

Operation Ignore

Excerpt from Al Franken's book "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them"

Bill Clinton's far-reaching plan to eliminate al Qaeda root and branch was completed only a few weeks before the inauguration of George W. Bush. If it had been implemented then, a former senior Clinton aide told Time, we would be handing [the Bush Administration] a war when they took office." Instead, Clinton and company decided to turn over the plan to the Bush administration to carry out. Clinton trusted Bush to protect America. This proved, nine months later, to be a disastrous mistake - perhaps the biggest one Clinton ever made.

Clinton's National Security Advisor Sandy Berger remembered how little help the previous Bush administration had provided to his team. Believing that the nation's security should transcend political bitterness, Berger arranged ten briefings for his successor, Condoleezza Rice, and her deputy, Stephen Hadley. Berger made a special point of attending the briefing on terrorism. He told Dr. Rice, "I believe that the Bush administration will spend more time on terrorism in general, and on al Qaeda specifically, than any other subject."

Which brings me to a lie. When Time asked about the conversation, Rice declined to comment, but through a spokeswoman said she recalled no briefing at which Berger was present" Perhaps so, Dr. Rice. But might I direct our mutual friends, my readers, to a certain December 30, 2001, New York Times article? Perhaps you know the one, Condi? Shall I quote it?

"As he prepared to leave office last January, Mr. Berger met with his successor, Condoleezza Rice, and gave her a warning. *According to both of them*, he said that terrorism-and particularly Mr. bin Laden's brand of it-would consume far more of her time than she had ever imagined." (Italics mine.)

When I read this, my instinct was to shout for joy and dance around the room, naked, celebrating the finding of a lie. And I did. "Badda Bing!" I cried, as I ran around the house, my genitals flopping wildly, embarrassing my wife and her bridge group.

After the dressing down from my wife, who really read me the riot act, it occurred to me that all I had really found was a contradiction between Time and the Times. Maybe The New York Times had it wrong. Maybe Dr. Rice, considered a paragon of integrity, had told Time magazine the truth-that her predecessor had never warned her about the impending threat from al Qaeda and its evil mastermind.

It was time for the Franken investigative juggernaut to assert itself. I called Dr. Rice's office, prepared to pierce the infamous White House veil of secrecy with a lance of white-hot journalistic enterprise. I left a message, and they called me right back with the answer. A White House official told me that Dr. Rice had met with Berger at a briefing, and he had told her about the seriousness of the al Qaeda threat.

Condi lied to Times! Badda Bing!

Anyway. After Berger left, Rice stayed around to listen to counterterrorism bulldog Richard Clarke, who laid out the whole anti-al Qaeda plan. Rice was so impressed with Clarke that she immediately asked him to stay on as head of counterterrorism. In early February, Clarke repeated the briefing for Vice President Dick Cheney. But, according to Time, there was some question about how seriously the Bush team took Clarke's warnings. Outgoing Clinton officials felt that "the Bush team thought the Clintonites had become obsessed with terrorism."

The Bushies had an entirely different set of obsessions. Missile defense, for example. The missile defense obsession proved prescient when terrorists fired a slow-moving intercontinental ballistic missile into the World Trade Center. If only Clarke had put his focus on missile defense instead of obsessing on Osama bin Laden.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was obsessed with a review of the military's force structure, which had the potential of yielding tremendous national security dividends ten or fifteen years down the road. I, personally, am a longtime proponent of force structure review, as anyone who has had the misfortune to spend any time around me when I am drunk can attest. But I don't think it should be to the exclusion of everything else. Let me give you one little example: I also believe in FIGHTING TERRORISM.

While all the Bushies focused on their pet projects, Clarke was blowing a gasket. He had a plan, and no one was paying attention. It didn't help that the plan had been hatched under Clinton. Clinton-hating was to the Bush White House what terrorism-fighting was to the Clinton White House.

Meanwhile, on February 15, 2001, a commission led by former senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman issued its third and final report on national security. The Hart-Rudman report warned that "mass-casualty terrorism directed against the U.S. homeland was of serious and growing concern" and said that America was woefully unprepared for a "catastrophic" domestic terrorist attack and urged the creation of a new federal agency: "A *National Homeland Security Agency* with responsibility for planning, coordinating, and integrating various U.S. government activities involved in homeland security" that would include the Customs Service, the Border Patrol, the Coast Guard, and more than a dozen other government departments and agencies.

The Hart-Rudman Commission had studied every aspect of national security over a period of years and had come to a unanimous conclusion: "This commission believes that the security of the American homeland from the threats of the new century should be the primary national security mission of the U.S. government."

The report generated a great deal of media attention and even a bill in Congress to establish a National Homeland Security Agency. But over at the White House, the Justice Department, and the Pentagon, President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Attorney General Ashcroft, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld decided that the best course of action was not to implement the recommendations of the Hart-Rudman report, but instead to launch a sweeping initiative dubbed "*Operation Ignore*."

The public face of Operation Ignore would be an antiterrorism task force led by Vice President Cheney. Its mandate: to pretend to develop a plan to counter domestic terrorist attacks. Bush announced the task force on May 8, 2001, and said that he himself would "periodically chair a meeting of the National Security Council to review these efforts." Bush never chaired such a meeting, though. Probably because Cheney's task force never actually met. Operation Ignore was in full swing.

Unbeknownst to Bush and Cheney, Richard Clarke was doggedly pushing his plan to put boots on the ground in Afghanistan and kill Osama bin Laden. Thanks to Clarke's relentless efforts, the plan was working its way back up the food chain, after having been moved to the bottom of the priority list, right below protecting the public from giant meteors.

On April 30, Clarke presented a new version of the plan to the deputies of the major national security principals: Cheney's chief of staff, Lewis Libby; the State Department's Richard Armitage; DOD's Paul Wolfowitz; and the CIA's John McLaughlin. They were so impressed, they decided to have three more

meetings: one on al Qaeda, one on Pakistan, and a third on Indo-Pakistani relations. And then a fourth meeting to integrate the three meetings. Sure, scheduling these meetings would take months, and would delay the possibility of actually acting on the plan and eliminating al Qaeda, but, according to a senior White House official, the deputies wanted to review the issues "holistically" which as far as I can tell means "slowly."

On July 10, 2001, nearly five months after the Hart-Rudman report had warned of catastrophic, mass-casualty attacks on America's homeland and called for better information sharing among all federal intelligence agencies, Operation Ignore faced a critical test. Phoenix FBI agent Kenneth Williams sent a memo to headquarters regarding concerns over some Middle Eastern students at an Arizona flight school. Al Qaeda operatives, Williams suggested, might be trying to infiltrate the U.S. civil aviation system. He urged FBI Headquarters to contact the other intelligence agencies to see if they had information relevant to his suspicions. Had Williams's memo been acted upon, perhaps the CIA and FBI would have connected the dots. And had Hart-Rudman been acted upon, perhaps the memo would not have been dismissed. Operation Ignore, now in its 146th day, had proved its effectiveness once more.

The holdovers from the Clinton era - Clarke and CIA Director George Tenet-were going nuts. Bush administration insiders would later say they never felt that the two men had been fully on board with Operation Ignore. Tenet was getting reports of more and more chatter about possible terrorist activity. Through June and July, according to one source quoted in the Washington Post, Tenet worked himself nearly frantic" with concern. In mid-July, "George briefed Condi that there was going to be a major attack," an official told Time.

Only Time would tell what happened next.

On July 16, the deputies finally held their long-overdue holistic integration meeting and approved Clarke's plan. Next it would move to the Principals Committee, composed of Cheney, Rice, Tenet, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Rumsfeld--the last hurdle before the plan could reach the President. They tried to schedule the meeting for August, but too many of the principals were out of town. They had taken their cue from the President. August was a time to recharge the batteries, to take a well-deserved break from the pressures of protecting America. The meeting would have to wait till September 4.

No one understood better the importance of taking a break to spend a little special time with the wife and dog than President George W. Bush. Bush spent 42 percent of his first seven months in office either at Camp David, at the Bush compound in Kennebunkport, or at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. As he told a \$1,000-a-plate crowd at a fund-raiser in June, Washington, D.C., is a great place to work, but Texas is a great place to relax." That's why on August 3, after signing off on a plan to cut funding for programs guarding unsecured or "loose" nukes in the former Soviet Union, he bade farewell to the Washington grind and headed to Crawford for the longest presidential vacation in thirty-two years.

On its 172nd day, Operation Ignore suffered a major blow. Already, the operation was becoming more and more difficult to sustain as the intensity of terror warnings crescendoed. Now, on August 6, CIA Director Tenet delivered a report to President Bush entitled, "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S." The report warned that al Qaeda might be planning to hijack airplanes. But the President was resolute: Operation Ignore must proceed as planned. He did nothing to follow up on the memo.

Actually, that's not entirely fair. The President did follow up, a little bit. Sitting in his golf cart the next

day, Bush told some reporters, "I'm working on a lot of issues, national security matters." Then, Bush rode off to hit the links, before dealing with a stubborn landscaping issue by clearing some brush on his property. The next day, he followed up again, telling the press, "I've got a lot of national security concerns that we're working on Iraq, Macedonia, very worrisome right now."

But Iraq and Macedonia weren't the only things on Bush's mind. "One of the interesting things to do is drink coffee and watch Barney chase armadillos," he told reporters on a tour of the ranch later in his vacation. "The armadillos are out, and they love to root in our flower bed. It's good that Barney roots them out of their rooting."

On August 16, the INS arrested Zacharias Moussaoui, a flight school student who seemed to have little interest in learning to take off or land a plane. The arresting agent wrote that Moussaoui seemed like "the type of person who could fly something into the World Trade Center." Trying to pique the interest of FBI Headquarters in Washington, a Minneapolis FBI agent wrote that a 747 loaded with fuel could be used as a weapon. If this information had been shared and analyzed, for example by a newly founded Homeland Security Agency, it might have sparked memories of the Clinton-thwarted 1996 al Qaeda plot to hijack an American commercial plane and crash it into CIA Headquarters.

On August 25, still on the ranch, Bush discussed with reporters the differences between his two dogs. "Spot's a good runner. You know, Barney-terriers are bred to go into holes and pull out varmint. And Spotty chases birds. Spotty's a great water dog. I'll go fly-fishing this afternoon on my lake." And you know something? He did just that.

Among those left to swelter in the D.C. heat that August was one Thomas J. Pickard. No fly-fishing for him. In his role as acting FBI director, Pickard had been privy to a top-secret, comprehensive review of counterterrorism programs in the FBI. The assessment called for a dramatic increase in funding. Alarmed by the report and by the mounting terrorist threat, Pickard met with Attorney General John Ashcroft to request \$58 million from the Justice Department to hire hundreds of new field agents, translators, and intelligence analysts to improve the Bureau's capacity to detect foreign terror threats. On September 10, he received the final Operation Ignore communique: an official letter from Ashcroft turning him down flat. (To give Pickard credit for adopting a professional attitude, he did not call Ashcroft the next day to say, "I told you so.")

Clarke's plan to take the fight to al Qaeda lurched forward once more on September 4, 2001. Eight months after he had first briefed Condi Rice about it, and nearly eleven months after Clinton had told him to create it, Clarke's plan finally reached the Principals Committee that served as gatekeeper to the commander in chief. Bush was back from his trip, rested up, and ready for anything.

Cheney, Powell, Rice, Rumsfeld, and the other Principals debated the plan and decided to advise Bush to adopt it with a phased-in approach. Phase One, to demand cooperation from the Taliban and make fresh overtures to al Qaeda opponents such as the Northern Alliance, would begin the moment the President signed off on the plan. Phase Zero, however, came first: wait several days as the proposal made its way to the Bush's desk.

On September 9, as the plan cooled its heels, Congress proposed a boost of \$600 million for antiterror programs. The money was to come from Rumsfeld's beloved missile defense program, the eventual price tag of which was estimated by the Congressional Budget Office at between \$158 billion and \$238 billion. Congress's proposal to shift \$0.6 billion over to counterterror programs incurred Rummy's ire, and he threatened a presidential veto. Operation Ignore was in its 207th day.

On Operation Ignore Day 208, Ashcroft sent his Justice Department budget request to Bush. It included spending increases in sixty-eight different programs. Out of these sixty-eight programs, less than half dealt with terrorism. Way less than half. In fact, none of them dealt with terrorism. Ashcroft passed around a memo listing his seven top priorities. Again, terrorism didn't make the list.

On that day, I left for Minneapolis to visit my mom and play some charity golf.

On the next day, the world shook.

The day after that, they started blaming Clinton, covering their tracks, and accusing liberals of blaming America.

Hart-Rudman Report - February 15, 2001
<http://www.nssg.gov/PhaseIIIFR.pdf>