As Washington focuses on Foley scandal

Condoleezza Rice evades charges over 9/11

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The fixation of both official Washington and the mainstream media on the emails of Congressman Mark Foley (Republican of Florida) and the Republican House leadership's cover-up of his pursuit of teenage male pages has served to divert public attention from a far more significant cover-up of a far greater crime.

The Foley story has highlighted the official corruption and hypocrisy that characterize the political establishment as a whole in America. The spectacle of a party that has made "family values" its battle cry and sought to exploit homophobia and religious backwardness for political ends being caught up in such a scandal has undoubted popular appeal.

For the Democrats, it provides a useful political club, without compelling this second party of corporate America to advance a single substantive difference with the Republicans on domestic or foreign policy.

But the time and resources—not to mention prurient interest—that the media has devoted to the exposure of Foley's emails and instant messages stand in sharp contrast to its virtual silence on the revelations—first reported September 28, the same day that the emails from Foley surfaced on ABC News—in the new book by Bob Woodward, *State of Denial*.

Most damning among them is the revelation that former CIA Director George Tenet and the CIA's chief of counterterrorism, J. Cofer Black, sought and obtained a July 10, 2001 emergency meeting with Condoleezza Rice to discuss the imminent threat of a major terrorist attack by Al Qaeda on US targets, and were "brushed off" by the then-national security adviser.

In the relevant passage, Woodward writes,

"On July 10, 2001, two months before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, then-CIA Director George J. Tenet met with his counterterrorism chief, J. Cofer Black, at CIA headquarters to review the latest on Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terrorist organization. Black laid out the case, consisting of communications intercepts and other top-secret intelligence, showing the increasing likelihood that al-Qaeda would soon attack the United States. It was a mass of fragments and dots that nonetheless made a compelling case, so compelling to Tenet that he decided he and Black should go to the White House immediately.

"Tenet called Condoleezza Rice, then national security adviser, from the car and said he needed to see her right away... He and Black hoped to convey the depth of their anxiety and get Rice to kick-start the government into immediate action..."

Woodward writes that Tenet hoped to "shake Rice" and that Black "emphasized that this amounted to a strategic warning, meaning the problem was so serious that it required an overall plan and strategy... They needed to take action that moment—covert, military, whatever—to thwart bin Laden..."

Woodward continues, "Tenet and Black felt they were not getting through to Rice. She was polite, but they felt the brush-off. President Bush had said he didn't want to swat at flies..."

The damning implications of this reported conversation are self-evident. The chief adviser on national security to President George W. Bush was given an explicit warning, just two months before the hijacked passenger jets crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, claiming nearly 3,000 lives, and nothing was done.

Black is quoted in the book as saying, "The only thing we didn't do was pull the trigger to the gun we were holding to her head."

In a subsequent report, the McClatchy Newspapers quoted an official who had helped prepare the briefing describing it as a "10 on a scale of 1 to 10" in terms of the seriousness of its warning of an imminent attack.

The revelation of this meeting follows the similar exposure, during the hearings held by the 9/11 Commission two years ago, that on August 6, 2001 Bush was given a Presidential Daily Brief (PDA) from the CIA, entitled, "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in the United States." As with the July 10 meeting, the PDA provoked no action by the administration, and Bush remained on vacation for the next three weeks at his Texas ranch.

The Bush administration has unceasingly invoked the events of September 11 as the justification for all of its policies—from wars of aggression abroad to the destruction of basic constitutional and democratic rights at home. Yet the revelations concerning the July 10 meeting only add to the mounting body of evidence that the administration was, at best, criminally negligent in failing to take action to prevent attacks that had been widely predicted or, at worst, directly complicit in allowing them to take place.

More than five years after the attacks, one thing is certain: no one in the US government has ever been held accountable. Even if one takes the official version of what happened on September 11 as good coin, the inescapable conclusion is that it represented the greatest single failure of US intelligence and national security in the country's history. Yet, not one official in the White House, the CIA, the Pentagon or any other agency suffered so much as a demotion.

Woodward's book suggests that tensions over who bears the blame for 9/11 are continuing to generate internecine struggles within official Washington, and Tenet is determined not to be made a scapegoat for the administration's policies. A new book by Ron Suskind, entitled *The One Percent Doctrine*, quotes Tenet as saying he wished he "could give that damn medal back," referring to the Medal of Freedom bestowed upon him by Bush when he resigned from the CIA in 2004.

The administration's reaction to Woodward's book is every bit as damning as the book's contents. The White House has sought to discredit the author's credibility, a difficult task given that the Bush administration had previously turned the veteran *Washington Post* reporter into a virtual court chronicler, providing him with unprecedented access while he wrote two previous and largely laudatory volumes on Bush: *Plan of Attack* and *Bush at War*.

As a measure of its alarm, the administration issued a detailed response to Woodward's account, posted prominently on the White House web site. The thrust of this attempted refutation was to claim that there had not been a cover-up of the July 10 meeting, and that Rice had responded

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seriously to Woodward's claims.

However, after excerpts from the Woodward book were first published, Rice initially feigned ignorance about the conversation with Tenet and Cofer, referring to it as a "supposed meeting," while adding that it was "incomprehensible" that she would have ignored such warnings. Soon after, the State Department was forced to admit that a review of official records revealed that the encounter had indeed taken place.

As a fallback position, Rice's spokesman at the State Department, Sean McCormack, declared, "The information presented in this meeting was not new, rather it was a good summary from the threat reporting from the previous several weeks."

This alibi echoes almost precisely the tack taken in response to the revelations concerning the August 6 presidential brief, which Rice similarly insisted contained nothing new and was "historical" in character. It was only after the administration was compelled to release the document that it became clear it contained a clear and stark warning that Al Qaeda was actively preparing an attack within the US, singling out New York and Washington DC as likely targets.

Before the title of this document was made public, Rice had insisted—as she now claims in relation to the July 10 meeting—that the presidential briefing did not make any warnings of attacks within the United States. She was lying then, and it is clear that she is lying now.

McCormack continued to insist that his boss could not specifically recall the July 10 meeting in which she was told that a massive terrorist attack on the US was imminent.

Rice was not the only one suffering from selective amnesia. Coming to the aid of the beleaguered administration, former Attorney General John Ashcroft issued a statement clearly aimed at discrediting Tenet. "It just occurred to me how disappointing it was that they didn't come to me with this type of information," he told the Associated Press October 2. "The FBI is responsible for domestic terrorism."

But no sooner had Ashcroft made this claim than the State Department revealed that the ex-attorney general had indeed been given the same CIA briefing less than a week after the meeting with Rice. Once again, nothing was done. Actually, one step was taken—Ashcroft stopped flying on commercial airlines.

Woodward's revelations prompted protests and comments from various members and staff of the September 11 commission. Philip Zelikow, who served as the panel's executive director, told the press that no witness who testified before the commission had ever mentioned such a meeting, including Tenet and Black, who made both private and public statements to the panel.

"If we had heard something that drew our attention to this meeting, it would have been a huge thing," he told the *New York Times*. "Repeatedly Tenet and Black said they could not remember what had transpired in some of those meetings."

Democratic commissioner Richard Ben-Veniste, a former Watergate prosecutor, likewise told the *Times* that the meeting "was never mentioned to us." He added, "This is certainly something we would have wanted to know about."

Subsequently, however, the *Washington Post* and other sources revealed that Zelikow and Ben-Veniste were both told about the meeting in secret testimony given at CIA headquarters by Tenet, who provided them with a detailed outline of the briefing he had given Rice. Clearly, Tenet wanted to make his warning part of the record.

Zelikow, an administration loyalist and long-time academic colleague of Rice, has since been appointed to a top job at the State Department. No reference to the July 10 meeting ever appeared in the 9/11 commission's reports.

McClatchy Newspapers has quoted Ben-Veniste as acknowledging that Tenet did give him and Zelikow the Rice briefing in secret testimony, but said that Zelikow would have to answer as to why it was not mentioned in the commission's report. Zelikow failed to respond to inquiries on this issue.

Several of the commissioners seemed genuinely shocked and outraged that the meeting had been concealed, indicating that they were not informed of Tenet's secret testimony.

"None of this was shared with us in hours of private interviews, including interviews under oath, nor do we have any paper on this," said Timothy J. Roemer, a Democratic member of the commission and a former member of the House of Representatives from Indiana. "I'm deeply disturbed by this. I'm furious."

These latest revelations leave not one shred of credibility to the Bush administration's repeated claims that the 9/11 attacks could not have been anticipated. What has emerged is that not only were they foreseen, but explicit warnings were made that were deliberately rebuffed by the White House. Moreover, the very existence of these warnings was then concealed through an elaborate cover-up that culminated in a white-wash by the 9/11 commission.

The fixation of official Washington with the Foley affair in the context of these revelations constitutes a continuation of the cover-up. The detailed parsing of statements by the Republican leadership as to what they knew about Foley's sexual behavior and when they knew it stands in sharp contrast to the indifference of the media and politicians of both parties to contradictory statements, evasions and outright lies related to a crime that resulted in the greatest loss of life on American soil since the Civil War.

A crime, moreover, that has served as the pretext for a global eruption of American militarism that has killed and maimed hundreds of thousands in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The evidence points inexorably to one conclusion: The attacks of September 11 were facilitated by powerful elements within the government itself, which engineered a "stand-down" of the US intelligence and security apparatus. That a terrorist attack was coming was known and welcomed by those seeking a *casus belli* for long-planned wars to secure US hegemony over the strategic oil reserves of the Middle East and Central Asia.

If there is no great impetus to probe these matters, it is because every section of the American political establishment, including the media and the Democratic Party, is so thoroughly implicated.

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