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A Lack of Intelligence

By JACOB HEILBRUNN

America's intelligence services may try to work in secret, but they are increasingly being exposed to public scrutiny. After the 9/11 Commission chronicled their shortcomings in its best-selling 2004 report, the Bush administration and Congress backed sweeping

reforms. But as accounts appear about fresh lapses, it doesn't seem that much has changed. The surprising thing doesn't seem to be when things go wrong, but when they go right.

"The Commission," by Philip Shenon, helps to show why this is the case. Though the 9/11 Commission might not seem like the stuff of high drama, Shenon, an investigative reporter at The New York Times, expertly quarries numerous documents and interviews to produce a mesmerizing account. He offers vivid portraits of everyone from [Henry Kissinger](#) to [Samuel R. Berger](#), from [George Tenet](#) to [Condoleezza Rice](#). Few reputations emerge unscathed.

Most valuably, he details the incessant maneuvering that took place among the commissioners, the Bush White House, former Clinton administration officials and Congress to influence the final report. Ultimately, the commission was no more immune to partisan wrangling than the officials it was scrutinizing. (Shenon's book has itself prompted the former 9/11 commissioners to issue a statement in February defending their executive director, [Philip Zelikow](#).) The result was a document that, while valuable as a chronology of events, ended up assigning responsibility for the 9/11 catastrophe to no American official.

From the outset, the Bush administration tried to block not only the creation of the commission but also public Congressional hearings on pre-9/11 intelligence failures. Shenon reports that Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) called [Tom Daschle](#), then the Senate majority leader, in January 2002 to warn him that questions about errors would be a "very dangerous and time-consuming diversion for those of us who are on the front lines of our response today. We've got our hands full." Indeed they did. Bush and Cheney were embarking upon a new intelligence fiasco — falsely linking [Saddam Hussein](#) to weapons of mass destruction and [Al Qaeda](#). But as public pressure mounted and Senator [John McCain](#) signed on to the idea, Bush caved and created the commission, albeit with an insultingly small budget of \$3 million, compared with more than \$40 million for the commission that investigated the 1986 Challenger disaster.

Soon enough, the commission would become mired in controversies over the looming Iraq war. Some of Shenon's most scathing remarks are reserved for the conduct of Zelikow.

A talented historian who wrote a book with Rice, Zelikow came to be loathed by much of the

THE COMMISSION

The Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation.

By Philip Shenon.

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commission's staff for his arrogance. Some staff members and more than a few people in the Washington press corps even viewed him as a White House mole, intent on sanitizing the Bush administration's record. According to Shenon, Zelikow did not inform the leaders of the commission of his role in drafting the White House's September 2002 "pre-emptive defense" doctrine and was frequently in touch with both Rice and [Karl Rove](#).

The very first expert witness to appear before the commission was the State Department's legal adviser during the Reagan administration, Abraham Sofaer, who championed the notion of pre-emptive war in his testimony. According to Shenon, "members of the commission's staff would look back on Sofaer's testimony as the first evidence that Zelikow might try to use the commission to promote the war with Iraq."

In addition, Zelikow extended an invitation to Laurie Mylroie, an eccentric academic at the American Enterprise Institute who believed that Saddam Hussein had been behind the first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, to testify that Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda were linked. "After the hearing with Mylroie," Shenon writes, Zelikow "made it clear to the commission's staff that he wanted the issue of Al Qaeda-Iraq links pursued aggressively." Shenon's verdict is unequivocal: "He wanted to put the commission's staff on record as saying that there was at least the strong possibility that [Osama bin Laden](#) and Saddam Hussein had collaborated to target the United States before 9/11." The commission staff rebelled and Zelikow retreated.

Another major issue was the respective records of the Clinton and Bush administrations in confronting, or failing to confront, terrorism. Shenon suggests that the Clinton administration was, in fact, preoccupied by terrorism (even though it did too little to combat it), while the Bush administration focused on issues like Russia and China. The 9/11 staff, we are told, uncovered dozens of instances in which Clinton spoke about terrorism. Bush, by contrast, referred to it only in the context of state-sponsored terrorism and as demonstrating the need for missile defense. Once again, Zelikow apparently intervened, and, Shenon writes, "the comparison between Bush and Clinton came out of the final draft over the objections of the staff."

Other difficulties the commission encountered were highly questionable accounts from officials like the former [C.I.A.](#) director George Tenet: he claimed that he had not informed Bush about an Aug. 6 Presidential Decision Brief warning of a possible hijacking attempt, only to reverse himself. "Either Tenet's memory was faulty to the point of dementia or he had lied," Shenon writes, "hoping that no one would learn what had been discussed between him and Bush."

Obtaining access to such warnings was onerous. Attorney General [Alberto Gonzales](#) held an absolutist view of executive privilege and refused to hand over White House documents. The commission's gifted investigator Warren Bass went so far as to memorize passages of a prophetic

e-mail message from the [National Security Council](#) staff member [Richard Clarke](#) to Rice warning of an imminent attack by Al Qaeda. He would rush back to his office to type them out.

Though Shenon vividly illuminates the obstacles to holding high-level intelligence and government officials accountable for their bungling, he doesn't discuss the reforms passed by Congress after the 9/11 report appeared. He might have noted that absent charges of personal culpability and punishment for failure, intelligence officials have little incentive to improve their performance. And for all the sound and fury about intelligence lapses, the Congressional

reforms themselves amounted to little more than shuffling boxes on paper. Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of the commission itself was to endorse a patchwork of feel-good reforms that simply slathered on a new layer of bureaucracy in the form of the director of national intelligence, who lacks the authority to supervise the unwieldy 16 agencies that constitute the intelligence community.

But even if it functions perfectly, this community can't, as Shenon's account abundantly demonstrates, control the politics of intelligence. If anything, the Bush administration's ideological approach before 9/11 appears similar to its response to terrorism after it. The commissioner John Lehman probably got closest to the truth when he told Shenon that before 9/11, Bush administration officials were "just besotted" with missile defense, Iraq and other issues, concluding, "They were living in another world."

Apparently, they still are.

Jacob Heilbrunn, a regular contributor to the Book Review, is the author of "They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons."

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