

Tom Kean's summer school

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TOM KEAN is about to become a thorn in the side of the Bush administration again. This is good news.

The former chairman of the 9/11 commission is stepping forward to ask whether the president and the nation have been too sidetracked lately and are ignoring steps to protect America from another terrorist attack. It's about time someone asked this.

The nation is understandably discussing Bush's plan to overhaul Social Security. Meanwhile, Congress is predictably fixated on the ethical woes of Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay.

But what about loose nukes falling into terrorists' hands? Or the continuing failures of airport security? Why isn't there more talk in Washington and elsewhere about those and other problems?

In an interview, Kean, the former Republican governor who will soon retire from the presidency of Drew University, said he plans to jump start (again) the national debate on terrorism, this time in a dramatic way. In mid-summer, Kean and fellow 9/11 commissioners plan to issue report cards on how well the federal government is reforming itself to prevent another attack.

Don't expect the feds to make the honor roll. Sadly, what Kean has found is essentially a bad case of attention deficit disorder within the federal bureaucracy. The summer report cards are aimed at encouraging remedial help for a government that still seems out of touch.

"I think we're being distracted," Kean said. "That's, of course, what the terrorists would like. There are a lot of things on the national plate."

Not all the distractions are caused by government, however. Consider what happened only last week when the White House scheduled an hour-long presidential news conference.

Television network executives broke into sweats over the possibility of President Bush competing with Donald Trump. The networks successfully lobbied for Bush's news conference to start at 8 p.m. so such prime-time shows as Trump's "The Apprentice" would not be interrupted mid-program.

Such a schedule change would be unthinkable in the months after the 9/11 attacks. But these are different times, with different priorities.

Luckily, not everything is dismal in the war on terror. Kean acknowledges that.

Yes, Bush followed recommendations of Kean's 9/11 commission and threw his support behind a plan to unify America's competing spy services under a national intelligence director. And yes, the White House established a national center to coordinate information on terror threats.

But that's barely a start. Far more needs to be done. Kean acknowledges that, too.

Bush clearly has changed agendas for the second term of his presidency. Why else would the president devote two months of speeches around the nation - and much political capital - to stir up interest in changing Social Security?

The president's Social Security road tour underscores his missed opportunities. Imagine if Bush had taken to the road after the 9/11 commission report was released last summer and lobbied harder for reforms that went beyond just appointing an intelligence czar and setting up a counter-terrorism center. Imagine, for example, if the president focused attention on safeguarding shipping ports, on a tightening of America's borders, or on upgrading rail and truck security - to name a few lingering concerns.

Or imagine if the president bore down on the FBI and CIA to see how well they were cooperating. There is still far too much evidence the FBI and CIA are immersed in turf battles and are not sharing information with the Department of Homeland Security. Indeed, the FBI still needs to update its computer system so its own agents can coordinate terror tips.

Of the more than 40 proposals by Kean's bipartisan commission, many are still in limbo. As he cleans out his office at Drew, Kean is vowing to turn his attention back to the commission's reforms.

This should not be a shock. All through the commission's tenure, Kean hinted that he did not want his panel to follow in the footsteps of other commissions and basically issue a wonderful report that would be quickly forgotten.

Beginning later this month and running through June and into July, Kean and fellow commissioners plan to hold a series of public seminars to draw attention to the holes that still linger in America's anti-terror safety net. After that come the report cards.

The seminars, sponsored by the 9/11 Public Discourse Project, which was set up by Kean and other commissioners and funded with foundation grants, will not have the official sanction of the federal government. Nor will the report cards and grades on such topics as border security, congressional oversight reform, allocation of Homeland Security funds, the promoting American values in the Muslim world, coordination of emergency radio signals, and protecting civil liberties amid tighter anti-terror security.

No matter, Kean says. These are all important issues that need to be discussed - again.

But to Tom Kean, one issue looms above all others.

"I've learned to listen to Osama bin Laden," he said. "What I've found is that he tries to do what he has said."

What Bin Laden now wants is a nuclear weapon.

"I worry about that a lot," Kean said.

If only others would worry more, too.