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9/11 panel remains on watch, but public can't sleep

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Apparently, the 9/11 commission, whose every finding not so long ago was featured on newspaper front pages and in the electronic media, is old news.

The assessments of the 9/11 Public Discourse Project -- in which the commissioners have monitored the implementation or non-implementation of their recommendations -- are almost an afterthought in today's news. The report issued at its most recent session, held Oct. 20 in Washington, made few newspapers and got only a brief mention on news programs.

This move toward virtual obscurity is precisely what Congress and the Bush administration want for the simple reasons that Congress doesn't want any reforms that dilute its power and the Bush administration is uninterested in any dialogue that will call attention to shortcomings or failures.

But it's the last thing the American public should want. That particular report made it abundantly clear we are a long way from being secure against another terrorist attack.

The 9/11 commission existed, you'll recall, only because the relentless pressure from family members of those who died on 9/11 forced President Bush to establish it. Congress, which already had closed the book on its own woefully limited investigation, was equally reluctant.

But those relatives and friends of 9/11 victims would not go away. And so the president created the commission with the idea, I'm guessing, that it would conduct a perfunctory re-examination of the known facts under a congenial team player from his own party. Bush's first choice was Henry Kissinger, who might have turned out to be exactly what he wanted. But Kissinger would not divest himself of the necessary personal interests and alliances. So Bush tapped former New Jersey Gov. Tom Kean.

Most New Jerseyans know Kean as a quiet man whose public style and demeanor seem eminently suited to the academic post he assumed after leaving Trenton: president of Drew University. Few of us -- no doubt Bush included -- realized that polite demeanor cloaked a pit bull who wouldn't take on such a task without utterly committing himself to it.

Still, the administration and Congress no doubt figured the commission's requisite report would ultimately gather dust on shelves next to similar reports issued over the years by other president-appointed commissions.

But the 9/11 commission members fooled them. When their term was up and their report was issued, the commissioners scared up private funding to establish what came to be known as the 9/11 Public Discourse Project. They lobbied members of Congress and appeared regularly before congressional committees to explain their recommendations and in public forums to promote those recommendations.

The thanks the commission has received for its work includes the following: 1) bad-mouthing for not having focused on specific blame for 9/11; 2) foot-dragging by Congress on reforming itself (although it implemented changes to the executive branch with alacrity); and 3) virtual dismissal by some agencies that most need to do business differently.

Progress has been made. But a lot more is needed to render America capable of averting or intercepting another attack.

Congress, the president and the agencies have done the easy stuff. But information sharing -- something even the least news-attentive American understood was a major reason the attackers got through our defenses -- is still being resisted.

At the end of this year, the commissioners' watchdog work will be over. They'll be off the case. After that, it will be up to Congress and intelligence agencies, none of which appears to have much inclination to follow through.

That leaves us. Will we demand that our representatives protect us by enacting these recommendations?

If not, we can be certain of one thing: When the next terrorist attack occurs, there will be no need for a commission to investigate how it happened. It will have happened because members of Congress and those agencies put partisanship and preservation of their own powers ahead of the well-being of those they are paid to protect.

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