

WAR STORIES

Condi Lousy

Why Rice is a bad national security adviser.

By Fred Kaplan

One clear inference can be drawn from Condoleezza Rice's testimony before the 9/11 commission this morning: She has been a bad national security adviser—passive, sluggish, and either unable or unwilling to tie the loose strands of the bureaucracy into a sensible vision or policy. In short, she has not done what national security advisers are supposed to do.

The key moment came an hour into the hearing, when former Watergate prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste took his turn at asking questions. Up to this point, Rice had argued that the Bush administration could not have done much to stop the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Yes, the CIA's sirens were sounding all summer of an impending strike by al-Qaida, but the warnings were of an attack *overseas*.

Ben-Veniste brought up the much-discussed PDB—the president's daily briefing by CIA Director George Tenet—of Aug. 6, 2001. For the first time, he revealed the title of that briefing: "Bin Laden Determined To Attack Inside the United States."

Rice insisted this title meant nothing. The document consisted of merely "historical information" about al-Qaida—various plans and attacks of the past. "This was not a 'threat report,'" she said. It "did not *warn* of any coming attack inside the United States." Later in the hearing, she restated the point: "The PDB does not say the United States is *going* to be attacked. It says Bin Laden would *like* to attack the United States."

To call this distinction "academic" would be an insult to academia.

Rice acknowledged that throughout the summer of 2001 the CIA was intercepting unusually high volumes of "chatter" about an impending terrorist strike. She quoted from some of this chatter: "attack in near future," "unbelievable news coming in weeks," "a very, very, very big uproar." She said some "specific" intelligence indicated the attack would take place overseas. However, she noted that very little of this intelligence was specific; most of it was "frustratingly vague." In other words (though she doesn't say so), most of the chatter might have been about a foreign *or* a domestic attack—it wasn't clear.

Given that Richard Clarke, the president's counterterrorism chief, was telling her over and over that a domestic attack was likely, she should not have dismissed its possibility. Now that we know the title of the Aug. 6 PDB, we can go further and conclude that she should have taken this possibility very, very seriously. Putting together the facts may not have been as simple as adding $2 + 2$, but it couldn't have been more complicated than $2 + 2 + 2$.

The Aug. 6 briefing itself remains classified. Ben-Veniste urged Rice to get it declassified, saying the full document would reveal that even the premise of her analysis is flawed. The report apparently mentions not historical but "ongoing" FBI precautions. Former Democratic Sen. Bob Kerrey added that the PDB also reports that the FBI was detecting a "pattern of activity, inside the United States, consistent with hijacking."

Responding to Ben-Veniste, Rice acknowledged that Clarke had told her that al-Qaida had "sleeper cells" inside the United States. But, she added, "There was no recommendation that we do anything" about them. She gave the same answer when former Navy Secretary John Lehman, a Republican and outspoken Bush defender restated the question about sleeper cells. There was, Rice said, "no recommendation of what to do about it." She added that she saw "no indication that the FBI was not adequately pursuing" these cells.

Here Rice revealed, if unwittingly, the roots—or at least some roots—of failure. Why did she need a recommendation to do something? Couldn't she make recommendations herself? Wasn't that her job? Given the huge spike of traffic about a possible attack (several officials have used the phrase "hair on fire" to describe the demeanor of those issuing the warnings), should she have been satisfied with the lack of any sign that the FBI *wasn't* tracking down the cells? Shouldn't she have asked for positive evidence that it *was* tracking them down?

Former Democratic Rep. Tim Roemer posed the question directly: Wasn't it *your* responsibility to make sure that the word went down the chain, that orders were followed up by action?

Just as the Bush administration has declined to admit any mistakes, Condi Rice declined to take any responsibility. No, she answered, the FBI had that responsibility. Crisis management? That was Dick Clarke's job. "[If] I needed to do anything," she said, "I would have been asked to do it. I was not asked to do it."

Jamie Gorelick, a former assistant attorney general (and thus someone who knows the ways of the FBI), drove the point home. The commission's staff has learned, she told Rice, that the high-level intelligence warnings were not sent down the chain of command. The secretary of transportation had no idea about the threat-chatter nor did anyone at the Federal Aviation Administration. FBI field offices and special agents also heard nothing about it. Yes, FBI headquarters sent out a few messages, but have you seen them? Gorelick asked. "They are feckless," she went on. "They don't tell anybody anything. They don't put anybody at battle stations."

Bob Kerrey was blunter still. "One of the first things I learned when I came into this town," he said, "was that CIA and FBI don't talk to each other." It has long been reported that regional agents deep inside the FBI wrote reports about strange Arabs taking flight lessons and that analysts inside the CIA were reporting that Arab terrorists might be inside the United States. If both pieces of information were forced up to the tops of their respective bureaucracies, couldn't someone have put them together? "All it had to do was be put on intel links and the game's over," Kerrey said, perhaps a bit dramatically, the conspiracy "would have been rolled up."

This was one of Clarke's most compelling points. In his book, testimony, and several TV interviews, Clarke has argued that the Clinton administration thwarted al-Qaida's plot to set off bombs at Los Angeles airport on the eve of the millennium because intelligence reports of an impending terrorist attack were discussed at several meetings of Cabinet secretaries. Knowing they'd have to come back and tell the president what they were doing to prevent an attack, these officials went back to their departments and "shook the trees" for information. When Bush came to power, Rice retained Clarke and his counterterrorism crew, but she demoted their standing; terrorism was now discussed (and, even then, rarely) at meetings of *deputy* secretaries, who lacked the same clout and didn't feel the same pressure.

Rice's central point this morning, especially in her opening statement, was that nobody could have stopped the 9/11 attacks. The problem, she argued, was cultural (a democratic aversion to domestic intelligence gathering) and structural (the bureaucratic schisms between the FBI and the CIA, among others). But this is the analysis of a political scientist, not a policymaker. Culture and bureaucracies form the backdrop against which officials perceive threats, devise options, and make choices. It is good that Rice, a political scientist by training, recognized that this backdrop can place blinders and constraints on decision-makers. But her job as a high-ranking decision-maker is to strip away the blinders and maneuver around the constraints. This is especially so given that she is the one decision-maker who is supposed to coordinate the views of the various agencies and present them as a coherent picture to the president of the United States. Her testimony today provides disturbing evidence that she failed at this task—failed even to understand that it was part of her job description.