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NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES

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First public hearing of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States

Statement of Stephen Push to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States March 31, 2003

Gov. Kean, Congressman Hamilton, and the other members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to offer my views about the Commission as it starts its investigation of the worst terrorist attack in American history.

You have an extremely important task before you. What is at stake is nothing less than the legitimacy of the United States government. The primary function of government is to provide for the common defense. If the government cannot do that effectively, everything else it does is of little value.

I would like to explain to you what it was that brought me before you today. I don't claim to

Current News

The Commission has released its final report. [\[more\]](#)

The Chair and Vice Chair have released a statement regarding the Commission's closing. [\[more\]](#)

The Commission closed August 21, 2004. [\[more\]](#)

Commission Members

Thomas H. Kean
Chair

Lee H. Hamilton
Vice Chair

speak for all of the 9/11 families, but I believe that many of them have similar views concerning the need for this Commission.

When my wife, Lisa Raines, was murdered aboard American Airlines Flight 77, I was immediately cast into a spiral of shock, disbelief, and grief. Within two weeks, however, my strongest emotion was anger. Actually "anger" is an inadequate word for what I felt. What I felt was a rage so intense it was like no emotion I had ever felt before. Initially my rage was directed at the hijackers. Why did they do this? What did they expect to accomplish? What had Lisa ever done to them?

But as I read the newspapers and spent night after sleepless night watching cable news networks and searching books and the Web for information about terrorism, I also became angry at my government. The government that was supposed to protect Lisa but that, as I eventually learned, had failed her and the other 3,000 plus victims of 9/11.

I learned, for instance, that two of the hijackers on Lisa's plane were known to the CIA nearly two years before the attacks but nevertheless were allowed to enter the country, live here for months, and board the plane using their own names. I also learned that, for 14 years prior to 9/11, the General Accounting Office repeatedly documented the ineffectiveness of the aviation security system - but nothing was done to correct the problems.

I realized that Al Qaeda had first attacked America in 1993, declared war on America a few years later, and mounted a series of increasingly daring and deadly attacks. While all of this was happening, the Clinton administration took only ineffectual steps against Al Qaeda. And after all of these clear signs that we were at war with a ruthless enemy, the new Bush administration put counterterrorism on the back burner until September 11th.

Richard Ben-Veniste
Fred F. Fielding
Jamie S. Gorelick
Slade Gorton
Bob Kerrey
John F. Lehman
Timothy J. Roemer
James R. Thompson

Commission Staff

Philip D. Zelikow
Executive Director

Chris Kojm
Deputy Executive Director

Daniel Marcus
General Counsel

I am now convinced that this tragedy did not have to happen. 9/11 was foreseeable. And it could have been prevented.

I'm not advocating conspiracy theories. I don't believe that anyone in the government had specific knowledge of what would happen on 9/11. If only it were that simple, we could easily correct the problem by investigating and punishing those responsible.

But I fear that what we are up against is far more insidious. There has been a failure of leadership in this country that cuts across decades and political parties. Too many politicians put reelection above national security. Too many government managers favor process over results and careerism over service.

I'm not maligning the many brave men and women who protect us. I have great respect and gratitude for those in the military, the intelligence agencies, and many others who have dedicated their lives to public service. But in many cases, they have been poorly led.

Since 9/11, there have been some important successes in the war on terrorism. Afghanistan has been liberated, Al Qaeda has been disrupted, and many of Al Qaeda's leaders have been captured.

But there have been far too many failures. For example, despite the expensive and highly publicized creation of the Transportation Security Administration, aviation security is little better than it was on 9/11. Just last month, an investigative journalist was able to defeat the carry-on bag screening process at a major American airport ten out of ten times. The TSA's response to this appalling failure rate was to assert that "proper screening procedures were followed." I'm sure that the families of the next hijack victims will take great comfort in knowing

that "procedures were followed."

These ineffectual reforms of transportation security focus almost exclusively on addressing past attacks: 9/11 and the Pan Am 103 bombing over Lockerbie. Little has been done to address other aviation security issues or threats to other modes of transportation. We have to do much more than prevent a repeat of prior terrorist tactics. We need people in government who know how to anticipate new tactics and develop methods to defeat them.

Even more important, we need to understand and change the causes of terrorism. This will require a major change in the government's mindset.

I urge you to look beyond Al Qaeda and 9/11 and examine the underlying problems that this country has not fully faced and has done little to address. I urge you ask the tough questions and offer tough solutions. For example:

- What changes need to be made in our foreign policy - including in our relations with so-called "friends" such as Saudi Arabia?
- Does the new Department of Homeland Security really make America safer, or has the government just shuffled the boxes on the organizational chart?
- Can we obtain useful counterterrorism intelligence from an intelligence community made up of 14 agencies - with no one in charge of the entire operation?
- Can the FBI - an agency steeped in a law enforcement culture - transform itself into a counterterrorism agency, or do we need to create an agency similar to Britain's MI5?
- Are political campaign contributions from the airlines undermining congressional oversight of aviation security?

The list of questions is too long for this brief testimony. I know that 9/11 families and others are providing you with far more comprehensive lists.

The 9/11 families aren't asking these questions for our own benefit. We have already been irreparably damaged. Our loved ones have already paid the ultimate price. We ask these questions for all Americans. For all the people who may be the next victims of terrorism. For future generations.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify. And good luck in your search for the truth.

Stephen Push is a co-founder and board member of Families of September 11, which represents 1,500 family members of 9/11 victims. A resident of Front Royal, Va., Mr. Push retired from his public relations career in December 2001 to volunteer full time for 9/11-related causes. Before that, he was director of corporate communications at Igen International Inc., a biotech company in Gaithersburg, Md. His wife of 21 years, Lisa Raines, was a passenger on American Airlines Flight 77, the plane that terrorists crashed into the Pentagon.

National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States
The Commission closed on August 21, 2004. This site is archived.