Rectifying a failure in imagination using a medical generalist model: An analysis of the 9/11 Commission Report

F. Matthew Mihelic, MD

**ABSTRACT**

The 9/11 Commission asserted that a failure in imagination was the primary reason for inadequate prevention and response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This assertion has sparked discussion but has not been thoughtfully analyzed. The Commission also proposed the model of the medical generalist to address these inadequacies. This paper analyzes what the Commission perceived as a failure in imagination, examines the measures necessary for success in this area, and proposes avenues to institutionalize these measures in accordance with the suggested medical generalist model.

**INTRODUCTION**

The 9/11 Commission Report described how the events of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were foreseen by various persons at various levels within the intelligence structure; however, no action was taken to respond to such concerns. All of the pieces of the plot, along with many of the possible connections of such pieces, had been conceived before the event occurred. What was lacking was the insightful judgment necessary to assess the true risks of those pieces coming together, along with the initiation of actions necessary to prevent and respond to the risks and events. Judgments must be made to accurately assess these risks; then, judgments must be made to initiate action to counter them. The qualities necessary for such insightful judgment include a broad scope of knowledge, complex decision-making capabilities, the ability to function well in uncertain circumstances, and an orientation toward action.

Current proposals to reorganize the intelligence structure will straighten the path between intelligence administrators, intelligence information, and its analysis. However, there is a risk that actionable intelligence will be filtered out before it reaches the people who initiate action. The 9/11 Commission’s recommendation to institutionalize imagination demonstrates an understanding of this vulnerability. That which the 9/11 Commission Report described as “imagination” can be described as insightful judgment that proceeds from a generalist orientation. Steps must be taken to recognize the importance of a generalist orientation within the intelligence structure and then to structure this orientation into organizations that enable insightful judgment and appropriate action.

**FAILURE IN IMAGINATION DEFINED AND REDEFINED**

According to the 9/11 Commission, the government did not recognize the significance of certain intelligence information and did not take action to respond accordingly. This is what is described in the report as a “failure in imagination”; however, the report itself describes how each of the factors leading to the terrorist attacks on that day had actually been considered (or imagined) as significant prior to the attacks. For instance, Al Qaeda had been identified as a threat years before, and Osama Bin Laden had also been identified as being particularly malignant (p. 342). Warnings had been raised regarding a lack of effective control of immigration (p. 352), as well as a lack of effective security on airliners (p. 344). The problem of suicide airliner hijacking had been foreseen (p. 345), and the risk of airliners being used in suicide attacks had been considered (p. 345-346). Consideration had even been given to the possible need to one day shoot down a civilian airliner that threatened a US population center (p. 345). Even the overall threat of “catastrophic, grand, or super terrorism” was considered but judged to be minimal (p. 343). All this indicates that there was
sufficient imagination to envision all the pieces of the puzzle and also to put them together. What was missing was not the ability to imagine the threat but the ability to judge the level of a specific threat risk among all of the other threat risks imagined.

The failure of imagination described by the 9/11 Commission is better defined as a lack of insightful judgment regarding the level of threat risk and the appropriate level of action necessary to counter that risk. These are judgment calls about unique situations that are made in an environment of uncertainty. Because of the unpredictable nature of dealing with creative threats, developing procedures specific to predicting and responding to every imaginable threat would be an impossible task, and such an approach would be akin to that of a hypochondriac who develops every imaginable illness. Such a lack of judgment would lead to commitment of resources to explore and counter every imaginable threat, as a hypochondriac would constantly seek tests and remedies for every ill imaginable. In these circumstances, credible threats may be disregarded because decision makers are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of potential threats. Even if all of the intelligence information and analysis had been centralized prior to September 11, 2001, it would still have required insightful judgment to assess the threat level and initiate action to prevent the attacks.

**THE MEDICAL ANALOGY**

A medical generalist must properly assess risk levels and then initiate the appropriate actions to meet the risks. The 9/11 Commission Report and others have expressed the need for these skills in Homeland Security; however, there has not been an in-depth discussion of what these qualities are. Since the 9/11 Commission Report draws analogies from the medical world, it is useful to examine the qualities of an effective medical generalist for application in the Homeland Security arena. The applicable qualities of such a generalist include a complex decision-making capability, the ability to function well in an environment of uncertainty, and an orientation toward action.

The 9/11 Commission illustrated the need of a generalist as follows: “The agencies are like a set of specialists in a hospital, each ordering tests, looking for symptoms, and prescribing medications. What is missing is the attending physician who makes sure they work as a team” (p. 353). Indeed, without the generalist’s judgment toward weighing and prioritizing risks, each specialist would easily convince the patient that his or her area of expertise is the most important to the patient’s health. Such emphases are only natural for the specialist because of his or her orientation and do not occur because of ulterior motivations. The limitations of the specialist become evident in the hypochondriac who self-refers to multiple specialists. Each specialist then finds a different area to diagnose and treat, with resources expended by each. The patient is left confused as to the nature of his or her true health concerns, because each specialist has made a compelling argument for the primacy of concern about his individual area of expertise. This is the dilemma that the members of the 9/11 Commission express when they state, “It is crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination. Doing so requires more than finding an expert who can imagine that aircraft could be used as weapons” (p. 344). In other words, successful function here is not just the ability to imagine or name all the possible maladies or threats that might be encountered but the ability to choose which threats, if any, are of sufficient risk to deserve further exploration or action and then to choose what level and types of actions to initiate in order to further explore the risk, or to counter the threat. This is what the generalist is called upon to do.

**SALIENT QUALITIES**

The successful generalist must keep in mind all of the potential threats that might be indicated by the presenting situation. After careful examination, it is through insightful judgment that he makes a decision on action. Each decision is an active decision, even when deciding not to act. Such judgment is dependent upon a combination of qualities that is unique to the successful generalist.

The field of Homeland Security encompasses many different disciplines that range from technical sciences and economics to governmental affairs and law enforcement. The eclectic generalist in Homeland Security would need competencies in all these fields, as well as others, but because of the great technological emphasis
in Homeland Security, such an individual needs to have demonstrated great capabilities in the technical sciences. The technical scientific competency of such a generalist results from training and experience. Much of the decision making in Homeland Security focuses on technological choice, and the US intends to utilize its great technological advantage in the war on terrorism. Therefore, the Homeland Security generalist needs to be able to handle much of the basic technical decision making without relying on specialists’ opinions, in much the same way that the general physician functions.

The Homeland Security generalist must be able to make complex decisions, often at a very rapid pace. Such decisions will involve weighing alternate responses to make life-or-death choices for groups of individuals. Such an individual must be able to synthesize (often conflicting) scientific information and real-world events with psychosocial considerations and compassionate ideology. Legal and governmental concerns must be factored into decision making, while maintaining patriotic intentions. Another important quality is the ability to utilize subject matter experts effectively. The Homeland Security generalist must understand the difference between expert skills and expert opinion and to what extent either should be utilized in any particular circumstance.

Homeland Security generalists must be able to function well in a milieu of uncertainty. Such a position would be fraught with uncertainty, which will arise not only from the problems to be dealt with, but also political uncertainties inherent in working with, and coordinating individuals from, varying backgrounds and agencies. Such individuals must have confidence in their own knowledge base, capabilities, and judgment, while recognizing their own limitations.

At whatever organizational position the Homeland Security generalist is placed, that position must, above all, be understood to be a position of action. The individual must understand his or her role not just to analyze information but to appropriately initiate action within his or her capabilities. Such initiation of action would include the notification of, and consultation with, technical specialists. It would follow that an individual in such a position must be given appropriate authority for the initiation of such action and would use such authority wisely and appropriately.

---

DHS introduces plan of action in response to 9/11 Commission Report


The NRP establishes a standardized approach to protecting US citizens and managing homeland security incidents. All federal agencies required to assist during a national incident will use the NRP.

The plan uses the National Incident Management System (NIMS) to establish standardized training, organization, and communications procedures for multijurisdictional interaction and clearly identifies authority and leadership responsibilities. The plan also provides a comprehensive framework for private and nonprofit institutions to plan and integrate their own preparedness and response activities, nationally and within their own communities.

"With the NRP our nation and its federal, state, local, and tribal response communities now have a comprehensive, all-hazards tool for domestic incident management across the spectrum of prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery," said Ridge.

The NRP outlines incident management processes to:

- improve coordination and integration between federal, state, local, tribal, regional, private sector, and nongovernmental organization partners;
- integrate the federal response to catastrophic events;
- improve incident management communications and increase cross-jurisdictional coordination and situational awareness;
- improve federal to federal interaction and emergency support;
- maximize use and employment of incident management resources; and
- facilitate emergency aid and federal emergency support to state, local, and tribal governments.

(Source: DHS press release, January 6, 2005.)
INSTITUTIONALIZING IMAGINATION

The 9/11 Commission spoke of the need for institutionalizing imagination but did not explain how to do this. The promotion of a generalist influence within the Homeland Security milieu would further the objectives brought forward by the Commission, but a conscious decision must be made to emphasize this generalist influence through fostering and positioning such individuals and then empowering them.

After the need for generalist influence has been recognized and the decision has been made to promote a generalist orientation, the first step toward this goal would be to select and train the appropriate candidates for roles in the Homeland Security organizational structure. Such candidates should have demonstrated a technical and scientific acumen in a well-rounded course of study, but individuals having an overly-specialized educational background may not be as well-suited for generalist function. Appropriate candidates must then receive training to round out and further extend their knowledge base in all the areas necessary for decision making in the Homeland Security field. Individuals who are to function in a generalist capacity should be positioned throughout all levels of the organization. They must be empowered to enable timely initiation of action when appropriate because their function is primarily one of action, and part of that empowerment entails reasonable security in their authority to act.

CONCLUSION

What the 9/11 Commission Report characterizes as a failure in imagination is best described as a lack of insightful judgment, the kind of judgment exercised by a generalist, as suggested by the Commission. The salient qualities of a generalist include complex decision making, the ability to function well in uncertain conditions, and an orientation toward action. To successfully institutionalize generalist capabilities for Homeland Security purposes, this orientation must be fostered, positioned, empowered, and secured within the organizational structure.

F. Matthew Mihelic, MD, Center for Homeland Security Studies, Graduate School of Medicine, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee.

REFERENCES