

# September 11: A Decade Later

## Early Warnings Ignored

by Jonathan Schanzer

In its final report of July 22, 2004, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (commonly known as the 9/11 Commission) charged that Congress had failed America. In the commissioners' judgment, Congress had "adjusted slowly to the rise of transnational terrorism as a threat to national security. In particular, the growing threat and capabilities of [Osama] bin Laden were not understood in Congress ... To the extent that terrorism did break through and engage the attention of the Congress as a whole, it would briefly command attention after a specific incident, and then return to a lower rung on the public policy agenda." Indeed, the commission was unequivocal about "Congress's slowness and inadequacy in treating the issue of terrorism in the years before 9/11."<sup>1</sup>

The commission was not alone in its indictment. Richard A. Clarke, former White House coordinator for counterterrorism under President Bill Clinton, asserted that "only after 9/11 did Congress muster the political will to strengthen the U.S. laws to fight terrorist financing and money laundering."<sup>2</sup> Paul Pillar, a former CIA official, noted that congressional interest in terrorism merely mirrored the public's interest, spiking after major terrorist incidents but waning shortly thereafter.<sup>3</sup>

But these critics were not entirely accurate. One small group of congressmen was undeserving of these admonishments. Working under the obscure banner of the Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, a handful of legislators consistently warned of jihadist terrorism for more than a decade before the 9/11 attacks.

### TASK FORCE ORIGINS

The story of U.S. aid to the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s is well known. As author George Crile detailed in his book, *Charlie*

*Wilson's War*, Rep. Charlie Wilson (Democrat, Texas) of the House Appropriations Committee

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1 *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004), pp. 104-6.

2 Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 195.

3 Paul R. Pillar, *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), pp. 20, 204-5.

championed an initiative to arm and fund these forces and repel the Soviet invasion.<sup>4</sup>

A lesser-known story was the supply of non-military aid, thanks to the efforts of Rep. Bill McCollum (Republican of Florida). With the help of his chief of staff, Vaughn Forrest, McCollum airlifted medical supplies to El Salvador, Thailand, Cambodia, Chad, Angola, Vietnam, and other conflict zones. The success of these “McCollum Airlifts” prompted the U.S. Agency for International Development to request in 1985 that a similar program be developed for Pakistan.<sup>5</sup>

Forrest also found a legal loophole that enabled the Pentagon to give away military surplus goods as humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. He further discovered that Air Force reserve pilots could maintain flight proficiency levels by flying transport planes to Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

As McCollum’s staff worked in Afghanistan and Pakistan, they cultivated a network of locals and expatriates, some of whom reported on radical, anti-Western elements,<sup>7</sup> alerting McCollum to new dangers among the mujahideen.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of 1988, the tide of the war had turned. Amid heavy losses, the Soviets began to withdraw from Afghanistan, and by May 15, 1989, they were gone. McCollum, however, did not join in the celebration. In a *Washington Post* op-ed, he boldly proclaimed that “something has gone terribly wrong with the war in Afghanistan.”<sup>9</sup> Drawing from continuing reports on radi-

calism among the mujahideen, McCollum sought to warn the West. To this end, together with Rep. Duncan Hunter (Republican of California), the head of the Republican Research Committee, he created the ad-hoc Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare.<sup>10</sup>

The aims of the task force were not immediately apparent. Congress did not fund it or provide it with offices. McCollum put Forrest in charge of the group and soon hired as its director Yossef Bodansky, a part-time academic from Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies, who provided additional research.

In its first known report, issued on July 28, 1989, task force letterhead listed its members as Republican representatives Michael DeWine (Ohio), David O’Brien Martin (New York), Porter Goss (Florida), Jim Lightfoot (Iowa), Bob Livingston (Louisiana), Jack Buechner (Missouri), John G. Rowland (Connecticut), and Olympia Snowe (Maine). Also listed as cochairman was Dana Rohrabacher (California).<sup>11</sup> By the following year, the roster had changed so that only Goss, Livingston, and Snowe remained from the original letterhead. Joining them were Republican representatives William Broomfield (Michigan), Benjamin Gilman (New York), Robert Doman (California), and Christopher Cox (California).<sup>12</sup>

Membership changed frequently in the early years. Inclusion simply signaled an active interest in the subject.<sup>13</sup> Members also contributed funds from their budgets for task force operations and reports.

The task force faxed its reports to more than 400 people, including members of the intelligence community, the White House, the State Department, Congress, and the media.<sup>14</sup>

**A 1991 report on “Emerging Trends and Threats” emphasized the threat posed by Afghan mujahideen.**

4 George Crile, *Charlie Wilson’s War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), pp. 33-114.

5 Author’s interview with Peter Leitner, Pentagon City, Va., June 9, 2009.

6 Ibid.

7 *The Hill* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 26, 2003.

8 Phone interview with Bill McCollum, Sept. 29, 2005.

9 Bill McCollum, “Afghan Endgame: The CIA Has Bungled It,” *The Washington Post*, Sept. 10, 1989.

10 *The Hill*, Nov. 26, 2003.

11 “Trends in Afghanistan,” Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, July 28, 1989, Hoover Institution library, Stanford University, Stanford, Calif.

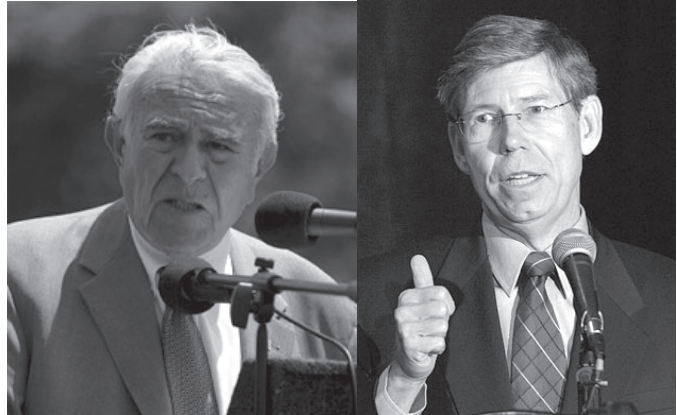
12 “National Security Advisory,” Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, Jan. 29, 1991, Hoover Institution library.

13 Author interview with Donald Morrissey, Washington, D.C., June 19, 2009.

14 Author interview with James Geoffrey, Washington, D.C., June 12, 2009.

Staffers recall going from one member's office to another begging for boxes of paper to print the reports because the task force lacked funds, but even when the group printed enough reports, they often went unread.<sup>15</sup>

Part of the problem was the tone of the research. Analysis by the task force conveyed a sense of absolute certainty. Indeed, the reports rarely included caveats or even attributions. It was as if the task force was conveying immutable facts—a style typically avoided in intelligence reports, think tank analyses, and journalism.



*Reps. Benjamin Gilman (left) and Bill McCollum (right) were two of the leading figures in the Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, which sought to alert Congress to the threat of “radical-revivalist Islamists” beginning in 1989.*

## EARLY PRESCIENCE

The task force reports, without exception, contained errors. But, if one can look past the errors, some of the early reports had remarkably prescient information.

The first report, titled “Trends in Afghanistan,” warned that the “radical-revivalist Islamists, (the fundamentalists), who are the recipients of the bulk of U.S. aid, are actually involved in international terrorism aimed at the United States and its allies throughout the Islamic world.” Should Washington fail to take note, the task force warned, “there will be unleashed a wave of terrorism aimed at the U.S.”<sup>16</sup>

In another early report of February 28, 1990, titled “Saudi Arabia,” the task force warned that “Afghan mujahideen and Arab Wahhabi activists, financed by Saudi money, have attempted to enforce their way of life ... on rural populations in Afghanistan.”<sup>17</sup>

A separate 1990 task force report titled “A Question of Trust,” drew attention to Gulbaddin Hekmatiyar, the leader of the Islamist faction Hezb-i-Islami. It noted that he had received U.S. assistance in the 1980s and that his faction now posed a threat to U.S. interests in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> The task force was nearly thirteen years ahead of its time; in 2003, the U.S. Treasury designated Hekmatiyar for terrorist activity with al-Qaeda and the Taliban.<sup>19</sup>

A 1991 report on “Emerging Trends and Threats” emphasized the threat posed by Afghan mujahideen but also provided intelligence not acted on for more than a decade by fingering “Sami ar-Rayan” as a U.S.-based Islamist who attended an “Islamic Conference for Palestine” in 1989.<sup>20</sup>

17 Richard J. Leitner and Peter M. Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings: The Lost Reports of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare*, vol. II (Washington, D.C.: Crossbow Books, 2009), pp. 166-8.

18 “A Question of Trust,” Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, Mar. 1, 1990, private library of Rosanne Klass, New York City.

19 “Alphabetical Listing of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons” (SDN list), Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, Washington, D.C., accessed July 11, 2011.

20 Leitner and Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings*, vol. 1, p. 336.

15 Author interview with Scott Brenner, Washington, D.C., June 22, 2009.

16 “Trends in Afghanistan,” July 28, 1989.

This was a reference to Sami al-Arian, a Palestinian professor in Florida who pleaded guilty in 2006 to a charge of conspiring to provide services to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, in July 1992, the task force issued a report alleging that Tehran and Damascus were printing “nearly perfect” counterfeit U.S. currency to destabilize the U.S. economy while easing Iran’s deficit. McCollum even displayed the currency at a press conference,<sup>22</sup> driving Iran’s U.N. mission to lash out at the task force and its “wild hallucinations of the extreme right.”<sup>23</sup> Later, however, the Treasury confirmed the task force’s report, noting that, “excellent forgeries have turned up in the Middle East.”<sup>24</sup>

On February 1, 1993, McCollum submitted an 80-page report for the *Congressional Record* titled “The New Islamist International.”<sup>25</sup> It was an attempt to provide an overview of the jihadist movement, including an analysis of the “leadership and high command” of terrorists in Sudan where “the pan-Islamist movement has taken

hold.” While the report did not mention al-Qaeda, it did note the existence of an “international jihad organization.” It identified the “most important figure” within that organization as the late Abdullah Azzam—later identified as al-Qaeda’s cofounder—and also mentioned Ayman al-Zawahiri (al-Qaeda’s future deputy leader), and Abdul Majid

al-Zindani (finally designated by the U.S. Treasury in 2004 for “working with bin Laden, notably serving as one of his spiritual leaders. In this lead-

ership capacity, he ... played a key role in the purchase of weapons on behalf of al-Qaeda and other terrorists”).<sup>26</sup>

Remarkably, the February report also warned of Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, “the spiritual guide of the most radical branch of Islamic Jihad in Egypt,” who “arrived in the U.S. in the fall of 1990 and established an Islamist center ... in Brooklyn, New York.” It noted that Abdel Rahman was exploring the “possibility of terrorist operations” in the United States.<sup>27</sup> Although he was largely unknown at the time, Abdel Rahman would soon be arrested and later convicted for his role in a plan to plant five bombs in the New York City area.<sup>28</sup>

Task force member Benjamin Gilman is worthy of special mention. Even before the creation of this group, he demonstrated an abiding interest in counterterrorism legislation. He was among the most vocal advocates of the Domestic Antiterrorist Reward Act (HR 1241) in March 1993, raising the reward for leads in domestic terrorism cases from \$500,000 to \$2 million.<sup>29</sup> The program led to, among others, the 1995 capture of senior al-Qaeda operative Ramzi Yousef in Islamabad, Pakistan.<sup>30</sup>

Gilman also relentlessly pushed the State Department to reform. He hammered it for allowing Abdel Rahman into the United States on a tourist visa in 1990 and campaigned to have the department update its antiquated microfiche system.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, one cannot discuss the early years of the task force without addressing Yossef

**Bodansky’s 1993 book alleged that Tehran was training jihadists to “crash the airliner ... into a selected objective.”**

21 “Sami al-Arian Pleads Guilty to Conspiracy to Provide Services to Palestinian Islamic Jihad,” Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., Apr. 17, 2006.

22 Author interview with Scott Brenner, June 22, 2009.

23 *The Independent* (London), July 3, 1992.

24 *Moneyclips* (San Angelo, Tex.), July 2, 1992.

25 Leitner and Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings*, vol. I, pp. 102-91; excerpts at “The New Islamist International,” The Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, Feb. 1, 1993.

26 “United States Designates bin Laden Loyalist,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, Washington, D.C., Feb. 24, 2004.

27 Leitner and Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings*, vol. I, pp. 102-91; excerpts at “The New Islamist International,” The Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, Feb. 1, 1993.

28 *The New York Times*, Jan. 18, 1996.

29 Gerald Solomon, speaking in support of the “Domestic Antiterrorist Reward Act of 1993,” H1035, House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, Mar. 4, 1993.

30 CNN, Mar. 1, 2003; for more on Yousef, see Simon Reeve, *The New Jackals: Ramzi Yousef, Osama bin Laden and the Future of Terrorism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999).

31 Benjamin Gilman, “Time to Slam the Door on Terrorists,” U.S. House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, 103rd Congress (1993-94), Washington, D.C., May 11, 1993, p. E1207.

Bodansky's 1993 book, *Target the West: Terrorism in the World Today*, in which he argued that a new terror network, the Armed Islamic Movement, had emerged with "operational centers in Sudan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan."<sup>32</sup> Bodansky was clearly struggling to understand the nascent al-Qaeda network.

Perhaps the most notable passage appeared on page 15, which alleged that Tehran was training jihadists "to seize (or hijack) a transport aircraft. Then, trained air crews from among the terrorists would crash the airliner with its passengers into a selected objective."<sup>33</sup> This, of course, was a chilling description of the 9/11 plot eight years later.

## EARLY FAILURES

But, as noted above, the task force reports were riddled with errors, some of which were spectacular. One example is the wildly inaccurate analysis of the 1990 crisis with Iraq. One report, "Some Speculations on Desert Warfare," erroneously predicted that war would "almost certainly cover the entire region" and that Saddam Hussein's forces would "defeat U.S.-led forces piecemeal."<sup>34</sup> Another falsely stated that "Iraq had already developed other nuclear weapons."<sup>35</sup> After U.S.-led forces routed Saddam, the task force erroneously warned of "spectacular strikes, including suicide attacks" in the United States.<sup>36</sup>

The task force released a 1992 report titled "Terrorism in the U.S.: Emerging Trends and the Florida Connection." It claimed, without attribution, that "Disney World . . . would make a visually spectacular and socially meaningful target" for terrorists.<sup>37</sup>

In 1993, the task force warned that a "new

phase in an Islamist, terrorist campaign in the United States and overseas has been initiated." A report warned of attacks "by the Iranians and their Islamist allies" between March 17 and March 23, and then from March 25 through the end of the month, as the "most likely period for some terrorist attack to occur."<sup>38</sup> The attack, of course, never occurred.

In what may have been its most spectacular failure, the task force released a May 1993 report alleging that a terrorist network existed

within a "radical [native] American Indian movement." It alleged that Libya provided aid to Native American allies, who in turn provided "shelter and hiding places to terrorist operatives on various reservations."<sup>39</sup>

These are just a few of the task force's many errors in the early years.

## UNDER FIRE

The task force also quickly began to accumulate enemies. In 1994, the Qur'anic Open University published a book titled *Target Islam: Exposing the Malicious Conspiracy of Zionists against the World of Islam and Prominent Muslim Leaders*. The book rebuked the task force for attempting to "maliciously link American Muslim organizations and individuals" with the January 1993 World Trade Center attack. The Qur'anic Open University, by way of background, was headed by Sheikh Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani, who was later implicated—but not convicted—in the kidnapping and murder of *Wall Street Journal* journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002.<sup>41</sup>

**A November 1994 report was one of Congress's earliest warnings about Osama bin Laden.**

32 Yossef Bodansky, *Target the West: Terrorism in the World Today* (New York: S.P.I. Books, 1993), pp. xv.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

34 Leitner and Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings*, vol. 1, pp. 312-7.

35 "Iraq's Other Bomb," Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, Nov. 28, 1990, Hoover Institution library.

36 Leitner and Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings*, vol. 1, pp. 42-4.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 380-9.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 403-5.

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 429-33, report titled, "Terrorism and the Radical American Indian Movement: The Unexpected Connection."

40 *The New York Times* News Service, Jan. 10, 2002; *The Baltimore Sun*, Jan. 10, 2002.

41 Mira L. Boland, "Sheikh Gilani's American Disciples," *The Weekly Standard*, Mar. 18, 2002.

Other Muslim groups lashed out at the task force for a report titled “Iran’s European Springboard,” which claimed that Tehran sent fighters to Bosnia to launch a European Islamist revolution and that Bosnian Muslims were slaughtering their own people as a ploy for world sympathy. The report alleged that “several key events, mostly strikes against civilians, that had galvanized public opinion and governments in the

West to take bolder action in Bosnia-Herzegovina, were in fact ‘staged’ for the Western media by the Muslims themselves in order to dramatize the city’s plight.”<sup>42</sup>

In response to the report, in 1993, American Muslim Council director

Abdurahman Alamoudi accused the group of “Muslim-bashing.”<sup>43</sup> Eleven years later, Alamoudi would be sentenced by a federal court to twenty-three years in jail for plotting to assassinate the King of Saudi Arabia with financing and assistance from Libya.<sup>44</sup> At the time, however, his criticism was taken seriously. Rohrabacher resigned from the task force, registering his dissatisfaction with the report.<sup>45</sup> Representatives Snowe and Cox left shortly afterward.<sup>46</sup>

The task force soon stopped listing members on the letterhead. Listed beneath the seal of Congress and the title of the Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare were only the names of Bill McCollum (chairman), Vaughn Forrest (chief of staff), Yossef Bodansky (director), and Donald Morrissey (legislative director).

**The task force drew the ire of CAIR, a Muslim group later tied to terrorism.**

The Alamoudi controversy did not help when task force members approached Rep. Charlie Rose (Democrat of North Carolina), then-House administration chairman, to create the Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare Caucus. This was an effort to transform the group into a recognized and bipartisan institution with a congressional budget.<sup>47</sup> In addition to the fallout from the Alamoudi scuffle, the intelligence community and the State Department reportedly bristled at the task force’s attempts to challenge their authority. Rose eventually denied the request in July 1994.<sup>48</sup>

## EARLY ATTEMPTS TO IDENTIFY AL-QAEDA

Despite its setbacks, the task force continued doggedly to try to understand the evolution of the jihadist movement. One 1994 report, titled “Islamist Terrorism and the Geneva Connection,” identified Ayman al-Zawahiri as “one of the senior leaders of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad,” who relocated “to Pakistan where he joined a fledgling international Islamist group in Peshawar.”<sup>49</sup>

The task force produced another important report, which McCollum submitted for the *Congressional Record*, noting that “Arab volunteers continued to arrive in Peshawar” and that the “main Ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood] facility is Maktaba-i-Khidamat (services offices), which was originally established by the late Shaykh Abd Allah Azzam.”<sup>50</sup> Here the task force had fingered (using the Urdu spelling) the central clearinghouse for al-Qaeda in its early years—Maktab al-Khidamat.

Then, on November 2, 1994, the task force released a report titled “The Persian Gulf Redux.”

42 Yossef Bodansky and Vaughn S. Forrest, “Iran’s European Springboard?” Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, Sept. 1, 1992.

43 Greg Noakes, “Republican Task Force Faces Backlash on Bosnia Report,” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, July/Aug. 1993, p. 30.

44 “Abdurahman Alamoudi Sentenced to Jail in Terrorism Financing Case,” U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., Oct. 15, 2004.

45 Author telephone interview with Dana Rohrabacher, June 26, 2009.

46 Noakes, “Republican Task Force Faces Backlash on Bosnia Report,” p. 30; *National Catholic Reporter*, Mar. 19, 1993.

47 *Roll Call* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 20, 1994.

48 *Ibid.*, July 11, 1994.

49 “Islamist Terrorism and the Geneva Connection,” Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, Mar. 14, 1994, accessed Aug. 13, 2010. This link has since been removed.

50 Bill McCollum, “Pakistan Supports Terrorist Rebels in Kashmir—By Yossef Bodansky and Vaughn S. Forrest,” House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, June 22, 1994, p. E1296.

Though it did not identify him as a central figure, the report was one of Congress's earliest warnings about Osama bin Laden:

the Committee for Advice and Reform, a Saudi Islamist group closely affiliated with Khartoum, specifically condemned the establishment of the Higher Council for Islamic Affairs. In a statement signed by Osama bin Laden, the Committee accused Riyadh of "trying to deceive the public"... Bin Laden further accused Riyadh of attempting "to put an end to genuine Islam."<sup>51</sup>

## NEW LEADERSHIP, SAME INCONSISTENCY

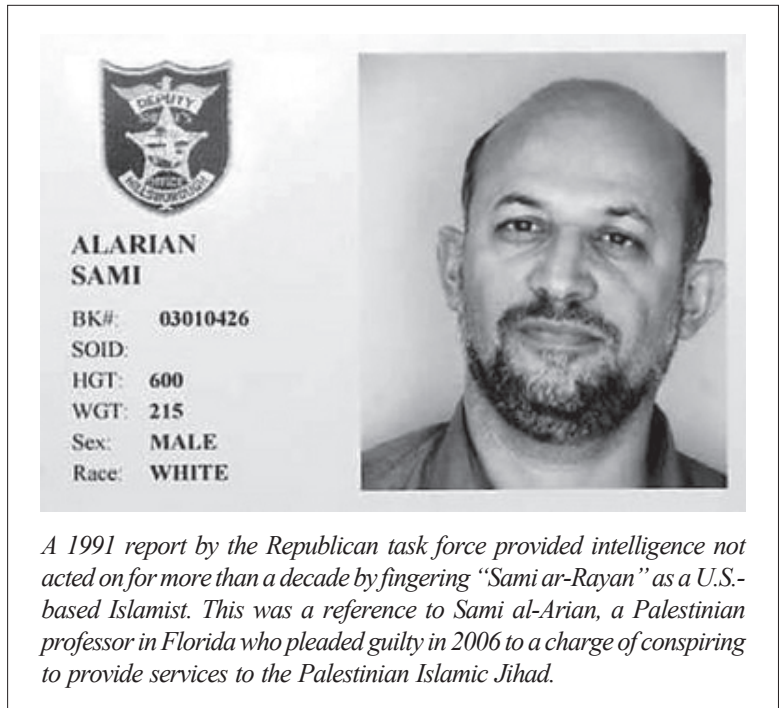
On January 4, 1995, the 104th Congress was sworn in, marking the first time Republicans controlled both houses since 1953.<sup>52</sup> The task force also underwent dramatic change. McCollum was appointed to the House Intelligence Committee, which prompted him to relinquish his chair. "I had access to secure things that I couldn't talk about," McCollum later said.<sup>53</sup> Task force members agreed that McCollum could assist the group's work from the inside.<sup>54</sup>

51 Leitner and Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings*, vol. 2, pp. 364-5.

52 Laurence M. Vance, "What a Republican Majority Has Not Meant," Future of Freedom Foundation, Fairfax, Va. Sept. 29, 2004.

53 Author telephone interviews with Bill McCollum, Sept. 29, 2005, Jan. 16, 2010.

54 Author telephone interview with Vaughn S. Forrest, Jan. 13, 2010.



Rep. Jim Saxton (Republican of New Jersey) became the new chairman.<sup>55</sup> He approached his new position with vigor and took a more active interest in the research and writing involved in producing task force reports.<sup>56</sup>

The task force also drew interest from new members, including former actor and musician Sonny Bono (Republican of California), who was elected to represent California's 44th district in November 1994, and quickly became one of the members who contributed funds for task force salaries from their congressional budgets.<sup>57</sup> Gilman, who continued to press for State Department reform, had become chairman of the House International Affairs Committee.

The task force, despite these changes, continued to issue questionable reports. In February 1995, the group warned that "Iran-sponsored Is-

55 Author interview with James Geoffrey, June 12, 2009.

56 Author telephone interview with Mark O'Connell, July 22, 2009.

57 Author telephone interview with Gary Gallant, July 16, 2009; *Report of the Clerk of the House, 1996* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997).

lamist terrorists may soon strike in Washington D.C.—specifically the U.S. Congress and the White House.”<sup>58</sup> As was the case with previous warnings, no such attack took place.

The group also issued questionable research

following the April 19, 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, alleging that Islamists had carried out the attack when, in reality, the attack was homegrown. But on May 24 of that year, it also released a report titled “Recent Terrorist Conferences,” warning of the activities of

both bin Laden and Zawahiri.<sup>59</sup>

The task force also issued two responses to the bombings in the Saudi cities of Riyadh (1995) and Dhahran (1996) where it struggled to grasp the extent of al-Qaeda’s involvement. However, it continued to call it the “Armed Islamic Movement” in one report,<sup>60</sup> and the “International HizbAllah” in another. The latter report unequivocally warned of the “rise in prominence of Osama bin Laden.”<sup>61</sup>

**In 1997, the task force warned that “bin Laden and his allies have accelerated their preparations for ... terrorist attacks against U.S. forces.”**

## JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE YEARS

In 1997, Saxton was named chairman of the Joint Economic Committee, whose primary task was to recommend improvements in economic policy. He only had until the end of 1998, as the chairmanship rotates between Democrats and Republicans every two years, but he inquired about putting his two task force staffers—Bodansky and Forrest—on the committee payroll under the assumption that “terror can have a significant impact on the economy.”<sup>62</sup>

In the end, he only secured sufficient funds for Forrest.<sup>63</sup> Bodansky continued to receive a salary pooled by task force members.<sup>64</sup>

On March 12, 1997, the task force issued “The Dhahran Bomb: Update,” warning that “bin Laden and his allies have accelerated their preparations for the resumption of terrorist attacks against U.S. forces in the Middle East and elsewhere.” It questionably described bin Laden’s network as being wholly controlled by Iran but also cited an *al-Quds al-Arabi* article describing bin Laden’s “fortified bases and headquarters in the mountains ... in the Tora Bora military base of Nangarhar province.”<sup>65</sup> Tora Bora was, of course, the scene of heavy fighting after the U.S.-led coalition invaded Afghanistan in December 2001 and where bin Laden escaped via underground caves.<sup>66</sup>

At around this time, the task force came under attack again from an American Muslim group. An April 10 article in an Arab newspaper quoted Nihad Awad of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) as stating that “the congressmen who provide public funds to support this task force need to explain to their constituents why hard-earned tax dollars are being wasted on inflammatory reports.” He claimed that Bodansky had made “a career out of bashing Islam and Muslims.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, the task force had again drawn the ire of a Muslim group later tied to terrorism. Indeed, the U.S. government identified CAIR in 2007 as an “un-indicted coconspirator” in *United States vs. Holy Land Foundation*, a Hamas terrorism finance case.<sup>68</sup>

Gilman, in the meantime, had become fixated on the threat of the Taliban. He and former task force member Dana Rohrabacher publically and repeatedly challenged the Clinton administration’s official policies toward the Taliban.<sup>69</sup> He was cen-

58 Leitner and Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings*, vol. 1, pp. 509-12.

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 245-52.

60 *Ibid.*, pp. 533, 547, 567.

61 *Ibid.*, pp. 573-8.

62 Author telephone interview with Jim Saxton, July 24, 2009.

63 Author telephone interview with Vaughn Forrest, Jan. 14, 2010.

64 Author telephone interview with anonymous Joint Economic Committee staffer, Sept. 3, 2009.

65 Leitner and Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings*, vol. 1, pp. 579-83.

66 *The Washington Post*, Apr. 17, 2002.

67 *Al-Nashra* (Fairfax, Va.), Dec. 23, 1998.

68 *The New York Sun*, June 4, 2007.

69 Dana Rohrabacher, “9/11 Represented a Dramatic Failure of Policy and People,” House of Representatives, June 21, 2003.



tral in the congressional effort to condemn the Taliban. In 1998, he warned of a “new kind of adversary, one that draws its power from a convergence of the destructive tactics of international terrorism and radical Muslim extremism with one of the world’s largest heroin empires.” He warned that “bin Laden is only the tip of the iceberg and removing him will not end the threat . . . from Muslim terrorist extremists.”<sup>70</sup>

## BODANSKY’S BOOK

Following the 1998 twin embassy bombings in Africa, bin Laden had unquestionably become a household name in the United States. Capitalizing on Americans’ interest in the Saudi-born terrorist, Bodansky released *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America*.<sup>71</sup> He, however, declined to provide source footnotes for his text of more than 400 pages. Thus, as one reviewer later noted, “Bodansky leaves the veracity of many of his claims to ride on his name alone.”<sup>72</sup> This, coupled with the lack of caveats and qualifiers (similar to the style of task force reports), weakened the book’s credibility.

Still, no other analyst had attempted what Bodansky had done. His book described bin Laden as a “cog, albeit an important one, in a large system that will outlast his own demise.”<sup>73</sup> He further identified the existence of what is now recognized as al-Qaeda, though referred to it by the name used in task force reports: the “Armed Islamic Movement.” He noted that “under the leadership of bin Laden, Zawahiri, and their colleagues, the Islamist terrorist system continues to expand.”<sup>74</sup> In the end, Bodansky’s book was filled with both errors and worthwhile analysis, but it came out at a time when the public knew precious little about Islamist terrorism.

70 Benjamin Gilman, “The Taliban: Protectors of Terrorists, Producers of Drugs,” H. Con. Res. 336, House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, Oct. 8, 1998, p. E1989.

71 New York: Prima Publishing, 1999.

72 Ali Asadullah, “Book Review: Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America,” *Islam Online*, Nov. 4, 2001.

73 Bodansky, *Bin Laden*, p. 406.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 404.

By this time, in early 1999, Saxton had rotated out of the position of chairman of the Joint Economic Committee. Forrest attempted to stay on as a staffer, but he recalled that “the chairman was opposed to having me continue.”<sup>75</sup> Forrest left and founded the Higgins Counterterrorism Center along with defense analyst Peter Leitner. After Forrest’s departure, the task force continued to operate on a shoestring budget. Bodansky, according to staffers, worked out of a tiny room, a converted broom closet, down the hall from Saxton’s office.<sup>76</sup>

## SPECIAL PANEL (1999-2000)

In May 1999, House Speaker Dennis Hastert (Republican of Illinois) named Saxton as chair to a new Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism. Saxton expressed his delight in presiding over “an official entity.”<sup>77</sup> Bodansky, however, did not receive an official position on the special panel; he remained an advisor to Saxton and the sole employee of the task force.<sup>78</sup>

Saxton’s panel held its first hearing on the threat of biological, nuclear, and cyber terrorism. It included testimony on the threat of an electromagnetic pulse attack, in which a nuclear warhead could be detonated high above the Earth’s surface, causing permanent damage to electrical systems on the ground. The panel also featured an expert on cyber terrorism, a new and growing field in the age of the Internet.<sup>79</sup> Saxton, the

**In 1999, an oversight panel chaired by Jim Saxton held its first hearing on biological, nuclear, and cyber terrorism.**

75 Author telephone interview with Vaughn Forrest, Jan. 14, 2010.

76 Author telephone interview with Mark O’Connell, July 22, 2009.

77 Author telephone interview with Jim Saxton, Dec. 15, 2009.

78 Author telephone interview with Jim Saxton, Sept. 4, 2009.

79 “Terrorist Threats to the United States,” Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism, House Committee on Armed Services, Washington, D.C., May 23, 2000.

ambitious chairman, held five more panels on terrorism-related topics in subsequent weeks.<sup>80</sup> One, titled “Terrorism and Threats to U.S. Interests in Latin America,” featured Elliott Abrams, who later served as deputy national security advisor during President George W. Bush’s second term.<sup>81</sup>

As Saxton enjoyed his newfound success, however, his task force predecessor fell on hard times. In November 2000, the founder of the task force, Bill McCollum, relinquished his House seat to run for the Senate but lost.<sup>82</sup> After two decades of service (he began in 1981), McCollum’s time in Congress had ended.

## COUNTDOWN TO 9/11

In the lead up to the September 11, 2001 attacks, terrorism remained a relatively high-profile subject in Congress after the lingering shock of the 1998 twin embassy bombings in Africa and the 2000 attack on the U.S.S. *Cole*. Senior intelligence officials provided regular briefings on Capitol Hill, and Saxton continued to raise awareness

through the newly created Special Oversight Panel.

Gilman, for his part, continued to warn of the Taliban. The Islamist government had destroyed two ancient statues of Buddha and forced Hindus to wear a yellow symbol on their clothes as a means to identify them as non-Muslim.<sup>83</sup> Other leg-

islators, alarmed by a tactic used by the Nazis

**The task force issued a statement calling for the “destruction of international terrorism’s supportive infrastructure.”**

80 “Terrorism and Threats to U.S. Interests in the Middle East,” Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism, House Committee on Armed Services, Washington, D.C., July 13, 2000.

81 “Terrorism and Threats to U.S. Interests in Latin America,” Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism, House Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., June 29, 2000.

82 *The Hill*, Nov. 26, 2003.

83 “Afghan People vs. The Taliban,” hearing before the House Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights, House Committee on International Relations, Washington, D.C., Oct. 31, 2001.

in World War II, joined him in his campaign.

The task force, according to staffers, continued to operate but did so primarily in the form of briefings. Saxton and Bodansky reportedly met with various decision-makers and analysts around Washington to generate awareness, but the analytical output had slowed.

Finally, seeking to devote more time to the oversight panel, Saxton handed off the chairmanship of the task force to Eric Cantor (Republican of Virginia) on April 1, 2001. Cantor, not yet forty years old, was a freshman representative with a vivid interest in counterterrorism.<sup>84</sup> According to the public record, Bodansky’s salary that year came from the budgets of representatives Cantor, Hunter, and Tom DeLay (Republican of Texas), then House majority whip, among others.<sup>85</sup>

## THE ATTACK AND ITS AFTERMATH

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Jim Saxton got to work early and received a telephone call informing him that his father had passed away. The grieving Saxton called his longtime colleague, Duncan Hunter, who came to the office to console him.

That same morning, nineteen al-Qaeda operatives hijacked four commercial airliners filled with passengers and carried out the most devastating terrorist attack in U.S. history. Predictably, the congressional record on September 12 is filled with fiery reactions even from legislators with little understanding of who had attacked Americans, or why.

The task force, now under Cantor, issued a release stating that “the terrorist attacks are an act of war. Therefore, retribution must be swift, sure, and overwhelming. But retribution is not enough. In war, one must destroy the enemy’s ability to wage war ... It is only through the destruction of international terrorism’s supportive infrastructure that attacks like this can be pre-

84 Author telephone interview with Jim Saxton, Sept. 4, 2009.

85 “Yossef Bodansky, Congressional Staffer — Salary Data,” LegiStorm, Washington, D.C., accessed July 1, 2011.

vented and terrorists emasculated.”<sup>86</sup>

Saxton asked how the United States could prevent this from ever happening again. He offered five specific suggestions, including restructuring the intelligence community. Gilman called for similar reforms, calling on Congress to “review all of our policies toward international terrorism, our airport security, and our intelligence capability.”<sup>87</sup> He later joined President George W. Bush to view the wreckage at Ground Zero.

Bodansky was soon in high demand. Television, radio, and newspaper audiences wanted to hear about this Saudi, who had engineered the most devastating terrorist attack in the country’s history. Bodansky, author of *Bin Laden: the Man Who Declared War on America*, was uniquely positioned to fit that role.

In 2002, Duncan Hunter was named chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. He, in turn, created the Terrorism, Unconventional Threats, and Capabilities Subcommittee, and placed it in Saxton’s hands.<sup>88</sup> Saxton recalled that “after 9/11, some members [of Congress] quietly came up to me and gave us credit for what we did in the hallway.” He was also invited to Vice President Dick Cheney’s office, which sought information about bin Laden’s potential use of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>89</sup>

## SHIFTING SANDS

On November 26, 2002, the 9/11 Commission first met to prepare a report on the September 11 attacks, the lapses in intelligence that enabled them to take place, and the role of the various arms of the government to prevent terrorism in the future. Its members, headed by former New Jersey governor Thomas Kean, included former representatives Lee Hamilton (Democrat of Indiana) and Timothy Roemer

(Democrat of Indiana), along with former senators Bob Kerrey (Democrat of Nebraska) and Slade Gorton (Republican of Washington).<sup>90</sup> Notably, the commission invited not one member of the task force.

Gilman, after three distinguished decades in Congress, retired in January 2003. Saxton and Hunter, however, continued to bring attention to the threat of terrorism through the hearings of the House Armed Services Committee. Saxton’s role as chairman of the Subcommittee of Terrorism, Unconventional Threats, and Capabilities kept him particularly busy. He traveled to Iraq in 2003 and Afghanistan in 2005. As one staffer recalled, his passion was funding the elite counterterrorism forces of the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM).<sup>91</sup>

The task force survived, but with institutes specializing in terrorism popping up all over Washington, members were losing interest. Cantor, Hunter, Saxton, and DeLay pooled their funds, but the records show that the amount dropped each year.<sup>92</sup> Bodansky lists his last year on the task force as 2004.<sup>93</sup>

Thus, after fifteen years, the Republican Task Force effectively dissolved. Cantor still proudly noted his affiliation with the group, stating that it was “composed of members of Congress who study the threat of international terrorism on the United States and develop policy proposals and legislative recommendations regarding the fight against terrorism.”<sup>94</sup> However, the task force today does not maintain an official online presence, and there is no public record of its roster.

**The task force deserves praise for mustering all the resources it could to warn the public of the looming dangers.**

86 Congressional Task Force press release, Sept. 12, 2001, cited in Media Matters Action Network, May 5, 2010.

87 S. J. Resolution 22, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., Sept. 12, 2001.

88 Author telephone interview with Jim Saxton, July 24, 2009.

89 Ibid.

90 “Biographical Information: Commission Members,” National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, Washington, D.C., accessed June 14, 2011.

91 Author telephone interview with Tom Hawley, Jan. 6, 2010.

92 “Yossef Bodansky, Congressional Staffer — Salary Data.”

93 “The Boards of the Global Panel Foundations,” accessed June 14, 2011.

94 “About Eric,” Eric Cantor website, accessed June 14, 2011.

## THE 9/11 REPORT

On July 22, 2004, the 9/11 Commission released its report and charged that Congress had failed to respond to the threat of transnational terror. It made no mention of the task force or its members. On August 3, *The Miami Herald* reported that McCollum, then campaigning for Senate, “generally endorsed” the commission’s findings.<sup>95</sup> “No, we weren’t acknowledged,” he said. “But the point was to identify the failures ... I thought the report from that perspective was pretty accurate. I suppose I was used to the task force not being recognized.”<sup>96</sup>

Forrest was less forgiving. He stated later that it was “mind-boggling that the 9/11 Commission didn’t talk to me, Saxton, McCollum, or the others.”<sup>97</sup>

Saxton, for his part, continued to raise awareness of terrorism, writing articles for *The Washington Times*<sup>98</sup> and *The National Interest*.<sup>99</sup> He also remained chair of the Subcommittee on Terrorism and Unconventional Threats, holding hearings on U.S. strategy in the “Global War on Terror” and other relevant topics. He spent three more years in Congress, then retired in January 2009, the same year as Hunter.

## FOR THE RECORD

The legislative record demonstrates that the Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare was undeserving of the *9/11 Report’s* admonishments. Thousands of pages of task force reports and statements incontrovertibly testify to this.

One *9/11 Report* staffer later recalled that

95 *The Miami Herald*, Aug. 3, 2004.

96 Author telephone interview with Bill McCollum, Jan. 16, 2010.

97 Author telephone interview with Vaughn Forrest, Jan. 13, 2010.

98 Jim Saxton, “Confronting Complacency,” *The Washington Times*, July 29, 2005.

99 Jim Saxton, “Reshaping Our Iran Policy,” *The National Interest*, Jan. 3, 2007; idem, “Finally, An Iranian Containment Strategy,” *The National Interest*, Jan. 26, 2007.

“the commission did not bring the same amount of resources, attention, or focus to investigation into the performance of the legislative branch.” In fact, the commission “was divided into nine teams, and Congress was not the focus of any of them. It was a last-minute look.”<sup>100</sup>

To be fair, the task force reports were not easy to find. Even the Library of Congress does not have them on file. As one archivist explained, the library would not collect the reports because they were not released by the Government Press Office and were not official publications. Moreover, because of their Republican identification, the archivists may have determined the reports were partisan, and therefore, elected not to collect them.<sup>101</sup> The many errors in the task force reports may have been a factor, too.

Until 2007, only a few of its earlier documents could be found online. Then, Peter Leitner and his son Richard, released *Unheeded Warnings: The Lost Reports of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare*. So the reports had not exactly been lost. Leitner requested them in 2006 from Saxton, who gladly complied.

The record clearly shows that the task force cannot be credited with conveying a clear view of the threat during the 1990s. Indeed, the reports were as erroneous as they were prescient. From warning of Libyan-inspired terrorists among Native Americans, to foretelling attacks on a Florida theme park, the task force was often more wrong than right. Yet the group’s members should be credited for their tenacious work to understand al-Qaeda and its affiliates at a time when almost no one else did.

On the tenth anniversary of those devastating attacks, the group deserves praise for mustering all the resources it could to warn the public of the looming dangers. At the very least, its efforts were worthy of mention in the 9/11 Commission’s report.



100 Author telephone interview with anonymous former 9/11 Commission staffer, Jan. 13, 2010.

101 Interview with archivist, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Dec. 16, 2009.