

Commission the Truth

Presidential Commission & National Security:

The Politics of Damage Control

By Kenneth Kitts

Lynne Rienner. 194 pp. \$49.95

By Max Holland

Presidents frequently resort to blue-ribbon commissions to help them find a way through, or at least temporary shelter from, political storms. High-level commissions took on the Pearl Harbor and 9/11 surprise attacks, President John F. Kennedy's assassination, and any number of lesser crises, such as the Iran-contra scandal during President Ronald Reagan's second term. Their reputation, however, is decidedly mixed. More than four decades after JFK's murder, for example, the Warren Commission's report remains the object of widespread ridicule. Yet such panels continue to appeal to presidents. Kenneth Kitts, an associate provost and political science professor at South Carolina's Francis Marion University, sets out to explain why.

He focuses on five panels, all concerned with national security: the Roberts Commission on Pearl Harbor (1941–42); the Rockefeller Commission on the CIA's domestic activities (1975); the Scowcroft Commission on MX missile deployment (1983); the Tower Commission on Iran-contra (1986–87); and the 9/11 Commission (2002–04). Four of the five (the exception being the Scowcroft Commission) came into being in response to catastrophes or apparent scandals, and were ostensibly established to uncover what happened, who was to blame, and how recurrences might be avoided.

Kitts makes a solid attempt to draw back the curtain of mystery behind which these commissions typically operate. He rightly emphasizes the paramount importance of who is selected to serve on them, and provides many insights into the political intrigue behind the scenes. His sketches of the members of the Roberts Commission investigating Pearl Harbor—four military men and a Supreme Court justice—demonstrate that the panel was congenitally flawed. Major General Frank McCoy, for example, was compromised by his friendship with Secretary of War Henry Stimson; and the panel's chairman, Justice Owen Roberts, was notable for an almost childlike naiveté.

Some of Kitts's omissions are curious, though. For example, he notes that the Tower Commission on Iran-contra portrayed President Reagan as confused and out of the loop, a president who had allowed National Security Council aides to run amok and cross-wire two covert operations (arms to Tehran in exchange for American hostages and cash, with the cash then diverted to the Nicaraguan contras). By contrast, two separate investigations, one by a joint congressional committee and another by independent

counsel Lawrence Walsh, found that Reagan, in Kitts's words, "had actively presided over an illegal and politically unsound policy." Kitts seems inclined toward the latter explanation, though he brings no new information to bear either way. Could President Reagan's Alzheimer's disease, unrecognized at the time, help account for the disparate accounts? Kitts doesn't even mention the possibility.

The outlier here is the Scowcroft Commission, which came into being because President Reagan wanted blue-ribbon sanction for his plan to deploy a new land-based missile. Though commissions are frequently convened to legitimize pre-cooked decisions, Kitts would have been wise to dispense with this one and devote more of his relatively short book to mining the history of the other, more controversial panels.

Kitts concludes that in appointing these commissions, presidents tend to be concerned more with protecting their own interests than with ferreting out the facts. At the very least, commissions buy time until their reports come out and establish one axis for debate. That's true enough, though congressional investigations—which Kitts generally takes at face value—are no less tainted by self-interest and political agendas. Still, and despite its limitations, *Presidential Commissions & National Security* succeeds in turning a spotlight on a phenomenon that deserves scrutiny: the efforts of temporary panels, their life spans measured in months, to investigate the permanent government and its failings.