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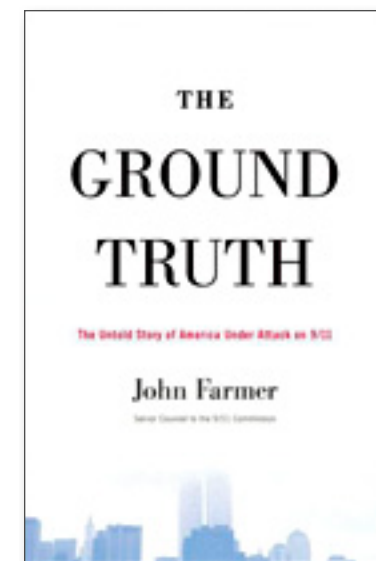
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The Bungled Response to 9/11

By Jessica Rettig



Official accounts of the 9/11 attacks portrayed an ordered response and a government on top of the unfolding crisis. But this picture is inaccurate, **John Farmer**, former senior counsel to the 9/11 commission, argues in *The Ground Truth*. Farmer, the dean of Rutgers Law School and a former attorney general of New Jersey, argues that the federal responses to both 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina demonstrate a dangerous inability to handle unfolding crises. He recently chatted with *U.S. News* about new details regarding 9/11, the problems with bureaucracies, and how the nation should face future threats. Excerpts:

You argue that federal officials decided “not to tell the truth about the national response to the attacks.” Why?

I think you have to look at the effect of the story that was told. The story that was told in the immediate aftermath and leading up to the 9/11 commission investigation was that by the time of the third flight, American 77, the one that hit the Pentagon, the national command structure had reacted to the surprise and shock of the two attacks in New York that hit the World Trade Center and had reasserted itself. In fact, there was really no effective notice of American 77. The military basically received word that the plane was missing about a minute before it crashed. So, quite a contrast between what the public had been told and what the truth was. The effect was to put the national command structure in a much more positive light than what is true.

What is the most significant new information that you reveal?
The pivotal report of the morning was the report that

Robert Schlesinger blogs at www.usnews.com/opinion.

came in about 20 minutes after 9, that American 11, the first plane that hit the Trade Center, had actually not hit the Trade Center at all but was still airborne and heading south for Washington, D.C. That report resonated up and down the government and virtually every primary source, and yet that was never disclosed to the public. The public was told that the [military] planes for Langley were scrambled in response to the threat posed by American 77 and United 93, when in fact there was really no notice.

Various elements of the government knew about the threat posed by al Qaeda. Why weren't they better prepared for such an attack?

What happened on 9/11 was simply a trailing consequence of all the malfunctions of government that had occurred in the prior 10 years. In virtually every department, there was a growing awareness of the threat of al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden through the '90s. What people who were engaged with the outside threat encountered was incredible inertia at the bureaucratic level that really prevented the government from effectively reconfiguring itself against the threat.

So why didn't officials reveal the whole story at the time?

No one wants to be embarrassed or confront unpleasant facts about their con-

duct. That's just the truth of human nature. And then you compound it with the sort of media culture in which we find ourselves, where it's really an "off with their heads" mentality, instead of looking constructively at mistakes that have occurred and trying to fix them.

Why did you write this book now?

When we wrote the 9/11 commission report, we had access to a lot of classified material, but the process for declassifying it was very time-consuming. You couldn't tell the story of the day itself in the kind of detail that is presented here. And I think it's instructive, because when people see how government really functions and [see how] people who were engaged in combating al Qaeda actually experienced it, I think you have a lot more empathy for what they were confronting.

What surprised you most?

The fundamental ineffectiveness of the government. And when I saw the same kind of pattern emerge in response to Katrina, it really brought it home for me. Katrina was not a surprise. Yet you still had a very similar dynamic play out with Katrina, where you had the top levels of

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government talking to themselves and estranged from people on the ground reacting to it.

Should we blame the leaders?

Well, I think there's a tendency after any one of these things to point at the leader and say, "Off with his head!" But when you see the same kinds of failures occurring over many different types and styles of leadership, and many different types and styles of departments and of crises, you have to question that reaction to it and realize that it's a much more fundamental problem.

How can the government change to better accommodate future crises?

Again, working our way up—after the civilians, the next most primary people are going to be the first responders—the police, the fire, the military. The most important recommendation of the 9/11 commission that has not been acted on is

our recommendation that a bandwidth be set aside to establish a national interoperable emergency communications network, because that's the next level up from the ground.

Some conspiracy theorists argue that you're part of an ongoing coverup to hide federal complicity in the attacks.

Well, it's just simply not true. I understand some of the impetus for these conspiracy theories because when the government hasn't told the truth about something, and that comes to light, then people's imaginations are sort of free to run wild. But the book, as I've written it, is laden with primary source material, and that doesn't lie.

What is the overall message you hope to give your readers?

I think the takeaway from the book, when it's looking at both crises, is the necessity to re-examine the way government is organized to meet these kinds of crises. In the past, what we've really done is take the government organizational chart and try to overlay it, so that people at the top make the critical decisions. Maybe in an ideal world, that's what would happen. But that's not the world we live in. We need to configure government to respond in a way that we now know these crises will be experienced. |

What do you think? Send your thoughts to letters@usnews.com.