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ABSECON, GALLOWAY



Former Gov. Kean and 9/11 Commission counsel say U.S. still in harm's way, despite intelligence gains

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By ELAINE ROSE Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, September 15, 2010

GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — The United States has improved its intelligence since Sept. 11, 2001, but the threats are still real, two experts on the terror attacks told an audience Tuesday night at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

Former Gov. Thomas Kean, co-chairman of the National Commission of Terrorist Attacks on the United States, and John Farmer Jr., senior counsel to the 9/11 Commission, spoke before nearly 300 people as part of the lecture series by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy. Farmer is also the author of a new book, "The Ground Truth: The Untold Story of America Under Attack on 9/11."

Farmer told the audience that he was in Atlantic City the morning of the attacks, as state attorney general attending a forum on racial profiling among law-enforcement officers. As he walked from his hotel to the Convention Center, "everyone's beeper started going off at once."

Farmer said he raced to Liberty State Park to help coordinate the response effort on a day that was "total chaos."

"You couldn't feel more defeated than we all did that night," Farmer said. "You couldn't help but feel that you'd failed everybody, and that feeling still haunts me."

Gaps in communication among government agencies probably allowed the attacks to take place, and also hindered the first response, Farmer said. For, example, the Federal Aviation Administration knew by 9:36 a.m. that United Flight 93 had been hijacked, but when it crashed into a Pennsylvania field at 10:08 a.m., the military had not yet been notified.

The code word of the 9/11 Commission was to "reinvent" government, but many of the commission's recommendations were not carried out, Farmer said.

"What really came home to me and caused me to write the book was when, during Hurricane Katrina, I saw the same things happened," he said.

Kean said the 9/11 Commission came up with 41 recommendations to prevent another attack, including having one person head the 17 government agencies responsible for national security, Kean said. The director was appointed, but still does not have the authority to force agencies to share their information.

Today, those agencies report to 90 separate congressional committees, which essentially means they are accountable to no one, Kean said.

As the United States strengthened its defenses, al-Qaida has changed its tactics, Kean said. The terrorist organization is reaching out to other groups of like-minded people, and has concentrated on conducting attacks on a smaller scale.

As a response to increased profiling of air passengers for ethnic characteristics, al-Qaida is recruiting "people from different parts of the world, so they find people who don't fit the profile," Kean said. They are increasingly using the Internet to recruit American citizens of varied ethnic backgrounds to commit acts of terrorism.

"You cannot take your eyes off the ball. There are still people trying to do us harm," Kean said.

In response to one Stockton student who asked what we can do to prevent people from becoming terrorists, Kean said the United States can make the Muslim world know that we are not against their religion, just against terrorists.

Recent news stories of demonstrations against a planned mosque near ground zero and of a Florida man who planned to burn the Quran on Sept. 11 — stories that spread around the world — didn't help, Kean said.

Responding to a question from another student about how terrorists can be found, Farmer said that we need better analysis of the millions of pieces of information that make their way to the government.

And "a lot more advantage should be taken of the resources of local law enforcement," Farmer

added.

Ordinary citizens also play an important part, Kean said.

It was a street vendor who saw a car with a bomb, reported it to police and thwarted the attempt of Faisal Shahzad to blow up Times Square in the spring, Kean said. After government agencies failed to communicate with each other, it was other passengers on the plane who jumped Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab as he attempted to set off a bomb on a Christmas Day flight to Detroit.

The attacks are still a major part of American consciousness, Stockton president Herbert Saatkamp Jr. said before the presentation.

It is clear that "9/11 will be a central part of the heartbeat of the U.S. for a very long time, perhaps forever," Saatkamp said.

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