



As 9/11 watchdog role ends, who will pick up baton?

By Carie Lemack

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On Friday, with little fanfare, one of the success stories of the war on terror will quietly disappear. Since the naming of former New Jersey governor Thomas Kean and former Indiana congressman Lee Hamilton to head the 9/11 Commission in 2002, the panel and its successor, the non-profit 9/11 Public Discourse Project, have proved that constructive self-criticism can be the greatest advantage of free societies against those who plot their destruction.



Chairman of the 9/11 Commission Thomas Kean, right, and Co Chair, Lee Hamilton.

By Mark Wilson, Getty Images

Before my mother, Judy Larocque, was murdered on American Airlines Flight 11 on Sept. 11, 2001, I trusted that my government would protect me and my family. I now know differently. This realization in 2001 led me to co-found the Families of September 11, which, among others, promoted establishment of the commission. During this past summer, I decided to get an "insider's" perspective on the commission's efforts as a fellow.

This month, the five Republican and five Democrat former commission members issued their final report on our government's ability to respond to and prevent terrorist attacks. Many of the grades were failing, including 17 D's and F's. There was only one A-

But based on the reaction that the report card and subsequent closing of the 9/11 project received from our elected officials, I had to wonder, was anyone listening?

Old recommendations

Most of the commissioners' recommendations were not new. But there was something special about the 9/11 commissioners that set their work apart. They chose cooperation over partisanship and presented a united front to the public and administration. In the process, they fought for, and won, an unprecedented level of access to secret documents — over the fierce resistance of the White House and executive branch agencies.

When the original report was released in 2004, all 10 commissioners agreed to maintain their unity and see their recommendations through. They created the 9/11 project to keep pressure on Congress and the White House to overhaul the intelligence community.

In the years and months before 9/11, many federal agencies failed to fulfill their most basic responsibilities, as the commission documented in its original report.

More than four years after the attacks, shocking gaps remain in our nation's defense against terrorism. Keeping a watchful, skeptical eye on the government is in the best tradition of our republic.

As the commissioners go their separate ways, the question remains: Who will champion the reforms that haven't been adopted?

Unfinished business

Congress has still not created a risk-based formula for the billions of dollars in homeland security grants it doles out each year. Major gaps in aviation security have not been closed: air cargo (carried under passengers' feet) is rarely inspected, and passengers are still not screened by the Transportation Security Administration against a consolidated terror watch list.

Progress to address the greatest threat — the threat of nuclear terrorism — does not appear to be a top priority. At the current rate, the U.S. government's effort to "lock down" nuclear materials in the former Soviet Union, so it can't be stolen or bought by terrorists, will not be completed for 14 years.

And the most difficult recommendation from the 9/11 Commission has been all but abandoned: Who will push Congress to reorganize itself to provide adequate oversight over intelligence and homeland security?

With the release of their critical but fair report card, the commissioners made their last stand, a call to adapt before the terrorists exploit our vulnerabilities again.

This week, with their silent but graceful exit from the public square, they will put the hard work of self-reflection and reform back into our hands. Will we, and our government, answer the call?

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