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Little talk of NSC

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The final report of the 9/11 commission remains atop the bestseller lists and has been required reading for those involved in the Senate confirmation hearing this week for Rep. Porter J. Goss (R., Fla.), the President's nominee for director of central intelligence.

The commission's recommendations are already turning into policy. The President has signed several directives to start the overhaul of America's intelligence agencies. Critics say he has not gone far enough, but the White House responds that this is merely an initial downpayment on intelligence reform.

Meanwhile, Congress has taken its first formal step toward the reform of its intelligence oversight system, called "dysfunctional" by the 9/11 panel. Senate leaders tapped 22 of its most prominent members to start streamlining the tangled lines of authority on Capitol Hill for supervising the CIA and the 14 other agencies in the intelligence "community."

Oddly lost in the debate over reform, though, has been discussion of the proper role for the institution with greatest responsibility for the conduct of intelligence activities: the National Security Council (NSC). With regard to improving its own intelligence performance - and correcting deficiencies noted by inside and outside observers - the NSC is MIA.

Created in 1947, the NSC is expected to be the overseer within the executive branch of America's security posture, coordinating and supervising the CIA and its companion agencies. It is the place where intelligence and policy meet.

Yet, as weapons inspector David Kay noted in recent congressional testimony, the NSC was "the dog that did not bark" with respect to intelligence about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. "Where was the NSC?" asked Kay, raising serious questions about how competently the head of the NSC's staff, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, evaluated the WMD estimates coming from the intelligence agencies.

Questions also were raised last year about the NSC's handling - or mishandling - of intelligence. Rice said that the White House was unaware of doubts expressed by the CIA regarding a report that Iraq had sought yellowcake uranium from Niger. Her staff, however, had been sent two CIA memos expressing concern about the validity of the allegation, and George Tenet, then director of central intelligence, expressed his doubts in a follow-up telephone call to Rice's deputy. Despite these alarm bells, the yellowcake claim ended up in the President's State of the Union address last January.

Further, former White House counterterrorism chief Richard Clarke told the 9/11 commission that Rice and her staff failed to deal in a timely manner with the rising number of intelligence reports that al-Qaeda was about to strike the United States. Within a week of President Bush's inauguration, Clarke wrote to Rice asking "urgently" for a Cabinet-level meeting to review the al-Qaeda threat. More than seven months later, on Sept. 4, 2001, that meeting finally took place - one week before the terrorist attacks.

As the debate over intelligence reform continues to unfold, the United States may establish a new office of director of national intelligence, consolidate the nation's counterterrorism defenses, and try to straighten out the ineffectual system of Congressional oversight. All to the good - indeed, imperative for our safety. But without an NSC and a national security adviser who is riveted on the essential task of managing and focusing on government-wide threats to the nation - who persistently pokes and prods the intelligence agencies to improve the quality of information for the President - all the debate and well-intended reform in the world will fail to establish a strong shield against those who seek to destroy us.

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