Cognitive Dissonance, Terrorism and 9/11
By Jon Perr
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The Richard Clarke firestorm and the public sessions of the 9/11 commission have gripped the nation, redefined the presidential campaign, and left the American people continuing to search for the truth behind the September 11 disaster. The families of the 9/11 victims in particular are looking for answers: how did the United States fail to anticipate and prevent Al Qaeda’s September 11 attacks and who is responsible for those failures?

The work of the 9/11 commission suggests that conclusive answers - and culprits - will be elusive. The public testimony and published findings to date point to an array of factors spanning multiple administrations, from bureaucratic stove piping across FBI, CIA, the Pentagon and other agencies, lack of information sharing, analysis and consolidation, the wall between foreign and domestic intelligence functions, and undermanned and underfunded intelligence services. For many Americans, 9/11 was the result of crossed signals, missed opportunities, and bad luck.

There is a strong argument to be made, however, that the massive national security disaster of September 11, 2001 was not primarily a failure of planning, bureaucratic coordination, or vigilance by either the Clinton or Bush administrations. Instead, the root cause of the American failure on 9/11 was psychological. That is, the American national security establishment simply could not absorb, process, and filter data regarding threats so fundamentally at odds with its post-Cold War mind set and conceptual framework. Perhaps more than anything else, the U.S. calamity of September 11 can be attributed to cognitive dissonance.

National Security Mind Games

Cognitive dissonance is no less a critical concept to the fields of foreign policy, national security and international relations than it is to psychology. In World Politics: Trend and Transformation (2001), Charles Kegley Jr. and Eugene Wittkopf defined it as “the general psychological tendency to deny discrepancies between one’s preexisting beliefs (cognitions) and new information.” Defense analysts, intelligence specialists, political leaders and presidents can and do fall victim to pre-conceived views of sources and methods of national security threats. What psychologists call cognitive dissonance can for national decision makers disastrously result in “fundamental surprise”, with the sudden and dramatic recognition of the incompatibility between one’s beliefs and reality.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War is perhaps the classic modern case of the calamitous impact of cognitive dissonance for a nation’s civilian and military leadership. Following the smashing victory in the Six Day War, the Israeli leadership shared a uniform view of the nature and manner of the threat posed by Egypt and Syria. Given the superiority of its air force, Israeli war planners took as a given that no future assault on Israel could commence without the mobilization of Egyptian and Syrian air forces and subsequent pre-emptive strikes against Israeli air bases.
The result in October 1973 was that the Israelis completely discounted the threat of an initial Arab ground attack; Golda Meir’s government was stunned by the simultaneous assaults in Sinai and the Golan Heights. Subsequent air attacks by Israel on Egyptian forces led to devastating losses for the Israelis, as the use by Sadat’s forces of the latest Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems caught them by surprise. Only through the staggering loss of over 3,000 killed and a massive infusion of American arms were the Israelis able to stem and then reverse the Egyptian gains. Israel’s very existence was imperiled by a fixed, unchanging conceptual model of the threats facing that nation, a model that was only shattered by the reality of the battlefield.

History is replete with other examples of national policy makers suffering cataclysmic military defeats and foreign policy setbacks due to unquestioned acceptance of “conventional wisdom” by security establishments. The 1930’s French government staked national survival on the Maginot line designed to repel a German assault on their shared frontier. The massive German invasion in 1940, of course, instead came through the Belgian Ardennes and the French were defeated in six weeks. The Japanese bombardment of Pearl Harbor stunned a United States that had not been attacked by a foreign power on its own soil since the War of 1812. Arguably, even the American tragedy in Vietnam resulted from cognitive dissonance, as Republican and Democratic administrations alike mistook a war of national liberation as part and parcel of a global Soviet campaign for communist domination.

The American Post-Cold War Consensus: A Broken Model

During her testimony on March 23, 2004, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright cautioned 9/11 commissioner Lehman and the public about the need to understand the reigning national security framework both before and after September 11, 2001:

And as you point out -- and I think this is the very hard part for all of us, Mr. Secretary -- is that we have to put ourselves into the pre-9/11 mode, and it's hard, because we've been in our post-9/11 prism, where we should be, and yet things were very different before 9/11.

The “pre-9/11 mode” to which Albright referred was a bi-partisan national security consensus that governed U.S. policy and planning following World War II through the end of the Cold War. The primary threat to the United States came from an expansionist Soviet Union and, to a lesser degree, China. To counter Soviet conventional forces, the U.S maintained a worldwide military presence, created a massive nuclear deterrent, and established a network of alliances in Europe (NATO) and Asia (ASEAN) to encourage regional stability and joint defense against the Soviets and their Third World proxies. The entire U.S. defense establishment, including the White House, Pentagon, State Department, CIA, Congress, academia and industry, viewed American national security through the lens of communist conflict. American policymakers doubled as game theorists, building scenarios to deter or defeat potential adversaries. They uniformly assumed nation-states as enemies, armed with both nuclear weapons and large conventional forces and led by rational decision makers who would make choices of war and peace based on a cold, cost-benefit calculus. Even with the demise of the Soviet Union, these basic premises persisted, as regional powers or rogue states such as China, Iraq, and North Korea, replaced the Soviet Union as the likely American adversary. As a result, the United States was conceptually and psychologically ill prepared for the coming 21st century conflict with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The emerging threats from transnational, non-state actors willing to die in the commission of horrendous attacks
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on American civilians at home and abroad simply could not be accommodated by the post-
Cold War security model. Almost across the board, the assumptions of the American
security community would crumble in the face of the new reality. Just not before September

Major Power Wars vs. Terrorist Threats. Beginning in the 1950’s, American defense
doctrine was based on the “two-and-a-half” war scenario. That is, the United States using
conventional and nuclear forces should be prepared to simultaneously fight and defeat the
Soviet Union in Europe, China in Asia, and a communist satellite or proxy in the Third World.
With détente and the Nixon visit to China in 1972, this policy morphed to “one-and-a-half”
wars. Under Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, the standing U.S. military was
reduced from 2.1 million members and 16 army divisions, to 1.4 million members and 10
army divisions.

Just before September 11, 2001, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld recommended further
reductions as part of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) process. The centerpiece of
the new administration’s planning? Fight and win two regional wars (Iraq, North Korea)
while deploying a missile defense system to protect the United States against launches from
rogue states. The emerging threats of terrorist attacks to U.S. interests abroad or to
political, economic or transportation targets at home, as well as the steps needed to prevent
them, were largely untreated. As Clinton and Bush counter-terrorism czar Richard Clarke
put it, ”I believe the Bush administration in the first eight months considered terrorism an
important issue, but not an urgent issue.”

In sharp contrast, the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century
led by Gary Hart
and Warren Rudman on February 15, 2001 released its Phase III report, “Road Map for
National Security: Imperative for Change.” It presciently warned:

A direct attack against American citizens on American soil is likely over the
next quarter century. The risk is not only death and destruction but also a
demoralization that could undermine U.S. global leadership.

Nuclear/Conventional Wars vs. Asymmetrical Conflicts. American military doctrine,
intelligence organization, weapons procurement, and war fighting tactics were essentially
predicated on stopping a massive Soviet tank thrust through the Fulda Gap in West
Germany. U.S. conventional forces in Berlin, South Korea and elsewhere were trip-wires;
conventional attacks by communist forces would be met with a U.S. commitment, one
backed by tactical and strategic nuclear weapons. American weaponry, from the Abrams
tank, the Apache helicopter and Tomahawk missiles to the nuclear missile-carrying Trident
submarine, stealth aircraft, and nuclear cruise missiles, was designed with the two
objectives of out-maneuvering larger Soviet forces while maintaining the invulnerability of
the U.S. nuclear deterrent.

The use by terrorist groups of a broad array on chemical, biological, cyber warfare and other
unconventional weapons in suicidal attacks designed to wreak civilian death and destruction
simply was not comprehended as a major threat post-Cold War policymaking by the
mainstream U.S. national security community.

There were warnings of the new danger, and not just to U.S. assets abroad like the USS
Cole and the African embassies. The February 2001 Hart-Rudman report in its Executive
Summary raised the alarm, stating flatly “the combination of unconventional weapons
proliferation with the persistence of international terrorism will end the relative
invulnerability of the U.S. homeland to catastrophic attack.” As Richard Clarke noted in his
9/11 testimony, the Clinton national security team worked with the organizers of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics to plan for the eventuality of a hijacked airliner being flown in to the stadium there.

The degree of cognitive dissonance at work among senior Washington policymakers and their inability to process, filter and understand the signals of the growing domestic terror threat is perhaps best exemplified by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice during a press briefing on May 16, 2002:

I don't think anybody could have predicted that these people would take an airplane and slam it into the World Trade Center, take another one and slam it into the Pentagon; that they would try to use an airplane as a missile, a hijacked airplane as a missile. All of this reporting about hijacking was about traditional hijacking.

State vs. Non-State Actors. One of the central pillars of the international system from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 through the Cold War was the primacy of the nation-state as the decision-making unit in international relations and the instrument of war. Countries would mobilize resources, build alliances, deploy military forces, and seek to maximize their power, treasure or territory through conflict, pressure or persuasion. All experts of diplomacy and international relations, whether of realist, idealist, or other viewpoints, universally accepted the central role of nations.

In the Age of Terror, that is no longer the case. Terrorists may be individuals or small groups with political, religious or other agendas. Globalization, immigration and porous borders make preventing their entry difficult at best, especially in failed Third World states. The terrorists may or may not be backed by state sponsors. As early as 1983, with the Hezbollah bombing that killed 241 U.S. Marines in Beirut, it has been clear that the United States has not had a security framework within which to understand and fight them. And the Bush administration's continued focus on the "Axis of Evil" states (Iraq, North Korea, and Iran) shows that the fundamental shift in threat perception has still not completely taken hold.

Rational vs. Irrational Actors. Another major assumption of the American national security conceptual model was that of the "rational actor." That is, national decision makers operate as a single, rational unit, and make policy and war based on cold, hard cost/benefit calculations. The rational actor of game theory was the cornerstone of the nuclear calculus of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD); no American or Soviet leader would launch a nuclear first strike while the other side possessed a retaliatory capacity sufficient to obliterate him in response. This certainty of reciprocal destruction ensured the Cold War did not get hot. With the rise of Al Qaeda and decentralized terror groups on every continent, American policy makers must discard the rational actor assumption. In an age where suicide bombings and indiscriminant slaughter are equated with martyrdom, where retaliation by the West is a welcome recruiting tool, the conceit of rationality is tragically irrelevant. Deterrence theory is meaningless to people more than willing to die for their cause. As the Hart-Rudman report put it:

Charismatic leaders with irrational premises...in the 21st century will be less bound than those of the 20th by the limits of the state, and less obliged to gain large industrial capabilities in order to wreck havoc...Clearly, the threshold for small groups or even individuals to inflict massive damage on those they take to be their enemies is falling dramatically.
Domestic vs. Foreign Threats. In the post World War II American national security model, domestic and foreign threats were seen as qualitatively and quantitatively different. At home, the FBI fought against espionage; the CIA performed it abroad. With the exception of North American inceptor aircraft and Distant Early Warning (DEW) systems to detect a Soviet nuclear attack, the notion of “defense” was inherently outward facing. Threats to the United States would be external and military, fought by armies on the ground, navies at sea, and by aircraft in the skies.

As the September 11 hijackers showed in New York and Washington, and the Madrid terrorists demonstrated in March 2004, the distinction between “domestic” and “foreign” threats no longer exists. Senators Hart and Rudman again noted this in their report in early 2001:

In the new era, sharp distinctions between “foreign” and “domestic” no longer apply. We do not equate national security with “defense.” We do believe in the centrality of strategy, and of seizing opportunities as well as confronting dangers. If the structures and processes of the U.S. government stand still amid a world of change, the United States will lose its capacity to shape history, and will instead be shaped by it.

Rational Leaders, Organizational Outputs, and Bureaucratic Outcomes

The public 9/11 commission testimony and reports released so far suggest other possible explanatory approaches, especially given the unending tales of missed opportunities, lack of interagency communication, and charter confusion. Officials from the White House, State, and CIA, from both the Clinton and Bush administrations alike, sounded similar themes.

In his seminal 1969 article, “Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis”, Graham Allison posited three models of understanding national security policy and decision-making using the Kennedy administration’s handling of the Cuban standoff as a case study. The first, the “Rational Policy Model”, is largely in keeping with the power-maximizing rational, state actors described above. The second, the “Organization Process Model”, sees decision making instead as the outputs of government agencies’ standard operating procedures. The last, the “Bureaucratic Politics Model”, explains policy decisions as the often unintended outcome of competing departments and agencies with conflicting agendas, turf and egos.

For the 9/11 victims’ families and the American public in general, the Organization Process and Bureaucratic Politics models will have some explanatory power. For example, information that field level FBI agents possessed about Zacarias Moussaoui and Arab students at flight schools never reached their superiors in Washington. Similarly, two of the 9/11 hijackers were known to be in the U.S. in the summer of 2001. In addition, Clinton national security advisor Sandy Berger and CIA director Tenet revealed apparent uncertainty over the critical issue of presidential authorization for the assassination of Osama Bin Laden. And Richard Clarke’s urgent request in January 2001 for a meeting of principals to discuss the Al Qaeda threat was rejected by Condi Rice, who steered her new subordinate instead to department deputies in keeping with her job title.

Despite the power of Allison’s methodology, his models seem inadequate for the immense scope of this American intelligence failure and the disaster that ensued as a result. The September 11 tragedy is not merely one of organizational breakdown or bureaucratic in-fighting. 9/11 was primarily a failure of mindset. Neither President Clinton (who at least raised the specter of the terrorist threat) nor President Bush made the case to the American
people for war against Al Qaeda prior to 9/11. Bob Woodward quotes President Bush as having said of Bin Laden, “I knew he was a menace, but I didn’t feel that sense of urgency.” Of course it didn’t seem urgent; in retrospect, virtually the entire American national security apparatus didn’t have a mental framework by which it could be.

In the meantime, Clarke’s book Against All Enemies and his 9/11 commission testimony have raised the specter of a Bush administration asleep at the helm before 9/11, and distracted by its fixation on Iraq, jeopardizing the war on terror afterwards. In response, the Bush White House, seeing the basis for its reelection undermined, responded with its usual fury and vitriol, with Dick Cheney, Condi Rice, Andrew Card, Dan Bartlett and others viciously attacking Clarke. The media will debate whether the contradictions in the administration’s statements and its political tone-deafness in refusing to have Rice testify publicly before the commission all add up to a PR defeat for the President.

But for the American people and the 9/11 families, the answer to the question of how the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks happened will have a simple, but unsatisfying answer: apparently, we simply couldn’t conceive of it.

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