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HEADLINE: Missing a Chance to Learn From 9/11

BYLINE: By John F. Lehman.

John F. Lehman, secretary of the Navy from 1981 until 1987, is a member of the 9/11 commission.

By their incredible bravery and selflessness, New York's firefighters and police officers saved far more civilian lives on Sept. 11 than anyone could have expected. Their leaders were also heroic, rushing to the scene and providing calm and decisive command and control under unbelievable conditions of pressure and peril. Commissioners Bernard Kerik of the Police Department, Thomas Von Essen of the Fire Department and Richard Sheirer of the Office of Emergency Management were part of this leadership team.

I regret that during last week's commission hearings, my assessment of the city's command control and communications systems within and among the agencies that responded to the Sept. 11 attacks was taken by some as a criticism of their leaders. That was not my intention.

It has long been military practice to do a thorough study after every battle to find the lessons to be learned. This does not dishonor the heroes of that battle. In addition to recognizing the magnificent heroes of 9/11, the commission must learn lessons and recommend actions to fix problems. Some will deride this as Monday morning quarterbacking, but it is a necessary duty.

It is understandable that the arrival of our investigators in any agency is about as welcome as an I.R.S. audit. The federal agencies got over that reaction and have been cooperating with us, acknowledging mistakes and making reforms. New York City has not yet adopted that attitude. It is our hope that it will.

The investigations of our commission staff leave no doubt that there are long-standing ambiguities and sources of confusion in procedures for command and control of crises. These traditional practices are adequate for most civil calamities but they are not adequate for the threats that our terrorist enemies are determined to carry out. New York's new incident management system does not provide clear-cut unity of command in all potential crises. This could lead to uncertainty and confusion in a future complex and multiple attack.

Hardware, training and procedures for communicating within and among these elite organizations do not have the robustness, breadth of frequencies, redundancy or technical support necessary to deal with the magnitude of attacks that Al Qaeda hopes to perpetrate.

My criticism was drawn from my experience managing similar problems with two other elite institutions. As secretary of the Navy, I was responsible for ensuring the training and equipping of the Navy and Marine Corps. Each had individual missions and communications requirements, but they had to work together in many battles on land and sea. When a marine under attack needs to call in naval gunfire from 10 miles at sea to enemy positions only yards from his foxhole, he must have communications with the Navy that work in any conditions reliably and redundantly. That requires diverse equipment, regular training and technical experts in all frontline units.

On my watch in 1983, we lost 241 marines, sailors and soldiers to a terrorist attack in Beirut. The subsequent investigation revealed that significant confusion in command and control contributed to the vulnerability. These findings were painful to bereaved families and unwelcome to many in the chain of command. But the resulting changes from those lessons learned saved lives.

During the 9/11 hearings, witnesses have repeatedly reminded the commission that police officers and firefighters are not the military. In valor and professionalism they are certainly the equals of military professionals, however, and it is past time that they be provided with the quality of communications support that is taken for granted in the military.

In the new age of jihadist terror, our firefighters and police officers need nothing less, and they don't have it. They need a combined signal corps of highly trained communicators and technicians to deploy with the first responders. The federal government needs to make many new radio frequencies available.

New York's Finest and Bravest are very likely to be the nation's first line of defense in the next terrorist attack. They deserve crystal-clear command and control procedures and state of the art communications equal to the best in the armed forces. The federal government should finance and support this as a priority of preparedness.