

Why won't Condoleezza Rice give open, sworn testimony on 9/11?

Bill Van Auken
30 March 2004

President Bush's National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice appeared on the CBS News program "60 Minutes" Sunday night to reiterate the US administration's rejection of growing demands that she testify publicly and under oath before the national commission formed to investigate the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Rice's interview with CBS correspondent Ed Bradley had been billed by the administration as the culmination of a concerted attempt by the White House and its political defenders to discredit charges by the former Bush counterterrorism chief Richard Clarke.

A 30-year veteran of the US national security establishment, Clarke has testified that the administration failed to act in the face of mounting evidence of a threat of an Al Qaeda terrorist attack, and then seized upon September 11 as the pretext for launching a long-sought invasion of Iraq.

The Rice interview provided nothing in the way of new information, and consisted largely of her insistence that the administration could have done nothing differently prior to September 11. She further claimed that the invasion and occupation of Iraq were justified as part of a "broad war" on terrorism, despite the absence of any evidence that the Iraqi regime either had links to Islamist terrorism or possessed weapons of mass destruction.

The only issue of substance raised by Rice in the interview was her confirmation of Clarke's charge that, the day after the September 11 attacks, Bush demanded that he (Clarke) search for a link between the terrorists and the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. The White House had steadfastly denied over the previous week that there was any evidence that such an encounter even took place.

In an interview the previous Sunday on the same news program, Clarke recalled responding to Bush: "Mr. President, we've done this before...we've been looking at this. We looked at it with an open mind, there's no connection." Bush, he said, responded by telling him: "Iraq, Saddam, find out if there's a connection." He described Bush's approach as "very intimidating" and interpreted it as a clear order to come back with the desired response implicating the Iraqi regime.

Rice's overall presentation was entirely unconvincing, serving only to fuel the perception that the administration is engaged in a cover-up over the September 11 events.

Meanwhile, even Republican allies of the administration have reacted with dismay over the refusal to have Rice give open and sworn testimony.

Thomas Kean, the former Republican governor of New Jersey who chairs the 9/11 commission, declared that "this administration shot itself in the foot by not letting her testify in public."

Kean went on to reject the administration's claim that the refusal was justified on the grounds of executive privilege. "We recognize there are arguments having to do with separation of powers," Kean said on "Fox News Sunday." "We think in a tragedy of this magnitude that those kind of legal arguments are probably overridden."

Appearing on ABC's "This Week", another Republican commissioner, John Lehman, said that the administration's rejection of the demand that Rice publicly testify is "creating the impression for honest Americans all

over the country and people all over the world that the White House has something to hide, that Condi Rice has something to hide". He went on to claim that given there are "no smoking guns" demonstrating wrongdoing by the administration, the refusal was "absurd" and "a political blunder of the first order."

Even Richard Perle, an influential advisor of the administration and one of the chief architects of the war on Iraq, told CNN that Rice "would be wise to testify." As for the separation-of-powers argument, Perle declared. "Sometimes you have to set those aside because the circumstances require it."

Meanwhile, the Family Steering Committee, representing relatives of those killed in the September 11 attacks, issued a public statement demanding that Rice testify "under oath in a public hearing immediately." The statement continued: "We believe that testifying before the Commission in a public forum is Ms. Rice's moral obligation given her responsibility as National Security Advisor to protect our nation. The death of nearly 3,000 innocent people warrants such a moral precedent."

In justifying her failure to appear before the commission either in public or under oath, Rice began the CBS interview with a crude lie about the nature of the investigation.

"This commission is rightly not concentrating on what happened on the day of September 11," she declared. "So, this is not a matter of what happened on that day, as extraordinary as it is—as it was. This is a matter of policy. And we have yet to find an example of a national security advisor, sitting national security advisor, who has—been willing to testify on matters of policy."

In reality, the commission, which was accepted by Bush in November 2002 after persistent attempts by the administration to block the formation of such a panel, is charged under law with investigating "the facts and causes relating to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001," and making "a full and complete accounting of the circumstances surrounding the attacks, and the extent of the United States' preparedness for, and immediate response to, the attacks."

There is ample precedent for Rice to testify. According to a study produced in April 2002 by the Congressional Research Service, Rice's predecessors as National Security Advisor—Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1980 under the Carter administration, and Sandy Berger in 1997 under Clinton—gave public testimony in legislative forums.

Moreover, the level of hypocrisy in the Republican administration's stand on executive privilege is evident when juxtaposed with the hue and cry against the Clinton administration in 1998 over its assertion of the same principle in an attempt to shield leading White House aides from interrogation by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr in the Monica Lewinsky affair.

Clinton's claims of privilege were denied by the courts, on the grounds that the Office of Independent Counsel had the legal authority to pursue an investigation into Clinton's personal life in a case which involved lying about a private sexual relationship. Yet Bush and Rice now assert

privilege over what is an undeniably public matter: their actions before, during and after a terrorist attack that claimed 3,000 lives and was turned into the pretext for an illegal war of aggression.

The real reasons for the Bush administration's reluctance to submit Rice for sworn public testimony have nothing to do with the administration's and Rice's invocation of "constitutional principle."

Rice's post represents the nexus between the White House and the US national security establishment. She has been indicted by Clarke as principally responsible for the Bush administration's inaction prior to September 11, 2001 in the face of growing indications of a threatened terrorist attack. She was also at the center of the Bush administration's manipulation of the 9/11 tragedy to prepare the invasion of Iraq.

Appearing on CNN's "Larry King Live" last week, Clarke declared: "If Condi Rice had been doing her job ... if she had a hands-on attitude to being national security adviser," critical information would have been gleaned from the CIA and FBI regarding the presence of known Al Qaeda operatives in the US and their preparations for using airplanes as guided missiles against civilian targets.

In his testimony before the 9/11 panel, Clarke pointed in particular to the case of Nawaf Alhazmi and Khalid al-Midhar—Al Qaeda operatives and eventual hijackers whom the CIA had monitored from the time they attended a meeting of the Islamist organization in Malaysia until they entered the US, where they found accommodation with an undercover FBI informant in San Diego. One was even listed under his real name in the telephone book. Had information about these two been disseminated, Clarke stated, the attacks of September 11 might have been foiled.

Rice responded by calling Clarke's accusations "scurrilous." While refusing to testify before the 9/11 panel, she appeared last week on virtually every network morning news show and several other programs as well to respond to the testimony of the former counter-terrorism chief. Neither she nor anyone else in the administration, however, has provided a credible explanation of why Clarke, a veteran counter-terrorism official and a registered Republican, would slander her and the Bush White House over these issues.

What is clear from the record is that Rice has placed herself at the center of a deliberate cover-up of what the administration knew and did in the period leading up to the September 11 attacks.

In May 2002, amid mounting charges that the administration had ignored evidence that a plot involving the hijacking of airplanes was unfolding, Rice declared: "I don't think anybody could have predicted that they would try to use ... a hijacked airplane as a missile."

In reality, Bush had received a memorandum barely a month before the attacks, on August 6, 2001, warning that Al Qaeda was capable of launching a major attack within the US and that such a strike could involve the hijacking of US aircraft. Just a month earlier, the administration had also been warned that terrorists had considered the use of civilian airplanes as missiles.

Two years before the terrorist attacks, a document prepared for the National Intelligence Council, a body that advises the White House on potential threats, specifically warned that Al Qaeda could hijack airplanes and fly them into buildings in retaliation for US air strikes against targets in Afghanistan.

"Suicide bomber(s) belonging to Al Qaeda's Martyrdom Battalion could crash-land an aircraft packed with high explosives (C-4 and semtex) into the Pentagon, the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), or the White House," the September 1999 report stated. The year before, US intelligence agencies learned of a plot to fly an explosive-laden aircraft into the World Trade Center towers.

In her own private testimony before the 9/11 commission (which was classified and not transcribed) Rice had asked to revise the statement about the impossibility of imagining the September 11 attacks, saying she "misspoke," according to commission member and former Watergate

prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste. She acknowledged that Clarke had himself warned of the possibility of such an attack.

That Rice has continued to "misspeak" throughout her attempts over the past week to refute Clarke's charges, was spelled out in an article by Walter Pincus and Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post* published last Friday.

"Rice's rebuttals of Clarke's broadside against Bush, which she delivered in a flurry of media interviews and statements rather than in testimony, contradicted other administration officials and her own previous statements," wrote Pincus and Milbank.

In an opinion piece she wrote for the *Washington Post*, for example, she dismissed Clarke's proposals as a "laundry list" of failed policies of the Clinton administration and claimed that he had no plan relating to Al Qaeda. In an interview on NBC two days later, however, she claimed that the administration had accepted Clarke's proposals and acted upon them "very quickly."

Alleged contradictions between charges made by Clarke in his testimony before the 9/11 panel and earlier statements he had made when he was working as a White House advisor have led to vitriolic suggestions by leading Republicans that he be charged with perjury. Rice, however, faces no such threat, as none of her conflicting statements have been made under oath.

Perhaps the greatest deception carried out by Rice is her denial that the immediate and overriding response of the Bush administration to September 11 was the desire to exploit the catastrophe in order to stampede the American people into a war against Iraq.

In her interview with "60 Minutes," Rice claimed: "It was Afghanistan that became the focus of the American response. And Iraq was put aside with the exception of worrying about whether Iraq might try and take advantage of us in some way."

Yet according to multiple sources from within the administration, Iraq was placed directly on the front burner. In a January 12, 2003 article, the *Washington Post* reported that "six days after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, President Bush signed a 2 ½ page document marked 'TOP SECRET'" that ostensibly dealt with Afghanistan but "directed the Pentagon to begin planning military options for an invasion of Iraq." This followed a September 2002 CBS News report that within hours of the 9/11 attacks, "Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was telling his aides to come up with plans for striking Iraq."

Paul O'Neill, the former Bush administration treasury secretary, provided similar testimony in the book by Ron Suskind, "The Price of Loyalty." He described a meeting of Bush's "war cabinet" at Camp David the weekend after the terrorist attack in which the discussion, led by Rice, quickly turned to Iraq.

"It was like changing the subject—Iraq is not where bin Laden is and not where there's trouble," said O'Neill. "I was mystified. It's like a bookbinder accidentally dropping a chapter from one book into the middle of another one. The chapter is coherent in its own way, but it doesn't seem to fit in this book."

Perhaps the most chilling moment in the "60 Minutes" interview with Rice came when Bradley asked her whether she believed it was appropriate for her to apologize to the families of the 9/11 victims for the administration's failure to halt the attacks.

Rice dodged the question, declaring: "You couldn't be human and not feel the horror of that day. We do need to stay focused on what happened to us that day. And the best thing that we can do for the memory of the victims, the best thing that we can do for the future of this country, is to focus on those who did this to us."

Rice's real reaction to September 11 was spelled out in a speech she delivered, some seven months after the attacks, at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. There she described the horrific event as an "enormous opportunity."

“An earthquake of the magnitude of 9/11 can shift the tectonic plates of international politics,” she declared. She described the emerging situation as “a period akin to 1945 to 1947, when American leadership expanded the number of free and democratic states—Japan and Germany among the great powers—to create a new balance of power...”

The comparison to the US occupation and restructuring of two countries defeated in war was no accident. By this time, plans for the US invasion and occupation of Iraq were well advanced, and the administration was manufacturing the case for such a war, with Rice playing a leading role in advancing lies about “weapons of mass destruction” and phony links between the Iraqi regime and September 11.

Rice’s performance as national security advisor and her celebration of September 11 as an “opportunity” raise serious questions as to whether the Bush administration or elements within it deliberately engineered a stand-down of the US counter-terrorism efforts with the idea that “taking” a terrorist attack would create a desired pretext for launching wars aimed at securing US hegemony over the strategically vital oil reserves of the Middle East and Central Asia.

While the 9/11 panel is not about to pursue such a line of investigation, the extreme reluctance of the Bush administration to allow Rice to give public, sworn testimony is a clear indication that there are questions it cannot afford to have asked or answered.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact