

# Former terrorism aide charges Bush manufactured case for Iraq war

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In a book published Monday and an interview on the CBS program “60 Minutes” Sunday night, former Bush counter-terrorism coordinator Richard Clarke has denounced Bush and his top aides for using the September 11 terrorist attacks as a pretext for waging war against Iraq.

In the TV interview, Clarke criticized Bush’s record in the “war on terrorism,” saying the Bush administration showed little interest in pursuing Al Qaeda in the eight months between Bush’s inauguration and September 11, 2001. Afterwards, he said, top officials like Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld pushed for Iraq to be the target of US military action, despite the absence of any connection between Saddam Hussein and the terrorist attacks.

Clark related one incident, on September 12, 2001, when Bush took Clarke and several aides aside in the White House Situation Room and told them to review evidence that the Iraqi president was involved in the attacks on New York and Washington. This was not a demand to be thorough and explore all possible avenues of investigation, Clarke recalled. Bush spoke “testily” and was “intimidating.” Clarke told “60 Minutes,” “He never said, ‘Make it up.’ But the entire conversation left me in absolutely no doubt that George Bush wanted me to come back with a report that said Iraq did this.”

Clarke’s interview and book are a scathing attack on the entire national security leadership of the Bush administration. “I find it outrageous that the president is running for re-election on the grounds that he’s done such great things about terrorism,” he said. “He ignored it. He ignored terrorism for months, when maybe we could have done something to stop 9/11.”

According to Clark, in the initial discussions after September 11, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld called for bombing Iraq rather than Afghanistan, declaring that there were no good bombing targets in Afghanistan.

Clarke wrote: “I realized with almost a sharp physical pain that Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were going to try to take advantage of this national tragedy to promote their agenda about Iraq.”

Bush deserves no credit for his conduct in the weeks after September 11—for which he received the adulation of the American media—Clarke said. “Any leader whom one can imagine as president on September 11 would have declared a ‘war on terrorism’ and would have ended the Afghan sanctuary by invading,” Clarke wrote in his book. “What was unique about George Bush’s reaction” was the decision to invade “not a country that had been engaging in anti-US terrorism, but one that had not been, Iraq.”

In his “60 Minutes” interview, trying to capture the arbitrary character of the decision to target Iraq, Clarke said that it was as if Franklin Roosevelt had responded to Pearl Harbor by declaring war on Mexico instead of Japan. Bush’s decision to target Saddam Hussein “launched an unnecessary and costly war in Iraq that strengthened the fundamentalist, radical Islamic terrorist movement worldwide.”

The timing of the Iraq war was motivated by domestic political concerns, he says, as evidenced by the passage of a congressional resolution only weeks before the 2002 mid-term election. “The crisis was manufactured, and Bush political adviser Karl Rove was telling Republicans to ‘run on the war’.”

This kind of language is unprecedented for a former top national security official to use in describing a president under whom he served, and who is still in office. The conduct that Clarke describes is not merely negligent before September 11 and cynical and lying afterwards. It is, in the full sense of the word, criminal, and would suffice to indict Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice and other top officials for the same crime that leading Nazis faced at Nuremberg: deliberately plotting

and fomenting an aggressive war.

For just this reason, Clarke's inside account of the "war on terror" has provoked a furious and vituperative response from the Bush administration. The White House immediately claimed that the book was politically motivated and timed to assist the Democratic Party and the Kerry campaign. Clarke, however, is a 30-year veteran of the national security apparatus who held positions in the Reagan and first Bush administrations before becoming counter-terrorism coordinator in the Clinton White House. As for the timing of the book, that was determined by the White House, which held up its publication for three months on the pretext of reviewing it for security concerns.

Clarke, a registered Republican as late as 2000, is a long-time associate of the most hawkish faction of the national security establishment. In 1991, he supported continuation of the first Persian Gulf War, arguing against the decision of President George H. W. Bush to call off the ground war after four days rather than pressing forward into southern Iraq. During the 1990s, he supported aggressive US military action against Iraq's supposed stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. That such an individual should come out publicly against the Bush White House is an indication of deep divisions within the American ruling elite and its military-intelligence apparatus over the deepening crisis in US-occupied Iraq.

Like former treasury secretary Paul O'Neill, who published his own critical book on the Bush administration in January, Clarke describes the Bush administration's leading personnel as "right-wing ideologues" who simply refused to consider any facts that did not conform to their world view, and who were focused on preparing war with Iraq from the time Bush entered the White House.

According to Clarke, Condoleezza Rice, the incoming national security adviser, did not appear to recognize the name "Al Qaeda" at the time of her initial briefings from Clinton administration officials during the transition period. In the first few months of the Bush administration, Rice repeatedly put off Clarke's request to brief cabinet-level officials on the danger of an Al Qaeda strike on American targets. When the briefing was finally held for cabinet deputies, in April 2001, the Pentagon's representative, Paul Wolfowitz, dismissed bin Laden as "a little guy" who was much less of a threat than the terrorism allegedly sponsored by Saddam Hussein.

Clarke says that even though he was the top US counter-terrorism coordinator, FBI and CIA reports that Al Qaeda

operatives had entered the United States early in 2001 never reached him, nor was he informed of the detention of Zacarias Moussaoui, the Al Qaeda member who was arrested on an immigration violation in August 2001 after seeking pilot training on a 747 from a Minnesota flight school.

A serious push from the White House to forestall an attack by Al Qaeda could have had an effect, Clarke maintains. "We would have been able to pull that thread, and get more of the conspiracy. I'm not saying we could have stopped Sept. 11, but we could have at least had a chance." George Bush "failed to act prior to September 11 on the threat from Al Qaeda despite repeated warnings, and then harvested a political windfall for taking obvious yet insufficient steps after the attacks."

Clarke's account confirms what millions of people opposed to the Iraq war have long understood. The invasion of Iraq had nothing to do with any "war on terror," and its causes must be found elsewhere—above all, in the drive by American imperialism to secure oil resources and a decisive strategic position in the Middle East.

Even more significant than Clarke's revelations about the Bush administration's cynical exploitation of the 9/11 atrocity to pursue its pre-9/11 agenda against Iraq—and much less noted in the media coverage—are Clarke's revelations about the attitude of the Bush administration to terrorist threats before September 11. At best, his description suggests a degree of incompetence and seeming indifference to the warnings of a terrorist attack within the United States that rises to the level of criminal negligence.

More likely, however, is another explanation of why the Bush administration made little effort to locate Al Qaeda operatives and break up their terrorist schemes. Without perhaps anticipating the full dimensions of such a terrorist attack—foresight is not a hallmark of Bush & Co.—the administration quietly welcomed the prospect of an outrage by the "little guy" (as Wolfowitz called him), because it would give them the pretext necessary to wage war on the "big guy"—Saddam Hussein.



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