

**B453. "The 9/11 Panel Looks the Wrong Way" Los Angeles Times (April 26, 2004), p. A13.**

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Fast-forward three years. A bipartisan commission is conducting hearings in Washington to determine why we were asleep at the wheel when terrorists set off a nuclear device in one of our major cities. The attack killed 300,000. It shook the nation's confidence so profoundly that the Constitution was "temporarily" suspended; all civil liberties were waived to prevent future attacks.

The new commission has established that one of the reasons we failed to prevent this tragedy was the impact of an earlier commission and an earlier set of hearings: the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, a.k.a. the 9/11 commission.

The problem was that the 9/11 investigation spent too much time assigning blame and looking backward. When it came to recommending safeguards for the future, it encouraged the public, federal agencies and the White House to plan for the kinds of attacks we had faced in the past rather than foreseeing dangers to come. It unwittingly contributed to a malaise that military historians have long studied: fighting the last war rather than preparing for the next one.

Could a mere congressional commission really have such a long-reaching effect? Indeed. A similar set of hearings spelled the end of the McCarthy era. Another drove Richard Nixon out of office and led to campaign finance reform. And the Church Commission, which found that the FBI improperly spied on domestic dissenters during the 1960s, strengthened the wall between the FBI and the CIA -- the same wall that is now under attack for its role in our 9/11 failures.

Consider the buzz emerging from the 9/11 commission now. In reaction to our intelligence miscues, it's pushing public opinion toward approving something like an American MI5, a domestic spying agency similar to Britain's. By highlighting Bush's inattention to terrorism before Sept. 11, it is no doubt abetting an administration desire to recoup politically by dispatching Osama Bin Laden before the elections. These actions might have merit, but they don't block the gravest of the foreseeable dangers posed by terrorism -- nuclear weapons.

In much the same way, our current anti-terrorist strategies also miss the point. Because airplanes were the previous weapon of choice, we've earmarked \$5.17 billion in 2005 (out of \$5.3 billion budgeted for the Transportation Security Administration) for airports. Now that trains have been attacked in Madrid, we are moving to better protect the rails. But we seem to ignore that Al Qaeda rarely attacks twice in the same way or in the same place.

We're also spending billions trying to eliminate terrorists -- in Afghanistan, in the Philippines and Indonesia, in Colombia and in Europe -- before they can hit us. This could be effective, but it is also exceedingly difficult. Terrorists are mobile, hidden and often protected by local populations. And there seems to be an unending supply of fresh recruits for every cell we take out.

As for preventing terrorists from getting their hands on nuclear weapons, it's a strategy that by comparison gets little attention and few resources. Approximately \$1 billion is set aside for the purpose, just one-fifth of what we're spending to find shoe bombs, box cutters and nail clippers at airports. (Eliminating chemical and biological weapons is also important but less so, because those agents are much more difficult to weaponize and employ than nuclear material.)

Yet the nuclear threat can be met. The number of nuclear devices floating around on the black market is limited. The number of sites where they are poorly protected is small and well known. The list of experts who might illicitly develop nuclear weapons is relatively short.

The 9/11 commission, which is charged not just with investigating the past but preparing us for the future, should fix this strategic imbalance. It should recommend a substantial budget increase for the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, which provides for the supervised destruction of nuclear weapons, the removal of "loose" plutonium from global circulation, and alternative training and employment of nuclear weapons scientists.

It should also recommend an increased commitment to the administration's Proliferation Security Initiative, a set of international agreements that allows the United States and its allies to search planes and ships that are suspected of carrying nuclear weapons and material. And finally, it should call for the creation of a special center for coordinating intelligence concerning nuclear attacks so that it will not be lost among the endless streams of other information about terrorists