

9/11 commission preps for 'unfinished agenda'

Panel to press Congress on reform, issue report cards on progress

By Robert Little
Sun National Staff

June 11, 2005

The panel formed to investigate the 2001 terrorist attacks dissolved nearly 10 months ago, vanishing along with its subpoena power, its public financing and - perhaps most noticeably - its guaranteed billing among the top actors in the nation's continuing battle with terrorism.

But as the 10 members of the 9/11 Commission continue next week with a series of unsanctioned public hearings designed to pressure Congress and the White House to implement the reforms they proposed, observers in Washington have started to question: Could this be the rare political beast that is equally powerful in death as in life?

Already members of the newly constituted panel have singled out recent changes in the congressional committee structure as a "glaring failure" by Congress to address the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Report, the end-product of the commission's work that became a national best seller. On Monday, the commission, under its new incarnation as a nonprofit watchdog called the 9/11 Public Discourse Project, will hold a panel discussion to explore the role of National Intelligence Director John D. Negroponte, whose job was created largely upon the commission's recommendations.

After eight such hearings, each exploring a different topic - the commission calls it "the unfinished agenda" - the 10 members will issue a "report card" assessing the government's progress in correcting the failings of intelligence and security that precipitated the 2001 attacks. Members also plan an informal campaign of personal appeals, private lobbying and media appearances to make their case.

Washington observers say the commission's mere existence today highlights the rare degree of authority and respect that it enjoyed during its 20-month life as an official government body, which led to the approval last December of legislation restructuring the national intelligence network.

But whether that authority survived the commission's shift to outsider status could become clear soon, when it submits a letter to the White House asking for cooperation similar to that it received as an official, government-appointed body. The group's spokesman, Al Felzenberg, said the former commission members are working on the letter now.

"The fact that a law was passed in response to their report gives them a great deal of gravitas. There's no question," said James Carafano, senior research fellow for defense and homeland security at the Heritage Foundation in Washington.

"They can spend that capital pretty quickly if they aren't careful about how they proceed, however, if they over-play their hand," Carafano added. "They better pick their shots carefully, because people could just walk away."

The shots, it seems, are already being picked. In speeches and letters around the country, the commission's members have begun to compile a list of areas where they think Congress and the White House have failed to heed their warnings.

One criticism that has surfaced repeatedly concerns the congressional structure that seems to give scant authority to the committees responsible for oversight of the nation's intelligence gathering operations and the Department of Homeland Security.

Several former commission members say intelligence and homeland security issues can get lost in a cumbersome oversight structure that tends to focus more intently on the Department of Defense and the federal budget.

"I would say it is the unanimous view of the former commissioners that the most glaring failure of our recommendations has been in the adoption of congressional reforms," said former Commissioner Jamie Gorelick, during the group's first hearing last week.

In addition, the commission's calls for a dedicated radio spectrum for emergency communications have been largely ignored, other members have said, and its hope for a "maximum effort" to keep nuclear weapons away from terrorists has not materialized. Government spending on homeland security has become overly politicized and wasteful, they add.

"We will explore why, four years after 9/11, these common sense reforms remain unaddressed," wrote commission members Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, in an essay scheduled to be published tomorrow in *The Sun*. "For us, and for our government, there is more work to be done."

Whether the group will inherit from its former self the stature necessary to do that work has not been determined, but there is speculation that it will. An editorial this week in the *The New York Times*, calling the commission members "such a credible voice on national security," said the group "may be able to shame Congress and the president into putting safety ahead of special interests in some key areas." Analysts interviewed this

week routinely referred to the group by its former name.

"This is a very unusual commission - maybe more so than any other commission I've seen in my adult life - in that I think it will continue to have that authority, at least initially," said Michael E. O'Hanlon, senior fellow in foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution in Washington. "It won't be as powerful, and the political climate has changed, but, with this commission in particular, its voice will be heard."

Hamilton said in an interview that the former commissioners agreed to continue serving with the group's nonprofit configuration because they believe in the recommendations they issued and feel some responsibility for overseeing their implementation. He said he approved the letter being sent to the White House, in which the group asks for help and cooperation in fulfilling its goals, and doesn't expect it to be perceived as confrontational.

He also said he thinks the former 9/11 Commission still enjoys a degree of respect and appreciation from the public that should serve it well as it tries to operate without any official horsepower. He said that yesterday he was approached by strangers in an airport who said they had read the 9/11 Commission Report, appreciated the work that went into it and hoped the members would continue championing its conclusions.

"I don't know that everything's the same, but I think we've earned a seat at the table," Hamilton said. "We've established a measure of credibility, I believe, and the White House has been very supportive in its responses so far. We don't foresee any immediate obstacles.

"But will we be perceived as having the same degree of authority? We don't know, is the honest answer to that. This is a complicated matter, and we're just getting started."

Copyright © 2005, [The Baltimore Sun](#)