

The Pre-9/11 Bush Administration

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By Michael Coblenz

The Bush administration has reacted with outrage to suggestions by former terrorism official Richard Clarke that they did not take the threat of terrorism seriously. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice wrote an opinion piece published in the Washington Post, and has been on numerous television programs, arguing that the entire Bush administration took the threat of terrorism very seriously.



To support this contention, Alberto R. Gonzales, Counsel to the President, wrote a letter to the 9-11 Commission on March 25, 2004 (which was conveniently given to the press simultaneously with its delivery to the commission) which says: "as records made available months ago to the Commission demonstrate, the draft national Security Presidential Directive on al Qaeda approved by Deputies and Principals before September 11, 2001, included a direction to the Department of Defense to plan for military action against: 'Taliban targets in Afghanistan, including leadership, command-control, air and air defense, ground forces and logistics' (as well as numerous al Qaeda targets)."

Perhaps the most interesting thing about this statement is that it directly contradicts testimony given by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld just one day before. On March 24 Secretary Rumsfeld told the 9-11 commission that he was consumed by other military matters and "did not recall any particular terrorism issue that engaged his attention before 9/11 other than the development of the Predator unmanned aircraft system for possible use against bin Laden."

Despite Rumsfeld's statements, Dr. Rice said in her numerous television appearances that the Bush administration took the threat of terrorism very seriously, but they never could have predicted that terrorists would hijack airplanes and fly them into buildings.

If the White House was so focused on fighting the Taliban and Al Qaeda before September 11, 2001, wouldn't there be evidence to that fact? Wouldn't, for example, Department of Defense policy reflect that fact? Wouldn't the State Department have identified terrorist groups as among the leading threats to this country?

The Bush administration is being accused of selectively interpreting facts to support their own preconceived world view in regard to the threat of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and they have been accused of manipulating the selection and interpretation of facts to prove a link between Saddam Hussein and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, so it is fascinating to see how they select and manipulate the facts regarding their efforts before September 11, 2001.

Unfortunately for the Bush team, it is very easy to do an Internet search and find out exactly what they were saying and doing before September 11. And it is even more unfortunate for them that the record

shows that, while they occasionally mentioned terrorism, it was hardly a major focus of their efforts.

For example in April of 2001, the State Department issued its annual terrorism report, titled "Patterns of Global Terrorism 2000." The report noted that terrorism was a continuing problem, and that Afghanistan continued to be a safe haven for terrorist organizations. According to news reports from April, 2001, "Unlike last year's report, bin Laden's al Qaeda organization is mentioned, but the 2000 report does not contain a photograph of bin Laden or a lengthy description of him and the group. A senior State Department official told CNN that the U.S. government made a mistake last year by focusing too tightly on bin Laden and 'personalizing terrorism ... describing parts of the elephant and not the whole beast.'"

The Bush team is now saying that they wanted to engage terrorism militarily because treating it as a crime was ineffective, yet the State Department report states otherwise. The report mentions the trial of suspects charged in the bombing of U.S. embassies in East Africa and the Lockerbie trial as a "further victory for the international effort to hold terrorists accountable for their crimes."

One of the Bush Administrations highest priorities when it took office was creating a ballistic missile defense shield. In the summer of 2001, news reports were dominated by discussions of whether the United States should withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty with Russia. Bush's advisers were all over radio and television supporting the withdrawal from the ABM treaty, and discussing the importance of creating the missile defense shield. There was virtually no discussion of the threat of terrorism, except where it could be used to support missile defense.

While the Bush administration is now saying that they were working on military plans to roll back terrorist organizations like al Qaeda, there is no evidence in the public record to support this contention. One possibility, certainly, is that it was all done secretly, but according to Richard Clarke's book this is not so. Throughout the summer of 2001, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld appeared before Congress on a number of occasions to promote and explain the proposed defense department budget for 2002. In all of his discussions before Congress there is no discussion of new military plans to roll back terrorism. The only discussions of terrorism involve using it as an excuse to build the 'Star Wars' missile defense shield.

For example, on June 28, 2001, Rumsfeld appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee to testify regarding the Fiscal Year 2002 National Defense Authorization Budget Request. He was specifically asked to explain the funding requests, and rank the various threats facing the country. He notes that the request for missile defense is \$8.2 Billion, and compares that to the \$11 billion requested for terrorism related issues. Senator Allard asks "Do you think the threat in this area is growing greater than in other areas of threat?"

Rumsfeld replied:

"I think that the threat of a major land conflict in Europe is very low. I think the threat of a major strategic nuclear exchange with Russia is very low. I think that the problem of proliferation and the advancement of technologies and the relaxed tension in the world has led to the availability of weapons of mass destruction and the ability to deliver them in a variety of ways. And because it is so difficult to cope with Western armies, navies and air forces, the nations that have an interest in dissuading us from doing things and have an interest in imposing their will on their neighbors, have looked for these asymmetric threats, from terrorism, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, I would guess down the road cyber-warfare as well, because we have vulnerabilities in those areas that distinctive compared to the vulnerabilities we have with respect to typical warfare, I would rank all of those as risks.

"The proliferation of cruise missiles is taking place. I worry a great deal about germ

warfare and what we read in the intelligence reports about what's taking place in the world. There's no question but that the number of nations that are getting ballistic missiles is growing, and I certainly rank ballistic missile threat up among those asymmetric threats very high."

Clearly the main concern is not the direct threat of terrorism, but the potential that terrorists might get ballistic missiles. So the response is not necessarily to go after terrorism, but to build a missile defense shield to protect the country.

Perhaps the most directly relevant example involved testimony by Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz before the House Budget Committee on July 11, 2001. Representative Dennis Moore (D-Kansas) asks: "I have heard and read from other defense experts that they have very real concerns about the threat that a terrorist attack on this country with chemical or biological weapons might represent. In that regard, how would you assess that kind of threat relative to the threat of a missile attack from a rogue nation?"

Wolfowitz replied:

"Basically I would say they are both very serious. We spend a lot of money -- some estimates are as much as \$11 billion in countering terrorist threats, and I would spend more if I thought it could be spent usefully. I was in Israel during the Gulf War. Former President Bush sent me and Undersecretary of -- Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, to persuade the Israelis to stay out of that war. I've been in a country under ballistic missile attack. It was ten years ago, Mr. Congressman, and ten years later we still don't have an effective defense against those primitive SCUD missiles that were landing on Israel. It's not what the United States does when we're serious. We didn't get to the moon that way. We didn't build Polaris submarines that way.

"This is a real problem. It's not a future problem. We have got to get serious about it, in my view. And we have to be serious about both. You could even frame it this way: we lost -- I'm sorry I don't remember these terrible numbers -- I think we lost 19 people to a truck bomb in Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, yes. We lost 24 people to a SCUD missile in Dhahran in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War. Those are both real threats. We need to work on both of them."

Clearly the numbers show how the Bush Department of Defense rated the threats. The SCUD missile won by 24 to 19, and so the best way to address terrorism was missile defense. They found their solution, and it could solve every problem. (Sort of like the Tax Cut, which was the solution for government surpluses, economic recession, and now government deficits.)

The Bush Administration's willingness to dissemble about their own record is truly baffling for a number of reasons.

First, why the Bush Administration cannot admit to imperfection. Why can't they say that we evaluated the threats and decided that terrorism was a low priority? This would be an honest mistake, one that apparently other administrations made. But Bush and his team seem completely unable to admit mistakes.

Second, it is troubling that they can't even get the facts right when they control the facts. The only logical explanation is that they don't care about the underlying facts; they only care about their beliefs. If they believe Saddam is a bad man, then it must be true that he's hiding WMD's or at least weapons programs. If they believe that tax cuts cure every economic ill then it must be true. And if they believe that before the terrorist attacks of September 11 they were sufficiently vigilant, then that too must be true.

But the most baffling thing of all is their arrogance. They misstate the facts even when the truth is readily discoverable. They just don't seem to care about the truth or what the public thinks. And that's truly frightening.

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