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BODY:

In naming Henry Kissinger to direct a comprehensive examination of the government's failure to prevent the Sept. 11 attacks, President Bush has selected a consummate Washington insider. Mr. Kissinger obviously has a keen intellect and vast experience in national security matters. Unfortunately, his affinity for power and the commercial interests he has cultivated since leaving government may make him less than the staunchly independent figure that is needed for this critical post. Indeed, it is tempting to wonder if the choice of Mr. Kissinger is not a clever maneuver by the White House to contain an investigation it long opposed.

It seems improbable to expect Mr. Kissinger to report unflinchingly on the conduct of the government, including that of Mr. Bush. He would have to challenge the established order and risk sundering old friendships and business relationships. The Kissinger commission, in theory, should provide the definitive account of how a raft of government agencies -- including the White House, Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation -- left the nation so vulnerable to terrorist attack. That final reckoning is overdue and so far absent from the narrower inquiries done by Congress and individual agencies. It is essential to ensuring that past mistakes are not repeated.

The new inquiry will be undone if the 10-member panel is hesitant to call government organizations and officials to account. There can be no place for the kind of political calculation and court flattery that Mr. Kissinger practiced so assiduously during his tenure as Richard Nixon's national security adviser and secretary of state. Nor is there any tolerance for the kind of cynicism that Mr. Kissinger applied to the prosecution of the Vietnam War.

The commission will be made up of five Republicans and five Democrats. Choosing its remaining members and staff director wisely will also be vital to its success. They must be fiercely independent and unafraid to challenge some of Washington's most powerful institutions. We were mildly encouraged to hear Mr. Kissinger say that he would "accept no restrictions" on the commission's work. To deliver on that promise, Mr. Kissinger must start by severing all ties to Kissinger Associates, the lucrative consulting business he has built up during the past two decades. As a consultant, Mr. Kissinger offered not just his own foreign policy expertise, but his famously easy access to the powerful and well connected.

Not long after Mr. Bush announced the appointment of Mr. Kissinger on Wednesday, Democratic Congressional leaders picked one of their brethren, former Senator George Mitchell, to serve as vice chairman. Like Mr. Kissinger, Mr. Mitchell has great experience and an understanding of how the world works -- and is not known for rocking established institutions.

The commission offers both men a chance for the kind of career-crowning legacy that many public personages dream of. But that would require rising above Washington's usual hedging and horse-trading. If they succeed, they could help the nation recover from the grievous

wounds of Sept. 11 and make sure the country is never so vulnerable again.
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