

To: National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence
From: Jordan Tama, Ph.D. and Christopher Kirchhoff, Ph.D.
Subject: What Makes Commissions Successful – Lessons from the Political Science Literature on Past Commissions
Date: January 11, 2019

Commissions have a long history in the Western democratic tradition. Royal commissions given writ by the British crown date to at least 1494. George Washington empanelled a commission to help defuse the Pennsylvania Whiskey Rebellion. When it failed, he was forced to ride West with the Army in 1794. More recently, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, popularly known as the 9/11 Commission, showcased the power of an independent body to unearth new facts about a complex breakdown.

As motors of reform, commissions wield singular power. They can provide the definitive account of an issue and frame the way an issue is discussed in the media and policy circles. They also frequently drive changes in official policy and issue recommendations that reshape how government is organized. They operate in, and help define, what scholars term the “policy window” that opens when crisis or concern has reordered political priorities. Commissions can also, depending on how they are managed, fail to achieve any of their aims.

This memo describes common types of commissions, explains how commissions can be valuable, and makes recommendations for maximizing the impact of the National Security Commission on AI (NSCAI). It is based on research we have conducted on commissions that have addressed national security, including a comprehensive database of all 55 national security commissions created by the U.S. government between 1981 and 2009, and other major scholarly works on commissions from the political science literature.

Types of Commissions

Broadly speaking, the term commission is regularly used to describe two kinds of institutions: 1) permanent governmental bodies that possess regulatory authority, such as the Federal Trade Commission; and 2) temporary advisory bodies that lack formal regulatory authority, such as the NSCAI. This memo’s discussion of the value of commissions and lessons learned from them is based on research on the second type of commission, often called an “ad hoc” or “independent” commission.

Independent commissions can be further categorized based on their role. Some commissions are created in response to a crisis or disaster, such as a terrorist attack or a major accident that caused many deaths. The mandate of such crisis or disaster commissions often includes the conduct of an investigation into what went wrong, as well as the generation of policy recommendations. Since crises and disasters often generate pressure on policy makers to adopt reforms, they tend to create windows of opportunity for commissions to see their recommendations get adopted. This partly explains why the most famous national security commission in American history – the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Against the United States, or 9/11 Commission – was very successful in shaping important intelligence and counterterrorism reforms.

Other commissions, such as the NSCAI, are formed when government decision makers see a need for policy innovation, but the complexities of an issue overwhelm the political system. In this context, government decision makers seeking new ideas or consensus about potential policy changes sometimes see value in appointing of a distinguished outside body to carefully explore and recommend a set of solutions. Some political scientists have called these institutions “agenda commissions” because they aim to advance a policy innovation or reform agenda.

The absence of a perceived crisis and the complexity of the issue can make it relatively hard for agenda commissions to get their recommendations adopted by the government, particularly when vested interests oppose changes to the status quo. Historically, agenda commissions have had 31% of their key recommendations fully adopted by the U.S. government, and have had an additional 17% of their recommendations partially adopted. By contrast, crisis commissions have seen their key recommendations fully or partially adopted at rates of 56% and 15%, respectively.¹ Based on the track record of other agenda commissions, a betting political scientist would guess that about half of your recommendations would result in some government action.

Yet these aggregate figures obscure a great deal of variation among agenda commissions. While some agenda commissions have failed to spark any significant policy changes or reforms, others have been quite successful in influencing important changes or public understanding of an issue, and the very best agenda commissions rival important crisis or disaster commissions in seeing many of their recommendations get adopted. The effectiveness of agenda commissions is dependent upon their skill at arriving at a compelling and original set of insights on the issue they are charged to address and building a coalition to see through the changes they call for. Put another way, the outcome of any commission depends at least as much on its own work as on external circumstances.

The Value of Commissions

The power of commissions stems from two critical attributes that can distinguish them from other governmental institutions: 1) extensive expertise and knowledge; and 2) distinct political credibility. These attributes can lead decision makers, the media, and ordinary citizens to perceive the commission’s ideas and recommendations favorably.

The first key piece of a commission’s power is its expertise and analysis. When a commission conducts in-depth research and presents high-quality analysis, this gives external observers confidence that the commission’s recommendations are based on a sound understanding of the issue. This attribute is all the more powerful when there does not exist another body in the

¹ These figures are based on the study of all 55 commissions established by the U.S. Congress or executive branch to address national security issues between the start of the Reagan administration in 1981 and the end of the George W. Bush administration in 2009. For each commission, one of us investigated whether each of the recommendations given the most attention in the commission’s report was fully adopted, partially adopted, or not adopted at all by the U.S. government during the two years after the report was issued. For more details on the study’s methodology, see Jordan Tama, *Terrorism and National Security Reform: How Commissions Can Drive Change During Crises* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Jordan Tama, “Crises, Commissions, and Reform: The Impact of Blue-Ribbon Panels” (*Political Research Quarterly*, 2014).

government that brings together the breadth of expertise and knowledge possessed by the commission on the issue.

The second key piece of a commission’s power is its political credibility. This credibility stems from the independence, stature, and political diversity of commissioners. When a highly-regarded set of commissioners drawn from different political parties and parts of society comes together to recommend a course of action, policy makers and the public tend to accord the commission’s recommendations a great deal of respect, especially when the commission’s work is not marked by excessive discord or formal dissent spilling over into public view.

Importantly, however, not all commissions possess these key attributes in equal measure. Commissions have to work hard to ensure that they possess and project these qualities, and some commissions do this more effectively than others. Our recommendations below center on ensuring that the NSCAI develops and projects strong expertise and political credibility, builds coalitions that will help see its recommendations through, and paces its work to make full use of two marquee moments – issuing interim and final recommendations.

Recommendations for Maximizing Impact

Based on lessons learned from past commissions, we recommend the following steps and approach for the NSCAI:

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Coalition Building

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Interim and Final Reports


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Concluding Thoughts

One of the most important functions Commissions can serve is taking a wider, and longer, view of the problem they are tasked with solving. So we recommend adopting a wide framing from the outset. While the commission will certainly issue specific recommendations on how the DoD and IC should adapt itself to the rise of AI, the NDAA language presses the Commission to answer even broader questions -- for example “means and methods for the United States to maintain a technological advantage” and what “public-private partnerships and investments” are necessary for the nation as a whole to succeed. It will be important for Commissioners to approach their work knowing they have explicit permission to opine on these broader questions and are being asked to do so by Congress. Indeed, this broader framing is what will give the specific recommendations you make about DoD, the IC, and other parts of the government even more power while also providing the nation something it does not have now – a national strategy on AI.

Having each studied or served on or in support of Commissions ourselves, we also urge you to appreciate how unique the experience you are about to have is in the American political system. You are free of party, any door is open to you, and you have at your disposal some of the most talented national security staff in Washington. If successful, you will not only help our nation wrestle to ground an issue central to the future of American economic competitiveness and indeed the intensifying competition between free and open societies and closed and autocratic ones. You will also likely forge new friendships between yourselves and your staff that will persist long into the future.

Further Reading on Commissions

Christopher Kirchhoff, [*Fixing the National Security State: Commissions and the Politics of Disaster and Reform*](#) (PhD dissertation, Cambridge University, 2010)

Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, with Benjamin Rhodes, *Without Precedent: The Inside Story of the 9/11 Commission* (Vintage, 2007)

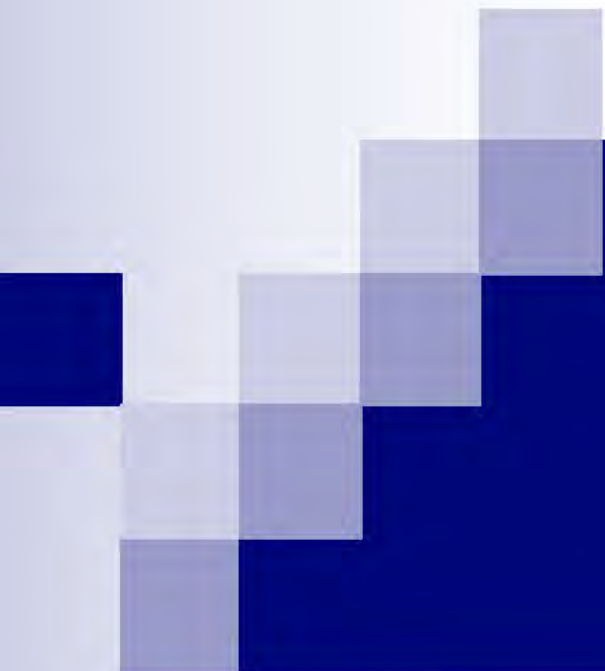
Jordan Tama, *Terrorism and National Security Reform: How Commissions Can Drive Change During Crises* (Cambridge University Press, 2011)

Amy B. Zegart, “Blue Ribbons, Black Boxes: Toward a Better Understanding of Presidential Commissions,” (*Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 2004)

Author Bios

Jordan Tama is Associate Professor in the School of International Service at American University and Co-Director of the Bridging the Gap Project. His research examines the politics and processes of U.S. foreign and national security policy. His books include *Rivals for Power: Presidential-Congressional Relations*, 6th edition (co-edited with James Thurber); *Terrorism and National Security Reform: How Commissions Can Drive Change During Crises*; and *A Creative Tension: The Foreign Policy Roles of the President and Congress* (co-authored with Lee Hamilton). He has also published articles in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Hill*, and various other publications. His work has been supported by the American Political Science Association, Woodrow Wilson Center, Social Science Research Council, IBM Center for the Business of Government, and Frankel Family Foundation. He has served outside academia as a foreign policy aide on Capitol Hill and a foreign policy speechwriter.

Christopher Kirchhoff leads the Schmidt Futures Challenges Project, a generational effort to harness the power of technology and science to solve the biggest challenges facing humanity. A strategist in emerging technology, Kirchhoff previously created and led the Pentagon's Silicon Valley Office, Defense Innovation Unit X, was Director for Strategic Planning at the NSC, Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Senior Advisor to Presidential Counselor John Podesta. Kirchhoff authored the White House Big Data report, Space Shuttle Columbia Accident Investigation report, U.S. government history *Hard Lessons: The Iraq Reconstruction Experience*, and the NYT's op-ed, "Silicon Valley Must Go to War." He graduated in History & Science from Harvard College and holds a doctorate in politics from Cambridge University, where he was a Gates Scholar. He has been awarded the Secretary of Defense Medal for Outstanding Service and the Civilian Service Medal for duty in Iraq.



What Makes Commissions Successful – Lessons from the Political Science Literature on Past Commissions

Jordan Tama, PhD and Christopher Kirchhoff, PhD
Briefing to National Security Commission on
Artificial Intelligence
March 11, 2019

Big picture

- Long tradition of using commissions in American politics
- Commissions have singular power to shape understanding of issues and as motors of reform
- A “policy window” can facilitate commission impact, but success depends on how a commission is led and how it carries out its work

Types of commissions

- Permanent regulatory bodies
- Temporary advisory bodies
 - Crisis or disaster commissions (e.g. 9/11 Commission)
 - Agenda commissions (e.g. NSCAI)

Commissions' differential success

- An analysis of 55 national security commissions reveals crisis commissions have had more recommendations adopted, but many agenda commissions have been successful too

	Crisis commissions	Agenda commissions
Share of key recommendations fully adopted	56%	31%
Share of key recommendations partially adopted	15%	17%
Share of key recommendations not adopted	29%	52%

Power of commissions

- Sources of commission power:
 - 1) Expertise and knowledge
 - In-depth research and high-quality analysis give observers confidence in commission's understanding of issue
 - 2) Political credibility
 - Stature, independence, and political diversity of commissioners lead observers to pay attention to commission and endorse its recommendations
 - 3) Coalition building
 - Commissions build allies as they do their work who help see through their recommendations

Maximizing impact - Staffing

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Maximizing impact – Coalition building

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Maximizing impact – Interim and final reports

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Concluding thoughts

- You have unique opportunity before you
- Building rapport among yourselves and your team is a crucial early step
- If successful, you'll shape understanding and policy making on an issue that is critical to America's future and competition between open and closed societies

Contact information

- Please contact us with questions or if we can be of further assistance
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