

The Bush administration and September 11: the implications of Richard Clarke's revelations

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In an appearance March 24 before the national commission investigating the September 11 terrorist attacks, and in an hour-long appearance on the NBC News program *Meet the Press* on March 28, former Bush counter-terrorism chief Richard Clarke reiterated his charges that the Bush administration downplayed the threat of terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda until after the hijack-bombings of the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, and then used the attacks as the pretext to set in motion pre-existing plans to invade Iraq.

Clarke's accusations are laid out in his newly published book, *Against All Enemies*, and amply corroborated by the documentary record and testimony of other participants. The controversy has created the biggest political crisis for the Bush administration since Bush took office in January 2001.

An array of Bush administration officials, congressional Republican leaders and right-wing media pundits have denounced Clarke's account, without providing any refutation of its factual content. Nor have they provided any explanation of why the former assistant to the president for counter-terrorism, a registered Republican, would seek to destroy Bush's political credibility on the issue upon which the president has largely based his reelection campaign—his leadership in the “war on terror.”

Clarke's charges focus on the most explosive of political issues: the connection between the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the Bush administration's decision to go to war with Iraq. Clarke explicitly and insistently links the Bush administration's inaction prior to 9/11 on the danger of Al Qaeda attacks and its obsession with invading Iraq. He maintains that the firm consensus of the US intelligence establishment was that Iraq had no connection to the terrorist attacks, and denounces the Iraq war as a diversion from the “war on terror” and a strategic blunder that has inflamed the Muslim world and politically strengthened Al Qaeda.

With 30 years experience in the US national security establishment, including high-level positions in the Reagan, Bush senior and Clinton administrations before he served in the second Bush White House, Clarke is no anti-war dissenter. He is a ruthless advocate of military and covert action in pursuit of the interests of American imperialism. This makes his testimony against the Bush administration all the more damaging.

In both his 9/11 commission testimony and his March 28 television interview, Clarke highlighted the difference between the

approach of the Clinton administration to an upsurge of terrorist threats and that of the Bush administration under similar circumstances.

In the period leading up to the millenium celebrations in December 1999, US intelligence agencies reported a dramatic spike in intercepts of threatening communications involving Al Qaeda. At Clinton's behest, his national security adviser, Samuel Berger, convened daily meetings of the highest-level security officials, including the heads of the CIA and FBI, to monitor efforts to forestall an attack. This continuous pressure, according to Clarke, led to the disruption of a planned New Year's Eve attack on Los Angeles Airport when an Al Qaeda operative assigned to that attack was arrested attempting to cross the US-Canada border near Vancouver, British Columbia.

If an effort of similar intensity had been mounted during the summer of 2001, when intelligence intercepts about terrorist threats from Al Qaeda again began to spike, Clarke insisted, the September 11 attacks might have been disrupted or prevented.

Much of the media focus on his testimony has concerned a series of meetings and memo exchanges among White House officials during the first eight months of 2001, and alleged differences between what Clarke said while he was a Bush aide and what he is saying now. But Clarke insists that bureaucratic foot-dragging by the administration had real consequences for efforts to prevent a terrorist attack within the US.

Well-documented facts support his case. When, for example, the CIA learned that two Al Qaeda operatives who had attended a high-level planning meeting in Malaysia had entered the United States, it did not notify the FBI for more than a year. Neither agency informed Clarke or his cohorts on the White House counter-terrorism team. These two known Al Qaeda operatives were among the hijackers who, using their real names, boarded four commercial jets on September 11 without encountering any impediment from either government or airline officials.

Clarke observed acidly, “I think we even had their pictures. I would like to think that I would have released, or would have had the FBI release, a press release with their names, with their descriptions, held a press conference, tried to get their names and pictures on the front page of every paper, America's Most Wanted, the evening news, and caused a successful nationwide manhunt for those two of the 19 hijackers.”

The lack of communication was despite the fact that Clarke had convened a high-level meeting of agencies responsible for preventing an Al Qaeda terrorist attack, including the CIA, FBI and Federal Aviation Administration, which monitors airline security, in June 2001, in response to the increased level of reported threats.

Clarke told the 9/11 commission last Wednesday, “I had been saying to the FBI and to the other federal law enforcement agencies and to the CIA that because of this intelligence that something was about to happen, that they should lower their threshold of reporting, that they should tell us anything that looked the slightest bit unusual.

“In retrospect, having said that over and over again to them, for them to have had this information [about the two future hijackers] somewhere in the FBI and not told me, I still find absolutely incomprehensible.”

In the same section of his testimony, Clarke said the FBI had not notified the White House counter-terrorism office of the case of Zacarias Moussaoui, a suspected Al Qaeda member who was arrested after he attempted to get training on a 747 jet at a Minnesota flight school. Commission member Richard Ben-Veniste, a former Watergate prosecutor, asked, “And had you known on top of that that there was a jihadist who was identified, apprehended in the United States before 9/11, who was in flight school acting erratically...”

Clarke responded, “I would like to think, sir, that even without the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, I could have connected those dots.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has long maintained that, in analyzing the events of September 11, the least plausible explanation is the official version of the Bush administration, propounded endlessly by the American media for two-and-a-half years: that 19 Al Qaeda operatives entered the United States, hijacked four airplanes on the same day and flew them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—using suicide pilots trained at US flight schools—without any US government agency having the slightest idea what the terrorists were doing.

Clarke’s testimony confirms that the Al Qaeda attacks were made possible by a virtual stand-down of the counter-terrorist preparations that had been in effect in the last years of the Clinton administration—certainly from the time of the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998.

What neither Clarke, nor his interrogators, nor the media have addressed is whether this stand-down was deliberate: i.e., that at some level of the US government, a decision was made to permit a terrorist attack to go forward in order to provide the necessary pretext for US military action in the Middle East and Central Asia, a step which up until then was politically impossible.

Not only Clarke, but the entire array of former and current national security officials who testified last Tuesday and Wednesday before the 9/11 commission agreed that public opposition made such military intervention impossible before the September 11 attacks. This was a fact of political life, confirmed by both Madeleine Albright, Clinton’s secretary of state, and Donald Rumsfeld, Bush’s secretary of defense.

Clarke—following in the footsteps of Paul O’Neill, former treasury secretary, and other eyewitnesses—confirms that the Bush

administration was focused from its first days in office on preparing for war against Iraq. Initially, Rumsfeld and other warmongers hoped to use Iraqi self-defense actions, such as anti-aircraft fire at US warplanes patrolling the “no-fly” zones in northern and southern Iraq, as a suitable pretext for war. But this proved to have little impact on public opinion.

Clarke never suggests that the Bush administration deliberately decided to “take” a terrorist attack in order to generate popular support for war, but he is clearly not saying all he knows about the background to September 11. Consider, for example, his comment during Wednesday’s hearing: “You know, unfortunately, this country takes body bags and requires body bags sometimes to make really tough decisions about money and about governmental arrangements.”

Another significant detail is Clarke’s report that after his office had triggered a nationwide counter-terrorist alert during the summer of 2001, based on intelligence intercepts, it encountered pressure from the Pentagon, which said that military units on alert status were beginning to suffer from fatigue. The alert, which had included the Federal Aviation Agency, was eased by the end of August, two weeks before the 19 suicide hijackers boarded their flights. The timing suggests that those who dispatched the hijackers knew when security was being relaxed. What was their source of information?

More than two years ago, the WSWS [See: “Was the US government alerted to September 11 attack?” 16 January 2002] laid out in detail the evidence that the US government had been alerted to the terrorist attacks well before September 11. The Bush administration was making preparations, not to forestall such attacks and the consequent loss of thousands of lives, but to use a terrorist atrocity as the pretext for carrying out long-planned military operations in the oil-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East.

The revelations of Richard Clarke provide further evidence that something far more sinister and ominous than incompetence or a failure to “connect the dots” was behind the government’s failure to prevent the worst terrorist attack in US history.



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