

Presidents aren't to blame

In the most anticipated release of a government document since the publication of the Warren Report in 1964, the 9/11 Commission issued its findings this week. The 567-page report noted numerous government mistakes but did not cast blame on any public official for the attacks and stopped short of saying the hijackings could have been prevented.

Admittedly, I am not an expert on the investigation, but I was glad to see that the panel did not fault President Bush or former President Clinton for the tragedy. As I have said before, Americans deserve to know the truth about what happened in the days leading up to 9/11. However, as the inquiry continues, we should not lose focus of this simple fact: The terrorists are to blame for the tragedy of 9/11. No one from the Clinton or Bush administrations hijacked those planes or flew them into their eventual targets in Washington, D.C., New York or Pennsylvania.

Nonetheless, the panel did find that both President Bush and President Clinton could have done more to make anti-terrorism a top priority. "Across the government, there were failures of imagination, policy, capabilities and management," the commission concluded in a voluminous report documenting a string of bungled opportunities by the CIA and FBI to uncover the Sept. 11 plot.

As we all know, nearly 3,000 people were killed when 19 Arab hijackers flew airliners into New York's Twin Towers, the Pentagon and the Pennsylvania countryside. Three years later, the report concludes that



LUKE
MESSER

from Indiana, took a strong leadership role in the Commission's report. He said a key finding was that no one in government was in charge of insuring that intelligence agencies worked together to pool resources, avoid duplication and plan jointly for America's safety. To unify efforts, the commission recommended creating a national counterterrorism center. It also recommended a Cabinet-level national intelligence director to centralize efforts now spread over 15 agencies in six Cabinet departments plus the CIA.

I support both proposals. The creation of a cabinet-level national intelligence director may seem like a largely symbolic gesture. However, the commission's report found that as the Sept. 11 plot advanced, the U.S. government was bogged down in an outdated Cold War mentality, unable to "think outside the box" in dealing with new threats or recognizing new dangers.

It is clear that we need new thinking about how we approach gathering, analyzing and distributing intelligence. And a centralized intelligence agency with Cabinet level leadership could help lead the much-needed

Americans are "safer" because of improvements in homeland security and the war against terror, "but we are not safe."

Commission co-chairman Lee Hamilton, a former Democratic congressman

reform.

In a related issue, all Americans should be concerned about Sandy Berger's removal of highly classified documents from the National Archives. His actions were a serious breach of national security warranting a thorough investigation of his conduct and motives.

If published reports are true, it is a remarkably bold story. It is alleged that Berger stuffed handwritten notes, subject to review by security officers, in his clothes. Reports are that the papers Berger removed were extremely sensitive. They included drafts of a secret Clinton administration analysis of its handling of a terrorist bombing plot surrounding the millennium celebration. The report also identified vulnerabilities at U.S. airports and seaports. Now, the reports are missing.

Berger has publicly apologized, and he is certainly entitled to the opportunity to defend his actions. However, Berger is an expert intelligence leader who knew better than to remove classified documents and notes from a secured government facility. Moreover, he failed to return the papers until after they were reported missing.

We may never know the true motivation for Berger's peculiar actions. But I agree with those who have urged the FBI to aggressively investigate the matter. If the probe finds that he deliberately concealed the documents, Berger should face criminal charges.

Messer represents the 57th District, including most of Shelby County, in the Indiana House.

7/17/2004