

The Berger affair: Kerry campaign cowers before Republican provocation

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Former Clinton administration national security adviser Samuel (Sandy) Berger resigned as an informal adviser to the Kerry campaign Monday, one day after the Bush administration leaked a report to the media that Berger was the subject of an FBI investigation for mishandling classified documents.

Berger has not been charged with any crime, the alleged offense took place last summer, and the FBI probe has been ongoing since last October, but the media reports touched off an around-the-clock barrage of criticism by congressional Republicans and Bush administration spokesmen. This included sensationalized allegations that Berger deliberately sought to withhold information from the 9/11 commission that could be damaging to the Clinton administration, and supplied government secrets to the Kerry campaign. There were even unsubstantiated claims that the former White House official had stuffed classified documents into his socks to smuggle them out of the National Archives.

The actual substance of Berger's offense is trivial compared to the intensity of the media campaign over it. The former Clinton aide was designated to review national security materials from the Clinton administration in the National Archives that had been sought by the 9/11 commission. He visited the facility in July, September and October 2003 and made some handwritten notes that he took with him, without showing them to the Archives staff, in violation of security rules. He also removed several copies of a classified memorandum drawn up by Richard Clarke to summarize the lessons of the Clinton administration's antiterrorism effort in December 1999, which resulted in the foiling of an attempt to bomb Los Angeles International Airport.

Berger says the removal of the memo copies was

inadvertent, and he returned several of the copies as soon as he was notified by the staff of the Archives, although at least one copy is missing and apparently discarded. Berger's critics do not explain how these actions could have undermined the 9/11 commission's work, since the original Clarke memorandum remains in the National Archives, together with multiple copies, which were supplied to the commission. A spokesman for the commission declared that it had access to the documents in question.

Moreover, the memo deals with a successful disruption of an attempted terrorist attack—something that stands in marked contrast to the Bush administration's performance in the eight months leading up to September 11, 2001.

The timing of the leak to the media—three days before the release of the report of the 9/11 commission, and one week before the opening of the Democratic National Convention in Boston—clearly marked it as a political provocation. So did the mechanics of the leak: an unidentified official of the Justice Department released the information to selected reporters, including Sue Schmidt of the *Washington Post*, the principal recipient of anti-Clinton leaks from Whitewater Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr during the Lewinsky affair.

A full-fledged media frenzy ensued. (Yahoo! News logged nearly 1,000 stories on Berger in the first 24 hours). The coverage not only overshadowed the Kerry campaign and the advance reports on the 9/11 commission report, it drowned out reporting on the Iraq war. The day after Berger stepped down, the death toll among US soldiers in Iraq reached 900, something that barely evoked a mention in the media. The media was also silent on reports that Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi personally executed six prisoners last month in

a Baghdad detention center.

The media campaign was sparked by the Bush campaign and congressional Republicans, who made repeated charges against Berger, the Kerry campaign and the Clinton administration. House Speaker Dennis Hastert held a press conference at which he suggested that Berger's action might have compromised the 9/11 commission's report. "What information could be so embarrassing that a man with decades of experience in handling classified documents would risk being caught pilfering our nation's most sensitive secrets?" he asked.

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay—now under investigation for felony violations of Texas state election laws—called the incident "absolutely shocking" and compared it to Watergate. Rejecting Berger's claim that his actions were merely careless, DeLay declared, "That is not sloppy. I think it is gravely, gravely serious what he did, if he did it, and it could be a national security crisis."

The Republican attacks are entirely cynical. The White House and congressional Republicans opposed the establishment of the 9/11 commission, and the Bush administration repeatedly stalled on delivering documents or making witnesses available to testify. The commission actually had to subpoena the Pentagon to compel testimony from some officials.

Hastert played a particularly prominent role in attempting to sabotage the commission. While he now howls about "cover-ups in the war on terror," Hastert tried to block an extension of the commission's original April 26 deadline for issuing its report, an effort to force the commission to drop its demand for sworn testimony from National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

One member of the 9/11 commission said that the Republican charge that Berger had disrupted the commission's work was "ridiculous." In an interview with the *Boston Globe*, the unidentified panel member said, "None of our work was affected in any way. We have many copies of it" [the Clarke memo].

Despite the flimsiness of the charges against Berger and the obviously concocted character of the Republican-manufactured scandal, the Kerry campaign responded within hours with capitulation. Kerry campaign spokesman Phil Singer rejected Republican charges that Berger had provided the campaign with

unauthorized classified information, calling this "a partisan attempt to divert attention away from the 9/11 commission report." But in less than a day, Berger resigned "voluntarily" as the campaign's principal national security consultant, and Kerry issued a perfunctory statement accepting his resignation "until this matter is resolved objectively and fairly."

This speedy surrender to a right-wing provocation underscores a central political fact about the Kerry campaign. The Democrats fight ferociously to suppress any challenge from the left—witness their shamelessly antidemocratic attacks on the Ralph Nader presidential campaign, on Socialist Equality Party candidate Tom Mackaman in Illinois, and on Green Party candidates in many states. But they are prostrate in the face of attacks from the Republican right, just as they were throughout the Clinton impeachment fiasco and the stolen 2000 election in Florida.



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