

The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist attacks upon the United States

WW Norton and Company, New York and London 2004

PB, 516pp, £6.99, 0 393 32671 3

Losing America: confronting a reckless and arrogant presidency
Robert C Byrd

WW Norton and Company, New York and London 2004

HB, 128pp, £18.99, 0 393 05942 1

War and the American Presidency
Arthur M Schlesinger

WW Norton and Company, New York and London 2004

HB, 224pp, £17.99, 0 393 06002 0

TWENTY-FIVE years ago, as an American GP living and practising in Wales, I would watch BBC sports programmes, such as darts and bowls and snooker, all unknown to me and, therefore, fascinating. I always found it odd — pairings such as Scotland (or Wales) versus The Rest of the World. It either seemed overly ambitious for Scotland or slim pickings for the rest of the world. After the recent US presidential election, it appears as if it will continue to be the US versus The Rest of the World.

Three books might help you, who are of ‘the rest of the world’, begin to grapple with what is going on in the US. Written from the short, medium, and long view, each has a somewhat parochial twist. Each also, however, contains a great deal of useful history.

The 9/11 Commission Report refutes the old saw that nothing good can be written by a committee. The report is a remarkable book and its recent nomination as a finalist for the National Book Award is a first for a government document, and well deserved. What is contained in this report is well known by most of us — the cast of characters has been in the news for over 3 years. And the sequence of events and many of the details that were gleaned from the ongoing hearings have been contained in news stories, long and short. However, to have published what is known until this point in a single narrative, which is at once accessible and clearly written, is a truly historical achievement. Reading the events of the day — regarding the planes that crashed in the city of New York, as the rescue squads from police and fire departments move into place and act — is both familiar and detailed in a way that helps us understand better than I would ever have imagined the why and how of all the death and destruction.

So much about those days have been parsed into documentaries — long analyses of causation of issues, like why the towers fell — that one would think that everything that could be written had been. But the Commission’s report really does add enormous amounts of history to the sound bites and 30-second visuals that have

pervaded politics and the world assessment of the US since that time. The report deals extensively and thoughtfully with the history of Islam, both ancient and recent, and describes the history of terrorism as it evolved from highjackings of the 1970s to the use of bombs and targeted destruction of military targets in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Events that occurred in the time that preceded the attacks of 9/11 are written in a way that shows the convergence of intelligence reports, a long history of threats from Bin Laden, and many alerts and warnings (‘the system was blinking red’ in the words of Tenet, CIA director). The information about the movements of the terrorists in their planning and the worldwide involvement of cells, support systems, and finances makes it clear that these events were truly the result of a network that reaches virtually everywhere.

After the attacks, reading of the efforts of the fire, police, and other rescue squads in New York adds specifics that are terrible and remarkable. On 9/11, I ran up and down the stairs between patients to watch on television as it was all happening. All of us who watched that day wondered what those people who were clearly doomed were thinking, feeling, and seeing. Their actual words in this report are not fiction, they are the words, for most the last words, of people who died as we watched. Their words are the hardest part of this long, detailed report to deal with.

Much of the final third of the report is devoted to what a fire captain friend of mine once called a PFE — a post-fire evaluation — which he mandated for his squad after every fire. In a PFE, the entire squad reconstructed, relived, and discussed the events to see what could be improved next time. The 9/11 Commission engaged in a world-scale PFE. Although all US politicians state that they intend to follow the recommendations of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, the backing and filling is already well underway. What politician, for example, is going to agree that major conurbations, and political and tactical targets should receive preference over their hometown fire departments and that homeland security money should ‘not be used as a pork barrel’?

Rather than bringing a grieving country together in a way that will make such events unlikely to happen again, the reactions from the report have begun to cleave along party lines once again. The 9/11 Commission was almost unique in its thoroughness, transparency, and its ability to focus on the real issue of terror and lawlessness. However, the extent to which a violent stateless ideology has negatively affected the tolerance of differences, the sense of community, and the level of civic discourse in the US means that terrorism has affected our neighborhoods as much as it has affected our country. And fear rather than determination, despite the President’s stump speech, has become the dominant emotion.

Robert Byrd, from his 45-year perspective in the US Senate, understands that cheques and balances are essential to avoid tragedy, even if they, at times, impede progress. His book, *Losing America*, contains several 'under-the-table' looks at Congress and the manipulations and arrogance of the coterie of ideologues who surround George W. Bush. Byrd, from the Southern tradition of politeness and respect, which often cloaks bar-room politics, is steeped in the history of the institution of the Senate. He is personally offended by Bush's lack of interest or curiosity in the legislative process prior to 9/11, and his dishonesty and deception afterwards. Byrd's address to the Senate on the eve of the war on Iraq was widely quoted and is contained in this book. While people marching in the streets made headlines, it was an 85-year-old senator, not previously known as an outraged progressive, who took on both the Administration for its hypocrisy and many of his colleagues for their lack of courage and principle. He voted against the war and continues to point out the dishonesty of the people who guide it. The book reads with a sensibility from another age. Although his own history is certainly not without problems, Senator Byrd's belief in the true democratic process, rather than the gun-barrel approach of George W. Bush, should be given the respect that he, and it, deserve.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr has been writing history since 1946 and has Pulitzer prizes to prove he does it well. His voice is considered, thoughtful, and scholarly — as one might expect from a historian and distinguished teacher. Toward the end of his book *War and the American Presidency*, however, Schlesinger's voice rises with outrage at those who surround and influence George W. Bush, the 'small group of Messianic statesman whose self righteousness bids fair to wreck our age'. He writes of the imperial presidencies of the early years of the country, which repressed dissent during wartime, and how the US moved from wars based on pique to engaging international diplomacy and internationalism. Schlesinger reminds us that all presidents since Wilson, with George W. Bush being the glaring exception, believed in statesmanship, diplomacy, alliances to guard against capricious choices and, when necessary, taking on common enemies.

Much of Schlesinger's book, however, also chronicles the record of the current Administration which, by being 'judge, jury, and executioner resurrects the imperial presidency'. An imperial presidency in the age of frigates and single-shot rifles cannot be compared with one that possesses weapons of mass destruction and a woolly-headed sense of divine guidance. We used to think of Henry Kissinger as the prototype for Dr Strangelove, but I wish Kubrick were still alive to do the remake with Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld in mind.

Needless to say, the recent election, instead of relegating George W. Bush and his

hangers-on to the historical trashbin, has pushed them to the front of the international agenda. A secretive, defensive, unreflective president will now shape the world for our grandchildren. Each of these books elaborates on the ineffectiveness of Bush dealing with the real enemy while he digs deeper into a country where he is creating more enemies by the day.

One has to ask why, instead of quietly writing their memoirs, two distinguished 87-year-old statesmen are raising the alarm and shaking us by the throat — like the aging Thomas Jefferson who, in his famous letter of 1820, said of the first compromise to try to divide the country between slave and free states: 'this momentous question, like a firebell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror'. Byrd and Schlesinger hear the firebell and are ringing it to wake us up. Another quote that might better capture Bush and his legacy would be from the Bible he uses as justification for his policies: 'He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind' (Proverbs 11, 29).

John Frey

NHS Plc – The privatisation of our health care
Allyson M Pollock
Verso, 2004
HB, 256 pp, £15.00, 1 84467 011 2

THIS is likely to be a controversial and much discussed book. It will be very unpopular in the corridors of power, which alone should ensure a wide readership. Having last worked in the NHS in 1986 and suffered under the New Zealand health reforms of the 1990s, I shouldn't perhaps have been surprised by this book. I was, however, not just surprised but appalled at the facts and figures, which Professor Pollock has assembled to support her account of the disastrous privatisation of the NHS in recent decades. She describes in detail the ideological obsession of successive governments with the belief that the market will solve the problems created by decades of underfunding a system that once was the envy of the world. Her recurring thesis is that the involvement of private business in the private funding initiatives (PFIs) led inevitably to expensive, yet smaller, hospitals offering less comprehensive services. These reductions were exacerbated by the hospital trusts having to service the new, and massively increased, debt from their operating budgets. The efficiencies needed to achieve the necessary savings resulted in a cascade of more restricted services; an army of managers and accountants needed to track expenditure. Savings were made by casualising the nursing workforce, outsourcing ancillary services, and higher transaction costs led to further cuts ... and so on.

The evidence presented seems almost too persuasive, so I was grateful for the opportunity to run the arguments past a senior Labour politician. The (somewhat

defensive) response was that outcomes are what is important and the waiting time for a hip replacement in England is a quarter that for the same operation in Wales (which, apparently, has not embraced involvement with the private finance sector in the same way). Why is it that waiting times for elective surgery seem in the minds of politicians to be the only arbiter of quality and effectiveness? Something about grumpy constituents perhaps?

The professional bodies — in particular the British Medical Association — do not emerge with much credit in this sad story. Indeed, many in senior positions within the profession seem to have been complicit, or at least asleep, to the implications of what was going on. Professor Pollock pulls no punches in naming names and the huge salaries paid to those who have benefited most from the backdoor privatisation of the health service. The tactics employed by government to discredit the author and her unit bring little credit to the former and would, I am sure, merit greater publicity.

The section on the evolution and reform of general practice/primary care in recent decades is interesting, if too brief. The effect of the new contract is only superficially discussed, however the local improvement finance trust (LIFT) scheme rates a mention and is portrayed as the thin edge of the same privatisation wedge. Erstwhile, primary care fundholding enthusiasts should definitely read this account; perhaps they will have a different perspective on the last two decades?

This book is very readable, unsettling, and particularly persuasive. I would recommend it to all those with an interest in the future organisation and delivery of primary and secondary care in the UK, as well as those in countries that consistently follow UK policies, irrespective of the evidence. The reforms of recent times have been profound and, clearly, the way in which we have traditionally practised will never be the same again. Will the changes ultimately be better for the patients as end users and for the health professionals working in the system? Time will tell if the 'efficiencies' gained will outweigh the transaction and opportunity costs, and the fundamental shift from a professional to an accounting paradigm of medicine and of health care in general.

It is a great shame that policy makers insist on repeating, rather than learning from, the mistakes of others. Ideologically driven blind faith in the omnipotence of market principles remains the greatest threat to health systems worldwide — the more so in the UK as this heavy-handed, misguided evangelism seems to have infected both sides of the political divide.

All in all, definitely worth a read, but not late at night — it is too troubling.

Les Toop