EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, better known as the Hart-Rudman Commission, produced one of the most authoritative assessments of our national security vulnerabilities in the years immediately preceding the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The commission issued one of several early, unheeded alarms. One of its central lessons can be encapsulated in three statements:

“A direct attack against American citizens on American soil is likely over the next quarter century. ... In the face of this threat, our nation has no coherent or integrated governmental structures.”

– “Road Map for National Security” (the third and final phase of the Hart-Rudman report), eight months prior to the 9/11 attacks

“Hardly anyone in Washington or the mainstream media paid [the final Hart-Rudman report] any attention.”

– Leslie H. Gelb, Hart-Rudman Commission member, 2002

“I know a guy — never mind his name — who was on one of those government terrorism commissions... and who used to say I ought to talk to him. I never did. I was busy, not just with Bill and Monica but with other things as well.... Anyway, I never wrote about the terrorist threat to this country. I was negligent. But I was not alone. The press in general did a miserable job preparing the American people for what happened on September 11.”


One of the key recommendations of the Hart-Rudman Commission was embraced three years later by the 9/11 Commission when it called for consolidated Congressional oversight of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security:

Congress should create a single, principal point of oversight and review for homeland security. Congressional leaders are best able to judge what committee should have jurisdiction over this department and its duties. But we believe that Congress does have the obligation to choose one in the House and one in the Senate, and that this committee should be a permanent standing committee with a nonpartisan staff.

In a similar vein, the Hart-Rudman Commission had urged that:

Congressional leadership must review its structure systematically in light of likely 21st century security challenges and of U.S. national security priorities. This is to ensure both that important issues receive sufficient attention and oversight and the unnecessary duplication of effort by multiple committees is minimized.

Echoing the 9/11 Commission and the Hart-Rudman Commission, last spring a group of national security leaders gathered as the Sunnylands-Aspen Institute task force to highlight the need for Congress to reform its oversight of homeland security. To ensure that the country does not have another occasion to look back at Congressional inaction and inattention with regret, its members should follow the Hart-Rudman and 9/11 Commission recommendations and streamline oversight of homeland security.
**THE HART-RUDMAN COMMISSION**

The U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century (commonly known as the Hart-Rudman Commission) grew out of a rare moment of late 1990s bipartisanship. After agreeing in 1998 on the need for a wide-ranging study of America’s national security in the 21st century, President Bill Clinton and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich initiated the commission, with former Senators Gary Hart (D-CO) and Warren Rudman (R-NH) as co-chairs. Among the other commission members were Gingrich, former CIA Director and Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, Ambassador Anne Armstrong, Congressman Lee Hamilton (D-IN), former New York Times national security correspondent Leslie Gelb, and Admiral Harry Train. (For a full list of members, see Appendix.)

As the Hart-Rudman Commission explained in the preface to its first report, it had been chartered in 1998 by Secretary of Defense William Cohen “to provide the most comprehensive government-sponsored review of U.S. national security” since the 1947 National Security Act, a major restructuring of government agencies that established the National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the office of the Secretary of Defense. Launched in October 1998, the Hart-Rudman Commission addressed three primary tasks:

- analyzing the volatile international security environment,
- developing a national security strategy appropriate to that environment, and
- assessing the nation’s security institutions for their ability to effectively and efficiently implement that strategy.

Over 2 ½ years, the 14 commissioners consulted with a dozen research associates and nearly 30 study group members, attended countless hearings, briefings and seminars, and visited two dozen countries on a budget of just $10 million from the Department of Defense. Detailed in the final phase of the Hart-Rudman report, the commission’s 50 recommendations aimed to “promote the security interests of the nation and its citizens,” “safeguard American institutions and values,” and “preserve the independence and well-being of the United States for succeeding generations.”

**A SERIES OF WARNINGS**

Commission members were not the only national security experts to recognize the nation’s vulnerability to a range of old and new threats on American soil. Their three-part
assessment of the threats to the United States in the post-Cold War era were among at least a half-dozen studies commissioned by Congress, the White House, or independent think tanks between the late 1990s and the 9/11 attacks. Among these were:

- two of five annual reports (1999-2003) to the President and Congress by the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction (also known as the Gilmore Commission), which recommended a special congressional committee to coordinate homeland security efforts, as well as a national office for combating terrorism within the Executive Office of the President;
- a June 2000 report, “Countering the Changing Threat of International Terrorism,” by the National Commission on Terrorism (the Bremer Commission), which called for an “aggressive strategy against terrorism” and “improved information sharing” between law enforcement and intelligence agencies; and
- a December 2000 report, “Defending America in the 21st Century: New Challenges, New Organizations, and New Policies,” published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which called for the creation of a National Emergency Planning Council within FEMA to coordinate federal, state, and local agencies tasked with responding to a terrorist attack.⁷

Among all these, however, the work of the Hart-Rudman Commission — particularly, its final report — was the most exhaustive and, arguably, the most prophetic. The commission said in 1999: “The upshot of the changes ahead is that Americans are now, and increasingly will become, less secure than they believe themselves to be.”⁸

**THE FIRST TWO PHASES OF HART-RUDMAN**

The Hart-Rudman report was issued in three stages. “New World Coming: American Security in the 21st Century” was released on September 15, 1999. In nearly 150 pages, the commissioners sought to provide an overview of the emerging global order of the first quarter of the 21st century, including new and unanticipated threats, the effects of globalization and social and political fragmentation, and America’s evolving place in the world. Its lead finding on national security was that “America will become increasingly vulnerable to hostile attack on our homeland, and our military superiority will not entirely
protect us.” It concluded: “Americans will likely
die on American soil, possibly in large
numbers.”

An Associated Press story on that report was
headlined “Panel: Americans less secure than
they think,” but it was the recap by the
Washington Times’ Tony Blankley that captured
the sense of dire warning. Under the headline
“Apocalypse soon: Nightmare to come may
catch U.S. unawares,” he wrote:

Weapons of mass nuclear,
chemical and biological
destruction will proliferate. We
should expect conflicts in which
our adversaries, because of [to
quote the report] “cultural
affinities different from our
own, will resort to forms and
levels of violence shocking to
our sensibilities.” The United
States will often be dependent
on allies, “but it will find
reliable alliances more difficult
to establish and sustain.”

The report goes on to conclude
that despite the fact that the
United States will be, both
absolutely and relatively, the
most powerful nation on Earth,
and despite the lack of a global
competitor, we will be “limited
in our ability to impose our will,
and we will be vulnerable to an
increasing range of threats.”

“States, terrorists, and other
disaffected groups will acquire
weapons of mass destruction
and mass disruption, and some
will use them.”

Seven months later, the Hart-Rudman
Commission released “Seeking a National
Strategy: A Concert for Preserving Security and
Promoting Freedom.” In this second phase, the
commissioners proposed a framework for a
new national security strategy, one more
appropriate in the increasingly chaotic post-
Cold War world. “Governments are under
pressure from below by forces of ethnic
separatism and violence,” it observed, “and
from above, by economic, technological, and
cultural forces beyond any government’s full
control.”

Noting that these late 20\textsuperscript{th} century
transformations were on the magnitude of
those that occurred at the advent of the
industrial age, only on a considerably more
compressed timeframe, they concluded the
“essence of American strategy must compose a
balance between two key aims. The first is to *reap the benefits of a more integrated world in order to expand freedom, security, and prosperity for Americans and for others.* But, second, American strategy must also strive to *dampen the forces of global instability so that those benefits can endure.*”  

**‘ROAD MAP FOR NATIONAL SECURITY’**


The report began by reiterating the threat described by the commissioners two years earlier. Attacks on civilians within the United States — “possibly causing heavy casualties” — were likely over the next quarter-century. The commission insisted that “the security of the American homeland from the threats” of “weapons of mass destruction and disruption” “should be the primary national security mission of the U.S. government.” Despite what it described as an emerging consensus on the seriousness of the threat, it said the government had failed to rise to this homeland-security challenge and, as a result, its “structures and strategies” were “fragmented and inadequate.”

The commission called for structural changes to accomplish five goals:

- ensuring the security of the American homeland;
- recapitalizing America’s strengths in science and education;
- redesigning key institutions of the Executive Branch;
- overhauling the government’s military and civilian personnel systems; and
- reorganizing Congress’s role in national security affairs.

The commissioners observed that the continued proliferation of unconventional weapons, combined with the persistence of terrorist groups determined to attack the citizens and symbols of the United States, would soon “end the relative invulnerability of the U.S. homeland to catastrophic attack.” Thus, in the second of its 50 recommendations, the report called for “the creation of an independent National Homeland Security Agency with responsibility for planning, coordinating, and integrating various U.S. government activities involved in
homeland security.” This recommendation was announced nearly two years to the day before the U.S. Department of Homeland Security began operations, in January 2003.\(^\text{13}\)

The commission also listed steps for Congress to reorganize itself in order to accommodate this proposed Executive Branch realignment. It recommended the creation of a single homeland security committee in each house to provide “support and oversight in this critical area.” In light of new security challenges, the commission also called for a systematic review of the Congressional committee structure, given the “complexity and overlaps” of the existing system, in order “to ensure both that important issues receive sufficient attention and oversight and that the unnecessary duplication of effort by multiple committees is minimized…”\(^\text{14}\)

The report warned of some of the very threats that currently weigh heavily as national security concerns, including bioterror, chemical warfare and cybersecurity – vulnerabilities identical to some of those raised again last year by the Sunnylands-Aspen Institute task force report on homeland security. As indicated by the Sunnylands task force, which included the co-chairs of the 9/11 Commission, Governor Tom Kean and Congressman Lee Hamilton, fragmented Congressional oversight continues to impede DHS’s ability to deal with major vulnerabilities, in addition to wasting considerable time and taxpayer dollars.\(^\text{15}\)

Despite the designation by Congress of a committee in each House to supervise homeland security, the “complexity and overlaps” in supervision remain, impeding clear supervision by Congress of homeland security issues, 13 years after Hart-Rudman.

The Hart-Rudman Commission concluded the final part of its report with a challenge:

> Unless the job of implementing reform is taken seriously, and unless the chosen mechanism designates senior officials to be responsible and accountable for guiding reform, the momentum for real change will quickly dissipate.\(^\text{16}\)

**A LACK OF URGENCY IN THE PRESS**

Upon publication of the first report two years earlier, Senator Hart and commission executive director General Charles G. Boyd had met with the editorial boards of the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post. “We got some serious yawns,” General Boyd later recalled, “and that was about it.”\(^\text{17}\) The report received a brief write-up in the Times, and some other minor coverage, but was largely
overlooked by the national media. The following year, the second and more theoretical Hart-Rudman report on national security strategy received even less coverage.

The commission’s final report, released at a press conference in late January 2001, received scattered attention, though not enough to help generate a sense of public urgency. Among television outlets, CNN and MSNBC ran brief stories, and CBS aired a segment as part of its radio news programming. The overall lack of coverage in the print media was disappointing to the commission, though the Los Angeles Times and Washington Post were notable exceptions. Under the headline “New Anti-Terror Cabinet Agency Urged,” the Los Angeles Times’ Norman Kempster wrote:

A blue-ribbon commission on Wednesday called for creation of a Cabinet-level agency to assume responsibility for defending the nation against the increasing likelihood of terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.

The bipartisan panel ... warned bluntly that terrorists probably will attack America with nuclear, chemical or biological weapons at some point within the next 25 years.18

Under the headline “National security overhaul pushed,” Steven Mufson of the Washington Post wrote:

Citing U.S. vulnerability to terrorist attacks, porous borders and new technologies, a congressionally mandated commission on national security recommended the creation of a National Homeland Security Agency, sharply higher spending on scientific research and education, and an overhaul of government institutions.

... The commission’s proposals include unifying the Coast Guard, the Customs Service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Border Patrol into the new homeland security body, whose director would have Cabinet status...

The commission's most pressing language was aimed at
international terrorism. “A direct attack against American citizens on American soil is likely over the next quarter century,” the group said.\textsuperscript{19}

As documented in journalism professor Susan Paterno’s analysis, “Ignoring the Warning,” published in the American Journalism Review in November 2001, the Hart-Rudman report “earned at most a few news stories in the nation’s leading newspapers.” USA Today published a brief item under the headline “Panel warns of national security risk in low math, science performance,” while other regional newspapers picked up the Los Angeles Times or Washington Post pieces. CNN posted an online story by its correspondent David Ensor. Commission members were surprised by the lack of interest from the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. As a consultant to the commission put it, the report essentially “got zero” from those two influential national publications. The overall picture did not change until after 9/11, when members of the commission were “flooded” by media calls.\textsuperscript{20} As Senator Rudman noted then, “We Americans have an ability to procrastinate until we get hit on the head by a 2-by-4.”\textsuperscript{21} “What happened this week,” Senator Hart observed, “ought to call into question what is important in our society and how the media cover it.”\textsuperscript{22}

Why did the three Hart-Rudman reports fail to garner widespread attention? Perhaps part of it was bad timing; the report was released 11 days after the inauguration of President George W. Bush, in the aftermath of a contentious electoral recount. In her analysis, Paterno cites comments and conjecture about a variety of other factors that could have influenced the lackluster response: the warnings were both dire and vague; they were overly repetitive, given other warnings, or seemed too far-fetched; the report was the third to come from the same commission and overlapped some of the contents of the first report; the official release of yet another report was regarded as DBI – dull but important – since it concerned the kind of major government restructuring that typically occurs at a glacial pace in Washington. Yet it proved not important enough to warrant daily coverage and thorough follow-up, analysis and commentary. As a Los Angeles Times reporter put it in the aftermath of 9/11, “Vague warnings that something bad is going to happen in some period of time don’t really tell you a lot.”\textsuperscript{23}

As it happened, lack of interest among the mainstream media, combined with inertia in the White House and across the legislative branch, delayed by eight months the start of national planning for how to respond most effectively to a major attack on American soil.
A LACK OF URGENCY WITHIN GOVERNMENT

In the months between the public release of the final Hart-Rudman report and the 9/11 attacks, Congress and the Executive Branch exhibited a similar lack of concern about the commission’s recommended steps to reduce the nation’s vulnerability to attacks within its borders. Several commissioners were surprised by this disinterest, not only because they viewed the recommendations as convincing and relevant, but also because they thought that in a polarized political environment a bipartisan roadmap to enhance national security would be welcome.

Yet with both Clinton and Gingrich out of office, the progenitors of the commission lacked the wherewithal to transform its recommendations into action. Congress held but half a dozen brief hearings in the spring of 2001 that touched on the report or a portion of its findings (and only half of those dealt with preventing terrorist attacks). Among them were:

- **a hearing on national security strategy**, held by the House Committee on Armed Services, with testimony from commissioners Gary Hart and Newt Gingrich, March 21, 2001;
- **a hearing on combating terrorism**, held by the House Committee on Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans’ Affairs and International Relations, with testimony from commissioner Rudman and executive director Charles Boyd, March 27, 2001; and
- **a hearing on homeland defense**, held by the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Technology, Terrorism, and Government Information, with testimony from commissioners Hart, Rudman, and Hamilton, April 3, 2001.

The last of these illustrates the difficulties encountered by the commission as it attempted to convince members of Congress of the need for an aggressive approach to improving the nation’s defenses against and preparedness for attacks on American soil. Senators Jon Kyl (R-AZ) and Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) were the only subcommittee members present that day. It was the third hearing on the subject they had held over the course of a year, each focused on the findings of a different commission, with the intention to eventually craft legislation to address the vulnerabilities identified.

Congressman Hamilton, in a statement at the hearing, described the crux of the matter: “We made 50 recommendations in this report overall. Seven of them were related to terrorism, and that shows you the emphasis
that the Commissioners gave to this problem. We believe, in short, that homeland security simply has to be addressed with greater urgency.”

Midway through the hearing, Senator Rudman, in response to a question from Senator Feinstein about how to build public support for creating a homeland security agency, observed that she had touched on “an extraordinarily difficult subject”:

How do you convince the American people that the year 2001 is very different than the years past, that there are people who cannot assault us in a conventional military way and would like to find a way that [is] asymmetrical, nonconventional, to hurt us. Some people who are experts in the field, academics and others, have said to us [that] you will never have people understand it until it happens. That’s a horrible thought.”

Senators Kyl and Feinstein agreed in general with the commissioners’ warnings about the threat but doubted that Congress would support major governmental restructuring.

Speaking of both the American people and their government in the face of the threat, Senator Feinstein lamented that “we are not ready, we are not prepared, we are disorganized.”

At the conclusion of the 90-minute hearing, the commissioners expressed the hope that the subcommittee would call on them for assistance in the near future. Yet as with each of the prior hearings on the final Hart-Rudman report, this one produced little sense of urgency within either house of Congress.

The commissioners had even less success convincing key members of the new administration of the value of their work. (The Clinton White House had likewise largely ignored the first two Hart-Rudman reports.) In the spring of 2001, commission co-chairs Hart and Rudman met with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, describing for them the core findings of their final report. However, they were subsequently unable to secure commitments to adopt any of the proposals. Senator Rudman later remarked that the commission’s report “went into a dustbin at the White House.”

In May 2001, President Bush assigned Vice President Dick Cheney to study the terrorist
threats facing the nation and to make concrete recommendations for improving homeland security. Slow to get off the ground, the Vice President’s task force did not begin its work in earnest until just before 9/11.28

A poignant example of the effects of such inattention occurred less than 24 hours before the first plane hit the World Trade Center. On September 10, 2001, a congressional staff working group on terrorism welcomed senior FBI officials for a briefing on the bureau’s antiterrorism efforts. The FBI officials informed the group that the nation’s No. 1 terrorist threat came from the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), radical animal rights and environmental groups. Several staff members who had heard that outside experts, including those on the Hart-Rudman Commission, were focused instead on the threat of mass-casualty terrorism asked if those two fringe groups truly represented the gravest terrorist threat to the country. The senior FBI official in the room confirmed that assessment, and the briefing drew to a close.29

Listening to the news, he swung between a “sick feeling that we had predicted it” and a belief that even if Congress and the White House had immediately adopted all of the commission’s recommendations, “it probably wouldn’t have made a difference.”30 Three days later, during a panel at the Council on Foreign Relations, he noted that “although some people in this government did pay attention to this report, I do not believe the attention was at the level it should have been.”31

If high-level government officials had paid greater attention to the final Hart-Rudman report — or the other pre-9/11 assessments on the growing terrorist threat — they could have begun the arduous task of reorienting the machinery of government to new and growing threats during a period of relative calm rather than within a post-attack atmosphere of crisis. At a minimum, national preparedness and recovery planning could have been months ahead, sparing the country some of the confusion and anxiety endured in the wake of 9/11 and during the subsequent anthrax attacks. As Senators Hart and Rudman wrote in an op-ed in mid-2002, shortly after President Bush proposed the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, its establishment was “not only a necessary step, but one that should have been taken well before September 11.”

“We saw this as necessary not only to defend

ALARMS UNHEEDED

The following morning, September 11, Senator Rudman was riding in a taxi when he heard that terrorists had attacked the World Trade Center.
against terrorism,” they said, “but also to satisfy one of the most important principles of democratic government: accountability, ultimately to the people.” Even after their op-ed appeared, however, legislation to create the Department of Homeland Security remained tied up in partisan disputes for months. The Hart-Rudman Commission’s recommendations represented a clear and cogent analysis, a call to action on what was seen as one of the most critical vulnerabilities of the United States at the turn of the millennium. But their warnings and others failed to summon sufficient interest among the legislative or executive branches of government, among members of the press, or among the general public to move swiftly and unhesitatingly to address these failings. Eight months later, the attacks of 9/11 would lend the terrible weight of truth to the commission’s analysis.

THE LESSONS OF HART-RUDMAN
On the 13th anniversary of the commission’s final report, it is important to recognize that its recommendations did not exist in a vacuum. They stood amid a series of alarms, some of which remain substantially unheeded today. The warnings of Hart-Rudman were not only an attempt at realigning the way our government thought about its national security interests at home in the years preceding 9/11, they were part of a crucial, ongoing examination of homeland security vulnerabilities that culminated in the work of the 9/11 Commission. Although the executive and legislative branches acted on Hart-Rudman’s recommendation to create a single agency to coordinate and supervise homeland security, Congress did not respond to the legislative part of its challenge. Hart-Rudman’s call for consolidated supervision of homeland security by Congress – later a key recommendation of the 9/11 Commission – was echoed last summer by the Sunnylands-Aspen task force. Without such clear oversight:

- Hart-Rudman warned about “complexity and overlaps” in supervision; according to the Sunnylands report, which examined the 112th Congress (2011-2013), more than 100 Congressional committees and subcommittees claim jurisdiction over the Department of Homeland Security, an increase since the department was created in 2002.
- Hart-Rudman warned of the “unnecessary duplication of effort”; in the 112th Congress, Homeland Security personnel took part in 289 formal House and Senate hearings, involving 28 committees, caucuses and
commissions, according to the Sunnylands report.

- Hart-Rudman said clearer supervision of homeland security was essential to ensure that “important issues receive sufficient attention”; according to the Sunnylands report, small boats and planes remain unregulated by national security officials; and

- Hart-Rudman warned of cyberthreats; the Sunnylands report noted that Congress has been unable to pass legislation establishing authority for cybersecurity issues because of a welter of conflicting committee proposals.

For policymakers, the media, and the public, the warnings of Hart-Rudman constitute a powerful argument for strong, clear, streamlined oversight of homeland security. The time to act on this recommendation is not after a preventable terrorist attack but now.

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5 “Road Map for National Security,” 112.


7 For additional information about these reports, see Howard Ball, The USA Patriot Act: A Reference Handbook (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), chapter 1.

8 “New World Coming,” 2.


13 “Road Map for National Security,” viii. It is interesting to note that use of the phrase “homeland security,” adopted by the Bush Administration shortly after 9/11, largely originated with the Hart-Rudman Commission.

14 “Road Map for National Security,” ix, 112.
15 “Task Force Report on Streamlining and Consolidating Congressional Oversight of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security,” September 2013. A pdf of the report is available at http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/task-force-report-streamlining-consolidating-congressional-oversight-us-department. The Hart-Rudman commissioners added that consolidating oversight would also benefit the Executive Branch, “which currently bears a significant burden in terms of testimony. The number of times that key Executive Branch officials are required to appear on the same topics in front of different panels is a minor disgrace. At a minimum, we recommend that a public record should be kept of these briefings and published annually. If that were done, it would become obvious to all observers that a great deal of testimony could be given in front of joint panels and, in some cases, bicameral joint panels.” “Road Map for National Security,” 112. Emphasis in the original.


APPENDIX: Hart-Rudman Commission Members and Staff

Gary Hart
Co-Chair

Anne Armstrong
Commissioner

John Dancy
Commissioner

Leslie H. Gelb
Commissioner

Lee H. Hamilton
Commissioner

Donald B. Rice
Commissioner

Harry D. Train
Commissioner

Warren B. Rudman
Co-Chair

Norman R. Augustine
Commissioner

John R. Galvin
Commissioner

Newt Gingrich
Commissioner

Lionel H. Olmer
Commissioner

James Schlesinger
Commissioner

Andrew Young
Commissioner