

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1589
August 22, 2007

Release of CIA Report on 9/11: Simple Lessons for the Long War

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The release of the executive summary of an internal CIA investigation into the agency's efforts against al-Qaeda up to 9/11 holds important lessons for combating transnational terrorism. Though the report has garnered significant attention in the press, the controversy over assigning responsibility for the agency's inability to thwart the attack has overshadowed the report's most important finding, which is its reaffirmation that the best way to combat terrorism is concerted and sustained intelligence and counterterrorism operations.

The Blame Game. Recently enacted legislation required the CIA to declassify and publish the executive summary of the CIA Inspector General's evaluation of the agency's efforts to combat al-Qaeda. The report, undertaken to satisfy a 2002 requirement from Congress to assess agency operations in the run-up to 9/11, is critical of the agency. In particular, the report concludes that the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington were preventable and that CIA procedures, policies, and leaders were at fault for not identifying and foiling the plot.

According to Michael V. Hayden, the current head of the CIA, controversy persists within the CIA over whether all of the report's findings are correct and its recommendations appropriate. Declassification of most of the executive summary—just 19 pages with some classified information blacked out—of a lengthy and complex report does not provide much insight into these controversies.

However, the report's release does, as Hayden has noted, have some negative consequences:

The release of this report would distract officers serving their country on the frontlines of a global conflict. It will, at a minimum, consume time and attention revisiting ground that is already well plowed. I also remain deeply concerned about the chilling effect that may follow publication of the previously classified work, findings, and recommendations of the Office of Inspector General. The important work of that unit depends on candor and confidentiality.

It is not clear what Congress hoped to accomplish in forcing the release of the report's executive summary.

Out of the Shadows. Now that the summary is public, all that can be determined for sure is that much of the post-9/11 effort to ensure that agencies cooperate and share information was necessary and appropriate, as was adding additional tools to investigate counterterrorism, such as those authorized under the Patriot Act. If the United States wants to stop transnational terrorists before they attack, the nation needs to take the problem seriously.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/wm1589.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
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Washington, DC 20002-4999
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It is also worth noting that, of the many measures the report suggests might have stopped terrorist attacks, *none* were among the plethora of initiatives (including mandatory inspection of cargo containers and many other new regulatory requirements) in the legislation that required the release of the executive summary.

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