

An Old Schism Haunts the 9/11 Commission

By Max Holland

Although attention largely focused on the solemn ceremonies, the most remarkable feature of the events marking the fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks may have been the 9/11 Commission's reversion to its repressed partisanship.

The precipitating factor was the seal of approval Thomas Kean bestowed on a controversial ABC miniseries that tended to ascribe a larger portion of the blame for 9/11 to the Clinton administration (although, in truth, the Bush administration did not go unscathed). Kean, a Republican former governor who chaired the commission, had been instrumental in keeping the panel on a more or less bipartisan page. But the price of unity had always been that everyone within sight was described as in some way to blame, which is another way of finding that no one was. The docudrama strove to accomplish the opposite. Thus, Kean's endorsement of *The Path to 9/11* as "true to the spirit" of what had happened was tantamount to tearing up an agreed-upon script, a provocative thing to do just weeks before a national election. Some of his former Democratic colleagues responded in kind.

Generating an aura of political bipartisanship had never been easy. In April 2004, during the public-hearings phase of its investigation, the panel gave every sign of becoming unhinged, with the sessions in Washington coming to resemble an intensely combative congressional investigation. Democratic members sought to pin the lion's share of responsibility for 9/11 onto the Bush administration because it had ostensibly disregarded an ample warning. Republicans countered by depicting a Clinton administration that had vacillated after U.S. embassies and the USS *Cole* burned.

Under increasing criticism, the commission managed to close ranks, and in July 2004 it delivered a report that was an instant and widely praised best-seller. The government's subsequent, and massive, reorganization of the intelligence community, instigated in part by the report, also burnished the commission's image.

In the two years since the report's publication, some of the sheen has worn off, as it has become apparent that to achieve unanimity the commission took a bipartisan dive. The report is compelling when the subject is Al Qaeda and its plot. But whenever the issue is how Washington let that plot be carried out, the historical analysis is underwhelming. The narrative reads like "an elephant rolling a pea," as a review by Loch Johnson, a University of Georgia political scientist, put it. "Especially disturbing [was] the inability of the commission—or, more likely . . . its unwillingness—to assign any blame among intelligence managers or policymakers." The only thing worse than this lack of accountability was the commission's decision to deny the public access to the information

it had assiduously collected from government files. This barring of access insures that the panel's non-interpretation will reign supreme until at least January 2009.

The authors of the 9/11 report tried to mask this deficit with a catchy theme: 9/11 happened, first and foremost, they maintained, because of a "failure of imagination" in two successive administrations. Problem is, the facts the commission presented not only failed to support this idea, they eviscerated it. If there truly was a failure of imagination, how was it that CIA director George Tenet declared war on Al Qaeda in 1998? Similarly, on August 29, 2001, an FBI agent (identified only as "Steve" in the report) e-mailed an FBI analyst (named "Jane") and demonstrated a very lucid conception of the stakes. "Steve" angrily wrote that "someday [Americans] will die [and] the public will not understand why we were not more effective" in tracking down Khalid al Mihdhar. Thirteen days later, al Mihdhar helped crash American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon.

There was no failure of imagination. But there was a failure of will and implementation, an inability to come to grips with a lethal, implacable threat. What the ABC docudrama managed to do was reopen a political divide that the 9/11 commissioners had so scrupulously sought to paper over.

Another notable feature of the fifth anniversary is the rise of conspiracy theories about what happened on September 11. According to recent polls, about 36 percent of Americans now believe that the U.S. government had an as-yet-undisclosed hand in the catastrophic events.

This development, in one sense, was entirely predictable five years ago, and nothing can be done about it. Nearly 65 years after the Japanese strike on Pearl Harbor, there still exists a hard-core group who believe Franklin Roosevelt knew about the exact coordinates of the surprise attack, but let it proceed because he was hell-bent on entering the war.

The "paranoid style," as historian Richard Hofstadter dubbed it in 1964, has always been a feature of American politics. Still, there is something unsettling when, two years after release of the 9/11 report, the doubters total more than one-third of those polled. The reason for this may be the report's failure to satisfy Americans' thirst for a coherent explanation for the calamity. Here, the aftermath of the 1941 assault on Pearl Harbor provides some insights.

After the surprise attack on the base, Roosevelt appointed the so-called Roberts Commission, headed by Justice Owen Roberts of the Supreme Court, to investigate why the United States was caught unawares. As with any such inquiry, the selection of who would do the investigating was of paramount importance. That would turn out to be the panel's Achilles' heel, in addition to the brevity of its probe and lack of access to critical information. Roberts, a Republican, was chosen because he had made his mark investigating the Teapot Dome scandal in the 1920s. The four other panel members were military men, two hand-picked by Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, and two by

Secretary of War Henry Stimson. What made this odd was that Knox and Stimson headed the very departments that were the subjects of investigation. One of the generals selected by Stimson, moreover, was a close personal friend of thirty years' standing.

Critics rightly pointed to these built-in conflicts when they charged the panel with having a hopeless bias against the U.S. commanders in Hawaii, while de-emphasizing, if not ignoring, equal or greater mistakes that had been made in Washington. Ultimately, the Roberts Commission did not put questions about the attack to rest; its performance generated controversy and spawned conspiracy theories.

Something of the same phenomenon may be happening with the 9/11 panel, and for similar reasons. It would have been more appropriate for Jamie Gorelick, who served for three years as Clinton's deputy attorney general, to appear before the panel solely as a sworn witness; instead she was one of the most active of the ten commissioners who shaped the report.

Likewise, historians will one day ponder why Philip Zelikow was selected as the commission's executive director. A friend of Condoleezza Rice's since their days together on the National Security Council under George H.W. Bush, Zelikow was a key member of Rice's transition team in 2000 and 2001 and was instrumental in the pivotal decision to demote counter-terrorism "czar" Richard Clarke. After 9/11, Zelikow remained an outside adviser to Rice, helping to draft the administration's 2002 national security blueprint for unilateral, pre-emptive military action—the framework for the invasion of Iraq. *Without Precedent* is the title of Kean's recently co-authored memoir about the commission's work, an apt choice considering that the panel featured a staff director who had to oversee the investigation, testify, and recuse himself simultaneously.

Since February 2005, Zelikow has been counselor to now Secretary of State Rice. It's a textbook case of what Ralph Nader calls Washington's "deferred bribe syndrome."
[Disclosure: From 1999 to 2003, this author worked at the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs while Zelikow was its director.]

The fifth anniversary of 9/11 also afforded George Bush a natural opportunity to deploy a president's ultimate asset, an address to the nation from the Oval Office. And once again, Bush used the occasion to promote his foreign policy of crackpot Wilsonianism.

Bush's cleverness (and presumably Karl Rove's) rests on his dressing up an untenable, insolvent policy with words that tug at the heart and mind of nearly every citizen. What American would declare him- or herself squarely opposed to democracy? Or against freedom?

Immediately after 9/11, the administration faced a choice: to address, via politico-military means, the threat posed by Al Qaeda, or to exploit the occasion to smite all of America's real or presumed enemies. The president has repeatedly assured Americans that what he is doing is only the contemporary version of FDR's call to arms to defeat

fascism, or Harry Truman's policy of containing communism. Ten years from now, Condoleezza Rice has claimed, the Bush era will be seen as the flowering of a new golden age of U.S. power and diplomacy, akin to the period when the Marshall Plan and the formation of NATO laid the groundwork for a prosperous and democratic Western Europe.

The only thing more astounding than the administration's staggering hubris is the smugness of its ignorance. Bush has not reinvented a contemporary version of containment but rather is engaged in a twenty-first-century version of rollback, an aggressive policy of combating communism that had been discredited by the mid-1950s.

Bush's latest mantra is that the world is a better place with Saddam Hussein stripped of power. Who would deny that? It's also true that the world would have been a better place in 1950 if Joseph Stalin had been deposed. But presidents from Truman to Bush's own father moved cautiously against the citadels of communist power, avoiding war until the Soviet empire imploded because of its own internal weakness. Bush and Rice would have Americans believe that the same nation that contained the Soviet empire for forty-five years was incapable of keeping Saddam Hussein in check.

By invading Iraq pre-emptively and under a false premise, Bush opened a second front before defeating Al Qaeda, giving it another theater of operations, a powerful recruiting tool, and training grounds. Meanwhile, the Taliban is resurgent in Afghanistan. Widening the war to include Iraq also squandered much international goodwill toward the U.S. in the wake of 9/11. World opinion, although intangible, always matters, but seldom as much as it does here.

Judging from the president's fifth-anniversary address, he remains bent on exaggerating Al Qaeda's deadly but limited menace into a polarizing, world-historical clash. His analysis threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, because the ideology of jihad has been, if anything, spreading. Five years into what Bush initially termed a crusade, there is a growing mismatch between the president's aim of remaking the world and America's not unlimited means.

If this isn't crackpot Wilsonianism, then it's a simpleton's view of history from a president who has watched one too many John Wayne movies.