

Converging Testimony

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By George F. Will

Present events grind the lens through which we view the past. Condoleezza Rice, testifying to the commission examining U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the decade before Sept. 11, addressed the past, particularly the Bush administration's activities in the 233 days prior to the attacks. But her testimony came against the backdrop of the deterioration of conditions in Iraq, which has increased public skepticism about an administration that radically underestimated postwar challenges.

The reception of her testimony was conditioned also by the presence in the hearing room of demonstrative spectators whose applause for certain questions expressed hostility to the Bush administration. The applauders, perhaps including some who applauded Richard Clarke's testimony two weeks ago, evidently believe what Clarke testified that he does not believe: that implementing Clarke's agenda during those 233 days would have prevented the attacks.

Rice's testimony also came in the context of Clarke's book. In one crucial particular, her testimony and his book are congruent.

His book announces his recent discovery that the Clinton administration's counterterrorism policies were markedly superior to those of the Bush administration. But that argument is incurably indeterminate -- an argument about adjectives and jargon. Was Clarke right that counterterrorism was an "urgent" matter for the Clinton administration but merely "important" to the Bush administration? Is Vice President Cheney correct that in the Bush administration Clarke was not "in the loop"? Being "in" the loop isn't like being, say, "in" Kentucky.

Clarke, the hero of his own book, also comes off very well in Richard Minitzer's "Losing bin Laden." Clarke was an important source for Minitzer's book, the subtitle of which is "How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror." Minitzer writes: "Through sheer force of will, [Clarke] coordinated an alphabet soup of federal agencies. . . . Imagine what he could have accomplished if Clinton had publicly endorsed his efforts." A melancholy -- and familiar -- refrain: Presidents have failed Clarke.

Minitzer, an experienced journalist who makes measured judgments, does not subscribe to Clarke's Clarke-centric understanding of the mechanics of the universe, but Minitzer suggests that the appointment of Clarke on May 22, 1998, as the government's first coordinator of the counterterrorism efforts that were dispersed to 40 agencies, "could have been the beginning of the end of al Qaeda. But the lack of presidential leadership, government inertia and bureaucratic squabbling often got in the way. Clarke publicly complained that he had too little power to get the job done."

When, during the Clinton administration, a planned covert operation to capture or kill Osama

bin Laden did not occur, Clarke told Minter that the problem was the CIA and that CIA Director George Tenet's stated reasons sounded as if he were either repeating or anticipating White House objections. The Defense Department also failed to follow Clarke's leadership.

Clarke told Minter that "I am sure that I saw bin Laden at least three times" in digital video images gathered by unmanned Predator spy drones. But Clarke suspected CIA obstruction and could not get military action. Again, Minter says, "the Clinton administration was deadlocked."

Clarke pushed for bombing al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan after the attack on the USS Cole, but he says Secretary of Defense William Cohen objected because the attack "was not sufficient provocation." And Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who was focused on quelling the new fighting between Israelis and Palestinians, told Clarke that "bombing Muslims wouldn't be helpful at this time."

Stripped of their score-settling over perceived professional slights, Clarke's conflicting versions of 10 years of counterterrorism policy, distilled to their essence, support the essential point of Rice's testimony. It is:

The processes of the federal government, and especially of the many agencies in its national security apparatus, had before Sept. 11 -- and Rice says they still have -- a thickness, a viscosity that are normal aspects of bureaucracies. But in these abnormal times this coagulating river of fudge unacceptably compromises national security.

So Rice's testimony was invaluable pedagogy for a public that thinks it knows what a blunt and cumbersome instrument government is but that doesn't know the half of it. The commission's public hearings give viewers a glimpse of the texture of institutional life within which presidents struggle to process information and defeat institutional inertia. The hearings frame a -- arguably, the -- great question of this election year: Both presidential candidates want to keep America safe, but which one has the attributes -- the world view and sheer orneriness -- needed to stir the fudge and make it flow?

georgewill@washpost.com

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