

Bush, Rice and the 9/11 commission: Behind the conflict within the US ruling elite

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The conflict between the Bush administration and the national commission investigating the September 11 terrorist attacks, focused on whether National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice would give public, sworn testimony, is an instructive example of how the American ruling elite manages an intense internal conflict, while seeking to exclude any intervention by the broad masses of working people.

The White House abruptly reversed itself on March 30, after weeks of maintaining that the principle of executive privilege forbade testimony by Rice under oath. Bush personally made the announcement in a brief statement lasting less than four minutes, with no questions allowed. Later in the week, the commission announced that Rice was scheduled to testify for several hours on Thursday, April 8.

The focus of the questioning of Rice—who appeared for an extensive private interview with the commission two months ago, and therefore is hardly an unknown quantity—will be the allegations made by former Bush counter-terrorism chief Richard Clarke, who testified March 24 before the commission, two days after the publication of his best-selling book, *Against All Enemies*.

The thesis of the book, reiterated in Clarke's testimony, is that the Bush administration was more concerned with overthrowing Saddam Hussein than with the danger of Al Qaeda before September 11, and then seized on the mass casualties at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as a pretext for invading Iraq, which had no connection to the terrorist attack. The war with Iraq, Clarke maintained, was a diversion from the struggle against Al Qaeda and has made terrorist attacks on Americans more, rather than less, likely.

In return for the appearance of Rice, the commission made concessions of its own. It agreed not to seek the testimony of any other White House aides after Rice leaves the witness stand, insuring that whatever contradictions exist between her testimony and that of Clarke will be left at the level of "he said, she said."

More significantly, the commission agreed to interview Bush and Cheney together at a private session where they will not be placed under oath and their testimony will not be recorded. Only a single note-taker will be permitted, although all 10 commissioners will be present and participate in the questioning. The White House initially proposed to limit the questioning to the chairman, Thomas Kean, the former Republican governor of New Jersey, and Vice-Chairman Lee Hamilton, a former Democratic congressman.

While both the Bush administration and the commission cited the constitutional separation of powers as the justification for this unusual arrangement, the real motive is much more concrete and practical: by giving testimony that is unrecorded and unsworn, Cheney and Bush avoid the kind of legal liability—either to impeachment or criminal prosecution—that President Clinton faced as a result of his testimony under oath in the Paula Jones lawsuit and his deposition before the Kenneth Starr grand jury. The president and vice president will, moreover, be able to minimize any contradictions by hearing each other's accounts of the

events leading up to 9/11.

Much like the presidential election campaign, the investigation into the September 11 terrorist attacks has become an arena in which serious policy differences within the political and corporate establishment are being fought out. At the same time, all of the factions of the ruling elite are conscious of the need to impose definite limits on the conflict, keeping the most sensitive issues out of public view, for fear of arousing popular sentiments that could well become uncontrollable.

In understanding this conflict, it is first necessary to strip away the conventional phrases employed by the various factions of the establishment to cover their real political concerns—language that the corporate-controlled media never critically examines.

For instance, when Bush announced that Rice would testify under oath, he said he had "ordered this level of cooperation because I consider it necessary to gaining a complete picture of the months and years that preceded the murder of our fellow citizens on September the 11th, 2001." No one in the media challenged this declaration, although it is clearly and obviously false.

The Bush administration opposed the initial investigation into September 11 conducted by the House and Senate intelligence committees, withholding documents and witnesses, then suppressing part of the panel's final report when it was issued last summer, citing "national security."

Both the White House and the congressional Republican leadership opposed the establishment of an independent commission into the causes and circumstances of September 11, only yielding when public campaigning by families of the victims of the attacks threatened political embarrassment.

Bush named former secretary of state Henry Kissinger as the chairman of the commission, in a transparent attempt to ensure a whitewash, but Kissinger quit within days because of controversy over his business ties to Saudi Arabia. Bush then selected Kean as a replacement.

In its 16 months of activity, the 10-member commission has had repeated conflicts with the administration over access to documents and witnesses. The commission was actually forced to issue subpoenas to the Federal Aviation Administration and the Pentagon in the face of the refusal of these agencies to produce information on one of the most contentious and mysterious aspects of September 11—why it took so long to scramble air defense fighter jets after the four airliners were reported hijacked.

Even after the agreement for Rice to testify, the White House faced new charges of foot-dragging for its refusal to hand over three quarters of the Clinton-era documents the commission had requested. Only after its position was publicly criticized did the administration back down and agree to allow access to the documents.

The attitude of the media to this White House stonewalling has been noticeably different from that which prevailed during the Clinton impeachment. Especially in the period of the frenzy over Monica

Lewinsky, every attempt by Clinton to defend himself against an investigation into his private life brought down imprecations of “coverup.” The Bush administration’s far more systematic and determined resistance to any investigation into an undeniably public matter—the conduct of the US government in relation to the worst terrorist attack in the country’s history—has evoked little criticism, at least until the emergence of Clarke.

From a legal standpoint, Clinton’s opposition to the invasive tactics of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr had far more justification than the Bush administration’s attitude to the 9/11 commission. As a Democratic commission member, Jamie Gorelick, observed, “This is not litigation. This is finding facts to help the nation, and we should not treat this as if we’re adversarial parties here.”

The Bush administration’s methods, however, clearly demonstrate that it regards the process of fact-finding about September 11 as an adversarial proceeding. The inevitable question is, what are Bush & Co. trying to hide?

Press accounts of the negotiations between the 9/11 commission and the White House have sought to foster an impression of a panel determined to uncover the truth about the terrorist attacks, regardless of the political ramifications. A look at the political physiognomy of the commission quickly dispels that illusion. All 10 of the commissioners are tried and tested defenders of the financial and security interests of American capitalism.

The five Republican members include Kean, governor of New Jersey from 1989 to 1997; former navy secretary John Lehman; former Illinois governor James Thompson; Slade Gorton, a former senator from Washington state; and Fred Fielding, White House counsel during the Reagan administration and deputy counsel in the Nixon White House during the Watergate crisis.

The five Democrats are headed by Hamilton, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee during his long tenure in Congress; Gorelick, former Pentagon counsel and deputy attorney general in the Clinton administration; former senator Bob Kerrey of Nebraska; former congressman Timothy Roemer; and Richard Ben-Veniste, a Washington lawyer and former Watergate prosecutor.

Some of the former government officials have gone on to service on the boards of major corporations with a huge stake in US military policy—Gorelick, for instance, is on the board of Schlumberger, a major oilfields service company, and defense contractor United Technologies, while Thompson is on the board of FMC Corp., another big weapons maker, and Hollinger International. Others work at top corporate law firms or head important ruling class think tanks like the Woodrow Wilson Institute (Hamilton).

All of the Democrats, with the possible exception of Ben-Veniste, are identified with the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council faction of the Democratic Party. From their comments at the public hearings, most support the war in Iraq, or criticize the Bush administration from the standpoint of Clarke, advocating more aggressive military action against Al Qaeda.

The only Democratic member of the committee to voice more strident criticisms of the Bush administration over the war, former senator Max Cleland of Georgia, left the commission last fall to take a lucrative sinecure on the board of the US Export-Import Bank. He was replaced by Kerrey, who two years ago admitted his role in a Vietnam War atrocity in which 18 women, children and old men were slaughtered.

During the public hearings on March 23-24, it was Kerrey who adopted the most right-wing, pro-war stance, repeatedly suggesting in his questions and comments that both the Clinton and Bush administrations blundered by failing to invade Afghanistan before September 11, despite the admitted lack of public support for such an adventure.

Most significant is the role of the commission’s executive director,

Philip Zelikow, a professor at the University of Virginia and former State Department and National Security Council (NSC) official. Members of the Family Support Group, an association of 9/11 victim families, have criticized the selection of Zelikow because he co-authored a book with Rice and worked in the transition team that handled the transfer of power from Clinton to Bush.

Richard Clarke revealed in his testimony on March 24 that Zelikow was actually present at the meetings where Rice and other newly appointed Bush NSC aides were briefed by outgoing Clinton officials on terrorism and other sensitive subjects. Zelikow was thus a direct participant in the events that the commission is charged with investigating.

(As a footnote to this discussion, it should be noted that a second bipartisan commission, established to look into the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the alleged “intelligence failure” before the decision to go to war, has begun its work. The commission’s chairman and vice chairman are retired federal Appeals Court justice Laurence Silberman and former senator Charles Robb. Its newly designated executive director, retired vice admiral John S. Redd, has been delayed in taking up his post until May because he is currently working as a deputy to L. Paul Bremer, the chief US administrator in Iraq. In other words, the panel investigating Iraq policy will be run by a military official who is currently playing a senior role in the US occupation government. So much for any pretense of objectivity and impartiality!)

The atmosphere in the hearing room on March 30-31, as former and current national security officials testified under oath in front of a panel consisting largely of former colleagues, was friendly, even clubby.

Wall Street Journal columnist Peggy Noonan—who despite a proclivity for right-wing hysteria occasionally makes a useful observation—commented that those who have achieved a certain level in the foreign policy apparatus “are on the same social circuit, have experienced similar pressures and stresses, have read similar data, talk to the same journalists. They belong to a brotherhood, and at the hearings you could tell.”

She added, however, “An uneasy brotherhood, though: It was hard not to find yourself wondering, as you watched the testimony, if a lot of these people didn’t have something on each other.”

Noonan did not pursue what that “something” might be, but it is clear that the Clarke revelations have brought to the surface a vitriolic conflict within this ruling elite—from the Republicans, charges of profiteering and suggestions that Clarke be prosecuted for perjury; from the Democrats, allegations of stonewalling and coverup; as well as Clarke’s own categorical declaration that the soldiers who died in Iraq did so to benefit Bush politically, not to defend Americans from terrorism.

The substance of the conflict within the ruling elite is the increasingly disastrous outcome of Bush’s decision to invade Iraq, which has left American imperialism bogged down in a major counter-insurgency war with little international support. Significant sections of the US political establishment view the war as a catastrophic strategic blunder and there are bitter recriminations against the recklessness of Bush, Cheney & Co.

Former President Jimmy Carter, for instance, in an interview with the British newspaper the *Independent*, declared last week that Iraq “was a war based on lies and misinterpretations from London and Washington, claiming falsely that Saddam Hussein was responsible for 9/11, claiming falsely that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.”

The Democratic Party, by nominating John Kerry, has agreed that the decision to go to war will not be debated openly in the election campaign, nor will there be any discussion of a withdrawal of US forces. Such a discussion would carry with it the danger of the intervention of broad masses of working people, like the tens of millions who marched and demonstrated during the run-up to the war last year.

But even though there will be no public challenge to the Iraq war in the election campaign, the issue is being fought out within the ruling elite, in

forums such as the 9/11 commission.



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