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9/11 Commission releases report

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The United States could not protect its citizens from the September 11 terrorist attacks because it failed to appreciate the threat posed by al-Qaida operatives who exploited that failure to carry out the deadliest assault ever on American soil, the chairman of the Sept. 11 commission said today.

In issuing the panel's 567-page final report, commission chairman Tom Kean said none of the government's efforts to thwart a known threat from al-Qaida had "disturbed or even delayed" Osama bin Laden's plot.

"(They) penetrated the defenses of the most powerful nation in the world," Kean said. "They inflicted unbearable trauma on our people, and at the same time they turned the international order upside down."

While faulting institutional shortcomings, the report did not blame President Bush or former President Clinton for mistakes contributing to the 2001 attack.

Kean and commission vice chairman Lee Hamilton presented Bush with a copy of the report Thursday morning. Bush thanked them for a "really good job" and said the panel makes "very solid, sound recommendations about how to move forward."

"I assured them that where the government needs to act, we will," Bush said.

Surviving Sept. 11 victims and the families of the dead vowed to continue to chip away at the bureaucratic rigidity they said is really to blame.

"The idea is to get past that resistance and move forward," said Martha Sanders of Darien, Conn., whose daughter Stacey perished at the World Trade Center.

Added April Gallop, who was injured at the Pentagon with her infant son: "I came here pessimistic, but I leave here optimistic."

The commission recommended creating a new intelligence center and high-level intelligence director to improve the nation's ability to disrupt future terrorist attacks. An intelligence-gathering center would bring a unified command to the more than dozen agencies that now collect and analyze intelligence overseas and at home.

Running the center would be a new Senate-confirmed national intelligence director, reporting directly to the president at just below full Cabinet rank, with control over intelligence budgets and the ability to hire and fire deputies, including the CIA director and top intelligence officials at the FBI, Homeland Security Department and Defense Department.

The panel also determined the "most important failure" leading to the Sept. 11 attacks "was one of imagination. We do not believe leaders understood the gravity of the threat."

The commission identified nine "specific points of vulnerability" in the Sept. 11 plot that might have led to its disruption had the government been better organized and more watchful. Despite these opportunities, "we cannot know whether any single step or series of steps would have defeated" the 19 hijackers, the report concluded.

Hamilton, a former Democratic congressman, appealed for political unity at the heights of America's power. A "shift in mind-set and organization" within the U.S. intelligence apparatus and a smoother transition between presidencies are also necessary, he said, to

ensure "that this nation does not lower its guard every four or eight years."

"The U.S. government has access to vast amounts of information but it has a weak process, a weak system of processing and using that information," Hamilton said. "Need to share must replace need to know."

Kean, the former Republican governor of New Jersey, said the 9/11 attacks "were a shock, but should not have come as a surprise."

"By September 2001, the executive branch of the U.S. government, the Congress, the news media, and the American public had received clear warning that Islamist terrorists meant to kill Americans in high numbers," Kean said.

The highly anticipated report provided new details on contacts between Iraq and al-Qaida, noting that Osama bin Laden began exploring a possible alliance in the early 1990s. In one new disclosure, the report says that an Iraqi delegation traveled to Afghanistan in July 1998 to meet with the ruling Taliban and with bin Laden.

Intelligence indicates that Iraq may have offered bin Laden safe haven, but he declined after apparently deciding that Afghanistan was a better location. The report says although there were some "friendly contacts" between Iraq and al-Qaida and a common hatred of the United States, none of these contacts "ever developed into a collaborative relationship" and that Iraq was not involved in the Sept. 11 attacks.

That question has been the subject of intense political debate, as critics say Bush exaggerated the contacts between al-Qaida and Iraq to justify the war. Bush, and especially Vice President Dick Cheney, insist those links were real and dangerous.

The panel said it did not find evidence that Iran had advance knowledge of bin Laden's plans, or that Saudi Arabia's government had a role in the terror conspiracy, which involved 15 Saudi hijackers.

But both Kean and Hamilton said the United States should look into the possibility of ties between Iran and al-Qaida. And Hamilton urged developing a U.S.-Saudi relationship that revolves around political, economic and educational reforms within the Saudi kingdom.

"We want to see that relationship get more depth and texture to it," Hamilton said.

Given new warnings about al-Qaida's desire to strike again on a mass scale, commission member James R. Thompson said all American leaders would be wise to take the commission's findings to heart.

"If it happens and we haven't moved, then the American people are entitled to make very fundamental judgments about that," Thompson said.

The report, which is the culmination of a 20-month investigation into the plot that killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, describes the meticulous planning of hijackers who sought to exploit weaknesses in airline and border procedures by taking test flights.

A surveillance video that surfaced Wednesday shows four of the hijackers passing through security gates at Washington Dulles International Airport shortly before boarding the plane they would crash into the Pentagon. In the video, the hijackers can be seen undergoing additional scrutiny after setting off metal detectors, then being permitted to continue to their gate.

The commission did not recommend creation of a new domestic intelligence agency similar to Britain's MI5, as proposed by some in Congress. Instead, the report endorsed steps already being taken by FBI Director Robert Mueller to create a specialized intelligence service within the FBI.

Beyond government reorganization, the report also says that the United States and its allies must embark on a global strategy of diplomacy and public relations to dismantle bin Laden's terror network and defeat the militant Islamic ideology that feeds such terror groups.

"To Muslim parents, terrorists like bin Laden have nothing to offer their children but

visions of violence and death. America and its friends have the advantage - our vision can offer a better future," the report said.

The commission also says the U.S. government must employ more safeguards at home, such as setting national standards for issuance of drivers' licenses and other identification, improving "no-fly" and other terrorist watch lists and using more biometric identifiers to screen travelers at ports and borders.

Richard Clarke, former counterterrorism czar in the Clinton and Bush administrations and now an ABC consultant, said on the network's "Good Morning America" the commission avoided controversy. "To get unanimity they didn't talk about a number of things, like what effect is the war in Iraq having on our battle against terrorism. ... What they didn't do is say that the country is actually not safer now than it was then because of the rise in terrorism after our invasion in Iraq."

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