

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Myth: The President didn't treat al-Qa'ida as a serious threat before September 11.

The Facts:

- The President recognized the threat posed by al-Qa'ida, and immediately after taking office the White House began work on a comprehensive new strategy to eliminate al-Qa'ida.
- The President specifically told Dr. Rice that he was “tired of swatting flies” and wanted to go on the offense against al-Qa'ida, rather than simply waiting to respond.
- The President's national security team worked aggressively and rapidly to develop a new strategy that would employ all elements of our national power: military, intelligence, diplomatic actions, and financial pressure. The new strategy called for military options to attack al-Qa'ida and Taliban leadership, command-and-control, ground forces, and other targets. It focused on the crucial link between al-Qa'ida and the Taliban, recognizing that the two were ultimately inseparable. We would attempt to compel the Taliban to stop giving al-Qa'ida sanctuary, and if it refused, we would have sufficient military options to remove the Taliban regime. Our strategy focused on the crucial role of Pakistan in this effort and the need to get Pakistan to stop its support to the Taliban, understanding the implications for the stability of Pakistan and its relations with India.
- NSC Deputies, the second-ranking officials in the NSC departments, met frequently between March and September 2001 to decide the many complex issues involved in the development of the comprehensive strategy against al-Qa'ida, and also oversaw the work by their staffs on these issues. Contrary to Dick Clarke's assertion that he was not able to brief senior officials until April 30, the first Deputies-level meeting on al-Qa'ida was held on March 7, and Dick Clarke conducted the briefing. Deputies agreed that a National Security Policy Directive on al-Qa'ida should be prepared.
- Although the issues involved were complex, the President's team completed the new strategy in less than six months and had the strategy ready to go to the President on September 4.

Myth: We didn't listen to Dick Clarke. Clarke had proposed ideas against al-Qa'ida, such as launching missiles from an armed Predator or modestly increasing assistance to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, that would have prevented 9-11 but these plans were not acted upon.

The Facts:

- At Dr. Rice's request, in January 2001, Dick Clarke presented her with a number of ideas to address the al-Qa'ida threat. The Administration acted upon the ideas that made sense. For example, the Administration approved increased assistance to Uzbekistan, a frontline

state in opposing al-Qa'ida, and pushed hard to develop a weaponized Predator unmanned aerial vehicle.

- Although the Administration pushed development of the Predator, the Predator was not available to be used against bin-Ladin before September 11. Extensive work and testing was required to develop a warhead that would be effective, and NSC Deputies were told that testing would not be completed until August at the earliest. Even if the Predator had been available, the Intelligence Community never presented senior officials with specific intelligence regarding bin Ladin's location. At the same time, the Intelligence Community also told senior Administration officials that killing bin Ladin would not destroy al-Qa'ida. Moreover, we know now that, according to the FBI, 16 of the 19 hijackers were in the United States by June 2001; there is no reason to believe that killing bin Ladin would have affected their plan.
- Increasing assistance to the Northern Alliance also would not have prevented 9-11. By 2001, the Northern Alliance had been beaten down by military defeats and controlled less than 10 percent of Afghanistan. Providing a small additional amount of money to the Northern Alliance, as Clarke suggested, would not have enabled them to sweep across Afghanistan and defeat the Taliban. Moreover, providing such assistance likely would have damaged U.S. efforts later to reach out to other tribes in Afghanistan. NSC Deputies developed a more comprehensive strategy to eliminate al-Qa'ida that included assisting tribal groups throughout the country, as well as providing significantly more assistance to the Northern Alliance. But such assistance, even if provided earlier, would not have disrupted the 9-11 hijackers, who were not in Afghanistan, but were assembling in the United States.
- Although Clarke suggested some ideas to address al-Qa'ida outside the United States, he did not advocate to the Bush Administration any plan of action to address al-Qa'ida's presence in the United States, such as the need to improve collection of intelligence information by the FBI and to reverse longstanding statutory restrictions and DoJ policies limiting sharing of domestic intelligence on terrorism between the CIA and FBI; or to take actions to root out al-Qa'ida cells in the United States and to make our borders less porous for al-Qa'ida and other terrorists. He also never made us aware of any intelligence assessments from the preceding Administration concerning the use of aircraft as weapons to attack the homeland.

Myth: Dick Clarke was never allowed to brief the President on the threat posed by al-Qa'ida.

The Facts:

- Dick Clarke was the President's principal counterterrorism expert. If he had asked to brief the President on any counterterrorism issue, Clarke could have done so. He never did.

- Instead, the only time Dick Clarke asked to brief the President was during the height of the terrorism threat spike in June 2001, when he asked to brief the President – not on al-Qa’ida, but on cybersecurity. He did so.

Myth: The Administration did not treat the intelligence chatter about an imminent attack during the spring and summer of 2001 with sufficient urgency; Principals did not “go to battle stations.”

The Facts:

- The President and senior Administration officials were very concerned about the threat spike during the spring and summer of 2001
- The President and his NSC Principals received intelligence reports about the intelligence “chatter” during this period, but none of the intelligence was specific as to time, place, or manner, and was focused overseas.
- The Government’s interagency counterterrorism crisis management forum (the Counterterrorism Security Group, or “CSG”), chaired by Dick Clarke, met regularly, often daily, during the high threat period. The CSG was at “battle stations.” If Dick Clarke or other members of this group needed anything, they had immediate and daily access to their superiors. Dick Clarke never suggested that the President or the Principals needed to intervene to take any immediate action on these threats.
- Dick did not ask to brief the President on the al-Qa’ida threat during this period – or at any other time. Instead, in the middle of the al-Qa’ida threat period, Clarke asked to brief the President, but on cybersecurity, not al-Qaida. He did so.
- Formal, in-person meetings among Principals were not required; unlike President Clinton, President Bush met every morning with his Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet for an intelligence briefing. Secretary Card, Dr. Rice, and the Vice President sat in on the briefings. The threat posed by al-Qa’ida and the need for a response was discussed regularly at these high-level meetings, as well as in frequent, regular discussions between Dr. Rice and Tenet. Dr. Rice and Secretaries Powell and Rumsfeld also have a 7:15 am phone call every morning and talk frequently during the day, and in this period they discussed actions to respond to the threat during these calls.
- Although the threats were focused overseas, in July, Dr. Rice specifically directed Dick Clarke and his CSG to meet to consider possible threats to the homeland and to coordinate actions by domestic agencies, including the FAA, FBI, Secret Service, Customs, Coast Guard, and Immigration, to increase security and surveillance. During the Summer of 2001, FAA and FBI issued numerous terrorist threat warnings, including a warning about “the potential for a terrorist operation, such as an airline hijacking to free terrorists incarcerated in the United States.” Security at federal buildings also were reviewed for vulnerabilities. Overseas, we also disrupted terrorist cells worldwide, significantly increased security at our embassies, and directed US Naval vessels to leave high-risk ports in the Middle East and heighten security at military facilities.

Myth: After the 9/11 attacks, the President ignored the evidence and tried to pin responsibility for 9/11 on Iraq.

The Facts:

- The President sought to determine who was responsible for the 9-11 attacks. Given Iraq's past support of terror, including an attempt by Iraqi intelligence to kill a former President, it would have been irresponsible not to ask if Iraq had any involvement in the attack.
- When the President and his senior advisers met at Camp David on September 15-16, 2001, to plan a response to September 11, the DCI told the President that there was no evidence that Iraq was responsible for the attack. The President then advised his NSC Principals on September 17 that Iraq was not on the agenda, and that the initial US response to 9/11 would be to target al-Qa'ida and Taliban in Afghanistan.
- Dick Clarke did prepare a memo for the President regarding links between Iraq and 9/11. He sent this memo to Dr. Rice on September 18, after the President, based on the advice of his DCI that there was no evidence that Iraq was responsible for the attack, had decided that Iraq would not be a target in our military response for 9/11. Because the President had already made this decision, Steve Hadley returned the memo to Dick Clarke on September 25 asking Clarke to "please update and resubmit," to add any new information that might have appeared. Clarke indicated there was none. So when Clarke sent the memo forward again on September 25, Dr. Rice returned it, not because she did not want the President to read the answer set out in the memo, but because the President had already been provided the answer and had already acted based on it.

Myth: The Administration didn't act on Dick Clarke's advice to hold a Cabinet meeting early in the Administration to discuss the threat posed by al-Qa'ida.

The Facts:

- NSC Principals did not need to have a formal meeting to discuss the threat because the threat was already well understood by the Principals and because Dr. Rice had already asked that a comprehensive new strategy to eliminate al-Qa'ida be prepared.
- In addition, unlike President Clinton, President Bush met every morning with his Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet, for an intelligence briefing. Secretary Card, Dr. Rice, and the Vice President sat in on the briefings. The threat posed by al-Qa'ida and the need for a response was discussed regularly at these high-level meetings, as well as in frequent, regular discussions between Dr. Rice and Tenet.
- Moreover, NSC Deputies, the second-ranking officials in the NSC departments, met frequently between March and September 2001 to decide the many complex issues

involved in the development of the comprehensive strategy against al-Qa'ida, and also oversaw the work by their staffs on these issues. Contrary to Dick Clarke's assertion that he did not brief senior officials until April 30, the first meeting of Deputies was held on March 7, and Dick Clarke briefed the group on al-Qa'ida. Deputies agreed that a National Security Policy Directive on al-Qa'ida should be prepared.

Myth: Before 9/11 the Administration was focused on Iraq rather than on al-Qa'ida.

The Facts:

- The President and the Administration were legitimately concerned about the threat posed by Iraq. Iraq had sponsored terrorism, attacked its neighbors, used chemical weapons, violated 16 U.N. Security Council Resolutions, kicked out UN weapons inspectors, was circumventing sanctions to acquire billions of dollars to fund its illegal activities, and continued to try to shoot down U.S. and U.K aircraft patrolling the no-fly-zones.
- But the Administration completed a comprehensive strategy to eliminate al-Qa'ida well before it completed a strategy to address Iraq. In fact, the directive to eliminate al-Qa'ida, approved by the Principals on September 4, 2001, was President Bush's first major foreign policy directive.

Myth: Dick Clarke was demoted and "stripped of his Cabinet rank" by President Bush.

The Facts:

- Dick Clarke never had Cabinet rank.
- Dick Clarke continued, in the Bush Administration, to be the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and the President's principal counterterrorism expert. He was expected to organize and attend all meetings of Principals and Deputies on terrorism. And he did.
- During the Clinton Administration, Dick Clarke regularly briefed President Clinton because President Clinton did not meet regularly with his DCI. Since the beginning of his Administration, President Bush has met daily with his DCI for his intelligence briefing. President Bush believes he should get his intelligence principally not from White House staff, but from those directly responsible for US intelligence.

-end-