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Congress raps self, agencies for 9/11

By Audrey Hudson
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The first congressional report on pre-September 11 intelligence failures laid some of the blame at the lawmakers' own feet yesterday, saying lack of funding and poor oversight by Congress contributed to a "catastrophic" intelligence breakdown.

"The failure of the intelligence community to provide adequate forewarning was affected by resource constraints and a series of questionable management decisions related to funding priorities," said the report, the first out of Capitol Hill on the intelligence failures since terrorists struck the Pentagon and World Trade Center.

The review was conducted by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence subcommittee on terrorism and homeland security and was made public yesterday.

Among the other causes cited by the review for the pre-September 11 intelligence-gathering failures by the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency, were:

- Leaks by the intelligence agencies themselves.
- Low priority given to anti-terrorism efforts.
- Preference for funding bureaucracy over field work.
- Laws against dealing with human rights abusers.
- Duplication in congressional oversight authority.

The bipartisan panel headed by Chairman Saxby Chambliss, Georgia Republican, and Rep. Jane Harman, California Democrat and ranking member, was created in January. The panel first was told to recommend ways to improve counterterrorism and homeland security and later was asked to investigate intelligence deficiencies.

The panel found that CIA managers used money intended for field work and analysis to enlarge the central bureaucracy. This emphasis on staffing at CIA headquarters "hurt the CIA's capabilities prior to 9-11."

The report also said internal CIA guidelines that limited the agency's cooperation with people suspected of human rights violations had a "chilling effect on operations." In undemocratic nations, analysts have noted, the kind of people who might be useful to the CIA as spies or agents are likely to have committed human rights violations.

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"These guidelines are still in place despite congressional direction that they be repealed," the report said.

Additionally, the CIA "chronically lacks" foreign language skills and training specific to counterterrorism, where knowledge of such languages as Tajik, Pashtun and Arabic is necessary but rare.

At the FBI, the report said, its mission as a law enforcement agency meant that preventing terrorism mattered less and that the agency was "culturally incapable of sharing information."

Counterterrorism did not get enough priority in the competition for limited funds at the NSA, the report charged. The agency was "chronically" short of linguists.

Prophetically, the report said, leadership within the intelligence community concluded at a high-level meeting on Sept. 11, 1998, that "failure to improve operations management, resource allocation, and other key issues within the [intelligence community], including making substantial and sweeping changes in the way the nation collects, analyzes, and produces intelligence, will likely result in a catastrophic systemic intelligence failure."

The panel recommended that Congress create senior staff positions in both parties' leadership because "congressional oversight of counterterrorism is highly duplicative and inefficient."

Several leaks from the agencies "have done major damage" to intelligence gathering, and the panel recommended prosecuting leakers.

In a statement, FBI Assistant Director John Collingwood said the bureau already had responded to many of the congressional panel's criticisms.

"A new set of priorities are in place, and since 9/11 the FBI has devoted every resource needed to prevent another attack," he said.

The statement cited an increase in the number of CIA officials working with the FBI, a quadrupling of the number of Arabic linguists under contract and command changes made by Director Robert S. Mueller III.

Meanwhile, key House committee leaders completed their work to create President Bush's Homeland Security Department and presented their findings to a select panel assigned with wrapping the measures into an omnibus bill.

House Majority Leader Dick Armey is chairman of the Select Committee on Homeland Security and plans to send a measure to the full House by tomorrow combining the bills from 10 committees that merges 22 federal agencies into the new department.

"When people wonder how Congress can possibly complete such a large task in a short amount of time, they forget the strength that can be found in our committee system," said Mr. Armey, Texas Republican.

The House is expected to take up the bill by the middle of next week, coinciding with a Senate committee vote on its version.

Disagreements centered on civil-servant rights and protections, the inclusion of the Coast Guard and Federal Emergency Management, and congressional control and oversight.

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