

Slate

JUICY BITS

Could We Have Prevented 9/11?

Slate tells you what Richard Clarke's book reveals about the Bush and Clinton administrations' war on terror.

By Julia Turner

Posted Thursday, March 25, 2004, at 8:19 PM ET

On March 24, Richard Clarke delivered a [persuasive performance](#) in front of the [commission](#) investigating the Sept. 11 attacks. Clarke—who has worked for Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, serving as counterterrorism chief for the last two—apologized for his failures in fighting al-Qaida. Then he slammed the Bush administration for paying insufficient attention to the terrorist threat in the summer of 2001. His new book, *Against All Enemies*, makes similar points at greater length.

Although the book amounts to a chronicle of what many in the present Bush administration did wrong (and what Clarke and Clinton did right), it is neither shrill nor overly self-congratulatory. Unlike some of the books *Slate* has diced and julienned in this space, this one's worth reading, mostly for Clarke's informed account of al-Qaida's rise and the U.S. government's awareness of the threat. But since you may not have time to read the whole thing, *Slate* presents Clarke's most salient pieces of criticism and praise.

What the Bushies Did Right Pages 1-29: Put Clarke in charge on the morning of Sept. 11. Clarke describes how he led the Counterterrorism Security Group meeting in which State, Defense, the Federal Aviation Administration, and others worked together to ground jets, rouse rescue workers, and protect the president that morning. (Meanwhile, Clarke reports, in the bunker where Dick Cheney and others were located, Lynne Cheney kept turning up CNN, drowning out the CSG teleconference.)

Pages 23-24: Resolved to attack al-Qaida on the evening of Sept. 11. That night, Bush spoke to his staff: "I want you to understand that we are at war and we will stay at war until this is done. Nothing else matters." When Donald Rumsfeld pointed out the legal problems posed by some proposed attacks, Bush said, "I don't care what the international lawyers say, we are going to kick some ass."

What the Bushies Did Wrong Page 30-32: Considered attacking Iraq on the evening of Sept. 12. At one point, Bush pulled a few of his advisors into a conference room:

"Look," he told us. "I know you have a lot to do and all ... but I want you, as soon as you can, to go back over everything, everything. See if Saddam did this. See if he's linked in any way."

I was once again taken aback, incredulous, and it showed.

"But, Mr. President, Al Qaeda did this."

"I know, I know, but ... see if Saddam was involved. Just look. I want to know any shred."

"Absolutely, we will look ... again." I was trying to be more respectful, more responsive. "But, you know, we have looked several times for state sponsorship of Al Qaeda and not found any real linkages to Iraq. Iran plays a little, as does Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, Yemen."

"Look into Iraq, Saddam," the President said testily and left us.

Pages 229-30, 234: Demoted Clarke. When the administration took office, Condoleezza Rice kept Clarke on staff. But she downgraded his position so that as national counterterrorism coordinator he no longer reported directly to Cabinet-level officials. Clarke reports that Rice's National Security Council staff meetings focused too much on the antiballistic missile treaty and other "vestigial Cold War concerns." (He also says that when he first briefed Rice on al-Qaida, in a January 2001 meeting, "her facial expression gave me the impression she had never heard the term before." Rice, however, discussed the threat of Bin Laden striking U.S. territory in an Oct. 2000 radio interview.)

Pages 230-31: Delayed meetings on counterterrorism. When, in January 2001, Clarke "urgently" requested a meeting with the Cabinet to plan the prevention of future al-Qaida attacks, he got his meeting not in January but in April. And not with the Cabinet but with a group of deputy secretaries. At the meeting, Paul Wolfowitz objected to his agenda—"I just don't understand why we are beginning by talking about this one man bin Laden"—and argued that Iraqi terrorism was an equally serious threat. The Cabinet-level meeting on al-Qaida did not take place until Sept. 4, 2001.

Pages 220-222, 238: Discontinued Predator flights over Afghanistan. Clarke thought armed Predator drones could be used to kill al-Qaida members in Afghanistan without risking American lives. Clinton had authorized several unarmed flights in September and October of 2000, and "from the camera images on three flights," Clarke was convinced the drones had found Bin Laden. The Air Force agreed to prepare armed Predators for use in the spring of 2001. But the Bush administration didn't use them until after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Page 246: Attacked Iraq. Clarke argues that the war diverted resources from the hunt for Bin Laden in Afghanistan and riled up potential al-Qaida recruits. "It was as if Usama bin Laden, hidden in some high mountain redoubt, were engaging in long range mind control of George Bush, chanting 'invade Iraq, you must invade Iraq.' "

Page 248-50: Created the Department of Homeland Security. Clarke argues that the launch of the new department led to molasses-slow bureaucratic reshuffling, not efficient counterterrorism. He believes a White House office on homeland security would have been more effective and says that Bush thought so, too—after all, that's what he initially created. The department's authorization was politically motivated, Clarke says: When Sen. Joe Lieberman appeared to be about to outflank the administration on counterterrorism with his popular bill founding the department, Bush shifted positions, supported and signed the bill, and claimed the idea as his own.

Page 234: Allowed Clarke to quit. When, in the summer of 2001,

Clarke asked Rice if he could be reassigned to cybersecurity, he explained his rationale: "Perhaps ... I have become too close to the terrorism issue. I have worked it for ten years and to me it seems like a very important issue, but maybe I'm becoming like Captain Ahab with bin Laden as the White Whale. Maybe you need someone less obsessive about it." Or—Clarke's implication is obvious—maybe not.

What Clinton Did Right Page 129: Declared "a war on terror before the term became fashionable." This was back in 1996, after the first World Trade Center attack, the Bush assassination attempt, the Khobar Towers attack, and the Oklahoma City bombing. (On Page 127, Clarke notes that it's possible that al-Qaida operatives in the Philippines "taught Terry Nichols how to blow up the Oklahoma Federal Building." Intelligence places Nichols there on the same days as Ramzi Yousef, and "we do know that Nichols's bombs did not work before his Philippines stay and were deadly when he returned.")

Page 225: Thwarted al-Qaida's efforts to establish a militant Islamist state in Bosnia. Clinton's efforts to quell the war in the Balkans "defeated Al Qaeda when it had attempted to take over Bosnia by having its fighters dominate the defense of the breakaway state from Serbian attacks."

Pages 79-84: Responded to Saddam Hussein's assassination attempt on George H.W. Bush with force. He ordered the bombing of Iraq's intelligence headquarters, which, Clarke says, paired with a "stark warning" to the Iraqis, "successfully deterred Saddam from ever again using terror against us."

Pages 112-21, 129: Responded to Iran's role in the 1996 Khobar Towers attack with an unspecified "intelligence operation" intended to deter further Iranian terrorism.

Page 186: Responded to the African embassy bombings with strikes on terrorist camps in Afghanistan and a chemical plant in Sudan, even though he anticipated criticism for the timing. (The strikes took place on Aug. 20, 1998, at the height of the Lewinsky scandal.) According to Clarke, Clinton said: "Do you all recommend that we strike on the 20th? Fine. Do not give me

political advice about the timing. That's my problem. Let me worry about that."

Pages 211-12: Worked to prevent al-Qaida attacks planned for the millennium. In December 1999, Clinton's National Security Adviser Sandy Berger "convened the Principals [Cabinet-level officials] in crisis mode. 'We have stopped two sets of attacks planned for the Millennium. You can bet your measly federal paycheck that there are more out there and we have to stop them too. I spoke with the President and he wants you all to know.' " Clarke adds: "It was the sort of attention we needed in the summer of 2001."

Page 225: Recognized early on that terrorism was a primary post-Cold War threat, and "greatly increased funding for counterterrorism and initiated homeland protection programs."

What Clinton Did Wrong Page 225: Went too easy on the CIA. "He had given the CIA unprecedented authority to go after bin Laden personally and Al Qaeda, but had not taken steps when they did little or nothing." (Clarke, however, goes pretty easy on Clinton for this failing: "Because Clinton was criticized as a Vietnam War opponent without a military record, he was limited in his ability to direct the military to engage in anti-terrorist commando operations.")

Page 131: Didn't always push hard enough for homeland protection measures. In 1996, Clarke championed a plan for "a permanent air defense unit to protect Washington." Despite Clarke's efforts, Clinton's Treasury Department refused to OK it. "Most people who heard about our efforts to create some air defense system in case terrorists tried to fly aircraft into the Capitol, the White House, or the Pentagon simply thought we were nuts."

*Julia Turner is **Slate's** deputy editor. You can e-mail her at juliaturneratslate@gmail.com.*

Article URL: <http://www.slate.com/id/2097803/>