

Transcript - Frank Sesno talks with Max Cleland

SESNO: The report of the 9/11 Commission is due in May. With me today is one of the members of the 9/11 Commission, former Georgia Senator, Max Cleland. His background gives him a unique perspective. As a young man, he enlisted in the Army and served in Vietnam, where he was seriously injured by a hand grenade.

Recovering from those wounds, Cleland committed himself to politics and public service. He started as a Democratic member of the Georgia State Senate. At the age of 34, President Jimmy Carter turned to Cleland to run the Veterans Administration. Cleland was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1996, establishing his expertise not only in veterans and health issues, but in bio-terrorism and homeland security.

He lost a bitter battle for reelection last year, and now teaches at Washington's American University in addition to serving on the 9/11 Commission. Welcome to NOW.

CLELAND: Thank you.

SESNO: Good to see you. The joint report that you're going to build upon is very important nonetheless, and it documents a series of mixed signals between the various agencies and departments, the FBI, the CIA, the National Security Agency. As you read that report, thinking of the independent commission that you're a part of, what raised your eyebrows?

CLELAND: Well, several things. First of all, it's terrifying. It's terrifying to me that three or four disparate elements of our government in the so-called intelligence community couldn't even share that intelligence and couldn't even communicate that to one another when each one had a bite of the elephant, but they couldn't put the picture of the elephant together.

What you find is the intelligence community... there's so many disparate agencies — over a dozen in six cabinet level departments combined.

You have a community, but they're not communicating. And therein lies the problem. What people have missed about the joint inquiry report is the number one recommendation. Let's get a National Director of Intelligence. One person to report to the President, and the Congress, and connect the dots. That's the real missing element that we've had for about 30 or 40 years.

SESNO: Coming back to this report for just a minute, I spoke with someone at CIA who said after reviewing this report that there's a lot of stuff in there. But really, nothing new. Did you see anything new in it?

CLELAND: Absolutely.

SESNO: What?

CLELAND: Absolutely. I did not know that there was an FBI informant in San Diego that was living with two of the hijackers, and that the FBI headquarters in Washington didn't even tell him that they should have been basically being looked at because the CIA didn't tell the FBI.

And the NSA didn't pass it on to the CIA or the FBI. They were picking up intelligence as early as 1994 about a potential attack in this country using aircraft. What we have here is a devastating indictment of the intelligence community.

SESNO: So, your commission builds on the joint Congressional...

CLELAND: Yep.

SESNO:...inquiry.

CLELAND: Now, let's talk about that.

SESNO: So, where do you go that they didn't?

CLELAND: Let's talk about that here. This commission was formed about mid-December, the 9/11 Commission. We were supposed to use the joint inquiry report as a launching pad to get into this

issue of not only fixing the intelligence community, but moving beyond, and getting into what is the al Qaeda all about? What is this terrorist global network that we're fighting? A new kind of war and all that.

Well, the independent, bi-partisan commission, hello, didn't even get the stuff 'til a few weeks ago.

I'm saying that's deliberate. I am saying that the delay in relating this information to the American public out of a hearing... series of hearings, that several members of Congress knew eight or ten months ago, including Bob Graham and others, that was deliberately slow walked... the 9/11 Commission was deliberately slow walked, because the Administration's policy was, and its priority was, we're gonna take Saddam Hussein out.

SESNO: Senator, do you have any documentation or any proof to back up this very serious charge of yours that this was deliberate besides your own...

CLELAND: Well, first of all...

SESNO: ...hunch or gut?

CLELAND: ...it's obvious.

SESNO: No, no, no, no...

CLELAND: But... but...

SESNO: ...but beyond... but beyond being obvious, let me press...

CLELAND: First of all the war in Iraq...

SESNO: ...you on this...

CLELAND: Yeah, okay.

SESNO: ...because this is a very serious charge you're making. If you're saying that this was deliberate what I'm asking is has anybody said anything to you, from inside the Administration to support that? Have you seen any document, any memorandum that substantiates your charge?

CLELAND: Well, just look at it. Okay? This executive summary of the intelligence inquiry... the joint intelligence inquiry, the executive summary, was available December 10th. Why did it take nine months to go over what ought to be held out of that?

Now, I'm saying that that was slow walked. I am also saying why did it take eight months to get this 9/11 Commission really cranked up and going, and the first step was to use the Intelligence Committee report as a jumping off point? Why did all of this take so long?

Because the real priority of the White House was not the 9/11 Commission — they fought it. And it was just, and it really was their interest was to delay the revelation of this report.

One of the reasons they didn't want it is they didn't want all this stuff out there.

SESNO: The White House says, and I've spoken to them, that they didn't slow walk it, that there was a lot of very sensitive information involved, both in disseminating the information to begin with, and then determining how much should be released.

At the news conference where the report was discussed, Congressman Porter Goss, who's head of the House Intelligence Committee, had the following to say on the subject of the sensitivity of this information. Take a look.

[VIDEO EXCERPT]

PORTER GOSS: You also have to understand that there are people who are watching this press conference who are going to read this book, who are going to analyze what information we have put out, and what we haven't put out. And the last thing we want to do in any way is create an opportunity for a terrorist to take advantage of us because of something we put in.

[END EXCERPT]

SESNO: Does he not have a point? That not just friends of the American public, but America's enemies are reading these reports and watching all of this?

CLELAND: America's enemies have been... have declared war on this country. But who declared war on the country? It was Osama bin Laden, and his terrorist cadre. And Islamic fanatics. That's what 9/11 was all about. It was not about Saddam Hussein. Who has the worst or, the greatest... who is the greatest threat in the world today to us, in terms of weapons of mass destruction? It's not Saddam Hussein. It's North Korea. So, why are we making this big deal? We should've found Osama bin Laden. We should've destroyed his network around the world. That was gonna take time.

It wasn't gonna make headlines. You can't do that war in three weeks, and say "Major combat's over."

What you're really up against here is Islamic fundamental terrorism that is infiltrating now not only back into Afghanistan, but into Iraq as well.

And that's what we're really up against. That's what the 9/11 Commission was designed to explore. And we're just getting into that.

SESNO: So what, specifically, are the key questions in your view that the 9/11 Commission has to ask and answer by next May?

CLELAND: Step number one, where in the world is Osama bin Laden?

SESNO: Well, how are you gonna answer...

CLELAND: Step num...

SESNO: ...ask that?

CLELAND: Step number two, what is the al Qaeda? Why did they do this? Why did they shift their target from the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, and the leadership in Egypt, why did they shift their target to America? They shifted their target, we know that.

And years ago, Osama bin Laden declared open war on the United States, why? Because we support the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, we support the leadership in Egypt. And that tees off a whole lot of folks out there.

SESNO: Step number three. FINANCIAL TIMES today reporting on the Congressional report. Report raises new questions on Saudi role in 9/11 attacks.

CLELAND: Absolutely.

SESNO: How far into that will your commission, A, be able to go, and B, actually be able to share with the public?

CLELAND: All right. We're... first thing, if it walks like a duck, looks like a duck, talks like a duck, it's a duck.

You can read between the lines and see that there were foreign governments that were much more involved in the 9/11 attack than just supporting Islamic fundamentalist teachings and schools. Now, that has been redacted. A whole 28 page section.

SESNO: And will you have access to all the documentation, including the redacted portion...

CLELAND: We darn well better.

SESNO:...of those committee reports?

CLELAND: Because... but look at what's happening. The Administration, the White House, has put several blocks in the road. One, they run all the information to the 9/11 Commission through a political coordinator in Ashcroft's Justice Department. Duh. Why that?

Secondly, they want to put minders — that's people who sit in the room when we have an interview with people in NSA, FBI, CIA, Department of... in DIA — in the Pentagon, and Immigration and Naturalization Services. They want to put minders in there. That to shut down information. That's not to reveal information.

SESNO: On the connection, if there is one, between the Saudi government and any funding or support for the 9/11 terrorists. Will you have access to the information that was redacted? Have you already had access to that?

CLELAND: We got it now.

SESNO: And how much...

CLELAND: It's... but we've got it late...

SESNO: And how much of what you...

CLELAND: We got it eight months late.

SESNO: But how of what you find and pursue in addition to that will your commission make public, and be able to make public?

CLELAND: I hope all of it.

SESNO: But you have no assurance of that.

CLELAND: America... well, we better.

SESNO: You are clearly passionate and exercised about this, and you have compared Iraq to Vietnam.

CLELAND: Absolutely.

SESNO: You have used the q-word, "quagmire."

CLELAND: It is a quagmire.

SESNO: Why? Why?

CLELAND: Because. There's so many similarities here. You have an assessment, which even Wolfowitz now realizes we underestimated the enemy. That was Dean Rusk's view a few years into Vietnam.

You get the big land force in there. You know. You don't cure the problem. And you're exposed. And then the guerrilla warfare comes after you. That's Vietnam. That's the quagmire we're in in Iraq. There is no exit strategy. Why? Because we want to do a pre-emptive war. We want to do it all alone.

SESNO: The administration would say the exit strategy is to build a fledgling democracy in Iraq...

CLELAND: Lots of luck.

SESNO: That then...

CLELAND: They're fighting 5000 years.

SESNO:...provides... that provides a beacon for the region.

CLELAND: Lots of luck. I mean, more power to `em. You can't force or impose democracy with 150,000 troops. We tried to do it in South Vietnam. There was an election there, and all this kind of stuff. But it never worked.

SESNO: I want to ask you about one final thing here, and that is the Commission itself, which is supposed to be independent. And your take on Iraq. You had a bruising, bitter political contest. Is this sour grapes for you?

CLELAND: No. No. I tell you what makes me mad. Is when I see the names of those youngsters that are being killed out there every day. I say, "God help us." I've been there. I've seen this movie before.

It was 35 years ago. I was one of those young 21-year-old, 22, 23-year-old guys. Young Lieutenant, hard charger, volunteer. First Air Cavalry Division. Airborne, all this kind of stuff. Hoo-wah, hoo-wah, hoo-wah.

And we got great young soldiers. And I've been at Bethesda and Walter Reade, and I've seen their legs blown off. And I've seen their eyes gone. And that's what bothers me.

SESNO: Very briefly, then, what do you think should be done now?

CLELAND: First of all, you got to go back and get the UN in there. we've got to go back to the very people we dissed. And we got to say to Russia and Germany and France and the UN and the Security Council, "We're in deep trouble. Help us out."

We got to make a UN protectorate, and that's gonna take a long time.

SESNO: Max Cleland. Thanks.

CLELAND: Thank you.



© Public Affairs Television. All rights reserved.