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WRITTEN REMARKS BEFORE THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES

Brian Michael Jenkins

While our attention understandably is focused on the war in Iraq, the worldwide war against al Qaeda and affiliated terrorist enterprises continues. Unlike the fighting in Iraq, the campaign against the terrorists does not provide the continuing flow of televised images or battlefield displays. It is a war fought largely in the shadows. We measure its progress in the periodic arrests of terrorist leaders and the passage of time without a major terrorist attack.

It has been nearly 19 months since September 11, 2001. Since then, we have made considerable progress in destroying al Qaeda's base in Afghanistan and in disrupting its operational capabilities, but much remains to be done. Our efforts to destroy al Qaeda and its successors will take years.

My remarks today will address three issues: (1) the nature of the current terrorist threat, (2) goals of a counter-terrorist strategy, and (3) the use of intelligence in dealing with terrorism. My remarks derive partly from research at the RAND Corporation, but my observations and conclusions are entirely my own.¹

THE NATURE OF THE TERRORIST THREAT

Understanding the nature the threat we face from al Qaeda means first understanding what al Qaeda is and how it operates and then understanding the current and future threat it poses.

¹Brian Michael Jenkins, *Countering al Qaeda: An Appreciation of the Situation and Suggestions for Strategy*, Santa Monica, California: RAND MR-1620-RC, 2002.

Paul K. Davis and Brian Michael Jenkins, *Deterrence and Influence in Counterterrorism: A Component in the War on al Qaeda*, Santa Monica, California: RAND MR-1619-DARPA, 2002.

What Is Al-Qaeda and How Does It Operate?

- Al Qaeda is more than just an organization. It is a global network of relationships, a system for transforming the frustrations and discontents of Islam—natives, marginalized immigrants, the militant sons of immigrants—into a violent expression of jihad. Destroying Al Qaeda will not end the social and political forces that feed it.
- Al Qaeda provides connectivity, training, and financial support to an extensive galaxy of terrorists enterprises, stretching from North Africa to the southern Philippines.
- Al Qaeda has indicated specific political grievances—the presence of American forces in Saudi Arabia, the oppression of the Palestinians, the suffering of Iraqi civilians under UN sanctions, or now, an American-led war—but such grievances are primarily used to recruit adherents to its cause.
- Al Qaeda reflects a change in the quality of terrorist violence, as ideologies based on religion have replaced political ideologies and specific national goals. The self-imposed constraints on terrorists anxious to maintain group cohesion and not alienate perceived constituents eroded as the word of god became the driving force of conflict. Large-scale indiscriminate violence has increasingly become the reality of contemporary terrorism.
- Al Qaeda may be destroyed but will not quit. Terrorism provides status, power, recruits, psychological rewards. Religious conviction gives its members strength, but the continuation of the armed struggle is what holds them together. They see their activities as a lifetime commitment. They measure success and failure in different terms.

What Current and Future Threat Does Al Qaeda Pose?

- In terms of current threat, today's al Qaeda is different from the al Qaeda of September 11th. It is more decentralized, and its operations now depend more on local initiative. It will continue to adapt to changes in its operational environment.

- The terrorist attacks and thwarted plots we have seen since September 11th have all been below the level of the September 11th scenario. Car bombs, assassinations, suicide bombings (although not on the scale of those seen in Israel), limited chemical and biological attacks, small-scale "dirty bombs," the use of surface-to-air missiles are all within the range of today's terrorists.
- In terms of future threat, al Qaeda is determined to acquire weapons of mass destruction. The September 11th attack was aimed at killing tens of thousands. It succeeded in killing thousands. For the time being, its capabilities trail its ambitions, but attacks aimed at causing large-scale casualties possibly involving chemical, biological, or radiological weapons must be presumed.
- In sum, the United States will remain the principal target of al Qaeda. We will confront individual jihadists, small local conspiracies with or without foreign assistance, and potentially large-scale plots involving foreign-based teams.

GOALS OF COUNTER-TERRORIST STRATEGY

Over the past 20 years, a succession of government commissions have redefined the threats we face and the measures required to meet them. Long before September 11, 2001, two major threats were identified: Terrorists were moving toward higher registers of violence, and a growing number of countries known to support terrorists were developing weapons of mass destruction. The commissions pointed out that from the standpoint of intelligence, government, organization, strategy, security, and response, we were not prepared for these new threats to our national security. We have taken action. We have begun to make organizational changes. Our strategy is a work in progress. What goals should guide that strategy as it progresses?

- **Keep the focus on terrorism.** America's battle against terrorism has been broadened into a "war on terror." The change in language signals a broadening of mission from destroying terrorist groups to disarming rogue governments possessing or seeking weapons of mass destruction. This

reflects valid fears, heightened by 9-11, but it is a very ambitious undertaking, for which the United States will find few allies. Reality may oblige us to carefully pick our fights, look for other ways to achieve our objectives, and even accept a level of residual risk.

- **Keep the focus on destroying Al Qaeda.** There are several dimensions to our counter-terrorist fight. We are at war with al Qaeda. However, we actively oppose many other terrorist enterprises, from Hizbollah to the Abu Saayaf organization. The destruction of al Qaeda represents the most significant current terrorist threat. Its destruction must remain the primary aim of the American campaign. While we cannot inflict a single decisive victory on this dispersed and amorphous terrorist foe, we can over time assure its absolute destruction, which also will serve as a deterrent to other terrorist enterprises.
- **Decide how we will deal with other terrorist groups.** The United States has not attacked groups like Hizbollah or Hamas with the same intensity that we have gone after al Qaeda. Some in government have argued that we will take down all of these terrorists groups one after the other. A key policy question is whether we will go after each one in turn or base U.S. actions on their future behavior.
- **Rely on international cooperation.** International cooperation is a prerequisite for success in dealing with the threat posed by al Qaeda and like-minded terrorists. We may appropriately use the term “war” here, although the global campaign will involve the orchestration of intelligence, law enforcement, and, at times, military force.

Combating terrorism is a broader concept. For more than 30 years, the United States has led an international effort to combat terrorism, with some success. September 11th gave a new sense of urgency to this effort, which has been formally stated in UN Resolution 1373 requiring all nations to cooperate in these efforts. This is not a campaign to destroy any particular terrorist group; instead, it is a campaign aimed at facilitating international cooperation and making the operational

environment more difficult for terrorists. It will be an enduring task.

If we are correct in viewing global terrorist enterprises as the kind of threat we are likely to confront for the foreseeable future, then current efforts to destroy al Qaeda must be simultaneously aimed at building the institutions and creating the machinery, domestic and international, that will enable like-minded nations to effectively oppose this new kind of foe. Specifically, new networks must be created to exploit intelligence across frontiers.

- **Seek to prevent terrorism from becoming an effective mode of economic warfare.** The September 11 attack produced cascading economic effects that directly and indirectly have cost the United States hundreds of billions of dollars. We cannot allow terrorism to become an effective mode of economic warfare. Nor can we allow the threat of terrorism to drag down our own economy. Our strategy and our security measures must be not only effective but efficient. Homeland defense strategy must support infrastructure and systems that are resilient and able to quickly recover.
- **Seek to resolve conflicts that are breeding ground of terrorism.** Beyond using increased intelligence, security, law enforcement, and when necessary, military force, America should continue its efforts to prevent the creation of environments that could provide fertile ground for future terrorism as in Bosnia and Kosovo, and help resolve conflicts that give rise to terrorism such as that in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. At the same time, we must accept the limits of American diplomacy, even armed intervention, when local parties are determined to fight.

That said, there is little convincing evidence to demonstrate that addressing the so-called root causes of terrorism—oppression, poverty, lack of education—has a causal impact on reducing terrorism. These are noble goals, which we ought to pursue anyway, even while realizing the difficulty and disruptive effects of such pursuit.

- **Accept that we will live with some level of risk for years.** That terrorists are planning further attacks and may strike again, perhaps soon, should not be breathless news. The United States cannot eliminate all sources of terrorist danger. Americans must accept that we will live with some level of risk for years.
- **Ensure that whatever strategy we pursue is consistent with American values.** Rules may be changed. Every liberal democracy confronted with terrorism has been obliged to increase intelligence collection, enact new laws, broaden police powers, and change trial procedures. They have done so while remaining democracies. New rules must be clearly set forth, widely discussed, endorsed by legislation, accepted by the public, and regularly reviewed.

USING INTELLIGENCE IN THE WAR ON TERRORISM

We depend on intelligence as our first line of defense against terrorism. What are some issues surrounding its use?

- **Using intelligence to prevent terrorist attacks is very difficult.** There are no troop mobilizations to watch for, no ships, no aircraft to track. Knowing what terrorists might do depends largely on human sources—undercover agents and informants. Penetrating small terrorist groups may take months, years.

Moreover, the looser organization of today's terrorists makes it even more difficult, because there are fewer identifiable groups. Instead, galaxies of like-minded fanatics spawn *ad hoc* conspiracies or engage in "leaderless resistance."

As a result, the threat picture is murky. Information is fragmentary. When terrorists are not engaged in actual operations, the volume of noise is high. Terrorists are prone to spend their time talking about possible attacks. Much of this is fantasy, and most of the attacks they talk about will never occur outside their own imagination. Still, all must be reported, resulting in numerous warnings and alerts. We have learned

since September 11th that communicating threat information poses a major challenge.

- **However, intelligence can be used to prevent terrorist attacks and to solve cases after the fact.** Intelligence can lead to the identification, location, and apprehension of terrorist leaders and operatives and thereby disrupt terrorist operation, as we have seen many times since 9-11. Good intelligence can act as a deterrent. Intelligence can be critical in assessing terrorist threats.

Intelligence is also important in solving cases--intelligence operations were involved in more than 60 percent of the terrorist-related cases according to a RAND study done in the 1980s.² Informants allowed the successful apprehension of the conspirators in the 1993 post-World Trade Center bombing plot in New York, the prevention of an attack on government buildings in Phoenix by domestic extremists, and the discovery of plot to blow up propane storage attacks in California.

- **Institutional intelligence capabilities need to be rebuilt.** Over the years, intelligence capabilities and constraints have changed in accordance with the political environment. In the 1960s, the goal of domestic intelligence gathering was prevention, but there was a loss of focus and control that led to abuses. New rules were put into place in the mid-1970s. Files were purged. New constraints were imposed. Intelligence shifted from proactive to reactive. These rules clearly impaired collection and by the early 1980s, the constraints were somewhat reduced, but a declining terrorist threat and the high political risks associated with domestic intelligence collection led to a reduction in resources and even the dismantling of some intelligence units. Growing terrorism in the 1990s increased concerns, but collection capabilities remained low. September 11 pushed the pendulum back toward prevention. The rules were changed, but institutional capabilities will take years to rebuild.

²Brian Michael Jenkins, Sorrel Wildhorn, and Marvin M. Lavin, *Intelligence Constraints of the 1970s and Domestic Terrorism: An Executive Summary*, Santa Monica, California: RAND R-2939-DOJ, 1982.

- **Building more effective local-level intelligence-collection might be better than creating another federal entity.** We have great potential at the local level. Local police know their territory. Recruited locally, their composition better reflects local populations. They may have more native-fluency foreign-language speakers. Unlike any federal force, they don't rotate to a different town every few years. And local police operate under locally elected political leaders, which may make intelligence operations more acceptable to the local community, although local departments are just as prone to abuses if not closely managed.

For example, the New York Police Department, one of the most effective in the country, has assigned about a thousand officers, 2.5 percent of its strength to intelligence collection and analysis. The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department has taken the lead in setting up an early warning group where local police jurisdictions and representatives of federal agencies come together to exchange vital intelligence on terrorism.

If departments across the country were to dedicate a similar portion of their strength to intelligence, we would have a domestic intelligence force of about 15,000 officers. And unlike MI-5, they would have arrest powers. What they need is better training, a common curriculum, and technology. And they would need to be linked so that information could be quickly transmitted across the network. It's not that difficult. Corporations now do this very well.

They are ready to go. We would not have to wait years to fully develop a new federal agency. We don't even have to build a new building in Washington.

- SUPPLEMENT -

**ORAL REMARKS BEFORE THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON
TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES**

MARCH 31, 2003

ORAL REMARKS

The written remarks that I submitted to the Commission address the nature of the current terrorist threat, the goals of our counter-terrorist strategy, and the role of intelligence in dealing with terrorism. Subsequently, I was asked by members of the Commission's staff if in my remarks this afternoon I would comment upon al Qaeda's mindset, its purpose in attacking the World Trade Center, and how this attack has affected our economy.

AL QAEDA'S DARK VISION

The violent jihadists who comprise al Qaeda and a galaxy of like-minded terrorist enterprises believe that the very existence of Islam is threatened, not merely by the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia or by U.S. support for Israel, but by western views of a secular society, individual freedom, gender equality, by our vast commercial and cultural reach, by the destructive effects they see in globalization, by the persecution of Moslems in Bosnia, Chechnya, and elsewhere, by their own marginalization in the world, in their own societies, and the societies to which they and their parents have migrated.

They share a harrowing apocalyptic vision of death and destruction informed by conflated centuries of history from the Mongol's sacking of Baghdad to this morning's news on CNN.

God commands that they mount an aggressive defense--a holy war, not merely a spiritual struggle, but a violent campaign. Only violence--catastrophic violence--can alter reality, defeat the tyranny which they suffer, and clear the path for the restoration of the caliphate.

To achieve this end, al Qaeda is determined to acquire and willing to use weapons of mass destruction, although for the time being, its capabilities fortunately trail its ambitions. It is in the context mass destruction that we must view the attack on the World Trade Center.

WHY 9-11?

What did the terrorists hope to accomplish by attacking the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11? By delivering a mighty blow on American soil, al Qaeda would demonstrate its own power, strike terror in the heart of its enemy, and send recruits streaming to al Qaeda's banner. Certainly, al Qaeda had to figure that such an attack would provoke American retaliation. A feeble American response, like that in 1998, would confirm American impotence; al Qaeda would benefit. An indiscriminate response could be portrayed as an assault on Islam and might provoke a huge backlash that also would advantage al Qaeda.

As a consequence of its sheer size, soaring height, and prominence on the New York skyline, the World Trade Center was an obvious terrorist target almost from the moment its construction was completed. Bringing it down would be the pinnacle of terrorist ambitions. Both terrorists and terrorism's analysts saw this.

Size meant mass casualties. To terrorists, who in the 1990s seemed increasingly intent upon large-scale violence, toppling the towers could bring fatalities in the tens of thousands, which we now know was the terrorists' intent on September 11.

While the Pentagon represented America's military might, the World Trade Center symbolized America's economic might, our ambition to extend our form of commerce throughout the world--the physical expression of globalization before the term globalization was coined. Bringing down the World Trade Center would challenge America's power and demonstrate the power of its foes, just as coalition forces in Iraq today deliberately topple the huge statues of Saddam Hussein.

The World Trade Center had special meaning for Islam. Those who studied its design would know that it repeated the architectural motifs of Venice, itself once the center of world trade, a rival to Islam, and a port of embarkation for the crusades.

Having been attacked, unsuccessfully, in 1993 increased the probability that it would be attacked again. We recognized this immediately after the '93 bombing, although we could not assign any specific probability to a second try. In contemplating all of the possible forms of attack, we even included among the theoretical scenarios a plane deliberately crashing into the building, although we considered it a remote possibility, and there was little we could do to prevent such an attack. We did, however, recommend measures to permit rapid evacuation of the towers.

Officials in charge of the property also recognized that another major terrorist attack, even if unsuccessful, would ruin its commercial future. I want to underline this point when as we consider the ruinous consequences of another 9-11 scale attack in the United States.

THE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF 9-11

The total destruction of the World Trade Center obviated concerns about the commercial viability of the property itself, but the attack had devastating effects on the American economy.

Calculating the costs of 9-11 is tricky business. In addition to the lives lost, direct damage and business interruptions produced \$50 billion in insured losses. Total losses in revenue ascend to the \$100s of billions.

Increased security requirements have cost the federal government tens of billions in additional spending (not counting the costs of the war in Afghanistan). State and local governments are being crushed by increased security costs. New York alone is spending \$5 million a week to remain on a heightened state of alert. Corporate security costs have increased on average by 40-50 percent, a heavy burden in a weakened economy.

Some commercial property insurance premiums increased by 30 percent. Terrorism coverage dried up.

Consumer confidence plummeted. There was a massive drop in the U.S. stock market, although not all of this can be blamed on 9-11.

Security-related delays eroded productivity. Just-in-time inventories have been increased at a cost. We spent the last three decades exploiting new technology and management techniques to remove friction from the economy. We have spent the past 18 and a half months putting friction back in.

All of this imposes a cost. I doubt that the terrorists themselves were aware of this on September 11, but they cannot help but to have observed these effects in subsequent months. Terrorism is an effective mode of economic warfare, unless we can develop sustainable counter-terrorist strategies.

We cannot rely on a gates and guards approach. We must approach the challenge of security strategically. We must design security that is effective and efficient. We must build critical infrastructure that is strong and resilient, able to suffer damage and continue to function. To reduce the psychological effects of further terrorist attacks and alarms, we must above all abandon unrealistic expectations of total security and instead adopt a more realistic acceptance of risk and not allow attacks or fears of attacks to shut ourselves down.