

White House lied about threat to Air Force One

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The White House has been caught in a lie about the alleged terrorist threat against Air Force One which it had cited as the reason for President Bush's absence from Washington for most of September 11. According to reports by CBS News and the *Washington Post*, White House officials have stated that the Secret Service never received a phone call warning of a direct threat to the president's airplane. The government's reversal has gone largely unreported in the media.

In the immediate aftermath of the terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Bush's movements became a matter of controversy within political and media circles. As the destruction in New York and Washington unfolded and unconfirmed reports emerged of a car bomb at the State Department and the danger of further hijackings, Bush, who began the day in Florida, was whisked from one military installation to another by the Secret Service.

Looking pale and shaken, he taped a brief initial message from an underground bunker at an air force base in Louisiana. Several hours later—when all non-US military aircraft in American air space had been grounded—Bush was flown to another fortified location at the Strategic Air Command headquarters in Nebraska. The president did not return to Washington until 7 p.m., nearly 10 hours after the initial attack.

Bush's failure to quickly return to Washington sparked pointed criticism, including from within the Republican Party. Under conditions of a massive attack on US civilians, involving the destruction of a symbol of American financial power and the partial destruction of the nerve center of the American military, any appearance of indecisiveness or panic on the part of the US president was of great concern to the American political and financial elite.

New York Times columnist William Safire, a one-time Nixon aide and fixture within the Republican Party, suggested that Bush had panicked and all but abandoned his post in the first hours of the crisis. Writing in a September 12 op-ed piece, Safire said, "Even in the first horrified moments, this was never seen as a nuclear attack by a foreign power. Bush should have insisted on coming right back to the Washington area, broadcasting—live and calm—from a secure facility not far from the White House."

Stung by such criticisms, Bush's chief political strategist

Karl Rove and other top administration officials worked feverishly to reassure the political, corporate and military establishment, and bolster Bush's authority among the population at large. By the afternoon of September 12, the Associated Press and Reuters were carrying stories, widely circulated throughout the media, that were intended to diffuse criticism of Bush's actions the previous day. They quoted a White House spokesperson saying, "There was real and credible information that the White House and Air Force One were targets of terrorist attacks and that the plane that hit the Pentagon was headed for the White House." White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer repeated this claim at an afternoon news briefing that same day, saying the Secret Service had "specific and credible information" that the White House and Air Force One were potential targets.

In a further column in the *New York Times* on September 13, entitled "Inside the Bunker," Safire described a conversation with an unnamed "high White House official," who told him, "A threatening message received by the Secret Service was relayed to the agents with the president that 'Air Force One is next.'" Safire continued: "According to the high official, American code words were used showing a knowledge of procedures that made the threat credible."

Safire reported that this information was confirmed by Rove, who told him Bush had wanted to return to Washington but the Secret Service "informed him that the threat contained language that was evidence that the terrorists had knowledge of his procedures and whereabouts."

Two weeks after these astonishing claims, the administration has all but admitted it concocted the entire story. CBS Evening News reported September 25 that the call "simply never happened."

The fact that top officials, at a time of extraordinary crisis and public anxiety, lied to protect the president's image has immense implications. If, within 24 hours of the terror attacks, the White House was giving out disinformation to deceive the American public and world opinion, then none of the claims made by the government from September 11 to the present can be taken for good coin.

If Bush lied about his activities on the day of the attacks, why should anyone assume he has not lied about the government's

investigation, the identity of the perpetrators, the motives and aims of US war preparations, and the intent and scope of expanded police powers demanded by his administration to wiretap, search and seize, and detain suspects?

This entire episode provides ample grounds for the American people to treat all claims by the government with the utmost suspicion and not accept any of its assertions without independent and verifiable information.

The duplicity of the government is all the more significant since the Bush administration has taken the position that people not only in the US, but throughout the world, must accept on faith its assertions that Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda network are responsible for the attacks, and that the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban government in Afghanistan bears direct responsibility because it harbors bin Laden.

It is quite possible that bin Laden played a role in the September 11 atrocities. To date, however, Bush has offered no evidence, and, apparently, has no intention of doing so. Instead the administration insists that the American people place blind trust in the White House and give it a blank check for waging war and trampling on civil liberties.

The phony Air Force One story not only exposes the duplicitous methods of the Bush administration, it also underscores the shamelessness and complicity of the media. When the White House came out with the story of a terrorist phone threat against the president's plane, the media uncritically repeated it, with banner headlines and chilling segments on the evening news. As it has throughout the present crisis, the media functioned unabashedly as a propaganda arm of the government.

But when the White House, two weeks later, retracted the story, most networks failed to even report the fact, as did leading newspapers such as the *New York Times*. The *Washington Post*, for its part, buried the government's about-face on its inside pages. No media outlet made an issue of this incriminating admission, or discussed its broader implications.

Well before the official retraction, it was widely accepted in the Washington press corps that the administration had made up the Air Force One story. In her column in the September 23 *New York Times*, Maureen Dowd noted that Karl Rove had "called around town, trying to sell reporters the story— *now widely discredited* —that Mr. Bush didn't immediately return to Washington on Sept. 11 because the plane that was headed for the Pentagon may have really been targeting the White House, and that Air Force One was in jeopardy, too" (emphasis added).

Dowd and her colleagues believed the government was lying, but the public had no way of knowing the story was not credible since the news media refused to openly challenge it.

There may be another reason for the silence of the press. The story handed out on September 12 by Rove, Fleischer and other White House officials raised issues even more explosive and potentially damning than Bush's feckless behavior on September 11.

Safire pointed to one such question in his September 13 *New York Times* column. Referring to the White House claim that the terrorists had knowledge of secret information about Air Force One, Safire asked: "How did they get the code-word information and transponder know-how that established their mala fides? That knowledge of code words and presidential whereabouts and possession of secret procedures indicates that the terrorists may have a mole in the White House—that, or informants in the Secret Service, FBI, FAA, or CIA."

Safire's entirely valid question as to how a supposed terrorist could have knowledge of such top-secret and sensitive information has never been taken up by the media at large, or addressed by the government.

If, indeed, such a phone call took place, it would raise an alternate theory of contact between the terrorists and one or another agency of the government at least as plausible as that suggested by Safire: Namely, that the call was not a threat, but rather a tip-off from an informant for the US who had knowledge of the plans and activities of the terrorists.

The *World Socialist Web Site* does not claim to have an answer to these questions. But it is legitimate and necessary to raise them, especially since they are posed by the government's own statements.

One thing is clear: the government lied to the people of America and the world. Either it lied on September 12 when it issued the story of the threat to Air Force One, or it lied two weeks later when it retracted the story. The millions of people who are being told they must accept unbridled militarism and the gutting of their democratic rights in the name of a holy war against terrorism must draw the appropriate conclusions from this indisputable fact.

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