

Forward Forum

Reviewing Our Defenses, Four Years After 9/11

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The fourth anniversary of the attacks of 9/11 is a time of mourning and reflection for all Americans. It is also an opportunity to assess what has been done — and what has not been done — to make our country safer.

Since that terrible day, we have been spared another major attack on American soil. This is a significant achievement, made possible by the diligence of many courageous Americans defending us at home and overseas.

But the threat that struck so terribly on 9/11 remains extremely dangerous. Al Qaeda and its affiliates have continued to strike at American and allied interests around the globe — most recently in London and Aqaba, Jordan. These attacks are a reminder that the Al Qaeda network is an adaptable enemy, willing to exploit any complacency or oversights in our defenses. It is also a patient enemy: The attacks of 9/11, for example, were conceived by Khalid Sheik Mohammed in 1996. We can only assume that Al Qaeda and its affiliates continue to desire, and plan, further attacks against our homeland.

The passage of historic intelligence reform, and the creation of a National Counterterrorism Center to integrate and ensure timely action on terrorism information, have made us safer. But many of the deficiencies that plagued our response on 9/11 remain. The recent difficulties in the initial response to Hurricane Katrina are a reminder of the challenges we would face in responding to another catastrophic terrorist attack, especially one involving weapons of mass destruction.

A number of common-sense recommendations made by the 9/11 Commission in its final report would address these deficiencies but remain unimplemented. The 9/11 Public Discourse Project, the nonprofit successor to the commission, will issue a series of reports over the next four months to assess government's implementation of the commission's recommendations, and highlight what remains to be done.

The first report, later this month, will assess progress in implementing the commission's recommendations on homeland security. Future reports will assess the status of recommendations on institutional reform, foreign policy and securing nuclear materials.

A number of commission recommendations in these areas remain unaddressed — all of which would improve the safety of the American people. These include:

•**Adopt a risk-based approach to homeland security.** The Commission recommended

that federal homeland security grants to states and localities be allocated solely on the basis of assessed risks and vulnerability, not based on politics. Unfortunately, since 9/11 the Department of Homeland Security has distributed \$6 billion in badly needed homeland security assistance without any provision for terrorist risk or vulnerability. Congress should pass legislation before the end of this year mandating that all homeland security grants be distributed based solely on the basis of assessed risk and vulnerability, not as general revenue sharing. The Department of Homeland Security should also complete the nationwide risk assessments that will make risk-based funding possible.

•**Improve collaboration among local responders.** On 9/11, emergency responders at the World Trade Center site had difficulty communicating over the limited radio frequencies available. Four years after 9/11 this problem *still* has not been rectified. Congress should act this year to make new frequencies available, at the earliest possible date, for public safety use. Local governments should adopt the Incident Command crisis management system, and designate one agency to lead any major emergency response. These steps would reduce the duplicative search and rescue, and other coordination problems, seen on 9/11 and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

•**Keep the world's most dangerous weapons out of the hands of terrorists.** The greatest threat facing our country is a nuclear weapon in the hands of terrorists. In addition to the human toll, a nuclear weapon detonated in an American city would have profound consequences for our economy, our liberties and our very way of life. The commission recommended a maximum effort to "lock down" vulnerable nuclear materials around the world, so they do not fall into the hands of terrorist groups. Congress and the administration should provide full support to the various programs, in the Departments of State, Energy and Defense, devoted to this critical task.

•**Better communicate our message to the Muslim world.** In the Cold War our success in the battle of ideas was a key element in our ultimate victory over communism. In the war against Islamist terrorism we are not winning that battle. We must redouble our efforts to convey the core values that define the American people, our system of government and our way of life to the world. A successful strategy for public diplomacy will involve educational and cultural exchanges, diplomatic efforts to directly engage local populations, international broadcasting and substantial involvement from the American private and nonprofit sectors.

•**Reform Congress for the post-9/11 era.** Because much of the work of intelligence and homeland security occurs outside the public eye, the American people rely on committees of the Congress to ensure that this work is being done effectively. Unfortunately, Congress is not currently organized to provide effective oversight of the federal agencies created to address the threats of the post-9/11 era.

The committees responsible for overseeing the Department of Homeland Security and the intelligence community should be given the carrots and sticks they need to hold those agencies to account. This means having full and exclusive oversight jurisdiction over those agencies' activities, and greater control over their funding.

The 41 recommendations of the 9/11 Commission flowed directly from our inquiry into the

facts and circumstances surrounding the 9/11 attacks. They were issued not to assign blame or point fingers, but to chart a path to a safer America. As former commissioners, we remain committed to the work of making the American people more secure.

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