

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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While America Slept

A Survey of Recent Articles

Amid all the uncertainty that followed September 11, one thing seemed predictable: The periodical press would soon be full of retrospectives on the mistakes of perception and policy that left the United States vulnerable to such a disaster. And doubtless there would be political recriminations. Yet that has not happened. The need to maintain a united front, the sense of urgency about future threats, and other imperatives have largely suppressed, at least temporarily, the national appetite for deep inquiries into the past.

One of the more useful analyses of past U.S. policies was written months before the attack. In *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (No. 5, 2001), Martha Crenshaw, a political scientist at Wesleyan University, examines the domestic political currents that have made it difficult for the United States to formulate a coherent antiterrorist strategy. U.S. policy before September 11 lurched forward in response to crises, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, but the sense of urgency was not powerful enough to force the suspension of politics as usual, especially within the executive branch.

"No agency . . . wants an issue on the agenda unless it has an efficient and acceptable solution for it," Crenshaw observes. As a result, counterterrorism policy gets chopped into bite-sized problems

managed by different bureaucracies: the Department of Health and Human Services deals with bioterrorism, while the Department of Energy worries about nuclear materials.

In 1998, President Bill Clinton moved to create a national coordinator for counterterrorism policy on the staff of the National Security Council, but in what the *New York Times* called "a bitter fight," the departments of defense and justice resisted a move they thought would dilute their own power. In the end, a coordinator was named but given little staff and no direct budget authority—and thus little real power.

Bureaucracies also have a tendency to dodge jobs they don't want. The Clinton-era Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), for example, avoided taking charge of a domestic preparedness program. Crenshaw writes: "FEMA officials opted out on budgetary grounds, fearing that the program would be inadequately funded, and thus be a drain on already scarce resources, and that the agency would then be criticized for ineffective implementation of the program."

Many other players contribute to the disarray and gridlock, including interest groups and "experts," the news media, and Congress (which often earmarks counterterrorism money for favored projects).

During the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, President Jimmy Carter drastically limited his options by promising the families of those held that he would do nothing that would endanger the lives of the hostages.

In the *New Yorker* (October 1, 2001), staff writer Joe Klein blames “institutional lassitude and bureaucratic arrogance” for keeping three post-Cold War administrations from dealing adequately with the terrorist threat. Proposals by the Clinton White House to use cyberwarfare techniques “to electronically lock up bank accounts” used by Osama bin Laden and others were shot down by the Treasury Department, which feared that such an effort would undermine faith in the international financial system.

The Clinton administration comes in for especially heavy criticism by Klein’s sources. Enamored of the “arcade-game” technology of the Gulf War and frightened by the disastrous attempt to capture Somali warlord Muhammad Farah Aidid in 1993, the administration was “more concerned with gestures than with details.” And even its gestures were sometimes compromised. The U.S. cruise missile attacks on targets connected with Osama bin Laden in August 1998 came three days after the president’s grand jury testimony in the Monica Lewinsky case.

It’s not just the government that suffers from gridlock. On January 31, 2001, the United States Commission on National Security/21st Century released a major report highlighting America’s vulnerability to terrorist attack and calling for a major government reorganization to deal with the threat. The press gave it slight attention (and the all-important *New York Times* completely ignored it), notes Susan Paterno in the *American Journalism Review* (November 2001). One reporter suggested to her that the report received little coverage because “it slip[ped] between beats”—it could be a Pentagon reporter’s story, a congressional story, etc. And covering unlikely government reorganization schemes is never a high priority; as Paterno’s source pointed out, even today few of the commission’s recommendations are likely to be implemented.

In the trade publication *Broadcasting & Cable* (October 22, 2001), deputy editor Steve McClellan argues that there is one very big story the news media, particularly TV news, did not cover well: the high tide of anti-American sentiment in the Islamic world. The three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) slashed the minutes devoted to reports from overseas roughly in half during the 1990s. Since September 11, foreign coverage has sharply increased; the question is whether there’s enough viewer interest to keep it at a high level.

Now the news media are scrambling to make sure they don’t get caught napping again, and the periodical press is no exception. The emerging conventional wisdom holds that America’s woes in the Arab and Muslim worlds arise in significant part from America’s long support of autocratic governments (such as those in Egypt and Saudi Arabia) that welcomed American help even as they channeled the discontent of their own repressed populations into officially tolerated (and sometimes officially encouraged) anti-Americanism.

Among those focusing on the Saudis are investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, whose report in the *New Yorker* (October 22, 2001) paints a grim picture of a corrupt regime protected by successive American administrations, and writer Ken Silverstein in the *Nation* (December 3, 2001). The Saudis have been accused of underwriting the spread of Islamic fundamentalism abroad even as the fragile regime of King Fahd faces the threat of unrest at home. They own 25 percent of the world’s oil reserves and supply 15 percent of U.S. oil imports. “The problem is this,” a “senior general” told Hersh. “How do we help the Saudis make a transition without throwing them over the side?”

The last word, however, belongs to Martha Crenshaw, who predicts in her pre-September 11 essay that even in the event of “spectacular” terrorist attacks on “important national symbols,” the political process will make it “difficult for any administration to develop a consistent policy based on an objective appraisal of the threat of terrorism to American national interests.”