

The Aspin-Brown Intelligence Inquiry: Behind the Closed Doors of a Blue Ribbon Commission

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During 1995–96, the United States conducted a major inquiry into the status of the nation’s intelligence agencies. Carried out by a high-level commission, chaired in succession by former secretaries of defense Les Aspin and Harold Brown, the inquiry’s avowed purpose was to determine how best to adapt the Intelligence Community to the challenging new world that had emerged following the end of the Cold War. The inquiry served other purposes as well, some having more to do with domestic politics than national security. The experience of the Aspin-Brown commission sheds light on the state of intelligence in the United States in the years immediately following the end of the Cold War and provides insights into why this nation was taken by surprise in the attacks of 9/11. Its history also offers lessons about the policy value of independent panels.

Despite the frequency of such commissions of inquiry, the scholarly literature on them is thin, especially in the realm of national security, where commission doors have generally been locked tight against scholars and reporters. What follows is a detailed, behind-the-scenes look into the Aspin-Brown inquiry. It will describe the commission’s internal dynamics and the kind

of cooperation (or resistance) it received from outside institutions and individuals. It will also offer conclusions about the commission’s influence on intelligence.

METHODOLOGY

This article is the result of archival research, interviews, and the personal observations and notes of the author, who served on the commission staff. The archival research included examination of public documents on intelligence; the interviews with commission members and staff took place during the inquiry and in the months after the commission issued its report. The author, the only academic on the staff, attended every formal commission meeting and most of its informal staff sessions and spent many hours privately with Chairman Aspin in the planning and startup of the inquiry. It is, in effect, an eyewitness account of a significant political event.¹

¹The author expresses his appreciation to the members and staff of the Aspin-Brown commission for discussing with him their views on the panel’s work. He thanks the CIA Publication Review Board for its prompt and helpful reading of the manuscript; he is grateful to Leena Johnson for her perceptive editorial suggestions and encouragement.

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Creation of the Commission

The incident that initially drove the establishment of the Aspin-Brown commission in 1994 was the military encounter in Mogadishu, Somalia, in October 1993 in which the soldiers of a Somali warlord killed 18 US Special Forces soldiers in an intense fire-fight. With US troops surprised by the sophisticated firepower and determination of ragtag Somali forces and Americans shocked by the humiliating, televised display of killed soldiers in the city, the tragedy suggested yet another intelligence failure, coming on top of the surprising terrorist detonation of explosives at the base of the World Trade Center in February that year.

Vice President Al Gore, national security adviser Anthony Lake, and Secretary of Defense Les Aspin sought an explanation for the debacle in Somalia. So did members of Congress, who were quick to blame the Clinton administration for the defeat. As criticism of the administration mounted on Capitol Hill and in the media, President Clinton fired Aspin in December, less than a year into his job, forcing the secretary of defense to take the hit for the administration. To soften Aspin's fall, Clinton in April 1994 appointed him chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB), a group of civilian advisers to the White House on intelligence matters. In this capacity, Aspin—backed by Gore and Lake, with the president himself “largely indifferent to

bureaucratic reform” and with “only a passing interest” in the nation's intelligence agencies—gained permission from Clinton to pursue a major probe into the intelligence deficiencies that had contributed to the Somali tragedy.² In June, the media reported the prospect of a presidential commission on intelligence, led by Aspin in his capacity as PFIAB chairman.

The idea of an Aspin-led intelligence commission did not sit well in some corners of Capitol Hill, where Aspin had served in the House of Representatives for 22 years (D-WI) and developed a reputation as a sharp-tongued critic of the CIA. Aspin had been a member of a controversial House committee that briefly investigated the CIA in 1975, and, subsequently, he became an unabashed critic of the Agency as a member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI, created in 1977). Already distrusted by conservatives, Aspin had become doubly suspect because of the losses in Somalia.

² James Bennet, “Thinking About the Day After Tomorrow,” *New York Times* (24 December 2000): A14; Donna Cassata, “Congress Jumps to CIA's Aid in Its Quest for Identity,” *CQ Weekly Report* (7 January 1995): 41.

Besides, conservative lawmakers had a different intelligence agenda. When it came to the CIA, what most concerned them was not so much the quality of intelligence. That was a cerebral debate tailor-made for the brainy Les Aspin, “The Secretary of Analysis,” with a *summa cum laude* degree in history from Yale University, a Ph.D. in economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and a tendency “to look at all five sides of a triangle.”³ Rather, they worried about the hemorrhaging of America's secrets to the Russians. In 1994, CIA investigators discovered that one of their own officers, Aldridge H. Ames, had spied first for the Soviet Union and then for Russia for more than a decade, revealing to the Kremlin details of hundreds of CIA operations and the names of US agents in Moscow. If the CIA were to be a subject of an investigation, this counterintelligence failure (conservatives reasoned) should be the focus.

The leader of the effort to block the Aspin initiative was the formidable Republican senator from Virginia, John W. Warner, the ranking minority member and vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI). In February 1994, he had written a letter to President Clinton asking him to establish a task force to investigate the

³ Bob Woodward, “The Secretary of Analysis,” *Washington Post*, 21 February 1993: W8 and R. W. Apple Jr., “Vietnam's Student,” *New York Times Magazine*, 31 December 1995: 9.

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Ames case and, at the same time, reassure the public that the CIA remained a vital organization in the nation's security. Clinton replied that he saw no need for a special investigation. Unhappy with Aspin's role in the Somalia incident to begin with, the Virginia senator pushed Congress to create its own panel to serve as a counterweight to what might become an overly negative report by Aspin. Hearing about Warner's plans, Aspin went to the senator's office in an attempt to dissuade him. He greeted the senator with a big grin and his standard Wisconsin salutation, "Hey, whadda ya know?" This stab at charm often worked, but seemed to have no effect on Warner, so Aspin went straight to the point: two investigations would be redundant and wasteful. PFIAB could do the job. As a bargaining chip, he offered seats on the PFIAB commission to individuals of Warner's choosing—including the senator himself.⁴

Warner rejected the offer and moved ahead with plans for a separate inquiry. He had an agenda in mind rather different from Aspin's. The senator viewed a congressional inquiry as an opportunity to buoy up the CIA (based in Langley, Virginia, a part of his constituency), whose morale had dipped dramatically with the revelation of the Ames treachery. Warner was also concerned about the public calls of

⁴ Author telephone conversation with Les Aspin, 21 February 1995.

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) for the outright abolition of the Agency, on grounds that it had demonstrated its uselessness by failing to forecast the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Reflecting Warner's orientation, the SSCI staff director told the press that an alternative commission was needed to "rebuild the political consensus" in support of the CIA.⁵

Lawmakers also questioned whether the CIA had adequately pondered its post-Cold War mission. Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) R. James Woolsey had been unable to communicate a vision of the role intelligence should play in the new era—at least, to the satisfaction of SSCI members. "Warner's commission proposal is the only way to get [the CIA] back on track, because Woolsey hasn't put it there," declared SSCI Chairman Dennis DeConcini, (D-AZ).⁶

⁵ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Do We Still Need the C.I.A.? The State Dept. Can Do the Job," *New York Times*, 19 May 1991: E17; John J. Fialka, "Congress Is Set to Approve Big Review of Costly U.S. Intelligence Community," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 September 1994: A6.

⁶ Steven Komarow, "In Turnabout, the CIA Finds Itself under a Microscope," *USA Today*, 15 July 1994: 5A.

Indeed, Woolsey's cocksure personality, interpreted by some as arrogance, had managed to alienate key lawmakers—notably DeConcini, who accused him of "total obstructionism" with respect to the Congress.⁷ The DCI had been widely admonished on the Hill, too, for merely reprimanding 11 CIA officers in supervisory capacities over Ames rather than dispensing harsher penalties. As for PFIAB's inquiry, some lawmakers were of the mind that since this panel was part of a White House already tarred by intelligence mistakes in Somalia, Congress could provide a better perspective. So ran the arguments for a second intelligence inquiry. Try as he might with several more visits to Warner and his colleagues, Aspin could not get this horse back into the barn.

In frustration, Aspin proposed in September 1994 a combined presidential-congressional commission, with the president choosing nine members "from private life" and the leaders of Congress selecting eight members (four "from private life" and four from Congress). It was a take-it-or-leave-it proposal: either this hybrid or two separate inquiries. Satisfied that he would have enough clout on the proposed commission (including his own membership) to rein in the Aspin faction, Warner agreed to the deal, sweetened further when Aspin agreed to name the SSCI's general counsel, L. Britt Snider—

⁷ *Ibid.*

a Warner protégé—as staff director of the joint inquiry.

On 30 September, Congress approved the creation of the bipartisan “Commission on the Roles and Capabilities of the United States Intelligence Community” and the president signed the bill on 14 October, setting a 1 March 1996 deadline for the panel’s report. “I have warned for the last several years that if the Intelligence Community did not move boldly and publicly to change, that change would be forced upon it. That has now happened,” observed Woolsey’s predecessor, DCI Robert M. Gates.⁸ DeConcini predicted the panel could be of tremendous help—“if it doesn’t get co-opted by the Intelligence Community.”⁹ His counterpart in the House, HPSCI Chairman Larry Combest (R-TX), had a different concern: that “partisans” might “hijack” the commission “to validate their efforts to dismantle the Intelligence Community.”¹⁰

Starting Up the Commission

Membership. The Congress was quick to name its eight commission members: two incumbent senators, two incumbent representatives, and four private

citizens. The presidential side of the new commission got off to a slower start. After more than two months of jockeying over who would be among the chosen few, the Clinton administration managed in December to present the names of its eight appointees to join the already announced commission chairman, Les Aspin. The administration’s slowness prompted the *New York Times* to warn in an editorial in January 1995 that unless the panel got moving it would soon be “road-kill,” run over by HPSCI, which was gearing up under Combest’s leadership to conduct a House probe into the state of intelligence.¹¹ The House committee planned a set of hearings labeled “IC21,” short for the “Intelligence Community in the 21st Century.”

In addition to a few individuals who were already members of PFIAB, the presidential side of the commission’s roster included two former managers from a single intelligence agency (out of the then 13 in the Intelligence Community): the National Security Agency (NSA). Aspin’s original plan of an exclusively White House inquiry had been swamped by “outsiders,” with only five PFIAB people making it onto the 17-member panel.

As the White House sauntered toward the selection of its quota of commissioners, Aspin sifted through piles of *curriculum vitae*

⁸ Tim Weiner, “Commission Begins Its Task to Redefine Role of C.I.A.,” *New York Times*, 18 March 1995: A1.

⁹ Elizabeth A. Palmer, “Congress Creates Commission to Study CIA’s Performance,” *CQ Weekly Report*, 1 October 1994: 2824.

¹⁰ Walter Pincus, “Politics Marks Intelligence Study Panel,” *Washington Post*, 1 November 1994: A5.

¹¹ “Mr. Aspin: Pick up the Pace,” *New York Times*, 16 January 1995: A16.

MEMBERS OF THE ASPIN-BROWN COMMISSION

(presidential appointees in italics)

Les Aspin, first chairman

Harold Brown, second chairman

Warren B. Rudman, vice chairman

Lew Allen Jr.

Zöe Baird

Ann Z. Caracristi

Tony Coelho

David H. Dewhurst

Norman D. Dicks

J. James Exon

Wyche Fowler Jr.

Stephen Friedman

Porter J. Goss

Anthony S. Harrington

Robert J. Hermann

Robert E. Pursley

John W. Warner

Paul D. Wolfowitz

to assemble a staff. In the final compilation, nine of the 17 staff members had served in the intelligence agencies (six retired); six had worked on intelligence issues as Capitol Hill aides; one came from the Office of Management and Budget; and one from academe.

Planning. During January 1995, as the FBI established

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security clearances, the staff began to trickle into the commission's quarters in the New Executive Office Building, across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House. As PFIAB chairman, Aspin already had a spacious suite of offices in the Old Executive Office Building, adjacent to the White House. In these early weeks, the staff leaders shuttled between the two buildings for planning sessions with Aspin. Between meetings, the chairman placed calls around Washington, DC, and the country, consulting on intelligence topics with his wide network of government and academic specialists. The questions poured out: “What topics should we focus on?” “In what sequence?” “Whom should we call as witnesses?” “Should we hold public hearings?”

The chairman maintained a steady flow of press releases on commission activities. He also made himself available for media interviews and lectures to organizations interested in intelligence issues, beginning with an American Bar Association breakfast in January. There he told the attorneys that the number one question facing the commission was “What is the Intelligence Community for?” He vowed to examine closely America's intelligence “targets, organizations, costs.”

As always with commissions, this one was constantly buffeted by external events. In December 1994, DCI Woolsey resigned, grumbling about lack of access to

the president. Deteriorating relations with Congress doubtless added to the DCI's frustration in his job. So, as the commission began its work, the Intelligence Community was without a director. After the administration finally picked an Air Force general to replace Woolsey, the candidate was forced to withdraw amid innuendos that he had suffered ethical lapses. The next prospect, John M. Deutch, a former MIT chemistry professor and provost, and at the time deputy secretary of defense, publicly balked at leaving his job at the Department of Defense (DOD).

On 3 February 1995, more than three months after its creation, the commission held its first meeting in the staff conference room. Two members were absent, but the others visited amiably and with an air of excitement about the challenge before them. Aspin, looking ruffled as always, called the meeting to order and gave a brief history of the commission's origins, skating over his early run-ins with Senator Warner. Staking out a position in favor of the status quo, Warner expressed his concern that some lawmakers were out to cut the intelligence budget. This would be unwise, he cautioned.

As the commissioners discussed the panel's objectives and likely witnesses, national security adviser Anthony Lake arrived at the meeting by invitation of the chairman. He offered a list of topics he thought important to study. At the top: Do we have the right structure for the Intelligence Community? Are we keeping up with technological change? He observed that the administration would soon name a new DCI, as well as issue a presidential decision directive (PDD) on intelligence that would lay out the president's priorities. Most likely, the new DCI would come up with his own plan for reform, Lake said, rather than be “brain dead” until the commission completed its work.

Aspin's main concern in these start-up weeks was to think through how to organize the commission's work. For help, he turned to his associates at RAND, the government-funded think tank that carries out research primarily on defense issues. It was a perfect symbiotic relationship: RAND saw the commission as a source of funding, and Aspin respected the expertise inside RAND that could help him structure the commission's work. He asked RAND to set up a series of strategy sessions; the search was on for an analytic framework to guide the commission. “What should the Intelligence Community be doing now that the Cold War is over?” Here was the central question Aspin posed to the RAND experts.

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“There’s good news and bad news,” Aspin told the RAND staff in February. The good news was that reform was likely to happen since so many people had an interest in it, as demonstrated by HPSCI’s “IC21” project and a lively interest in the subject inside the White House—if not in the Oval Office, at least with Gore and Lake. The bad news was that all of these different parties might go off in sundry directions, bringing chaos to the reform efforts. Taking on the coloration of an advanced graduate seminar on intelligence (punctuated with quintessential RAND jargon like “tilting the matrix” and “force multiplier”), Aspin and his senior staff entered into an all-morning exchange of views with RAND specialists on how to proceed. For RAND, it was imperative that the commission establish a “baseline”—a firm understanding of how the intelligence agencies currently do their work. Then commissioners could consider what changes were necessary and then appraise a wide range of reform proposals against the baseline.

“We’ve got to establish intelligence targeting priorities,” Aspin insisted. Here was a “first order” issue. The RAND experts pushed the idea that the CIA had to be able to mobilize information in a hurry, having access to the telephone numbers of the nation’s top experts: agile resources able to respond to “flavors of the month,” like the unexpected crisis in Rwanda that had suddenly popped up when Aspin was secretary of defense. The commission

would have to define more precisely the universe of subjects for which the Intelligence Community would be responsible, instead of the vague targeting list currently used.

Of concern, too, was another first-order issue: how to organize the intelligence agencies—and, especially, how to overcome the problem of “gorillas in the stovepipes.” Here was more jargon, referring to the individual intelligence agencies acting separately (as if in isolated stovepipes) under the leadership of their own strong program managers (the gorillas, such as the NSA director) and beyond the control of the DCI. The RAND “seminar” ended with clear marching orders from Aspin: build a baseline for the commissioners.

RAND was not the only source of advice pouring into the commission. In January and February, the panel averaged 600 telephone calls a day from individuals (frequently job seekers) offering guidance on how the commission should proceed. A similar deluge of letters fell on the commission, some from retired generals and admirals, others from citizens concerned about civil liberties, a few from cranks. Think tanks and “beltway bandits” descended on the

New Executive Office Building in search of government contracts, armed with fancy, four-color briefing books on how they would organize the panel’s work. Many of their ideas were good, but none of these policy entrepreneurs had the close ties to Aspin enjoyed by RAND, which ended up supplying the commission its chief set of outside consultants.

Prestigious study groups interested in intelligence reform sprang up, too, including forums at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, and at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York City.¹² In March, the Georgetown group offered an impressive checklist of recommended reforms, high among them the consolidation of the nation’s military intelligence agencies.

By the end of February, the commission staff had drafted a “scope paper” meant to plot out the boundaries of the inquiry and, working in harness with RAND, had set down the “baseline” that Aspin sought. The framework consisted of four guiding questions:

1. *What are the intelligence needs of the United States in the post-Cold War world?*
2. *What are the intelligence capabilities required to col-*

¹² For a report on the Georgetown colloquium, see “The Intelligence Community: Is it Broken? How to Fix It?” *Studies in Intelligence* 39, no. 5 (Annual Unclassified Edition, 1996): 11–18.

lect, analyze, and disseminate such information?

3. To what extent do the existing capabilities compare with those needed to satisfy future requirements for intelligence?

4. To the extent that existing capabilities fall short, what changes—organizational, managerial, programmatic, or budgetary—should be made?

Finding answers to these questions became the staff's abiding interest, which, in turn, led them to prepare long lists of specialists inside and outside the government who could help. The staff also initiated requests to each of the intelligence agencies asking them to provide documents that explained their "baseline" activities and budgets. And RAND forwarded the first of many "project memoranda" designed to help the commission in its planning. This opening memo suggested that the key question the commission should keep coming back to as it worked through its agenda was "how to make intelligence both more useful to customers, and more used by them." RAND also came quickly to the crux of the organizational dilemma facing the DCI. "The current intelligence system is organized and dominated by the owners of collection systems," noted the memorandum—"that is, by the *suppliers*." Here were the gorillas in the stovepipes undermining the more centralized coordination of intelligence that President Harry S.

Truman had sought when he created a *Central Intelligence Agency*.

Interviews and Task Forces

On 1 March 1995, the staff held its first formal meeting, with Chairman Aspin presiding (and the only commissioner present). After reviewing the origins of the hybrid panel, he reprised the good news/bad news remarks he had made to RAND. His grey-flecked eyes sparkling with intelligence, Aspin ended what had become a pep talk with the prediction that "we are going to learn a great deal as individuals and do some good things."

The staff director, L. Britt Snider, announced that questions of oversight—keeping the secret agencies accountable—were off the table. That challenge would be left to others (presumably SSCI and HPSCI) to work out; instead, the commission was going to concentrate on how to improve intelligence gathering, analysis, and dissemination. Turning to the anticipated schedule, he said that for the rest of the year the commission would go through a "discovery phase" that would include a series of interviews, briefings, and formal hearings with experts.

Thus began a series of staff meetings, usually once a week, occasionally with Aspin presiding, but more often with Snider in charge. Now and then, RAND experts would sit in. In the absence of commissioners, the

staff meetings were often free-wheeling debates about important intelligence issues, no holds barred. "NSA is like a huge vacuum cleaner," opined one staffer at a meeting, "it collects way too much information." "Which is to say 'NSA sucks,'" chimed in another before the former NSA officers on the staff came to their agency's defense. During a session early into the inquiry, the staff director evoked Warner's chief objective for the commission: Moynihan's call for the abolition of the CIA had to be rebuffed. "Our goal is to sell intelligence," Snider declared. "We have to establish a political consensus in the country favoring intelligence."

By the end of April, the staff had conducted 66 interviews, mostly with intelligence officers, but also with a wide range of policymakers, academics, Hill staffers, and businesspeople (given the interest in economic intelligence that had become a fashionable topic in Washington). The staff recommended to Aspin, and he agreed, that—instead of all the staff and commissioners working on everything—the commission's tasks be distributed to 11 task forces:

- Collection Priorities
- Macro-Organizational Issues
- Military Intelligence Restructuring
- Analysis and Production
- Programmatic Changes in Imagery

- Programmatic Changes in Signals Intelligence
- New Methods of Management
- Budget Process
- International Issues
- Personnel Policies
- Cats and Dogs (a catchall including covert action and counterintelligence)

The Briefings Begin

On 16 March, the commissioners convened for a series of briefings by a panel of intelligence officers on the nuts-and-bolts of the spy trade. After greeting the group, Aspin—a listener and a thinker more than a talker—turned the meeting over to Rudman, the vice chairman. A barrel-chested man with an air of confident command honed as a battlefield soldier in the Korean War, Rudman had gained some national notice since retiring from the Senate for his cochairmanship of the Concord Coalition, a group of private citizens interested in trimming the federal budget. He told the commission forcefully that they needed first to establish the “threshold questions.” Aspin nodded, “There are six to ten really critical questions. We need to talk those out.”

The commission welcomed its first briefer. Adm. William Studeman, the deputy director of central intelligence and (for the moment) acting DCI. He described intelligence as a “river

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‘Major heart attack at the DOD!’ Aspin answered for Studeman.

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of information, deep and wide. We receive thousands of intelligence reports every day.” After the admiral had outlined the various threats facing the United States, Aspin opened the floor for questions.

“What if we placed the entire intelligence budget under the control of the DCI?” former Democratic House majority whip Tony Coelho (CA) asked.

“Major heart attack at the DOD!” Aspin answered for Studeman. The biggest of all the gorillas—the secretary of defense—would not passively accept a DCI’s encroachment on military intelligence spending. The admiral smiled in recognition of the tension between the DCI and the secretary of defense. The DCI had, in fact, only clear authority over the CIA and had to rely on the soft power of persuasion to convince other agencies to follow his lead.

The briefings spilled over into the next day when the commission convened again to hear from more intelligence managers, one of whom observed that the ties between intelligence officers and policymakers were strained and sometimes nonexistent. “If we were a business, we’d be out of

business,” he said. “Our customer relations are terrible.”

Terrorism at Home

In March, the president managed to persuade John Deutch to accept the DCI nomination after all, with the hint that he might be favorably considered as a candidate for secretary of defense down the road. During his Senate confirmation hearings, Deutch said that he would “move immediately to consolidate the management of all imagery collection, analysis, and distribution.” He intended to streamline the way in which the United States used satellites to photograph intelligence targets, interpreted the pictures (“images”), and disseminated the information to policymakers. He vowed as well to rid the CIA of its old, cold warriors and change the Agency “all the way down to the bare bones.”

If the commission and the public needed any reminding of the importance of intelligence, they got it—tragically—on 19 April, when a truck filled with explosives blew up the federal building in Oklahoma City. “I think we are going to see more of this,” Studeman warned.¹³ Security tightened around the White House and the Executive Office Buildings, with the Secret Service now inspecting each vehicle entering underground parking

¹³ Craig Gilbert, “Expect More Terrorism,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 21 April 1995: A12.

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‘Our mission is to explain to the American people that intelligence is important,’ said John Warner.

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and prohibiting any trucks or vans from idling in front of the buildings. Aspin asked a commission staffer to prepare a study on the US counterterrorism capability. “‘Aerial terrorism’ seems likely at some point,” a CIA counterterrorism specialist informed the aide—“filling an airplane with explosives and dive-bombing a target.” American was still six years away from comprehending the full implications of this warning, and how the right kind of passenger airplane—loaded with highly volatile aviation fuel—would serve well enough as a bomb.

At the Farm

To attempt some bonding of the diverse commissioners, Aspin decided to have the panel escape the hectic pace of Washington for a couple of days. The retreat took place in early May at the CIA facility in Virginia known familiarly as “the Farm” and used chiefly as a training site. The atmosphere had the desired effect. Open collars replaced starched white shirts and ties, and commissioners joked easily with one another. Almost all stayed for the full two days of briefings and discussions.

The sessions began with a panel of “case officers,” the foot soldiers of the CIA who lived abroad and recruited indigenous spies. They had a primary message: the CIA was being asked to do too many things. “Just say no!” seemed to be the theme. The featured speaker at the retreat was former

DCI Gates. He reiterated the theme that CIA was overwhelmed by all the intelligence targets that had emerged since the end of the Cold War. He recommended that the commission establish a pared down list of intelligence priorities and propose a method by which policymakers could communicate their needs to intelligence managers with greater clarity. He urged, too, enhanced authority for the DCI over communitywide budgets and personnel, in order to overcome the centrifugal forces in the Intelligence Community. On his checklist were these additional proposals: reduced redundancy among the eight military intelligence agencies; the construction of better connections among the “stovepipes” that the 13 agencies had become; consolidation of counterintelligence operations (Ames was the ghost in the room at many commission meetings); and greater attention to reform within the Directorate of Operations (DO).

During Q and A, Warner took the opportunity to underscore his philosophy about the commission’s charge. “A few of us were desperately concerned that someone was going to go in and cut up the intelligence budget,” he said. “This commission was meant to

stop that—and it has succeeded. Our mission is to explain to the American people that intelligence is important.”

Deutch as DCI

The following week, Aspin had dinner with Deutch on the eve of his confirmation hearings, and the DCI nominee, an old friend of Aspin’s, asked for changes in the commission’s “scope paper” (now in its third iteration). Deutch wanted the commission to focus more on technical improvements in intelligence gathering. Clearly, he intended to take an active role in intelligence reform and, drawing on his cordial ties with Aspin, was not going to be shy about trying to shape the commission’s recommendations. In private asides during breaks in the commission’s meetings over the next month, some commissioners began to question what they feared was too close a relationship between the DCI and Aspin. The commission, they whispered, had to ensure a proper balance between independence and cooperation in its dealings with the new intelligence director.

On May 9, a couple of days after the Deutch dinner, Aspin showed up late for a staff meeting. “I’m not feeling well,” he mentioned to an aide, a worrisome comment since Aspin had a long history of heart problems (surgeons had implanted a pacemaker in 1993). But he was able to rally enough to listen attentively to the day’s witnesses. After their departure,

he summarized for the staff his dinner conversation with Deutch and asked them to strengthen the technical side of the commission's scope paper, which would soon be distributed for comment to the White House, the intelligence agencies, and congressional officials.

That same day, without dissent, the Senate confirmed Deutch's appointment as DCI and he left the Pentagon to take up his post at CIA Headquarters, soon dubbed "Deutschland" by insiders. After a four-month quietus, the Intelligence Community at last had a director again (although Adm. Studeman had filled in effectively). Deutch immediately called a "Town Meeting," and the CIA's top brass assembled in the 600-seat auditorium known as "the Bubble." Reflecting his concentration on technical issues at DOD, Deutch spoke of "a new system for the management of both our military and intelligence satellite acquisition systems." He predicted that "there would be no seam, in my view, between our efforts and the efforts of the [Aspin] commission...I don't regard them as a problem; I regard them as an opportunity—as a help."

The Loss of a Chairman

Between commission meetings, Aspin attended plays at the Kennedy Center and professional basketball games, played tennis once or twice a week, spoke at forums in DC and

around the country, and was continuously on the telephone, asking experts for their thoughts on intelligence reform. He said nothing more about feeling unwell. Then, on the morning of 19 May he tried to rise from bed only to slump to the floor, the left side of his body paralyzed. Aspin had suffered a major stroke. Living alone, he somehow managed to telephone for help and was rushed by ambulance to the Georgetown University Medical Center. He could still speak lucidly when carried on a stretcher into the hospital, and initially there was hope he would survive; but, later in the day, his brain began to swell and he fell into a coma. The next evening, death claimed the chairman at age 56.

A cloud of despondency settled over the commission staff. Aspin had been the primary source of energy and direction for the inquiry, and, while his haphazard administrative style could be vexing at times, he had a warmth, intellect, and knowledge about national security affairs that had won over the staff's respect and devotion. There was a feeling of great loss. Senator Rudman took over as interim chairman while the White House considered Aspin's replacement. Rudman met with the staff on 22 May and assured them the commission would "continue on the same path that Chairman Aspin laid out."

Rudman at the Rudder

Despite the loss, the commission had to move on. Rudman dropped his other obligations for a while and met with the staff leaders to keep the work on track. The briefings were now turning toward the testimony of policymakers—those on the receiving end of intelligence. What were their information needs? How well were they being served? Rudman assumed the position of acting chairman officially on 1 June, beginning a commission meeting with a moment of silence for Aspin. "There can be no better monument to Les than to move this work forward," remarked Commissioner Coelho.

The star witnesses for the day were Secretary of Defense William J. Perry and former national security adviser Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft. Perry said that halting the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction had become the foremost intelligence and defense priority for the United States. He dwelled on the need for better HUMINT ("We focused too much on the Soviet Union, at the expense of places like Iraq, Iran, and North Korea"), and for better all-source coordination of intelligence gathering and analysis ("Nothing exists to bring it all together"). Many a witness lamented the woeful state of HUMINT, especially the lack of precise tasking (that is, carefully focused requests for information) from policymakers and the absence of good foreign language skills among case officers and

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Joe Nye . . . informed the commission that, despite his interest in intelligence, he rarely had more than 40 minutes to read each day and only five minutes or so for intelligence reports.

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analysts. “We only have 26 Farsi speakers in the Intelligence Community right now,” a retired military intelligence manager informed the commission, “and only three are able to understand excited Muslims talking to each other.”

Scowcroft criticized the imbalance in intelligence spending that favored the military. “Now political intelligence is more important,” he argued. “What makes North Korea tick? What about the leaders of Iran?” Commissioner Zoe Baird asked Scowcroft how it was that some commissions succeeded and some failed. “It depends on the subject and the circumstances,” he replied. “President Reagan and the Congress were at loggerheads over the Commission on Strategic Forces in 1983. It went nowhere. There was another commission on defense management during the Reagan years that attracted little public interest, because the subject didn’t seem that urgent. Your commission suffers from that same lack of interest.” Still, Scowcroft viewed the Aspin inquiry as an “unusual opportunity” to sit down with the DCI and focus on his problems.

Joseph S. Nye Jr., the thoughtful assistant secretary of defense, followed Scowcroft on the agenda and informed the commission that, despite his interest in intelligence, he rarely had more than 40 minutes to read each day (between meetings) and only five minutes or so for intelligence reports. With a reported annual budget near \$30 billion, agents

all around the world, and spy satellites crisscrossing the heavens to provide information to Nye (an avid reader) and policymakers like him, he had only a few minutes to look at the intelligence product each day! It was sobering testimony. Nye also complained that he got “a lot of information, but not a lot of insight” from the intelligence reports he received.

By mid-June, the commission had brought its discovery phase to an end and had entered a phase of analysis—trying to figure out what all the information it had gathered meant in terms of possible reforms. This endeavor would last through the summer. The centerpiece for moving the work forward was the task force. More motivated commissioners attended task force meetings of interest to them and some asked for the creation of additional task forces, including one on intelligence and law enforcement (of special interest to Baird). The staff decided to prepare special “options papers” as well, so the commissioners could select which of several possible reform directions they would like to pursue. The staff

would continue to meet with experts periodically, but most of its attention was now concentrated on report writing and interactions with commissioners to make sure their views were well reflected in the drafts.

Rudman played an important role during June in “working the Hill,” meeting with key legislators (particularly on SSCI and HPSCI) to keep them informed of the commission’s progress. His busy law practice prevented him from giving the commission the steady attention that Aspin had invested, however, and it was clear a more fully engaged chairman was desperately needed. Yet the White House had failed to come up with a replacement for Aspin. For a month, from mid-June to mid-July, the commission had little direction from the top.

During a brief burst of interest in the subject of intelligence, on 13 July the White House picked a replacement for Aspin: Harold Brown, secretary of defense during the Carter administration. The next day Clinton made a rare presidential visit to CIA Headquarters. Under a sizzling noon-day sun, he stood between Deutch and the First Lady on a platform set up in the courtyard in front of the Original Headquarters Building and addressed the Agency’s VIPs. As if written by Senator Warner, the speech was a rallying cry to boost morale among intelligence officers, still reeling from the Ames spy case. The president reminded the audience that Ames’s deceit was a



Commission at work under Chairman Brown.

(Photo: *Studies in Intelligence*)

“terrible exception to a proud tradition of service” at the CIA. “Every morning I start my day with an intelligence report,” he said, adding a further reassurance: “I believe that making deep cuts in intelligence in peacetime is comparable to canceling your health insurance when you’re feeling fine.”

Brown Takes Over

In addition to his service as secretary of defense, Harold Brown had been director of defense research and engineering in the Pentagon during 1961–65 and president of the California Institute of Technology during 1969–77. Like Deutch (who had recommended him to the White House), he was a bona fide “techie” with a strong interest in intelligence “hardware,” from surveillance satellites to reconnaissance aircraft. He held the commission gavel for the first time on 14 July,

and the panel soon found itself under quite a different style of leadership than Aspin’s.

Brown wasted no time in establishing a commanding presence. While Aspin had been informal and casual, with his tie askew and his body hunched over the table, Brown sported cufflinks and a tie pin, and sat erect. Aspin was soft-spoken and content to let others talk; Brown had a persuasive, even intimidating, way of expressing himself and soon began to dominate commission meetings (see Figure 1). Aspin was exceptionally smart, but Brown had a reputation for brilliance—perhaps the brightest of all the secretaries of defense—with a flypaper memory for facts and figures.

For the most part, though, it was business as usual on the commission. Most of its schedule had already been worked out under Aspin, as had the task force top-

ics. Brown needed only to preside, give authoritative backup for staff decisions, and, above all, pull the report together by March and sell it to Congress. Yet, clearly he intended to preside with a strong hand—at least when he was around. It soon became clear that Brown would not match Aspin’s steady presence. Aspin had thrived on the work of the commission; here was the joy of high policy—and a chance to win back his good reputation, sullied by Somalia and his forced resignation. In contrast, the Washington rumor mill suggested that DCI Deutch had twisted Brown’s arm to take the job. The commission had inherited a forceful, yet reluctant, chairman, whose hectic consulting schedule would keep him away from the nation’s capital most of the time, including the entire month of November.

A Second Retreat. Before Brown arrived, Rudman and the staff had already decided to hold another retreat to corral the commissioners for an intensive workshop on the composition of the final report, especially regarding the recommendations the commissioners wanted to make. “This retreat will probably be our most important meeting,” Rudman told the staff. Then, near the end of the commission’s inquiry, would come one day of public hearings. “Les wanted the public to have a chance to be heard and I agree,” Rudman said to the staff before Brown took over. “Besides,” he noted, “this will be a self-protective exercise.” That is, the

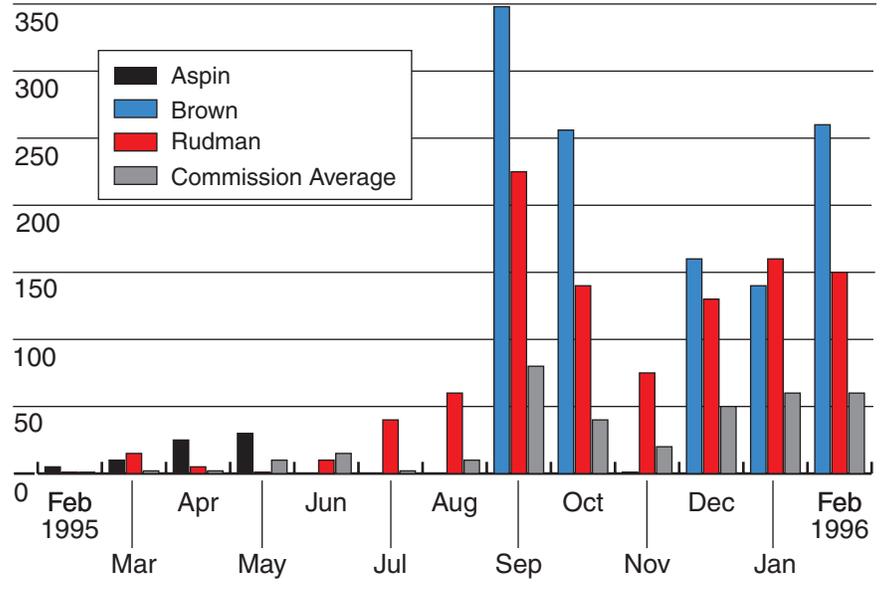
commission would be able to claim a certain degree of openness to outside views—an opportunity to offer symbolic reassurance to the public (a common role of commissions) that the intelligence agencies were back on track.

Ironically, in August just before the retreat and long into its life, the commission finally addressed one of the major drivers of its creation: the Ames affair. A CIA officer who had helped crack the case warned commissioners that “we’re never going to stop people from ‘volunteering’ [i.e., spying for the enemy]. We just have to learn how to catch them earlier, and to encourage people to report on those engaged in suspicious activities.”

In September, the commission convened for the retreat at a conference center in Leesburg, Virginia, near Dulles Airport. The staff realized they were unlikely to gain a consensus around every issue, but the sessions would provide them with a valuable sense of where the commissioners stood. For two days, the staff presented options to the commissioners (*sans* Warner and Senator James J. Exon [D-NE]) and received a good reading on what topics and recommendations they wanted to include in the final report. No votes were taken; the idea was to identify worthy recommendations through discussion. “We should say the honest thing,” Rudman said, “not pull any punches. But let’s also be realistic. No sense

Commission Member Participation (U)

Number of comments and questions



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putting up something that is going to go nowhere.”

The commissioners went in a dozen different directions, spending most of the first morning on a topic that was not even on the main agenda: economic intelligence, weighing whether the CIA should spy on behalf of US business (with widespread opposition to the idea). Covert action—from propaganda to paramilitary operations—caused the most fireworks, with little consensus for or against. “It’s a dirty diaper pail,” a commissioner concluded. Disputatious, too, was an idea floated to consolidate all technical intelligence under one command. “Wait, IMINT is different from SIGINT!” objected a

techie commissioner who balked at lumping together photographic intelligence with telephone intercepts. One thing was certain: with three commissioners on the panel and two senior staffers on the commission, the NSA was unlikely to lose its control over signals intelligence. Discussion of the intelligence budget also produced sparks, with different factions in favor of downsizing, increasing, or holding spending exactly where it was. Brown grew fidgety during these clashes, his right fist doubled and pumping up and down on the arm of his chair.

“We are in danger of becoming a status quo commission,” Coelho warned.

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[Moynihan] singled out ‘analysis’ for special criticism, complaining that the process had ‘too much bureaucratic layering.’

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“We will have some changes.” Brown replied, with an edge to his voice.

“According to whom? The DCI? The SecDef?”

The chairman’s jaw hardened. “Let’s put this discussion off to later.”

On the last day of the retreat, Brown reviewed the topics the commission had decided were most important. The list included: economic intelligence; the relationship between law enforcement and national security; covert action; whether the office of DCI should be strengthened; whether to consolidate the military intelligence agencies; personnel issues; improving the management of space surveillance (Deutch’s pet project); whether to declassify the aggregate annual intelligence budget figure; whether to trim the budget; whether policy departments and agencies that wanted intelligence should be charged a fee by the DCI; oversight (revived as a commission subject, at the insistence of Representative Porter Goss [R-FL]); counterintelligence (the Ames problem); and the state of HUMINT. Commissioner Paul Wolfowitz saw these last two issues as “the most spectacular failures going into this inquiry.”

Brown was leery of trying to pass a new law to increase the DCI’s authority at the expense of the 800-pound gorilla in the Pentagon: the secretary of defense. “It is really telling the secretary of

defense how to run his shop; so as a member of the club, I’m of two minds about that.... I would not want to write this into legislation, but,” he added lamely, “rather urge the secretary of defense to make those changes.”

“I think we’ve made a very important start,” Rudman concluded at the end of the fourth day, “but there is a lot more to be done.”

Preparing the Final Report.

The glamorous activities were now over; no more government celebrities visiting the premises, no more retreats, no more foreign trips (commissioners and staff had traveled to consult intelligence services in Europe, Israel, Canada, Australia, and the Far East). Now it was time for the staff to prepare the final report, in continual dialogue with those commissioners who had shown an interest in specific topics. In October, the staff huddled with clusters of commissioners in the conference room, trying to hammer out exactly what language and recommendations the members desired. Goss’s concern about oversight received added attention when newspaper reports revealed that the National Reconnaissance Office had played shell games with its

funding, misleading the Congress on how its money was being spent.¹⁴

Also in October, Brown and Rudman visited Congress to bring key legislators up-to-date—an unsubtle form of lobbying—and to solicit their opinions. Brown told the lawmakers that the commission would make four or five significant recommendations, related to the DCI’s authority, law enforcement, satellites, personnel, and military intelligence. “By significant, I refer to the number of persons who will be upset,” he joked: “the more outcry, the more significant the recommendation.” The lawmakers kept their cards close to their vests, although HPSCI Chairman Combest said he would not release his “IC21” report until April 1996 (a month after the planned publication of the commission’s report). Senator Moynihan was as feisty as ever and, while he backed away from his earlier public statement that the CIA should be dismantled, he offered a spate of reform proposals. He singled out “analysis” for special criticism, complaining that the process had “too much bureaucratic layering.”

To satisfy the staff’s ongoing quest for directions on how commissioners wanted the report written, the commission assembled once a month during the winter to hear staff briefings on

¹⁴ Robert Pear, “Disclosure of Spy Agency’s \$1.5 Billion Fund,” *New York Times*, 25 September 1995: A12.

specific topics. Only the techies—plus Democratic fundraiser and now commissioner Stephen Friedman, who had begun to display a voracious interest in all topics before the commission—showed up for the technical briefings, like one on the possible consolidation of imagery operations. More understandable and sexier subjects, such as covert action, drew larger crowds of commissioners. At one session, in an uncommon conservative-liberal alliance, Goss emphasized, seconded by former Senator Wyche Fowler (D-GA), that “We need strong language on oversight.” “We haven’t spent enough time on counterintelligence,” Friedman complained, as around and around the table flew a bevy of policy pleas, caveats, and declarations.

At another session the prickly issue of budget cuts came up again. Representative Norman D. Dicks (D-WA) and Goss opposed the 15 percent spending reduction over 10 years recommended by a commission subcommittee led by former NSA director Gen. Lew Allen. “We ought to stabilize intelligence, not cut it,” argued Dicks, who represented a district in the state of Washington where spy satellites were built. “That kind of cut wouldn’t muster 100 votes on the Hill.” Coelho and Fowler countered that the commission should do what is right, not what might be politically palatable; cuts were the right thing to do, since (in Fowler’s words) “appetites [for more money] are insatiable...the public expects savings.” The debate made it

clear that the Dicks-Goss faction had the votes on the commission if it came to a formal division, including most importantly Chairman Brown’s. Gen. Allen eventually threw in the towel: “If I can’t convince you to save money, then, okay, I’ll go along.”

These meetings made it clear that on a good many issues the staff would face challenges trying to find common ground among commissioners for the final report. Moreover, when the report was finished, the commissioners would need to build a consensus outside the panel. “We have to sell this report to the public and the media,” Rudman reminded his colleagues in December. “And to the DCI,” Dicks added.

In the midst of partisan wars that had broken out in the nation’s capital—this was the autumn in which the president closed down federal agencies and departments in a budget feud with House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA)—the commission staff continued to polish drafts of the final report. Then, on 18 January 1996, the panel convened to prepare for its public hearing the next day. The commissioners went through the report chapter by chapter. Warner opposed personnel downsizing, since the CIA’s “morale is very low,” he warned. He also advised the commission to drop most of the language about enhancing the intelligence role of the United Nations, a “hot button” issue that, in his opinion, would discredit the report on the Hill. He

was prepared, though—however reluctantly—to allow disclosure of the aggregate intelligence-spending figure, but without further budget details. Several of the commissioners thought the staff language in the report was too critical of the intelligence agencies. “Remember the underlying reason for the commission,” Warner stressed: “to restore confidence in intelligence.” Goss agreed: “We shouldn’t paint such a black picture. I’m not trying to whitewash, but let’s tone this down.”

The commissioners often got sidetracked, at one point spending 20 minutes on how to define intelligence. A senior staffer whispered to a colleague: “This will be like drafting a National Intelligence Estimate: we’ll get the lowest common denominator.” The wide range of views on the commission and the hope for consensus did seem to have the effect of blurring important issues—a common criticism of commissions.¹⁵ “This will be viewed as an extraordinary apology for the Intelligence Community,” Fowler cautioned, drawing grimaces from Goss and Warner. “We don’t say enough about counterintelligence,” Fowler continued. “What about covert action? What about environmental intelligence? And the stuff on economic intelligence strains credulity.”

¹⁵ Joseph A. Pika, John A. Maltese, Norman C. Thomas, *The Politics of the Presidency*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2002).

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Other commissioners advanced their favorite proposals, most of which Brown dismissed brusquely.

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“We’ve got to move along,” Brown insisted. “I plead for self-restraint,” Rudman seconded. “We’d all write this differently.”

“Yes, but we need to be comfortable with this report if our names are going to be on it,” retorted Coelho.

Nerves frayed, the commissioners took a break. When they returned, Friedman raised the subject of consumer-producer relationships. “There seems to be a high correlation between consumer satisfaction [with intelligence] and a close personal relationship between intelligence officers and policymakers,” he observed. The implication was that the commission needed to find ways to get the two groups to interact more frequently. Other commissioners advanced their favorite proposals, most of which Brown dismissed brusquely. These included Fowler’s ideas for more extensive economic intelligence gathering, as well as tighter restrictions over paramilitary action.

The budget received the most attention. “We better try to cut 5 percent if we are going to have any credibility—except with the defense contractors,” Rudman suggested. Goss was not convinced. “It’s more difficult to track a bunch of snakes [emerging world threats] than one dragon [the Soviet Union during the Cold War],” he said, paraphrasing a metaphor made popular by Woolsey. “Therefore, we need more money for intelligence, not less.” Once again,

forces pulling in opposite directions seemed to leave the commission stuck in the middle with the status quo. One of the few budget matters most commissioners could agree on was the release of the aggregate annual budget figure. “Nothing will give us more credibility than releasing the top figure,” said Rudman. “We’ll look silly if we don’t,” Brown agreed.

By the time the commissioners had worked their way through the full draft, they looked exhausted. “My head is exploding,” Fowler commented to a staffer on the way out of the conference room. “These people [the commissioners] don’t understand that the press and the public are going to be interested mainly in accountability, covert action, and counterintelligence, not dry, sterile treatises on bureaucratic changes—moving boxes from here to there.” His face was a portrait of dismay.

The next day, the commission held its only public session in a grand Senate hearing room. One of the witnesses, Assistant Secretary Nye, repeated his realistic impressions of life as a harried intelligence consumer; and Richard N. Haass, with the Council on Foreign Relations, reviewed the findings of his study group on intelligence, emphasizing the need to create a stronger DCI.

The commission’s last meeting to gather testimony took place on 2 February, with only a single witness: DCI Deutch, who was being given an opportunity to present his own reform plans, many of which paralleled those of the commission. After his departure, the commissioners returned to their discussion of the final report. Brown sarcastically punctured the idea of increased funding for environmental intelligence, an idea advanced by Fowler. “While there are hard targets [dangerous states and terrorist groups],” he scoffed, “we should spend time on the environment?”

Moving through each chapter, commissioners commented as they saw fit. If their suggestions perked interest from other members, discussion led to changes in wording, unless Brown or Rudman expressed opposition—the kiss of death. Late in the afternoon, Brown called for a formal vote on the report. There were no dissenters. The smiles on the faces of staffers lit up the conference room.

The Commission Reports.

After several more weeks of fine-tuning, with drafts sent out to commissioners for comments, the report was ready for printing in mid-February. Though some were unhappy with the compromises that had been made, each commissioner signed the report and, on the morning of 1 March, gathered in the Oval Office to brief the president. Even Senator Exon—normally AWOL—miraculously appeared for the occasion.

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When it came to the powers of the DCI, Brown had successfully blocked any effort to turn the DCI into an 800-pound gorilla.

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In an amusing denouement to the commission’s many months of labor, the president turned to Exon and asked about the report and how it was likely to play on Capitol Hill. The senator came up with a vague reply that may have puzzled the president, but was not unexpected among those who knew he had skipped almost every panel meeting. The president, who had arrived 45 minutes late, quickly departed, leaving Vice President Gore to hear the full briefing.

Later that day, the 200-page report—dedicated to Les Aspin and to intelligence officers who had given their lives in the service of their country—was ready for release to the public.¹⁶ At a press conference, attended by 11 commissioners but dominated by Brown, the chairman summed up the main recommendations. The panel had looked at some radical proposals, he noted, like taking the DO out of the CIA, engaging in industrial espionage, making the DCI an intelligence czar, or putting all of intelligence in DOD; but, he concluded, “we decided that whatever their virtues, the deficiencies of the proposals were greater.”

His checklist of reforms the commission had embraced featured steps to make the intelligence agencies more responsive to con-

sumers, notably by creating better liaison ties between policy-makers and intelligence officers. In addition, the commissioners advocated the creation of a Foreign Intelligence Committee within the framework of the National Security Council (NSC), to highlight targeting priorities for the president and to review the propriety of intelligence ties to particularly unsavory foreign agents; and another NSC committee to review disputes between the DCI and law enforcement officials over the best way to share the handling of individuals suspected of endangering the nation’s security—all efforts to seek ways through the often tangled lines of existing bureaucracy.

When it came to the powers of the DCI, Brown had successfully blocked any effort to turn the DCI into an 800-pound gorilla capable of standing up to the secretary of defense. Instead, the commission proposed creation of special intelligence deputies to assist the DCI—a modest attempt to offset the strong centrifugal forces in the Intelligence Community and to provide a modicum of symbolic reassurance to reformers that at least something was being done to help the nation’s intelligence chief

cope with the fragmentation of the Intelligence Community. In this same spirit, the commission recommended that the DCI be given a little more say over who would be appointed to head each of the dozen other intelligence agencies beyond the CIA (led by the DCI), but only in concurrence with—that is, with the possible veto of—the relevant cabinet secretary, in contrast to the DCI having the final say over the selections. Nor would the DCI have final say over the budgets for each of the intelligence agencies. Some Director of Central Intelligence!

Brown spoke of the personnel changes the commission had in mind, whereby the secretary of defense and the DCI would be given a brief period of time to weed out people through generous retirement benefits. As Brown would explain to the American Bar Association later in the month, this proposal could be “the toughest one of all to get through, because people don’t like their rice bowls cracked.” Brown referred to some technical reforms as well, including a measure to sell spy satellites to friendly nations with an arrangement to share the product.

As for saving money, the commission took the easy way out, suggesting that Congress and the executive branch should think of ways to trim overlap and waste—as if that responsibility had not been part of the commission’s charge in the first place. The commission leaders gave a nod to the need for better oversight,

¹⁶ Commission on the Roles and Capabilities of the United States Intelligence Community, *Preparing for the 21st Century: An Appraisal of U.S. Intelligence* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996).

and, introducing the proposal meant to be the climax of the press conference, they endorsed release of the aggregate budget figure. After all, Brown explained, as he glanced wryly around the assembled press corps, “you’ve got to throw meat to the lions every once in a while—otherwise, they’ll eat people.”

Public Reaction.

The editors of the *New York Times* quickly dismissed the “anodyne” report for its lack of “imagination and courage.” The commission had displayed the “the spine of a rag doll,” according to the newspaper, by leaving “a flawed system essentially intact.”¹⁷ Intelligence officers interviewed by the *Times* said the report was “underwhelming.”¹⁸ Nor were intelligence scholars impressed; the report offered only limited insight or reform, according to the widely shared assessment. One critic berated the commission for arguing “that we need everything and since everything is expensive, we need to spend just as much as before.”¹⁹

Nor did these limited reforms travel far in the hurly-burly politics of Washington, despite

Rudman’s hopeful handwritten inscription on HSPCI Chairman Combest’s copy of the report: “Get it done!” In the Intelligence Authorization Act for FY 1997, lawmakers granted the DCI his new deputies, but their roles have remained limited. The act also provided the DCI’s Community Management Staff with a larger staff and more funding; however, the Pentagon, along with the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, ganged up to halt more serious measures to give the DCI real muscle, such as transferring the DOD’s HUMINT assets to the CIA. Even DCI Deutch, now eyeing the top Pentagon office himself, backed away from the idea of giving too many powers to the DCI, powers he might later want to have for himself.

Dispirited, Deutch left the CIA in December 1996, observing that the DCI position had been so frustrating that he should have followed his initial instinct not to be “pushed into” the job.²⁰ He fell short in his bid to become secretary of defense, having alienated the White House over a public disagreement about the effects of Clinton’s policies toward Iraq.

The Intelligence Community was, in sum, largely unaffected by the Aspin-Brown inquiry—or, for that matter, the similar reform proposals of “IC21.”²¹ The Intelligence Community’s budget remained intact; counterintelli-

gence and counterterrorism received little attention; the limits of covert action were never defined; the weaknesses in accountability went largely unaddressed; and the DCI’s powers remained stunted. It would take the tragic events of 11 September 2001 to bring about stronger demands for intelligence reform.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding its negligible immediate effects on the Intelligence Community, the commission did lead to tangible results. Presidential commissions have a multiplicity of functions. Traditionally, they offer symbolic reassurance, provide information to shape policy, educate experts and the general public, and allow delay—a “cooling-off” period—as a problem is further studied.²² While the Somali disaster had prompted Aspin’s interest in an intelligence inquiry, most members of the commission initially were concerned chiefly with the Ames case and—in light of Moynihan’s widely reported attack against the CIA for failing to predict the fall of the USSR—with providing legitimacy to the intelligence mission. The commission’s final report reassured the public on

¹⁷ *New York Times*, “Spy Pablum,” 2 March 1996: E14.

¹⁸ Tim Weiner, “Presidential Commission Recommends Shrinking Intelligence Agencies,” *New York Times*, 1 March 1996: A17.

¹⁹ John Prados, “No Reform Here,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist* (September/October 1996): 56.

²⁰ R. Jeffrey Smith, “The CIA,” *Washington Post*, 26 December 1996: 11.

²¹ Abraham H. Miller and Brian Alexander, “Structural Quiescence in the Failure of IC21 and Intelligence Reform,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 14 (Summer 2001): 234–61.

²² David Flitner Jr., *The Politics of Presidential Commissions* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Transnational, 1986).

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The commission also shaped intelligence policy by publicizing and giving legitimacy to the idea of strengthening the DCI's authority.

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both counts, recommending closer attention to counterintelligence and extolling the importance of the nation's intelligence agencies. Warner had achieved his original goal: lifting the CIA's sagging reputation in the wake of Ames's treason and Moynihan's perorations.

The commission also shaped intelligence policy to some modest extent by publicizing and giving legitimacy to the idea of strengthening the DCI's authority, a notion that began to gain currency in reform circles despite ongoing objections from the Pentagon. In 2002, following the 9/11 attacks, a special PFIAB task force on intelligence created to advise President George W. Bush (led by Brent Scowcroft) adopted this view, and creation of a cabinet-level director of national intelligence is the center piece of intelligence reform in the Kean commission report released in July 2004.

And while many of the commission's reform proposals languished, some did become policy. For example, Deutch's replacement as DCI, George J. Tenet, announced the aggregate intelligence budget figure for 1998: \$26.6 billion (although he stopped making annual disclosures in subsequent years). Moreover, as proposed by the commission, the intelligence agencies carried out long overdue personnel decisions to downsize staffs. Even when formal policy change was not the end result, the commission's highlighting of the key issues

helped intelligence managers understand and address weaknesses in their operations.

Certainly the commission helped educate experts and the public alike on intelligence issues, even if the *Times* and other critics remained unimpressed. The serious debates held by the commission allowed members and staff to learn more about the intricacies of intelligence. In this sense, the commission served as an advanced leadership training ground for participants. When Fowler became US ambassador to Saudi Arabia soon after the inquiry, his expanded knowledge of intelligence proved useful. This was true, as well, for Dicks and Goss in their intelligence oversight duties in HPSCI (whose chairmanship Goss assumed in 1997). Wolfowitz became deputy secretary of defense in 2001; David H. Dewhurst, the head of the Texas Office of Homeland Security in 2002; and staff director Snider, the CIA's inspector general—all better in their jobs (and perhaps helped into those jobs) by their experience on the commission. Further, largely through media reprises, the public acquired a better comprehension of intelligence organizations, budgets, and activities, as presented in the commission's

final report; and scholars were handed an important archive in a field where data are difficult to acquire.

The goal of delaying decisions about intelligence was a factor, too. A senior staffer on the commission remarked to a colleague midway through the investigation that the Aspin-Brown panel was all about “gaining time.” While the Clinton administration searched for a new DCI, considered how to prevent another Ames, and tried to head off Moynihan's calls for shutting down the CIA, the creation of a commission gave the public a sense that something was being done about these issues. “The irresponsible cries for cuts in intelligence have faded,” Senator Warner observed happily at a commission meeting just before release of the final report. As he rose to leave for another appointment, he turned to Brown, smiled, and said, “The commission has fulfilled the original objective; I commend you.”

It should be emphasized, too, that the DCI and the intelligence agencies were hardly passive players before, during, or after the commission's existence. The first post-Cold War DCI, Robert Gates, as early as 1991, had already made dramatic changes in the orientation of the CIA by shifting resources away from Russia as a target and toward new threats—especially global weapons proliferation. Similarly, the NSA director took steps to prepare his agency for changes in technology affecting

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... this case study stands as a reminder of the limitations of commissions as instruments of policy change. . .

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electronic surveillance (notably the trend toward the use of fiber-optic transmissions); the CIA's Counterintelligence Staff adopted important reforms to lessen the likelihood of another Ames; Deutch pursued his consolidation of space surveillance; and Tenet moved to expand the nation's HUMINT capabilities in regions of the world largely ignored during the Cold War.

Yet, DCIs found change difficult in some areas and this case study stands as a reminder of the limitations of commissions as instruments of policy change, especially in a political system characterized by the sharing of power among institutions and the existence of well-placed defenders of the status quo who are able to thwart unwelcome

recommendations (as did the members of the Armed Services Committees, who supported the secretary of defense's position against augmenting the DCT's authority).

Overcoming the fragmentation of the Intelligence Community posed the greatest challenge to the Aspin-Brown commission. It fell short of achieving the all-source integration of intelligence that some reformers, on and off the commission, hoped to see (and that might have prevented the 9/11 attacks from succeed-

ing). Still, the commission did shift the debate among national security experts toward considering that point-of-view more seriously. The groundwork done by the Aspin-Brown commission, along with the terrorist attacks of 9/11, made it more palatable for PFIAB under Scowcroft's leadership in 2002 and the Kean panel in 2004 to advance the cause of a stronger DCI and a more cohesive Intelligence Community. President Truman's elusive goal of a genuinely central intelligence is, thus, nearer at hand than ever before and the commission deserves a place alongside other key moments in the modern history of US intelligence from the creation of the Intelligence Community in 1947 to the just-concluded work of the Kean commission.

LITERATURE ON US COMMISSIONS OF INQUIRY

For more on the work of US government-sponsored commissions, see the following:

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