional and political priorities. It ignores the links between some forms of HUMINT and operations, and the fact that many paramilitary operations should be political and policy driven and not military driven (See Chapter 13, p.415).

- **Future Role of the Department of Defense Left Largely Unaddressed:** The report does little to analyze or address the future role of the Department of Defense in counterterrorism, other than recommend that it takeover all current CIA paramilitary activity.

- **FBI Intelligence Section:** The Commission's recommendation seems generally sound, and far better than creating yet another new organization. However, the proper interface between the Intelligence section, the rest of the FBI, and the intelligence community as a whole, are dealt with in very vague terms. (See Chapter 13, pp. 423-427.)

- **HUMINT**: Another tacit subtext in the Commission's report -- although not one discussed in its analysis, or presented formally in its conclusions -- HUMINT can do what technical intelligence cannot do. This is the only way the Commission can have reached the conclusions laid out in Chapters 12 and 13 without considering the real world limits to intelligence collection and analysis.

It is far from clear that this is true. As the British Butler Commission reports, HUMINT is often unreliable or simply not available. In many other cases, open source material is as good and still does not solve the problem. This is a specific case where an honest analysis of the inherent limits of intelligence is critical.

- **A Focus on Prevention and Not on Response:** The Commission report focuses on

prevention and not response, and on eliminating uncertainty rather than learning how to live with it. This may suit the world the United States wants but does not match the world it lives in.

Chapter 9, for example, is interesting as a history of the response to the World Trade Center attack but is largely an exercise in tunnel vision. It describes problems in one kind of attack on one building in one city.

- **Root Out Terrorist Sanctuaries:** The report does not seem to have properly considered the pattern of events since 9/11. Terrorists already have adapted to many of the U.S. efforts to root out sanctuaries and now have looser, better distributed and informal networks. They increasingly operate in ways that do not require fixed sanctuaries, and trying to deprive them of operational areas in fixed states comes close to calling for fixing the world (See Chapter 13, pp. 365-367).

- **Prevent Continued Growth of Islamist Terrorism:** There is good background analysis of the overall threat and developments in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia, but there is also the tacit assumption that the problems involved are ones that the United States can solve. (See Chapter 13, pp. 367-374).

Such recommendations come close to being yet another variation on "fixing the world," without enough attention to the scale of the problem, and the sheer complexity of the issues involved. Simplistic fixes are proposed, while the Commission fails to address the need to develop tangible and specific forms of cooperation with regional allies and to place a primary focus on issues like the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The problem is not communicating American values, it is rather that much of the region does not share the same values and/or deeply distrusts the United States.

Fixing the situation -- to the extent it is possible -- may well require fundamental changes in the willingness of the United States to work with local governments and local reformers. It requires a U.S. understanding that America's problems are often just as much the content of its messages as how well the United States can communicate its messages.

It also requires a U.S. understanding that most action will have to be more country-by-country than coalition and have the resources necessary to address problems on this basis. The Commission makes vague recommendations regarding an almost universal coalition (See Chapter 13, p. 380).

- **Terrorist money:** The Commission notes in many places in its report that the Saudi government did not deliberately support terrorism and that terrorist operations are relatively inexpensive. Yet, it trots out the same advice about the importance of reducing the flow of money.

As is the case with drugs, a major effort does need to be made to limit and control this problem. A frank recognition is needed, however, of the fact that such efforts soon reach

the point of diminishing returns, and there is no prospect of cutting off financing as long as such efforts receive significant private support (a great deal of Arab and Muslim money is in private banks in the West) and can self-finance. Once again, the limits of any given recommendation, and its cost-effectiveness are not addressed (See Chapter 13, pp. 381-383).

- **Maximum Effort to Fight Proliferation:** Always a noble goal, but the Commission report says little that will make it more obtainable, and little about what to do with existing proliferation. It makes no attempt to look at the future of terrorist and state proliferation, and trends in biotechnology, delivery systems, nuclear technology, and chemical processes that present major new control problems. It does not address the reality of having to live with terrorist groups that can proliferate -- something that is already a reality for chemical weapons and crude "dirty bombs" and biological devices (See Chapter 13, pp. 380-381).

- **Analysis by Bright Idea and Wish List:** The report proposes a long list of individual fixes in pages 393-298 of Chapter 13 that have little justification and no real analysis of their cost, time to implement, and probable effectiveness. They are not prioritized, and there is no report on how the Executive Branch views them. They seem to be thrown in more to have as many recommendations as possible than to reflect a solid analysis of overall needs and priorities.

  Some of the ideas -- such as instant biometrics and new immigration requirements -- could be extremely costly and technically uncertain and would require new, complex IT systems.

- **Analyzing the Limits of Counterterrorism Capability and the Cost-Effectiveness of Given Fixes:** The Commission is correct in talking about the urgency of the threat, but overstates the prospects for solutions. There needs to be far more honesty in saying that many of the improvements the U.S. government already have underway will not be ready for 3-5 years, and will still leave the United States and its allies with significant vulnerabilities.

Like other U.S. government reports that make such recommendations, the 9/11 Commission report also has a Sancho Panza character; it essentially calls upon Sancho to leap upon his mule and "gallop off in all directions." The key issue is how much will given fixes actually reduce the actuarial risk, and is there even a meaningful way to estimate this and relative priorities (See Chapter 13, pp. 374-380).

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Dr. Anthony Cordesman holds the Arleigh Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and is Co-Director of the Center's Middle East Program. He is also a military analyst for ABC and a Professor of National Security Studies at Georgetown. He directs the assessment of global military balance, strategic energy developments, and CSIS' Dynamic Net Assessment of the Middle East. He is the author of books on the military lessons of the Iran-Iraq war as well as the Arab-Israeli military balance and the peace process, a six-volume net

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Dr. Cordesman served as a national security analyst for ABC News for the 1990-91 Gulf War, Bosnia, Somalia, Operation Desert Fox, and Kosovo. He was the Assistant for National Security to Senator John McCain and a Wilson Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars at the Smithsonian. He has served in senior positions in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Department of State, the Department of Energy, and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. His posts include acting as the Civilian Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Director of Defense Intelligence Assessment, Director of Policy, Programming, and Analysis in the Department of Energy, Director of Project ISMILAID, and as the Secretary of Defense's representative on the Middle East Working Group.

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