

H-Diplo | ISSF

Roundtable, Volume III, No. 16 (2012)



A production of H-Diplo with the journals *Security Studies*, *International Security*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and the International Studies Association's Security Studies Section (ISSS).

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF> | <http://www.issforum.org>

Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo/ISSF Editors

George Fujii, H-Diplo/ISSF Web and Production Editor

Introduction by Ole R. Holsti, Duke University

Jordan Tama. *Terrorism and National Security Reform: How Commissions Can Drive Change During Crises*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. ISBN: 9781107001763 (hardback, \$93.00); 9780521173070 (paperback, \$29.99).

Published by H-Diplo/ISSF on **18 June 2012**

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-3-16.pdf>

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Introduction by Ole R. Holsti, Duke University

*Nothing fails like success because we don't learn from it.
We learn only from failure, but we don't always learn
the right thing from failure.* Kenneth E. Boulding ¹

The Chinese definition of crisis is "danger" and "opportunity" ²

International crises often give rise to commissions designed to assess the origins of the crises and to generate reforms that might improve American foreign and defense policies. Jordan Tama's exceptional study assesses the impact of fifty-one Congressional and Executive commissions established between 1961 and 2006 that focused on issues of national security and terrorism.

Because the three reviewers--Erik J. Dahl, Glenn Hastedt, and Loch K. Johnson--have very effectively summarized and raised a few interesting questions about the Tama study, there is no need for me to plough over the same terrain. Suffice it to say that we share an agreement that Tama has produced a work of exceptional value, not only for students of national security policy, but also for those with an interest in whether, how, and under what circumstances the massive institutions that constitute the U.S. government can undergo significant reforms. In this respect, the finding that it often takes a crisis to stimulate change is of special interest. That conclusion appears to provide some support for Kenneth E. Boulding's somewhat dolorous observation, cited above, and for the Chinese definition of crisis as presenting both a danger and an opportunity.

In an era of intensely bitter ideological and partisan divisions, little short of a major crisis would appear capable of creating sufficient agreement to engender even modest reforms. The current controversy arising from the American troop withdrawal from Iraq illustrates how even seeming agreement on policy can generate deep partisan cleavages. In 2008, the outgoing administration of President George W. Bush negotiated an agreement with the Nuri al-Maliki regime in Iraq, stipulating the withdrawal of all U.S. forces at the end of 2011. The Obama administration accepted the Bush--al-Maliki timetable and, in a December 2010 interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, al-Maliki made it clear that *nothing* could change that timetable. As the deadline approached and as it became clear that Iraq continued to suffer from serious sectarian conflict, the Obama administration attempted to negotiate permission for some American troops to remain in Iraq, but was rebuffed; those who stayed would lose any immunity, thereby putting them at the mercy of the Iraqi justice system. Had Washington agreed, Obama's Republican critics would be justly outraged and

¹ Kenneth E. Boulding, *Ecodynamic: A New Theory of Societal Evolution* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1978).

² Although some Chinese philologists--for example Victor H. Mair--have questioned this definition, it has been widely used and cited. For example, Presidents John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon used it in their speeches.

might be threatening impeachment. Instead, they are criticizing a president who honored an agreement signed by his GOP predecessor.³

The Tama study also gives rise to a somewhat different point that deserves mention. This book first saw the light of day as a doctoral dissertation at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Even graduate students with a somewhat limited interest in national security policy or commissions could profit from reading it as they contemplate their own dissertation research. Tama's book is a fine template for developing an effective research design from which young scholars can learn a great deal.

The project began with an important subject which generated a significant puzzle--in this case, why do some commissions seem to challenge the conventional wisdom that most if not all of them are a useless waste of time? In this respect, see the dismissive *New York Times* editorials of 1996 on the Aspin-Brown Commission and of 2005 on the Robb-Silberman Commission, cited in the Loch K. Johnson review.

To unravel the puzzle, Tama developed a multi-pronged research design that made excellent use of multiple methodologies. Happily the discipline has mostly moved beyond the unproductive "quantitative versus qualitative" debates dominated by such slogans as, "If you can't count it, it doesn't count," or "If you can count it, that ain't it." The Tama study used statistical analyses where it was appropriate to quantify data on the fifty-one commissions; employed well-designed comparative case studies to flesh out the regressions and other quantitative results; and carried out an impressive set of interviews with 209 commission members to provide further details and nuances to supplement the statistical and case studies. Obviously not all research projects can count on equally impressive interviews with public officials, if only because principals of earlier eras will have passed from the scene.

One final word. The dictum that "no man is an island" also applies to most major research undertakings. As Tama makes clear in his very gracious acknowledgements, he benefited greatly for an exceptionally supporting cast of mentors at Princeton; from generous data-sharing by Professor Amy Zegart, an earlier student of commissions; and from the willingness of so many former members of commissions to share their insights and evaluations. May all young scholars be similarly fortunate as they embark on their research.

³ For example, Kenneth Pollack, an ardent pre-war proponent of the Iraq invasion [*The Threatening Storm*, 2002] called Obama's "overly rapid drawdown from Iraq" as "his biggest mistake as a wartime president." *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2012, p. 112. A former member of the Bush National Security Council even asserted that Obama will have acted responsibly *only if*, within a year, Iraq is a stable democracy and a faithful ally in dealing with terrorists. That would merely require al-Maliki and his colleagues to transform themselves into leaders possessing the best attributes of Presidents Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln.

Participants:

Jordan Tama is Assistant Professor of International Relations at American University's School of International Service and Research Fellow at A.U.'s Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies. His research focuses on the foreign policy making process and the roles of Congress, the president, and other institutions in that process. Dr. Tama is an American Political Science Association Congressional Fellow for 2011-12. He received a Ph.D. from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.

Ole R. Holsti, Ph.D., Stanford, 1962, is George V. Allen Professor of International Affairs Emeritus, Duke University. His most recent books are *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, rev. ed., University of Michigan Press, 2004; *Making American Foreign Policy*, New York: Routledge, 2006; *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: How Publics Abroad View the U.S. since 9/11*, University of Michigan Press, 2008; and *American Public Opinion on the Iraq War*, University of Michigan Press, 2011.

Erik J. Dahl is an assistant professor of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, where he teaches in the National Security Affairs Department and the Center for Homeland Defense and Security. His research and teaching focus on intelligence, terrorism, and international and homeland security, and his work has been published in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, *Intelligence and National Security*, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, and *The Naval War College Review*. He recently completed a book manuscript titled *Preventing Surprise Attack: Intelligence Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to the Present*. He retired from the U.S. Navy in 2002 after serving 21 years as an intelligence officer, and received his Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Tufts University.

Glenn Hastedt received his PhD in political science from Indiana University. He is chair and professor of Justice Studies at James Madison University. His research interests in intelligence policy focus on questions of surprise and intelligence failures, and the politics of intelligence policy. He is the author of *American Foreign Policy*, 9th edition (Pearson, 2012) and numerous chapters and journal articles on intelligence.

Loch K. Johnson is the Regents Professor of International Affairs in the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Georgia. He served as assistant to the chairman on the Church Committee, staff director of the Subcommittee on Intelligence on the House Intelligence Committee, and assistant to the chairman of the Aspin Commission on Intelligence. His latest books are *The Threat of the Horizon: An Inside Account of America's Search for Security After the Cold War* (Oxford, 2011), and *National Security Intelligence: Secret Operations in Defense of the Democracies* (Polity, 2012). He is the senior editor of the international journal *Intelligence and National Security*, published in London.

Review by Erik J. Dahl, Naval Postgraduate School

Jordan Tama's new book is an outstanding addition to the literature on national security reform and the role of national commissions in effecting policy change. He takes a fresh look at a topic that hasn't gotten enough attention, and makes the very intriguing argument that blue-ribbon commissions accomplish much more than they usually are given credit for. Although I generally subscribe to the conventional wisdom Tama challenges, which sees national commissions as unlikely to spur policy change, I came away from the book at least partly convinced by his argument.

Tama focuses on commissions and panels that examine national security issues, and attempts to determine whether such commissions prompt significant reforms, and if so why some are more influential than others. There are considerable methodological challenges here, beginning with the question of how one defines a commission, and one of the strengths of the book is that he addresses these challenges directly and clearly. He 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 final report within four years (5).

To study the question of commission influence he developed a data set of 51 national security commissions that were established either by Congress or the President from 1983 to 2006. Quibbles can be made about his selection of these commissions. For example, he excludes the report on the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia because it was the report of one person, General Wayne Downing, rather than of a commission; but that report was actually the work of a task force led by Downing, so perhaps it should be included in Tama's study.¹ In general, however, his data set seems well developed and appropriate for this study.

Another strength of the book is that Tama approaches the problem through the use of statistical/quantitative tools as well as through qualitative, case study analysis. He devotes a chapter to a statistical analysis of the 51 commissions in his data set, and although I do not have enough experience with quantitative analysis to fully assess his statistical chapter—especially his regression analysis—I applaud his attempt to do more than case study work. The largest part of the book consists of three chapters containing a total of eight case studies of major commissions that investigated terrorist threats or attacks. The case studies are well written and argued, and are especially useful because they are based on more than just the commission reports and secondary accounts: the author conducted interviews with 209 commissioners, commission staff members, and other government officials. These interviews appear to have produced a rich, original source of material.

¹ *Report of the Assessment of the Khobar Towers Bombing*, August 30, 1996, at <http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/downing/report.pdf>.

Tama finds that in many cases commissions have resulted in new legislation, produced organizational reform, or sparked other policy changes that would not have been likely otherwise. Commissions formed after a crisis, he argues, tend to have more impact than those formed to examine issues in the absence of a crisis; and it helps when commissions have narrow mandates, they report their findings quickly and by consensus, and they establish a vigorous advocacy program to push for the reforms they recommend. Tama's arguments here seem solid, and the significance of these factors—especially concerning the importance of consensus and public advocacy—can be seen in the dramatic difference in the impact reached by the Congressional Joint Inquiry following the 9/11 attacks and the later 9/11 Commission. As Tama points out, the Joint Inquiry does not actually fit his definition of a commission because it did not include any private citizens. But the Joint Inquiry report is a good illustration of what doesn't work with government commissions, as it was the subject of harsh dissents by some members and attracted little public support for its proposals. It was soon overshadowed by the 9/11 Commission, which attracted a great deal of public support, reached its conclusions by consensus, and orchestrated a lengthy public relations campaign that outlived the official existence of the commission itself.

The book is an important counter to the standard view of intelligence reform commissions and panels, as seen for example in the work of Amy Zegart.² According to this view, commissions and blue ribbon panels do little to help the intelligence community learn the lessons of failures and disasters. Zegart, for example, reviewed twelve major commissions and task forces that examined the intelligence community and counterterrorism efforts between 1991 and the 9/11 attacks, and found that although most of them came to essentially the same conclusions regarding the need for organizational reform, little was actually done.

Tama argues that when commissions are formed in the absence of a major crisis—as was the case with most of the commissions in the 1990s—they are unlikely to gain much traction. But he also makes the case that at least some of these commissions did actually have more impact than is commonly recognized. One example Tama cites is the Hart-Rudman Commission, which has to some extent been seen as a poster child for the way most national security commissions conduct their work: a group of respected senior officials and experts study a problem carefully, they issue a lengthy report filled with wise recommendations, and then they and their report are quickly forgotten. Since 9/11 the Hart-Rudman Commission has been praised for having warned about the growing terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland, but has also been seen as ineffective because no one listened to what it had to say. Tama reverses this conventional view, arguing that the Hart-Rudman Commission had a great deal of influence through putting the concept of a national homeland security agency on the public agenda. The later establishment of the Department

² Amy B. Zegart, *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). See also Michael Warner and J. Kenneth McDonald, *US Intelligence Community Reform Studies Since 1947* (Washington: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005).

of Homeland Security, he writes, might not have occurred had not the Hart-Rudman Commission initially floated the idea.³

The favorable treatment of the 9/11 Commission in this book is also interesting in contrast to the much less positive views expressed in recent years by experts such as Zegart, who argues that the commission's reforms have not accomplished much, and Paul Pillar, who charges that the commission's work was a flawed and politicized effort that served largely to blame the intelligence community for its perceived failings prior to the attacks.⁴

A critical aspect of Tama's argument concerns his definition of what makes a commission successful. Stimulating the adoption of new laws or policies is enough; he does not require that a commission have any long-term effect, or even have any positive effect at all on public policy, in order to be considered a success (192). This definition sets the bar rather low, but I don't consider this a weakness. As Tama reasonably notes, commissions and panels usually disband long before their recommendations can be fully implemented; it is simply beyond the control of most commissions to influence what happens after their recommendations are either accepted or rejected.⁵ But his definition of success does help to explain the difference between his findings and those of Zegart and others. The Crowe Commission formed after the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings, for example, counts as a success for Tama, because it led to changes such as increased funding for embassy security (117). But in a broader sense, as the 9/11 Commission argued, neither the embassy bombings nor the Crowe Commission were enough to change America's perception of the threat from international terrorism and to prevent the later 9/11 attacks.⁶

One factor about commissions that I did not see Tama take directly into account is how a commission frames its recommendations. He notes that commissions are more effective

³ Tama credits the Hart-Rudman Commission for having been one of the first to use the term "homeland security" in American politics (146, note 20).

⁴ Pillar writes that the 9/11 Commission played to emotions and politics, which "would elevate the 9/11 Commission to the top of the pantheon of blue-ribbon panels, whose reports usually serve as little more than doorstops." Paul R. Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), 236. Another harsh critique of the way the 9/11 Commission did its work is Philip Shenon, *The Commission: An Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation* (NY: Twelve, 2008).

⁵ An exception might be the 9/11 Commission, whose members continued active as advocates for intelligence and national security reform, with private funding, after the commission officially disbanded.

⁶ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (NY: Norton, 2004), 349.

when they have a narrow mandate rather than a broad one, and he also points out that some commissions offer long lists of recommendations while others have only a few. It would be interesting to examine whether or not commissions are more successful—if they can better “sell” their recommendations—if they are able to simplify those recommendations down to only a few. He quotes William Webster as explaining that one commission lacked influence because “We didn’t have one big recommendation to get people’s attention” (31). By contrast, the 9/11 Commission may have been successful in part because for many Americans its recommendations boiled down to a few key concepts such as the establishment of a Director of National Intelligence. How important is it for commissions to be able to offer simple, “bumper sticker” type recommendations, as opposed to long lists of more detailed policy ideas?

One of the most significant contributions of the book may be to add to the literature on *focusing events*: disasters and crises that can stimulate policy change and help organizations and decision-makers learn. Tama’s discussion of the importance of crises in producing change echoes many of the findings of the focusing event literature, and he cites the work of scholars in this area such as Thomas Birkland. But he does not specifically link his findings to that literature, and I think it would be useful to set his work in the broader context of focusing events.⁷ For example, one of the findings in that literature is that crises are most effective in bringing about change and reform when innovations and changes have already been placed on the agenda. The Hart-Rudman Commission, it seems, may have served this function prior to the 9/11 attacks by placing the idea of a homeland security agency on the shelf, where it could easily be taken down and dusted off when policy makers were looking for changes to make. This suggests that a question for future research might be whether national security commissions are most effective when they are used to generate support for ideas and policies that are already in play. Or can they develop and successfully advocate for truly new and innovative policies?

In *Terrorism and National Security Reform*, Jordan Tama has written an important book that challenges many common understandings in the fields of public policy, national security, and intelligence.

⁷ Tama does discuss the concept of focal points, but not focusing events.

Whether they are identified as national commissions, blue ribbon commissions, commissions of inquiry, or special national investigative commissions, Congress and the president, independently or jointly, have often turned to temporary panels to advance policy goals or in response to a scandal or disaster. Jordan Tama examines the later. In particular he is concerned with the policy influence of national security and defense crisis commissions of which there were 51 from the time of the Reagan administration through the end of 2006.

Political folklore depicts commissions as largely lacking in independent policy significance. They are political creations designed to protect reputations or sully those of others, buy time, deflect attention or promote a predetermined policy position. With *Terrorism and National Security Reform* Jordan Tama debunks these stereotypes and shows that under a specified set of circumstances commissions have exerted a powerful independent influence on the national security policies adopted by Congress and the Executive Branch.

Tama demonstrates that while agenda commissions, those created in periods of political quiet to advance a policy goal, have on the whole lacked the ability to trigger political change, those created under crisis conditions have shown a remarkable ability to contribute to and produce change in national security and defense policy. Key here is the existence of a window of opportunity. Such windows close quickly, a factor that Tama cites as causing commissions formed by the executive branch to have a greater success rate than congressional commissions which tend to take longer to form and often have larger memberships. Also important to the success of a commission is a narrow mandate that allows it to carry out its work in an expedited fashion and formulate its key recommendations around a narrow set of issues. This in turn helps create a clear focal point around which the larger political debate can coalesce.

Three additional characteristics contribute greatly to the ability of commissions to see their recommendations adopted. First is the importance of political credibility rather than technical expertise on the commission. Second, and closely related to political credibility, is the importance of unanimity and the absence of dissent in making its policy recommendations. The third characteristic contributing to a commission's success is its willingness and ability to engage in advocacy and follow-up activities after its recommendations are released.

The analysis presented in *Terrorism and National Security Reform* proceeds in three parts. Tama begins by presenting a theory of commission influence that centers on the importance of focal points in solving negotiation problems and identifying under what conditions commissions are best able to contribute to their creation. Next, he undertakes a quantitative analysis that focuses on the conditions under which national security commissions have been created, their type, internal characteristics, and scope. He also constructs policy adoption and policy rating indexes. In constructing these Tama relies heavily on interviews with 209 individuals who served on commissions in some capacity.

Third, Tama presents a series of case studies over three chapters on the creation, operation, and impact of commissions established to investigate terrorist attacks beginning with the Long Commission (Marine barracks attack, October 1983) and the Inman Commission (U.S. Embassy attacks in Beirut, April 1983 and February 1984). His examination continues in a second chapter with the Crowe Panel (U.S. embassy attacks in Kenya and Tanzania, 1998), the Brenner Commission (National Commission on Terrorism) and the USS *Cole* Commission. His detailed case studies conclude with an investigation of the Hart-Rudman Commission (U.S. Commission on National Security in the 21st Century) and the 9/11 Commission.

A brief concluding chapter extends the analysis to the Iraq Study Group. It is only here that Tama's analysis appears to overreach. In the core chapters of *Terrorism and National Security Reform* he presents a cogent and compelling case for revising our assessment of how and under what conditions commissions can be influential in formulating policy. Tama borders on forsaking a core element of his own analysis by seeking to credit the Iraq Study group with policy influence even though neither Congress nor President Bush embraced the report and Bush's post-election announcement of the surge was widely seen as a repudiation of the Group's core recommendations. The success of a commission's efforts is closely tied to the existence of a crisis atmosphere. Here, Tama correctly notes that the conditions were too polarized for its recommendations to be positively received but the broader point is that the Iraq War was not a crisis of the same type as that produced by terrorist attacks (nor was it a commission established in response to terrorism). The Iraq War was not an act of aggression against the United States but a self-inflicted wound. Rather than unite Americans, it divided them. Moreover, in his earlier statistical analysis of commission reform proposals the argument is not made that in the absence of a crisis a commission will have no policy impact; it therefore seems unwarranted to stress the impact made by the Iraq Study Group on policy in this chapter. We are left to wonder about the possible policy impact of other low scoring commissions.

Tama firmly establishes that commissions created by the Executive Branch under conditions of a crisis and with ample amounts of political credibility that actively lobby for their recommendations are well positioned to have their key recommendations adopted. His analysis also raises important questions that while beyond the boundaries of his inquiry are nevertheless potentially critical areas of extension for helping establish the overall significance of commissions in the policy process.

A common starting point for two areas of extension is found in conceptualizing policy making as an ongoing stream of activity that leads from the introduction of an idea into the policy process and continues through its implementation. Commissions navigate this stream, selectively taking ideas and moving them forward so that they are (possibly) adopted as policy. A first question that arises is where successful commissions find new ideas that are adopted. The question is especially pertinent since, as Tama notes, windows of opportunity close quickly creating a need for commissions to work quickly if they are to see their recommendations adopted. Moreover, commissions are credited by participants with introducing new ideas into the policy process. Do commission members bring them with them, are they old ideas being recycled, or are they new creations? Is there a

difference in where successful versus unsuccessful commissions turn to for ideas? A Staff member is credited with coming up with the idea of creating a new professional diplomatic security service within the State Department (90). The concept of a Director of National Intelligence (DNI) was publicly endorsed by Lee Hamilton prior to the start of the 9/11 Commission (161). The idea of a DNI itself can be traced back at least to the 1971 Schlesinger Report.

The second extension looks to the end of the policy stream, the implementation of policies that result from commission recommendations and evaluations of their merits. In his concluding chapter Tama notes the relevance of these questions and legitimately argues that they lie beyond his study's scope. Commissions cannot be held accountable for how fully and faithfully their recommendations are implemented. Still, a full evaluation of the work of commissions needs to move into this portion of the policy stream. An obvious problem in doing so is the never ending nature of policy implementation. Somewhat arbitrary judgments will need to be made in this regard, but without venturing into implementation issues we are left with cases such as the establishment of a Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board coming out of the 9/11 Commission recommendations which has been virtually invisible under both Bush and Obama. A more profitable route for evaluating and anticipating the implementation of commission recommendations might be to dissect adopted commission recommendations by type: budgetary, personnel and organizational. Far greater implementation problems are likely to encounter organizational changes than budgetary or personnel ones. If, this proves to be the case it might provide an additional lesson for policy makers. Tama's first lesson is that in the absence of a crisis, have low expectations. From an implementation perspective this rule might be extended to the work of all commissions.

A related implementation extension grows out of Tama's case studies that repeatedly highlight the importance of a powerful actor within the bureaucracy who supports the commission recommendation. On occasion this individual helped sponsor the commission in order to bring about a desired change. In other instances the policy makers only came to embrace the idea later. Might the successful implementation of a commission's recommendation rest heavily on the presence of a policy advocate or champion within the organization? Tama presents us with a full range of responses. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger is cited as sponsoring the Long Commission in order to advance his favored set of reforms (79-80). Secretary of State Madeline Albright had a mixed response to recommendations of the Crowe Panel (116). President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney declined to be briefed on the Hart-Rudman Commission recommendations (138). This hypothesis dovetails nicely with Tama's observation that narrowly focused commissions are more likely to succeed in getting their recommendations adopted because they involve pleasing fewer constituencies.

The third area of extension involves jumping to new ponds. Tama notes that potentially important differences exist between national security policy and domestic policy that might significantly reduce the ability of domestic commissions to see their recommendations reach the policy agenda. Another set of comparisons is with the activity of and recommendations made by national security commissions of inquiry in other

countries. While this is a relatively new area of comparative inquiry and not one not limited to terrorism, studies of commissions do exist spanning such diverse settings as Great Britain, Canada, Australia, Latin America and East Europe.¹ A promising set of comparisons might be found in studies of British inquiries into policies toward terrorism in Northern Ireland and intelligence policy more generally.² Also of potential interest as a point of comparison is Israel with its establishment of commissions of inquiry under crisis conditions such as following the Yom Kippur War³ as well as under more routine circumstances.⁴

In sum, Tama's study into the ability of some commissions to have their policy proposals become adopted where others fail is long overdue given the attention given to their creation and the seriousness of the issues they address. Focusing on terrorism as a policy area, he persuasively demonstrates that the commissions can make a difference and identifies the circumstances under which this is most likely to occur. His work also serves as a stepping stone to new inquiries that will further advance our understanding of the role of commissions in the policy process.

¹ Stuart Farson and Mark Phythian (eds), *Commissions of Inquiry and National Security: Comparative Approaches* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2011).

² Robert Dover and Michael Goodman (eds.), *Learning from the Secret Past: Cases in British Intelligence History* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2011).

³ Raymond Cohen, "Threat Assessment in Military Intelligence," *Intelligence and National Security* 4, no. 4 (1989): 735-64.

⁴ Shlomo Shpiro, "No Place to Hide: Intelligence and Civil Liberties in Israel," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. 19, no. 4 (2006): 629-48; Shlomo Shpiro, "Ethics of Spying" in *Speak No Evil: A Reader for the Intelligence Professional*, vol 2, ed. Jan Goldman, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 59-72.

Presidential and legislative commissions, or a combination of the two, have become major influences in the conduct of government in the United States. While the work of every commission has not proven significant, several have guided policymaking by the nation's leaders, and some have even dominated debate about which pathways to take. The most conspicuous recent example of an influential commission is the 9/11 or Kean Commission of 2004, led by the former governor of New Jersey, Republican Thomas H. Kean, which probed into the question of why America had been unable to forecast and guard against the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Its dramatic and lively written report became a national bestseller, and Congress and the executive branch adopted several of its recommendations.

Given the importance of commissions, one might think the scholarly literature on the subject would be robust. Some excellent works do exist, but they are rare in the national security domain---no doubt because it is difficult for scholars to gain access to the activities of commissioners operating behind closed doors.¹ Happily, though, Jordan Tama has done much to chase away the darkness that has obscured the vision of outsiders into these hidden corners of government.

What strikes one most about Tama's examination of national security commissions is his devotion to empirical analysis and extensive interviews that explore a wide range of investigative panels, with the added bonus of nine case studies---an admirable, synergistic blend of methodologies. In his quest to determine what outcomes they have produced, Tama looked at all fifty-one national security commissions that reported between 1981 (when President Ronald Reagan took office) through the end of 2006. He incorporates understandable statistical tests into his analysis, controlling for a series of variables he considered likely to have an effect on a commission's influence. Tama supplemented these quantitative tools with 209 interviews carried out with past commissioners and their staff aides, as well as with more permanent government office-holders---all designed to shed light on his dependent variable: the influence of commissions on policymaking.

His specific measure of success is whether the principal recommendations of these panels were adopted, wholly or at least in part, by the government within two years. (Whether the recommendations were of high quality is another important matter, largely beyond the scope of this book.) Among the questions he posed in his interviews was this one: "How would you rate the commission's impact on policy on a scale of one to five, with one representing no impact and five representing very large impact?" Responses to this question yielded what Tama refers to as a "policy impact score" (46). He is then able to array each of the commissions along a continuum, from a high to a low policy impact score. The well-publicized Kean Commission registered a high of 4.61, while the Commission on

¹ Among the few first-rate studies on national security commissions are Morton H. Halperin, "The Gaither Committee and the Policy Process," *World Politics* 13 (1961): 360-384; and Kenneth Kitts, *Presidential Commission and National Security: The Politics of Damage Control* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2006).

the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces (reporting in 1992 and led by Robert Herres) registered a low of 1.33. The median policy impact score for all fifty-one commissions was 2.95.

While one admires Tama's systematic treatment of these panels of inquiry, reliance on interview responses to appraise their influence can lead to debatable rankings on the value of any given commission (a matter I return to below). As a second measure of impact, Tama checked to see how many reforms proposed by a commission were actually accepted. This is a sensible gauge; however, the reform proposals of some panels are not bold legislative initiatives whose success or failure is easily discerned, but rather more subtle inside pressures on the bureaucracy to change its modus operandi. These less visible changes may include boring, yet far-reaching, administrative corrections that escape media attention and even the eye of a close researcher (especially when they take place in the secretive realm of national security).

Tama generates a gaggle of useful hypotheses, each of which he subjects to the rigor of statistical analysis and his interview results. Here is a sample of the hypotheses, in paraphrased form: the impact of most commissions is driven more by their political credibility than by their specialized knowledge; the most important condition that enables a commission to turn its credibility into influence is the existence of a crisis related to the issue addressed by the panel; and commissions with relatively narrow mandates spur more reform than panels of broader scope. The presence of a crisis is especially important for success, the author tells us, and he divides all the panels into either "crisis" or more routine and less influential "agenda" commissions.

Tama also has another way of dividing commissions: as either executive or legislative. In reality, though, some panels have been hybrids of the two; they are established by statute but guided chiefly by the executive branch, as in the case of the Aspin-Brown Commission of 1995-1996. Further, Tama predicts that "executive commissions" are likely to influence policy more often than "congressional commissions," since the members of the former are usually less ideologically diverse and therefore less likely to cancel out one another's objectives. As well, executive commissions can act more quickly---striking while the iron is hot---and with greater unanimity.

Another central element for a commission's success, according to Tama, is the ability and willingness of its members to market their findings at the end of an inquiry. "To get anything through Congress, you need a full-court press with lots of media exposure," Harold Brown of the Aspin-Brown Commission told Tama in one of the interviews. Brown conceded: "I didn't do it. We didn't make a big push" (39). In contrast, Kean's 9/11 Commission lobbied vigorously for its recommendations over an extended period of time and several of them were adopted. Unfortunately, though, Congress watered down its main recommendation: the establishment of a Director of National Intelligence (DNI). Lawmakers managed to strip the nation's spymaster of meaningful budget and personnel authorities, as a majority responded to complaints from the Department of Defense that a strong civilian intelligence chief might downgrade support for military operations---even though it is highly improbable that a DNI would do anything other than fully support the

intelligence needs of America's fighting men and women on global battlefields. If a DNI were foolishly enough to slight this vital intelligence responsibility, he or she would be fired by the president.

Tama cites the conventional wisdom about commissions, namely, that they rarely have any effect. The panels keep a small number of people busy for a few months, or even a year or more, but then their work is quickly relegated to the ash bin. Media accounts of commissions routinely discount them as mere diversions at best and, for the most part, a waste of time and money. In 1996, for instance, the *New York Times* sneered at the Aspin-Brown Commission for its "anodyne" report and its lack of "imagination and courage"²---even though this panel (on which I served as Aspin's assistant) provided the most intensive examination of the U.S. intelligence agencies since the Church Committee in 1975 and stimulated widespread improvements in the operations of America's secret agencies. In January of 2001, the Hart-Rudman Commission, with former senators Gary Hart (D, Colorado) and Warren Rudman (R, New Hampshire) at the helm, predicted---eight months before 9/11---that a catastrophic terrorist attack aimed at the United States was probable unless important security reforms were made. At the time of this Commission's reporting, the *Times* published not a single article about its warnings. In 2005, the Robb-Silberman Commission, led by former senator Charles Robb (D, Virginia) and judge Laurence Silberman, looked into why the U.S. intelligence community had erred in its prediction of 2002 that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Most scholars hailed the Commission's findings and recommendations as highly professional and insightful. The *Times*, however, simply brushed it aside. The Commission "could have saved the country a lot of time, and considerable paper, by not publishing its report," opined its editorial page.³

Contrary to the conventional wisdom embodied in the coverage by the *Times*, Tama has found that many investigative panels have had significant influence on policymaking, notably the crisis commissions. His hypotheses are largely confirmed. In addition to a crisis setting, the ingredients for commission success are rapid action (usually an attribute of executive panels), a narrow scope, high political credibility, and sustained follow-up (marketing) activities. Ironically, though, the panel that scored the highest in his rating survey is the 9/11 Commission, which was a legislative commission with a broad mandate. It did have some of Tama's attributes for success, though: it was a crisis commission, it displayed unanimity, and it lobbied vigorously on behalf of its recommendations. "This [9/11 Commission] outcome demonstrates that the conditions of a commission's creation do not dictate its impact," he observes, adding: "much also depends on how the panel carries out its charge" (175-176).

Tama rests his case in favor of commissioners with this summation: "During the last three decades, national security commissions have, among other effects, placed heavy pressure on President Reagan to withdraw U.S. troops from Lebanon; prompted an array of

² Unsigned editorial, "Spy Pablum," *New York Times* (March 2, 1996): Wk14.

³ Unsigned editorial, "A Profile in Timidity," *New York Times* (April 1, 2005): A1.

important diplomatic, aviation, and military security upgrades; spurred the largest government and intelligence reorganization since 1947; and shaped Barack Obama's plan for ending the Iraq War." His conclusion is compelling: "That is a remarkable track record for a set of advisory bodies that lacked formal power and cost American taxpayers an average of just \$3 million" (195). Certainly in an era when Congress is deadlocked by partisan bickering and posturing, independent commissions have an important role to play and their creators would benefit from keeping Tama's prescriptions for success in mind.

To return to the problem of rating commissions, more work needs to be done on measuring their influence. The commission with which I am most familiar, the Aspin-Brown panel, provides an illustration. Tama's interview-driven index of success assigns a 2.78 policy impact score to this commission, placing it below the average. In contrast, four years later (to select one example) a National Commission on Terrorism led by Paul Bremer in 2000 scored 3.08, according to the Tama index. Yet the Bremer Commission saw, according to the author, none of its principal recommendations adopted over the ensuing one-and-a-half years (129), while in my judgment the Aspin-Brown Commission had considerable---if often quiet, behind-the-scenes---influence with respect to the internal workings of the intelligence agencies. For example, the Aspin-Brown Commission helped prod unexciting but vital changes in the consolidation of satellite surveillance; in personnel downsizing to bring about greater agency nimbleness; in improved dialogue between intelligence officers and decision-makers; in the public disclosure of the aggregate spy budget; and in the strengthening of role of the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) to bring about a greater integration of the nation's fragmented intelligence management practices.⁴

This is not to say that the Aspin-Brown Commission had anywhere near the influence of the Kean Commission, in part because of the crisis setting in which the latter operated and its more effective follow-through. It is to say, though, that the Aspin-Brown panel seems to have had more long-term effects on national security policy than the Bremer Commission and this is not reflected in Tama's policy impact scores. These scores are based on interviews that ranged in number from as few as two to as many as twenty, with a median of six. It is unclear how many responded with respect to the Aspin-Brown or the Bremer Commissions; but certainly, two---or even six---would be too few to provide much confidence.

These methodological questions aside, Tama's work on commissions stands as a major study on national security policymaking in the United States. His research is a gift to anyone interested in government-by-commission. The author sets new standards and offers fresh research directions in the search for more enlightened national security decisions by Washington officials.

⁴ See 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).

Author's Response by Jordan Tama, American University

I am deeply grateful to Erik Dahl, Glenn Hastedt, and Loch Johnson for their very generous and very thoughtful reviews of *Terrorism and National Security Reform*. It is heartening to see that three excellent scholars of U.S. national security policy agree that my book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of blue-ribbon commissions and the policy process. Each of the reviewers offers insightful feedback and reflections on the book, and I appreciate the opportunity to respond to their comments. I focus especially in what follows on a set of issues concerning the impact of commissions, which is the central concern of my book.

In assessing commissions, I faced a choice about how to evaluate their impact: Should I consider a commission to have a substantial impact if it induces the president and Congress to adopt its recommendations? Or should I only consider a commission to have a substantial impact if its proposals are adopted *and* effectively implemented? I chose the former approach, considering commissions to have a substantial impact if they catalyze the enactment of important reforms – even if those reforms are not fully or effectively implemented – because the implementation process usually occurs well after a commission has disbanded, and a commission therefore generally cannot influence it. Moreover, given that commissions only possess advisory power, if they persuade policymakers to adopt their proposals, that achievement in itself is remarkable.

Dahl and Hastedt both accept my argument that we cannot hold commissions responsible for the implementation process, but Hastedt correctly observes that a complete assessment of commission influence must also consider what happens after a commission-inspired reform is adopted. Such an analysis would be a natural extension of my book, and Eric Patashnik's excellent work on reform implementation represents a useful model for this kind of study.¹

A related point, raised by Johnson, involves how to assess the impact of commissions whose proposals are adopted in modified or watered-down form. As Johnson notes, this was the case with the 9/11 Commission's proposal to establish a director of national intelligence (DNI). Congress adopted the proposal, but did not give the DNI as much authority as the commission envisioned. As a result, the DNI has not been as powerful as the commission wanted – though the DNI has still played an important role in advancing information sharing and cooperation across the intelligence community. This example underscores how the politics of enacting commission ideas can result in reforms that turn out somewhat differently from a commission's vision.

Dahl notes that my findings about commission impact counter the conclusions of Amy Zegart in her own study of intelligence commissions. Indeed, whereas I find that national security commissions have had a surprisingly large impact over the past three decades,

¹ Erik M. Patashnik, *Reforms at Risk: What Happens After Major Policy Changes Are Enacted* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Zegart finds that intelligence commissions had minimal influence during the 1990s.² Our findings differ in part because Zegart uses a stricter standard – of recommendation implementation, rather than adoption – to assess a commission’s impact. But our findings also differ because we examine commissions from different time periods. During the 1990s – Zegart’s period of analysis – most intelligence commissions had limited impact because they did not operate in the context of a major crisis that placed pressure on policymakers to make significant reforms. By contrast, after the 9/11 attacks and after the 2003 intelligence fiasco concerning Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, elected officials faced significant pressure to shake up intelligence agencies. As a result, commissions – particularly the 9/11 Commission and the WMD (or Robb-Silberman) Commission – were able to spark major intelligence reforms. This difference underscores the importance of a crisis in creating a window of opportunity for commission-inspired change.

Given my argument about the way a crisis can open a window for a commission to spur reform, Dahl comments that I could have linked my findings more directly to the literature on focusing events. I agree. Indeed, my findings reinforce two key tenets of this literature: 1) disasters and other crises make reform possible but do not guarantee that it will occur; and 2) policy entrepreneurs (in this case, commissions or commission leaders) often play a critical role after a focusing event in overcoming obstacles to reform.³ As Dahl notes, commissions can also have a substantial impact by placing on the agenda before a crisis an idea that gains broader backing when a crisis hits – a natural extension of John Kingdon’s work on agenda setting.⁴

In another comment about commission impact, Johnson questions whether my impact measures capture changes within the government that are influenced by a commission but may not be observable to a researcher. Johnson raises a very important concern here, but I believe one of my measures of commission impact captures these kinds of changes quite well. In addition to assessing whether a commission’s key proposals were adopted by the government, I measured commission impact by asking over 200 commission participants and government officials who were responsible for the issues addressed by commissions to rate the impact of those commissions. When responding, government officials surely took into account the ways in which a commission might have influenced government actions behind-the-scenes. I also draw on interviews with government officials and other sources

² Amy Zegart, *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11* (Princeton: Princeton University Press); Amy Zegart, “An Empirical Analysis of Failed Intelligence Reforms Before September 11,” *Political Science Quarterly* 121, 1 (2006): 33-60.

³ Thomas A. Birkland, *Lessons of Disaster: Policy Change After Catastrophic Events* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006); Arjen Boin, Allan McConnell, and Paul ‘T Hart (eds.), *Governing after Crisis: The Politics of Investigation, Accountability and Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); John T. S. Keeler, “Opening the Window for Reform: Mandates, Crises, and Extraordinary Policy-Making,” *Comparative Political Studies* 25, 4 (1993): 433-486.

⁴ John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd Edition (New York: Longman, 1995).

in my case studies to explain how some individual commissions had this kind of impact. For instance, former Reagan administration officials observed that the 1983 report of the Long Commission on U.S. intervention in Lebanon strengthened the position of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who opposed the intervention, in internal administration deliberations, thereby hastening Reagan's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Lebanon.

Another case study for which interviews were very illuminating is the Iraq Study Group, which was led by James Baker and Lee Hamilton. Hastedt writes that I appear to overreach in arguing that the study group had policy influence, considering that neither President Bush nor Congress adopted most of its principal proposals. But I show that this commission had a substantial impact by providing Barack Obama with his plan for winding down the Iraq war, which was developed right after the study group's report was issued at the beginning of the 2008 presidential campaign. In interviews, senior Obama presidential campaign officials told me that Obama's Iraq plan was intentionally based on the Iraq Study Group report. That Iraq plan, moreover, is the same plan that he has implemented as president.⁵ This case reveals how a bipartisan commission report can be especially appealing to a presidential candidate seeking to establish his or her national security credentials.

The reviewers raise two other important points about the conditions that facilitate commission impact. Hastedt asks whether a commission needs a champion within the government in order for its ideas to be adopted. The answer is yes. Interestingly, however, sometimes such a champion does not emerge until after the commission has issued its report. For instance, Senator Joseph Lieberman was the key champion of the Hart-Rudman Commission's proposal to establish a Department of Homeland Security, but he only became keenly interested in this proposal after the 9/11 attacks, which took place eight months after the commission reported. Commissions can boost their prospects for success by aggressively cultivating champions in both Congress and the executive branch.

Relatedly, Dahl asks whether commissions have more success if they issue a relatively small number of proposals. My data does not provide clear evidence that commissions are more influential if they propose fewer recommendations. The key seems to be not so much the number of a commission's proposals, but whether a commission highlights a few specific recommendations in an executive summary and in its public statements. My investigation of media coverage and congressional discussion of commission reports shows that journalists and lawmakers will rarely discuss more than a handful of a commission's recommendations. Commissions are therefore well-advised to focus especially on their most important proposals.

Also on the issue of commission proposals, Dahl and Hastedt ask whether commissions generate new recommendations or just recycle pre-existing ideas. My research indicates

⁵ Jordan Tama, *Terrorism and National Security Reform*, 188-190; Jordan Tama, "The Power and Limitations of Commissions: The Iraq Study Group, Bush, Obama, and Congress," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41, 1 (2011): 150-152.

that some commissions formulate important new ideas – the Hart-Rudman Commission’s original proposal to create a homeland security agency is a case in point – but most commission recommendations have previously been proposed by other policymakers or experts. Yet this common lack of originality does not mean that commissions are unimportant. Sometimes an idea only gains broad public and congressional support once it has been recommended unanimously by a prestigious, bipartisan commission. In these instances, what the commission is doing is not so much providing new ideas as placing a veneer of bipartisan credibility over existing ideas – and thereby giving the ideas more traction and public appeal. This was the case with the 9/11 Commission’s proposal to establish a DNI – an idea with a long pedigree that only gained political momentum after the commission proposed it.

What next for the study of commissions? Hastedt notes that the analysis of U.S. domestic policy commissions and the comparison of commissions in different countries represent promising areas for future inquiry. I agree. My expectation is that, as with U.S. national security commissions, commissions on domestic issues and commissions in other countries also frequently have a substantial impact in the wake of a crisis by generating broad political support for reform ideas. An important new book presents some of the first cross-national comparative analysis of commissions.⁶ Additional research can help us determine to what extent commissions in different countries and on different types of issues have similar patterns of influence.

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⁶ Stuart Farson and Mark Pythian (eds.), *Commissions of Inquiry and National Security: Comparative Approaches* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2011).