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By James Woolsey

WHY AMERICA SLEPT - (Random House, 241 pages, \$24.95)

With his title, Gerald Posner draws a parallel to John F. Kennedy's "Why England Slept," the chronicle of Britain's sloth during the interwar years. And there are indeed parallels: Neither Britain after World War I nor the U.S. after the Cold War could bring itself to face the threats of new totalitarian movements -- Nazism then, Islamism now. In "Why America Slept," Mr. Posner provides a useful and highly readable overview of not really why but how America slept, though I would caution against buying all its details.

The "why" may be unknowable. Britain's weariness in the interwar years was understandable -- it had lost an entire generation in the trenches of Flanders. But why does this country, after it wins a war, habitually assume that the world has been permanently repaired? Why did we go on a holiday from global watchfulness in the roaring '90s, just as we had in the roaring '20s?

Whatever the reason, Mr. Posner's mosaic seems to me to get the big picture right with regard to "how."

A few examples: Congress makes it illegal to deny visas to members of terrorist groups. Sixteen boxes of plans for Islamist terror taken from Rabbi Meir Kahane's assassin in 1990 sit unopened in New York Police Department custody for years. Law-enforcement authorities conclude promptly that a lone, deranged individual is responsible for any given terrorist act even if substantial leads point toward backing from the Middle East. The CIA and FBI fail to talk to one another; both fail to talk to the Immigration and Naturalization Service or the State Department. Arabic documents are mistranslated by the few overworked linguists, substantially delaying investigations. Politically correct guidelines keep the CIA and FBI from recruiting terrorist informants. American universities go on jihad against the INS's efforts to obey the law and keep track of basic information about foreign students. The White House turns down offers of important information from Sudan about al Qaeda and misses opportunities to grab or kill bin Laden. Fund raising for terror, such as the Holy Land Foundation's and an amazing North Carolina cigarette-smuggling ring, elude the FBI and INS for years. Three major national commissions tell the government to get serious about terrorism and are ignored. Counterterrorism budgets are cut. Insightful FBI agents, working to delve into potential airline hijackings, are thwarted by headquarters and don't learn of one another's efforts. The CIA fails to tell the State Department about two terrorists being tracked in Malaysia - they get visas and become 9/11 hijackers.

In such a way did America sleep.

Mr. Posner's final chapter is a stunning picture of the interrogation of one of al Qaeda's senior members, who supposedly told his interrogators in spring 2002 that certain Saudi princes aided Osama bin Laden and had advanced knowledge of a 9/11 attack. Three of the princes named in this interrogation, it is said, died soon after the man's testimony was made known to the Saudi regime.

Overall, "Why America Slept" seems to paint a representative picture of our somnolence, but my experience of being interviewed for the book, as a former director of the CIA, might give some readers pause about details. My comments about one grand jury are applied in the book to another; the time of a trip is wrong; two points attributed to me (about FBI and CIA leads and Sudanese intelligence officers) must have come from elsewhere; Dee Dee Myers didn't interrupt nor did George Stephanopoulos address me in the meeting on Somalia; I'm given more credit than I deserve or have ever asserted for having suspicions in 1993 of Iraqi involvement with the first World Trade Center bombing; and no meeting with the FBI on information-sharing -- at least none I know of -- ended in "angry argument."

More important, Mr. Posner has some key points about the Aldrich Ames spy case badly wrong. CIA Counterintelligence Chief Paul Redmond, the person most responsible for catching Ames, brought two FBI agents fully into the mole investigation in 1991, not 1993. After Ames was caught in early 1994 the most contentious issue, ignored by Mr. Posner, was whether the chairman of the intelligence committee, Sen. Dennis DeConcini, would succeed in using the case as an excuse to transfer to the FBI responsibility for all counterintelligence, including operations overseas aimed at penetrating foreign intelligence services.

This most unwise proposal was indeed strongly opposed by the CIA -- and it was this proposal, not mindless bureaucratic infighting, that was the source of the disagreements the CIA had with Sen. DeConcini and the FBI during 1994. Unknown to any of us at the time, the DeConcini/FBI approach would have had the effect of displaying the nation's total counterintelligence effort to a Russian spy, senior FBI agent Robert Hanssen.

Further, Mr. Posner puts my conversation with Vice President Al Gore concerning my lack of access to the president in the spring of 1994, making it seem to be part of the Ames case, rather than when it actually occurred -- in late autumn, after the key decisions concerning Ames had been made. And contrary to Mr. Posner's claims, I resigned not over that case -- indeed we had prevailed on the central counterintelligence issue -- but over my continuing lack of access to the president.

I'm willing to assume that my experience with Mr. Posner is an exception and that I was the only interviewee who read the book with a puzzled frown. Still, he should get into the habit of checking his quotes and notes, maybe twice.

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