

The Making of a Washington Expert

By Max Holland

[Designating W.W. Norton as the publisher of the 9/11 Report](#) was not the only plum handed out during Philip Zelikow's tenure as director of the 9/11 Commission. Zelikow engaged in some blatant cronyism when he arranged for a colleague from the University of Virginia, Tim Naftali, to write a history of US counterterrorism policy from the Johnson to the Clinton administrations.

The commission's prime directive was to investigate the 9/11 attacks, of course, but a historical account of counterterrorism policy is the kind of ancillary study that comparable commissions have published. As part of its final report, the Church Committee, which investigated activities of US intelligence agencies, included an invaluable 106-page study of the CIA that was based upon access to classified internal histories.

But like other aspects of the commission's work, the Naftali study was not published as part of the commission's output; it was not even deemed fit for posting on the Internet. Why was it commissioned in the first place? Naftali, a Canadian citizen at the time, could not review classified materials. His study would have to depend entirely on open sources, meaning that at best it would represent a marginal addition to public knowledge. Naftali was not even a noted expert on the subject.

Naftali's unfamiliarity with the topic probably contributed to what happened next: he belatedly turned in a work that was way too long. Indeed, because of its tone and perspective it was quickly deemed unusable, according to sources on the commission. Since there was no time left to edit it, the commissioners would not even agree to have it posted on-line as a monograph.

There's an interesting coda to this story, too. Months before the commission closed its doors, in August 2004, some staff members found it odd that Naftali was engaged in research that clearly seemed tangential to his assignment. Sure enough, once the commissioners decided to "pass" on Naftali's history and gave him permission to use the study any way he liked, he took his manuscript—which had cost US taxpayers at least \$15,000—and nine months later published *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism*.

Naftali advertises the book as having been written partly "at the request of the 9/11 Commission," and markets himself as "the official historian" of the commission. The commissioners reportedly have gagged over this self-aggrandizement, brazen even by Washington standards. They are nonplussed that someone should have secured work

from the commission through a personal favor, produced work of no usefulness to the commission, yet managed to exploit the opportunity for his own professional and financial gain.

Postscript: One of the reviewers who noticed that Naftali's history of counterterrorism was slap-dash, and bordering on laughable, was Hayden B. Peake, who reviews books for [*Studies in Intelligence*](#). Writing in the March 2006 of *Studies*, Peake noted Naftali's "curious interpretation of intelligence history." Peake's review can be read in full [here](#).

In the fall of 2006, Naftali became the director of the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library.