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Prepared by: Chris Kojm

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Participant – non-Commission: Ambassador Richard Holbrooke

Participants- Commissioners: Kean, Hamilton, Ben-Veniste, Fielding, Gorelick, Gorton, Lehman, Roemer. Staffers: Philip Zelikow, Chris Kojm, Dan Marcus, Steve Dunne, Scott Allan, Stephanie Kaplan.

Opening remarks. Holbrooke began by observing that he firmly believed that 9/11 could have been prevented. To say that it couldn't have been prevented is to say that the government can't do its job. Holbrooke said that he is not interested in assessing blame; the important step at this point is improving the government's performance. This is what we pay the Intelligence and Law Enforcement communities to do. Names should have been on watchlists far earlier; CIA should have told INS, and INS should have acted. The American Express officials Holbrooke talks to believe they could have found these guys within hours, had they been asked.

Holbrooke called the US government "The machine that fails." We do not have a single government; we have a collection of fiefdoms. But because we are so strong, and our ideas are so powerful, we are usually able to transcend our bureaucratic failings. The internal agency coordination process with the government is a recipe for deadlock; only forceful leadership, especially by the White House, has any hope of overcoming inertia.

War of Ideas. The challenge we face now is a War of Ideas. We overcame and defeated Fascism, then Communism. Now we face a new challenge from a problem we cannot identify so easily. Holbrooke said that he had agreed with Jesse Helms on the need to merge USIA with the State Department; USIA was brain dead. Unfortunately, the merger has made our public diplomacy no better. He urged Commissioners to read Ed Djerejian's critical review of US public diplomacy.

Holbrooke asked how a mass murderer living in cave can out-perform the world's most sophisticated communicators in delivering a message. He asked how much of our problem is really the failure of Arab leaders, who have blamed us as the excuse for their own failures.

The Visa Function. Holbrooke commented that he thought Secretary Powell was wrong to oppose the movement of the visa function from the State Department to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). All junior foreign service officers do rotations and serve in consular functions during their first tour, and they are by definition inexperienced. The current problem dates from the 1924 Rogers Act, which merged the then distinct diplomatic and consular corps.

The visa process is absolutely essential, and there should exist a professional service trained in how to approve innocent applicants, and how to reject potential terrorists. The consular corps is fighting this change basically because it does not want a sociological downgrade from diplomatic status to that of DHS civil servant. Secretary Powell supported those working under him on this matter, and therefore made the error of supporting the retention of the visa function at State. Holbrooke observed that he would also transfer the passport function to DHS.

The current policy is leading to enormous problems because of the large number of visa denials to students, businessmen, professionals, and conference organizers. A professional service would have issued an all-points bulletin on the 9-11 terrorists, and we should have gotten them right away.

US Foreign Policy. Holbrooke commented on several US bilateral relationships. He noted the steep decline in U.S.- Turkish relations, and spoke of an unacceptable level of negativity in U.S. - Turkish relations. He said that in both Turkey and Poland a few years ago, 65% of the public viewed the United States as their country's best friend. Today, comparable figures are in the low teens.

Holbrooke observed that post-1973 the Saudis were building mosques and madrassahs all across the Islamic world. He noted that Indonesia has a lot of Gulf-funded mosques and madrassahs, some of which are radical, and these developments have very much changed Indonesia. If radicalized establishments spread to Turkey, the only democratic country in the Middle East, this would make things very, very difficult for us in the region.

Holbrooke stated that the Administration was saying things atonally, saying things that just didn't work in the outside world. Holbrooke said he supported the War Resolution against Iraq, but asks: How does the overthrow of a dictator (who was a "bad Muslim") and the liberation of the Shiites suddenly become the spark for jihad against America?

Saudi Arabia. Holbrooke commented that the U.S. relationship with the Saudis was one of the strangest in the world. Our national interests compel us to support the Royal

family and not support democracy in Saudi Arabia. Also, time and again, the State Department and the White House, he believes, have protected the Saudis from law enforcement. The most egregious example is that the Administration allowed the bin Laden family to fly out of the United States on Bandar's plane. Holbrooke asks who authorized these flights at what level; why were the Saudis left off the hook? He also stated that he was convinced that private Saudi money had helped finance terrorism, although he had no specific information.

Beirut bombing. Holbrooke commented that the U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon in the aftermath of the October 1983 Marine Barracks bombing in Beirut was a fateful decision, and has inspired bombers in the Middle East up to this very day. This sends the message that bombing is the way to force the Americans out of the Middle East. He noted that President Clinton, by the way, now views the withdrawal from Somalia as a mistake. Clinton had a very rocky first two years as Commander-in-Chief/foreign policy leader, but grew into the job. Today he is a towering international figure: it was Clinton, for example, who got Mbeki to change his views on AIDs.

MI-5/MI-6. In response to a question about how to organize the intelligence function inside the United States, Holbrooke stated that he did not believe the United States should replicate European models that it had spent the past two centuries fighting. The FBI needs to be improved, and this Director (and every Director) pledges to do it. Moreover, the CIA looks a lot better to the outside world than it really is.

INR. In response to a question about the State Department's Intelligence and Research Bureau, Holbrooke said that he would break off the smaller part that coordinates operations, and beef it up, making the State Department a bigger player in the intelligence policy process. He had little use for INR's analytic offices "second guessing" policymakers and slowing down the policy process. He would move them out of INR and attach them to the policy bureaus. He added that the State Department is a terribly organized institution with great people.

9/11 Classified Information

Embassies. In response to a question about the "hollowing out" of U.S. Embassies in the early 1990s, Holbrooke replied that he tried to reduce the footprint of the U.S. Embassy in Germany: move [redacted] people out of Frankfurt, move RFE/RL out of Munich. Where he opposed "hollowing out" was in the training of a new generation of leaders from Prague to Kazakhstan, an effort that worked well. He commended George Soros for similar work.

Coordination. Holbrooke closed by observing that the U.S. government wastes huge amounts of energy in vicious bureaucratic wars. As deep as the differences are between Powell and Rumsfeld, the fighting is actually far more vicious at levels below the two of them. Holbrooke felt strongly that the Commission's report must address the differences of cultures within organizations. Compartmentalization for operations is essential; compartmentalization of information is fatal. He believes that coordinating committees never work; that co-Chairs never work. Only strong leadership, especially from the White House, can resolve real issues.