

Frist's Comments on Clarke's Testimony

There has been much fulminating in the media and by some Senators on the other side about a new book by a former State Department civil servant named Richard Clarke. In this book, released for sale by the parent company of the CBS network, Mr. Clarke makes the outrageous charge that the Bush Administration, in its first seven months in office, failed to adequately address the threat posed by Osama bin Laden.

I am troubled by these charges. I am equally troubled that someone would sell a book, trading on their former service as a government insider with access to our nation's most valuable intelligence, in order to profit from the suffering that this nation endured on September 11, 2001. I am troubled that Senators on the other side are so quick to accept such claims. I am troubled that Mr. Clarke has a hard time keeping his own story straight.

I do not know Mr. Clarke, although I take it from press accounts that he has been involved in the fight against terrorism for the past decade. As 9-11 demonstrates, that decade was a period of growing peril, and unanswered attack, against the United States.

It is awesomely self-serving for Mr. Clarke to assert that the United States could have stopped terrorism if only the three Presidents he served had better listened to his advice.

In fact, when Mr. Clarke was reportedly at the height of his influence as terrorism czar in the Clinton Administration, the United States saw the first attack on the World Trade Center, the attack on a U.S. Air Force barracks in Saudi Arabia, the attack on two U.S. embassies in Africa, the attack on the USS Cole, and the planning and implementation for the 9-11 attack. The only common denominator throughout these 10 years of unanswered attacks was Mr. Clarke himself, a consideration that is clearly driving his effort to point fingers and shift blame.

While the reasons may be open to debate, the previous Administration's response to repeated attacks by al-Qaeda was clearly inadequate -- a few cruise missiles lobbed at questionable targets. Al-Qaeda could only have been encouraged by their record of success and the absence of a serious or sustained response from the United States.

After 10 years of policies that failed to decisively confront and eliminate the threat from al-Qaeda, Mr. Clarke now suggests that in its first seven months in office the Bush Administration is to blame. That sounds like finger pointing and blame shifting to me.

But this has not always been Mr. Clarke's view of the events leading up to September 11. This week a transcript was released of a press interview Mr. Clarke gave in August of 2002. I will submit for the record the full transcript, but let me just cite a portion of this interview reviewing in glowing terms the policies of the Bush Administration in fighting terrorism:

RICHARD CLARKE: Actually, I've got about seven points, let me just go through them quickly. Um, the first point, I think the overall point is, there was no plan on al-Qaeda that was passed from the Clinton administration to the Bush administration.

Second point is that the Clinton administration had a strategy in place, effectively dating from 1998. And there were a number of issues on the table since 1998. And they remained on the table when that administration went out of office issues like aiding the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, changing our Pakistan policy -- uh, changing our policy toward Uzbekistan. And in January 2001, the incoming Bush administration was briefed on the existing strategy. They were also briefed on these series of issues that had not been decided on in a couple of years.

And the third point is the Bush administration decided then, you know, mid-January, to do two things. One, vigorously pursue the existing policy, including all of the lethal covert action findings, which we've now made public to some extent.

And the point is, while this big review was going on, there were still in effect, the lethal findings were still in effect. The second thing the administration decided to do is to initiate a process to look at those issues which had been on the table for a couple of years and get them decided.

So, point five, that process which was initiated in the first week in February, uh, decided in principle, uh in the spring to add to the existing Clinton strategy and to increase CIA resources, for example, for covert action, five-fold, to go after al-Qaeda.

The sixth point, the newly-appointed deputies and you had to remember, the deputies didn't get into office until late March, early April. The deputies then tasked the development of the implementation details, uh, of these new decisions that they were endorsing, and sending out to the principals.

Over the course of the summer last point they developed implementation details, the principals met at the end of the summer, approved them in their first meeting, changed the strategy by authorizing the increase in funding five-fold, changing the policy on Pakistan, changing the policy on Uzbekistan, changing the policy on the Northern Alliance assistance.

And then changed the strategy from one of rollback with al-Qaeda over the course [of] five years, which it had been, to a new strategy that called for the rapid elimination of al-Qaeda. That is in fact the time line...

QUESTION: You're saying that the Bush administration did not stop anything that the Clinton administration was doing while it was making these decisions, and by the end of the summer had increased money for covert action five-fold. Is that correct?

CLARKE: All of that's correct.

Mr. President, apparently this is not the only account in which Mr. Clarke changes his story. In lengthy testimony before the Congressional joint inquiry that reviewed the

events surrounding the September 11 attacks, Mr. Clarke is equally effusive in his praise for the actions of the Bush Administration. It is my hope that we will be able to get that testimony declassified so all Senators may review it and discuss it as well.

Mr. President, I do not know if Mr. Clarke's motive for these charges is partisan gain, personal profit, self promotion, or animus because of his failure to win a promotion in the Bush Administration. But the one thing that his motive could not possibly be is to bring clarity to the issue of how we avoid future September 11 attacks.

Mr. President, in sum, there are five points that I find absolutely inexplicable about Mr. Clarke's performance this past week.

First, in an email to the National Security Advisor four days after the September 11 attacks, Mr. Clarke expressed alarm that when the era of national unity begins to crack, an effort to assign responsibility for the 9-11 attacks will begin. In that email Mr. Clarke proceeds to lay out in detail a defense of his own actions before the attack, and those of the entire Administration.

Mr. Clarke was clearly consumed by the desire to dodge any blame for the 9-11 attacks while at that same moment rescuers were still searching the rubble of the World Trade Center for survivors. In my mind this offers perfect insight as to what drove him to write his book.

Second, in the August of 2002 interview I just referred to, Mr. Clarke gave a thorough account of the Bush Administration's active policy against al Qaeda. Mr. Clarke now explains away that media performance by suggesting that he was simply telling lies in an interview as a loyal Administration official.

A loyal Administration official? Does Mr. Clarke understand the gravity of the issues being reviewed by the 9-11 Commission and the gravity of the charges he has made? If, in the summer of 2001, he saw the threat from al-Qaeda as grave as he now says it was, and if he found the response of the Administration as inadequate as he now says it was, why did he wait until the Sunday, March 21, 2004 to make his concerns known?

There is not a single public record of Mr. Clarke making any objection whatsoever in the period leading up to or following the 9-11 attacks. No threat to resign. No public protest. No plea to the President, the Congress, or the public, to heed the advice he now says was ignored. Mr. President, if Mr. Clarke held his tongue because he was loyal, then shame on him for putting politics above principle. But if he has manufactured these charges for profit and political gain, he is a shame to this government.

I myself have fortunately not had the opportunity to work with such an individual who could write solicitous and self-defending emails to his supervisor, the National Security Advisor, and then by his own admission lie to the press out of a self conceived notion of loyalty only to reverse himself on all accounts for the sale of a book.

Third, Mr. Clarke has told two entirely different stories under oath. In July 2002, in front

of the Congressional Joint Inquiry on the September 11 attacks, Mr. Clarke testified under oath that the Administration actively sought to address the threat posed by al-Qaeda during its first seven months in office.

Mr. President, it is one thing for Mr. Clarke to dissemble in front of the media. But if he lied under oath to the United States Congress it is a far more serious matter. As I mentioned, the intelligence committee is seeking to have Mr. Clarke's previous testimony declassified so as to permit an examination of Mr. Clarke's two different accounts. Loyalty to any Administration will be no defense if it is found that he has lied before Congress.

Fourth, notwithstanding Mr. Clarke's efforts to use his book first and foremost to shift blame and attention from himself, it is also clear that Mr. Clarke and his publishers adjusted the release date of his book in order to make maximum gain from the publicity around the 9-11 hearings. Assuming the controversy around this series of events does in fact drive the sales of his book, Mr. Clarke will make quite a bit of money for his efforts.

I find this to be an appalling act of profiteering, trading on his insider access to highly classified information and capitalizing upon the tragedy that befell this nation on September 11, 2001. Mr. Clarke must renounce any plan to personally profit from this book.

Finally, it is understandable why some of the families who lost loved ones in the 9-11 attacks find Mr. Clarke's performance appealing. Simple answers to a terrible tragedy; to the very human desire to find an answer why; why on that beautiful fall day two and one half years ago a series of events happened that shattered their lives forever.

In his appearance before the 9-11 Commission, Mr. Clarke's theatrical apology on behalf of the nation was not his right, his privilege or his responsibility. In my view it was not an act of humility, but an act of supreme arrogance and manipulation. Mr. Clarke can and will answer for his own conduct but that is all.

Regardless of Mr. Clarke's motive or what he says or implies in his new book, the fact remains that this terrible attack was not caused by the United States Government. No Administration was responsible for the attack. Our nation did not invite the attack.

The attack on 9-11 was the evil design of a determined and hate-filled few who slipped through the defenses of a nation that treasures its freedoms, its openness, its convenience. That our defenses failed is cause enough to review the sequence of events leading up to that awful day. We must understand how to do better -- balancing our determination to protect the Nation with equal resolve to protect our liberties.

Mr. President, the answer to Mr. Clarke's self-serving charges is that in fact we all bear that responsibility. Every one of us who served in government before and at the time of the 9-11 attacks also has the responsibility to do our best to avoid any such tragedy in the future. If we are to learn lasting lessons from the examination of the 9-11 attacks, it must be toward this end, not an exercise in finger pointing, blame shifting or political score settling.