



Jordan Tama

Terrorism and National Security Reform: How Commissions can Drive Change during Crises

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The oldest stunt in every politician's playbook when one encounters a crisis is to create a commission. The conventional view of commissions is well captured in a joke Tama shares (p.4). The joke by Lloyd Cutler, who was advisor to Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton goes something like this:

"A retiring president leaves his successor three envelopes to be opened in sequence, to learn what to do each time he faces a serious crisis. The first envelope says, 'Blame your predecessor.' The second says, 'Appoint a commission.' The third says, 'Prepare three envelopes.'"

The joke succinctly captures the widespread perception of commissions; that they are created for purposes other than creating results and most do not produce results. It is this conventional view of conventions that Tama sets out to challenge and manages to unsettle with a great deal of success.¹

The book originates out of Tama's doctoral thesis at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. This in itself holds several valuable lessons for readers and students of national security which is an issue I will deal with a little later in the review.

Firstly, the book is divided into three parts. The first part outlines the research questions and delineates the existing body of knowledge and the conventional view of commissions. This is followed by outlining the central argument and the method of testing the argument. The next section titled 'Patterns of Commission Influence' has two chapters wherein Tama outlines a Theory of Commission Influence and the Impact that National Security Commissions. This section tries to identify the focal points and tries to identify under what circumstances commissions are able to exert the maximum influence. This is followed by the third part titled 'Commissions and Counterterrorism Policy' which comprises of detailed case-studies of several blue-ribbon, executive commissions beginning with the Long Commission to the 9/11 Commission and Intelligence Reform.

Tama makes use of an interesting yet effective combination of quantitative and case-study approach to studying an issue at hand. This is a useful template for carrying out research for students of the area. Tama analyses (Chapter 3) an original data set (which is a modification of the data shared by Prof. Zergard) of fifty-one national security commissions between the beginning of the Reagan administration and the end of 2006. This data set includes information on numerous variables that contribute to commission outcomes as well as two original measures of commission impact. Analysing the impact that these commissions have had Tama conducts a quantitative analysis focussed on the conditions under which the commissions have been created, their type, scope and internal characteristics. The section and the book at large is benefited as a result of the 209 odd interviews Tama has conducted with individuals who have served in executive or congressional commissions in some capacity

1. Amy B. Zergard, *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.



or other. The interviews and the insights they have provided to the author is very apparent by the depth and dexterity with which Tama handles the subject at large.

A very important reason why the book should be read by students of national security is due to the fine template it provides for developing an excellent research design. One of the great strengths of the book is that the author takes on the significant methodological challenges head on and addresses them early in the book and does so very clearly and cogently. One of the first challenges was defining a commission. Tama defines a commission as “a temporary panel of two or more people – including at least one private citizen – created by an act of Congress or executive branch directive, which has only advisory powers and which is mandated to produce a report within four years” (p. 5).

To assess the effectiveness of commissions, Tama divides commissions into agenda commissions and crisis commissions. He describes the former as those which are established either by the Congress or the President with an aim to shift the status quo. Crisis commissions on the other hand are set up to divert political pressure during crises like that of a situation marked by disaster or government scandal. He however, goes on to concede that the changes are less likely to occur as a result of agenda commissions. Interestingly, though Tama accedes that crisis commissions are formed to divert political pressure, he also states that because of the ensuing disaster, a window of opportunity opens up briefly, which allows such commissions to often play a role in changing the existing policy.

Further, Tama also measures the impact that commissions creates by taking into account as to whether they have been set up by the Executive or by the Congress. Tama states that executive commissions have a greater impact because they can be appointed relatively faster. Additionally, executive commissions are likely to be less politically polarized and thus can reach consensus decisions much easier. They can therefore complete their work before the window of opportunity created by the crisis closes. Tama also states that the success of a commission is also influenced by its mandate. A narrow mandate allows the commission to carry out its work more quickly. The focus of the commission’s attention around a narrow set of issues results in a situation which is conducive for consensus among the members of the commission on the larger issues.

Tama also elucidates three characteristics which greatly contribute to the ability of commissions to get their recommendations adopted. First is the political credibility of the members of the commission. Related to this is the second characteristic which is the importance of unanimity and the absence of dissent in formulating its policy recommendations. Both these raises the commission’s public acceptability and as a result its success.

Another factor that contributes to a commission’s success is its willingness and ability to engage in advocacy and follow-up activities after its recommendations are released. This is brought to the forefront by the difference in the approaches of the Aspin-Brown Commission and the Kean (9/11) Commission. The 9/11 Commission hogged the limelight both during and following the submission of the report. On the other hand, the Aspin-Brown Commission members did not push the recommendations made in their report once it had been submitted (p. 39). However, the commission did have considerable influence in the internal workings of intelligence agencies.² It is interesting to note that despite this, the Aspin-Brown

2. Loch K. Johnson, *The Threat on the Horizon: An Inside Account of America’s Search for Security After the Cold War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.



Commission scores only 2.78 as compared to say Paul Bremer's Commission on Terrorism which scores 3.08. This could be because of the fact that Tama assigns these points on the basis of the interviews he has conducted. The responses provided by the interviewers therefore could skew the points assigned to measure the commission's influence. The measuring of commission influence is one area where more work needs to be done and where others could take Tama's work forward.

Another way in which Tama's work could be developed further is to study the manner in which the recommendations made by the commissions get implemented in the real world. The implementation of the recommendation by the 9/11 Commission for the creation of a Director of National Intelligence (DNI) at the apex of the US Intelligence Community (IC) is a case in point. Though the idea behind creating the DNI was to bring more cohesion and coordination amongst the IC, opposition to the DNI resulted in the creation of a institution without much budgetary and personnel powers. Without these powers, the DNI was severely challenged to carry out the mandate for which it was established. Therefore, measuring the follow-through in terms of the actual implementation of the commissions' recommendations becomes equally important.

Given that Tama's work solely looks at US national security commissions and terrorism, the real success of Tama's work would be if the framework he provides is used to carry out analyses of national security reforms in other countries. This would be of immense value to the existing knowledge base in the area.

Jordan Tama has produced an exceptional work which should be read by all those interested in national security policy and reform. The underlying thread of the book - crises beget opportunities for change - is an interesting one which challenges many pre-conceived notions. The take away from the book is that there is a silver lining in every crisis, which should be made use of by the decision-makers to push for reform.

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