

The No One Could Have Predicted President

Tag: Will "No one could have predicted" become the epitaph of the Bush Presidency?

By Michael Coblenz

When President Bush appeared on "Good Morning America" on Thursday, September 1, 2005, four days after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, his main excuse for the delay in the Federal government's response to the flooding was that nobody could have predicted that the levees around New Orleans could have broken. President Bush said, "I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees. They did anticipate a serious storm. But these levees got breached. And as a result, much of New Orleans is flooded."

Actually, the director of the National Hurricane Center has said that he called the President on Sunday, August 28, the night before the storm hit New Orleans, and warned him that if the storm hit near the city, the levees could either overflow, or break. And in the days after the storm hit there were numerous news reports saying that experts had been warning for years that the levees could break and that there could be devastating flooding in the city.

The day after the storm, the Associated Press said that: "Experts have warned for years that the levees and pumps that usually keep New Orleans dry have no chance against a direct hit by a Category 5 storm."

"Even as Katrina approached, experts like Louisiana State University's Ivor van Heerden warned of a pending 'incredible environmental disaster.' He predicted the levees would be overwhelmed

and much of the city would be turned into a giant, stagnant pool contaminated with debris, sewage and other hazardous materials."

This is just the latest example of an administration that ignores predictions that it disagrees with or just doesn't want to hear. After September 11, then National Security Adviser (and current Secretary of State) Condoleezza Rice said, "I don't think anybody could have predicted" that someone would try to use "a hijacked airplane as a missile."

In fact, as revealed by the 9/11 Commission looking into why the country was so ill-prepared for a terrorist attack, the Federal Aviation Administration had been investigating the possibility that terrorists might hijack a plane and use it as a weapon for years, and it had specifically warned airports of the possibility well before September of 2001.

The Bush administration is loath to make predictions (except about the economic effects of its tax cuts, but that's another story) but I will make a prediction. News reports out of Iraq indicate that growing ethnic hostility may eventually lead to civil war. I don't want to predict that there will be a civil war, and in fact I hope that there won't be. But what I do predict is that if the situation in Iraq does descent into civil war, President Bush will gravely intone that "no one could have predicted" that outcome.

Unfortunately, that is exactly what critics of the war have been predicting since before the war began. Bush and his supporters have consistently mischaracterized the arguments of many of the opponents of the war. Bush *et al* imply that opponents were (and are) simply and naively anti-

war, or that they feared that the U.S. military would not prevail. But the reality (which is as well documented as the warnings about the levees in New Orleans) was that many opponents of the war said that one very likely possibility was civil war in Iraq.

As I recall, there were a number of arguments given in opposition to the war. One prominent argument was that the war would radicalize the Muslim street, which would lead to chaos and possibly revolts in countries throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Fortunately that argument has proven untrue (though the level of hostility towards the United States is depressingly high in the Muslim world). Another argument was that war in Iraq would create more terrorists. For every Iraqi killed, some suggested, two terrorists would be created. The CIA now agrees with that assessment, though the Bush Administration won't admit it.

The third major argument was that the neo-cons in the Bush administration misunderstood the deep ethnic animosity among the three major groups in Iraq – Sunni, Shia, and Kurds – and an invasion could alter the existing balance of power and lead to civil war.

Critics of the war have been discussing this possibility since before the war began, and now many Middle East observers are saying that civil war is imminent. Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Faisal said in a September 22, 2005 interview that Iraq is "gradually going toward disintegration. ... There seems to be no dynamic now that is pulling the country together. All the dynamics there are pushing the (Iraqi) people away from each other."

Saud said that leaders in the Middle East have serious concerns that Iraq is threatening the stability of the entire Middle East. He said that other countries might be drawn into the fight between Iraq's Sunni and Shiite contingents. "That is the main worry of all the neighbors of Iraq." Finally, and most disturbingly, Saud said that the Saudi Government has been warning the Bush Administration of this possibility for many months, but the Bush Administration has ignored these warnings. Many Arab commentators are saying that the Iraqi charter, which will be voted for on October 15, is a recipe for civil war.

If they are right, my prediction is that Bush will fall back on his all purpose excuse: "no body could have predicted."

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