

White House reneges on proof of bin Laden's guilt

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29 September 2001

Within a day of an announcement by the Bush administration that it would provide proof that Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization were responsible for the September 11 terror attacks, the government reneged on its pledge.

Last Sunday, Secretary of State Colin Powell appeared on NBC's "Meet the Press" and said the government would soon "put out a paper ... that will describe clearly the evidence that we have linking" bin Laden to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Powell was responding to pressure on the US from governments in the Middle East, as well as some of Washington's NATO allies, who are demanding something more than bald assertions that bin Laden and his Afghan protectors are guilty of the terror attacks on New York and Washington before fully committing themselves to support American military strikes. He was also responding to widespread unease and skepticism within the American population toward the government's claims, as well as its plans for an open-ended war—feelings that persist despite grief and anger over the attacks on September 11, and a relentless media campaign to whip the country into a patriotic frenzy.

The day after Powell's statement, banner headlines appeared in newspapers across the country announcing the imminent report on bin Laden's guilt. A front-page article in Monday's *New York Times* cited statements by government officials that the evidence "reaches from the southern tip of Manhattan to the foothills of the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan."

But by Monday afternoon, the Bush administration was backtracking on making any public presentation of evidence. Ari Fleischer, Bush's press secretary, said there were no plans to produce a report and that

Powell's remarks had been misinterpreted. Consistent with the media's shameless promotion of the government's war drive, by Tuesday virtually all mention of the promised "white paper" had disappeared from the newspapers and TV broadcasts.

At the Monday press conference, Fleischer maintained that the evidence on bin Laden was classified, and releasing it would compromise US intelligence agencies. Even the thoroughly housebroken members of the White House press corps found this explanation hard to swallow. One reporter directly asked the press secretary whether there was "any plan to present public evidence so that the average citizen, not just Americans, but people all over the world can understand the case against bin Laden."

Fleischer dodged the question, repeating there was no timetable for releasing any evidence. He added cynically: "In a democracy it's always important to provide the maximum amount of information possible. But I think the American people also understand that there are going to be times when that information cannot immediately be forthcoming."

The claim that no public presentation of the evidence can be made for fear of revealing classified information is so crude and transparent as to insult the intelligence of the people of America and the entire world. What changed between Sunday and Monday that suddenly made the promised public accounting a threat to national security?

Can anyone seriously believe that if the administration had evidence directly tying bin Laden and his organization to the September 11 attacks, it would not rush to make it public?

The administration's lame attempt to justify its about-face indicates three things: first, it has no serious evidence linking bin Laden directly to the September

11 atrocities; second, it is in considerable internal disarray; and third, it feels it can lie without limit and get away with it because it has the services of a thoroughly reactionary and controlled media.

If the Bush administration cannot present a credible case to back up its charges, there must be another explanation for its decision to target bin Laden and Afghanistan. The flip-flop over the “white paper” is further proof that the government is pursuing an unstated agenda, behind the backs of the American people, and using the tragedy of September 11 to implement military and geo-strategic plans long in the making.

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