



## BOOK REVIEW

### SYMBOLISM AND SECURITY: THE POLITICS OF POST-9/11 INTELLIGENCE REFORM

BLINKING RED: CRISIS AND COMPROMISE IN AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE AFTER 9/11. By Michael Allen. Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books. 2013. Pp. 250. \$29.95.

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**Reviewed by Genevieve Lester\***

*Blinking Red: Crisis and Compromise in American Intelligence After 9/11* is truly a unique book that provides a legislative history of the period after the 9/11 Commission published and publicized its recommendations, when attention shifted to how to actualize them. While the attacks on 9/11 created a deluge of works focusing on terrorism, decision-making, and the political context of urgency surrounding these issues, few of these contributions offer the sophisticated detail and inside knowledge presented in Allen's book. Allen, with a background that bridges the gap between the executive and legislative branches, provides an intelligent inside look at the knotty problems that developed once intelligence reform was put in motion post-9/11.

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Several major themes emerge from his text. First, the largest intelligence reform since the National Security Act of 1947<sup>1</sup> was beset with political complications, including partisan politics, demands from special interests, and the need to project exceptionally quick policy action on the issue of terrorism to the public, particularly to those most closely affected by the attacks. The core of Allen's work analyzes the legislative development of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act ("IRTPA"),<sup>2</sup> which most notably created a Director of National Intelligence ("DNI") and the National Counterterrorism Center ("NCTC").<sup>3</sup> Allen also explains how the political dynamics surrounding this key legislation affected its outcome.

Though more than a decade after 9/11, it is still hard to overstate the impact the 9/11 Commission's findings have had on the nation's ability to *frame* the events of that day. The popular American consensus lays blame at the feet of the various intelligence agencies for not sharing information, for failing to appropriately predict and warn about the potential threat, and for failing to "connect the dots" to bring together a clear enough picture of the threat for taking countermeasures.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Congress's 2002 joint inquiry into the 9/11 attacks, there was support for an additional investigatory committee on the attacks based on the impression that the prior congressional investigation had not gone far enough. This second investigatory commission would investigate the criticism already percolating throughout Congress and the intelligence community ("IC")<sup>5</sup> that

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<sup>1</sup> National Security Act of 1947, Pub. L. No. 80-253, 61 Stat. 495 (codified as amended in 50 U.S.C. §§ 3001 et. seq.).

<sup>2</sup> Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-458, 118 Stat. 3638 (codified as amended in scattered sections of the U.S.C.).

<sup>3</sup> See MICHAEL ALLEN, *BLINKING RED: CRISIS AND COMPROMISE IN AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE AFTER 9/11* xv-xvi (2013).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>5</sup> "In 2004 the vast majority of Intelligence Community assets resided in the eight Department of Defense intelligence entities: the National Security Agency (NSA), the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO), and the intelligence elements of each of the military services." *Id.* at xvii.

there was a “failure to connect the dots,” failure to share information within and between agencies, and failure drawn from a foreign/domestic divide between the effective cooperative use of foreign intelligence and domestic law enforcement information.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of the Commission itself was political and fraught with demands from a new addition to the political arena—the families of those who perished in the attacks—the 9/11 Families (“9/11 Families”).<sup>7</sup> As Allen points out, this group was considered by one former senator to be “the most powerful lobby group he had ever come across in his career.”<sup>8</sup> Their opinion was clear and their mode of expressing it increasingly impassioned. They also held a strong symbolic position in post-9/11 America that made their fight for some type of recompense for their losses moral and unassailable. As one of them states in the text, “[George Tenet, Director of Central Intelligence for the CIA had] made many mistakes that had cost our husbands their lives, and we wanted people like him held accountable, not heralded as heroes.”<sup>9</sup> Politically, it was incredibly important to be viewed as supportive of the victims’ families.

The political power of the 9/11 Families presented immense and unprecedented political challenges to reform. Allen notes that the Commission viewed the families as a “moral force,” and felt that it was crucial that they support the final outcome of the Commission’s work.<sup>10</sup> Because the public favored the views of the families, acceptance of the Commission’s recommendations by the families would ostensibly ensure its acceptance by the public. As the Commission’s goal was to drastically change the intelligence community, the strategy behind the Commission’s recommendation rollout was unanimity on the recommendations prior to the presidential election, the endorsement of the 9/11 Families, and a visible public release of the recommendations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> ALLEN, *supra* note 3, at 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 32.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 34.

From this backdrop of the post-9/11 deliberations, Allen presents the core of his book—actualization of the Commission’s recommendations. At root, the recommendations sought the creation of a central authority over the intelligence community—the DNI and the founding of a center for information on counterterrorism to be shared among various agencies.<sup>12</sup> Both reforms were recommended in order to fix the inherent problems in the intelligence community that had led to the failure to prevent the attacks on 9/11. Particularly, the recommendations ostensibly addressed the concern of the failure to share and coordinate intelligence information across the community. These recommendations were endorsed by the 9/11 Families, accepted immediately by presumptive Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry, and quickly thereafter by President George W. Bush.<sup>13</sup> The next step was how to reify them in order to give them force beyond symbolic power.

In the words of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice:

After the 9/11 Commission comes in, the opponents of a DNI are severely weakened because the 9/11 Commission carries a weight nationally and bureaucratically and to say we are going to reject the recommendation of how to get better intelligence agencies performance after two of the highest mess-ups in modern American intelligence history: you had 9/11 . . . and the intelligence failure on Iraq. By now, you had to go with DNI. I was favorably disposed, anyway.<sup>14</sup>

The above provides the background to Allen’s main narrative—the legislative negotiations that extended from the Commission’s recommendations. Allen points out that three different camps quickly developed around what authorities the new DNI would have. The White House view was that there should be a strong DNI with appropriate budget and appointment authority.<sup>15</sup> A second opinion argued that the Director of Central Intelligence

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<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 49, 58.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 56.

<sup>15</sup> ALLEN, *supra* note 3, at 54.

(“DCI”) should be granted increased authority, even so far as to bolster the DCI’s authority by moving the national-defense intelligence agencies under his authority.<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, a third set of voices—those of Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld—argued against the creation of a DNI and NCTC based on the rationale that it would hinder the Secretary of Defense’s ability to manage the Department of Defense.<sup>17</sup> Beyond the friction between the actual personalities involved in the debate, the relationship between defense and national intelligence has historically been tense, due partially to the Secretary of Defense’s authority over a large portion of the intelligence budget.

Allen outlines the various issues involved in negotiating the bill adopting the Commission’s recommendations, particularly since they created the most significant change within the intelligence community for the first time since 1947. Among those negotiations were the level of budget authority the new DNI would have and whether money would flow from the new DNI to department heads or to department heads directly. According to Allen, the political alignment during the negotiations was unorthodox. Rather than strictly partisan divisions, the cleavages focused on more specific issues, such as immigration and veterans’ affairs. The political divide fell into groups based on considerations such as location (i.e., proximity to the President), budget authority, and staffing authority. Allen describes this process well, explaining how a process that appeared arcane and unimportant from the outside, in actuality determined the overall strength of the new reforms. Access to the President and control over resources are both crucial in terms of the efficacy of any senior position in Washington, but particularly in the case of security, where personal trust between the President and his advisers is fundamental to effective threat management.

Allen’s writing style is engaging and his arguments very persuasive. His comprehensive understanding of the congressional process and the required tradeoffs inherent to producing legislation shines in the sections describing finding compromise between the

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<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 55.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

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two congressional chambers and the White House. Allen's grasp of the institutions and the individuals involved in this process, while conveying his knowledge with warmth and generosity, is truly remarkable. Further, Allen supports his institutional knowledge with extensive research and interviews from all of the major players in this historic legislative undertaking.

Allen presents a thorough and extremely well-written work; a more explicit conceptual framework, however, could have helped to organize and clarify the various important themes that run through the book, including symbolism, the tension of a changed threat environment, and the discomfort of creating policy quickly in a uniquely charged political context. Like many books authored by expert Washington insiders, the use of acronyms and breezy language—while demonstrating Allen's persuasive fluency in the area—is most likely opaque to those newly arrived at these issues. Having said this, the reader will most likely never have another such opportunity to understand from the inside out the complexities of this type of sensitive policy-making under extreme pressure. Perhaps getting a small dose of the vernacular will allow the reader to understand how arcane the details of these problems can be, but also how complex and important these decisions are.

Allen captures the political and emotional dynamics surrounding the intelligence reform material and demonstrates how the reform itself was the outcome of competing forces.<sup>18</sup> These details have been lost from the public view, as the reforms have become absorbed into the official narrative, seen through a political and emotional lens. This text explores the range of relationships and political interactions that made the changes recommended by the Commission a reality. The book also provides a political context for the entire process, allowing the reader to understand the policymakers' sense of responsibility, political exigencies, and also the overall national feeling of the threat that pervaded this entire period of ongoing negotiations. As the memories fade, it is easy to judge retrospectively. Allen provides a sense of the urgency of the process at that time, but does so with an objectivity remarkable in an

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<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 168.

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individual who himself was so intimately engaged with the proceedings.

The institutional reform described in this book is unique—unique in that it focused a bright light on the usually secret issues of intelligence, and also because it produced major change developed in a compressed and urgent political context. As Allen writes, “[t]he battle for the intelligence system is a case study in American power politics and institutional reform born out of crisis and delivered under compromise.”<sup>19</sup> Allen provides a text that fills a great gap in literature, not only on change in the post-9/11 intelligence community, but also on the crisis politics that framed the national discussion on the meaning of the attacks themselves. This portrait of policy and politics set within the context of the odd, opaque world of intelligence is exceptional—an intellectual page-turner. Allen set out to write the definitive legislative history of this period of intelligence reform; he has succeeded.



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<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at xi.