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Honorable Commission, Toothless Report

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Americans owe the 9/11 commission a deep debt for its extensive exposition of the facts surrounding the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. Yet, because the commission had a goal of creating a unanimous report from a bipartisan group, it softened the edges and left it to the public to draw many conclusions.

Among the obvious truths that were documented but unarticulated were the facts that the Bush administration did little on terrorism before 9/11, and that by invading Iraq the administration has left us less safe as a nation. (Fortunately, opinion polls show that the majority of Americans have already come to these conclusions on their own.)

What the commissioners did clearly state was that Iraq had no collaborative relationship with Al Qaeda and no hand in 9/11. They also disclosed that Iran provided support to Al Qaeda, including to some 9/11 hijackers. These two facts may cause many people to conclude that the Bush administration focused on the wrong country. They would be right to think that.

So what now? News coverage of the commission's recommendations has focused on the organizational improvements: a new cabinet-level national intelligence director and a new National Counterterrorism Center to ensure that our 15 or so intelligence agencies play well together. Both are good ideas, but they are purely incremental. Had these changes been made six years ago, they would not have significantly altered the way we dealt with Al Qaeda; they certainly would not have prevented 9/11. Putting these recommendations in place will marginally improve our ability to crush the new, decentralized Al Qaeda, but there are other changes that would help more.

First, we need not only a more powerful person at the top of the intelligence community, but also more capable people throughout the agencies -- especially the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency. In other branches of the government, employees can and do join on as mid- and senior-level managers after beginning their careers and gaining experience elsewhere. But at the F.B.I. and C.I.A., the key posts are held almost exclusively by those who joined young and worked their way up. This has created uniformity, insularity, risk-aversion, torpidity and often mediocrity.

The only way to infuse these key agencies with creative new blood is to overhaul their hiring and promotion practices to attract workers who don't suffer the "failures of imagination" that the 9/11 commissioners repeatedly blame for past failures.

Second, in addition to separating the job of C.I.A. director from the overall head of American intelligence, we must also place the C.I.A.'s analysts in an agency that is independent from the one that collects the intelligence. This is the only way to avoid the "groupthink" that hampered the agency's ability to report accurately on Iraq. It is no accident that the only intelligence agency that got it right on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department -- a small, elite group of analysts encouraged to be independent thinkers rather than spies or policy makers.

Analysts aren't the only ones who should be reconstituted in small, elite groups. Either the C.I.A. or the military must create a larger and more capable commando force for covert antiterrorism work, along with a network of agents and front companies working under "nonofficial cover" -- that is, without diplomatic protection -- to support the commandos.

Even more important than any bureaucratic suggestions is the report's cogent discussion of who the enemy is and what strategies we need in the fight. The commission properly identified the threat not as terrorism (which is a tactic, not an enemy), but as Islamic jihadism, which must be defeated in a battle of ideas as well as in armed conflict.

We need to expose the Islamic world to values that are more attractive than those of the jihadists. This means aiding economic development and political openness in Muslim countries, and efforts to stabilize places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Restarting the Israel-Palestinian peace process is also vital.

Also, we can't do this alone. In addition to "hearts and minds" television and radio programming by the American government, we would be greatly helped by a pan-Islamic council of respected spiritual and secular leaders to coordinate (without United States involvement) the Islamic world's own ideological effort against the new Al Qaeda.

Unfortunately, because of America's low standing in the Islamic world, we are now at a great disadvantage in the battle of ideas. This is primarily because of the unnecessary and counterproductive invasion of Iraq. In pulling its bipartisan punches, the commission failed to admit the obvious: we are less capable of defeating the jihadists because of the Iraq war.

Unanimity has its value, but so do debate and dissent in a democracy facing a crisis. To fully realize the potential of the commission's report, we must see it not as the end of the discussion but as a partial blueprint for victory. The jihadist enemy has learned how to spread hate and how to kill -- and it is still doing both very effectively three years after 9/11.

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