

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

One Hearing, Two Worlds

By Robert Wright

How did Condoleezza Rice do in defending the Bush administration's antiterrorism policies yesterday before the commission investigating the Sept. 11 attacks? Better if you kept your eyes on her than if you glanced down at the CNN headlines rolling across the bottom of the TV screen.

Just as she said that invading Iraq had removed a source "of violence and fear and instability in the world's most dangerous region," the bottom of the screen read, "IRAQ'S INTERIM INTERIOR MINISTER NURIL AL-BADRAN ANNOUNCES HIS RESIGNATION; INTERIOR MINISTRY IS IN CHARGE OF POLICE FORCES."

You have to admire Ms. Rice, the national security adviser, for so staunchly defending the invasion of Iraq even amid the current turmoil there. But the effect of her defense—and of her testimony generally—was to raise questions about this administration's grasp of reality. The many grim surprises Iraq has brought over the past year seem to have had no effect on official thinking about terrorism. There were two parallel universes on display yesterday—the top of the screen and the bottom—and they were very different.

Throughout the public phase of these hearings, attention has centered on a pseudo-scandal: could 9/11 have been prevented? Probably not. Even a quite vigilant administration would have needed some luck to catch wind of Al Qaeda's plans. Moreover, President Bush was hardly alone in the central confusion that kept him from being quite vigilant: the idea that "rogue states" are a bigger threat than terrorism per se, and indeed that terrorists can't do much damage without a state's help.

More scandalous, as some have noted, is that the administration didn't change this view after 9/11, when terrorists based in places like Germany killed 3,000 people using weapons (in this case airliners) acquired in America. Hence the war in Iraq.

The polar opposite of a preoccupation with state support of terrorism is the view that, in the modern world, intense hatred is self-organizing and self-empowering. Information technologies make it easy for hateful people to coalesce and execute attacks—and those same technologies can also help spread the hatred. That's why opponents of the Iraq war so feared its effect on Muslim sentiment.

If Ms. Rice didn't appreciate that fear before the war, she should now. The current insurgency seems to have spread from city to city in part by TV-abetted contagion. And insurgents are handing out DVD's with deftly edited videos featuring carnage caused by the war.

But Ms. Rice is unfazed. Yesterday she said the decision to invade Iraq was one of several key choices President Bush made—"the only choices that can ensure the safety of our nation for decades to come." Meanwhile, down at the bottom of the screen: "IRAQIS SAY AIRSTRIKE KILLED DOZENS GATHERED FOR PRAYERS." Do headlines like that make us safer?

And as Ms. Rice lauded the president for putting states that help or tolerate terrorists "on notice" and recognizing that the war on terrorism "cannot be fought on the defensive," the crawl read: "DEFENSE SECY DONALD RUMSFELD WARNS OF POSSIBLE VIOLENCE AGAINST PILGRIMS IN IRAQI HOLY CITIES, PARTICULARLY NAJAF, IN DAYS AHEAD."

Yesterday even Bob Kerrey, a committee member who stoutly favored the war in Iraq, said that it is now helping terrorist recruitment through televised images of "largely a Christian army in a Muslim nation." He didn't pose the observation as a question, and Ms. Rice offered no comment.

There is one rationale for the Iraq war that might appeal even to those who see raw hatred as the root problem: a prosperous democracy would serve as a model, creating a Muslim world marked by less frustration and resentment. Yesterday Ms. Rice cited this rationale, criticizing a pre-Bush American policy that “looks the other way on the freedom deficit in the Middle East.”

Good point. But what of our current cozying up to an Uzbek regime that represses Muslim dissidents? This is a natural consequence of a state-based approach to fighting terrorism—of viewing the world as a realpolitik chessboard across which we project military force so that all governments will either like us or fear us (regardless of how the masses feel).

Once you understand how easily hatred morphs into terrorism in the modern world, new concerns arise. What about the feelings of American Muslims, who needn't cross a border to do damage? If they're alienated—by the Iraq war or just by the sense that they're viewed with suspicion and hostility—that could be a problem.

Nobody mentioned American Muslims yesterday, but the bottom of the screen featured this news: “SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS, POLICE CHIEF SAYS SERIES OF ARSON FIRES TARGETING BUSINESSES RUN BY MUSLIMS WERE PROBABLY HATE CRIMES.”

True, it may be unfair to hold Ms. Rice accountable for yesterday's dire headlines. She stressed that the war on terror will be a long haul, with setbacks. And that's true no matter whose strategy you use.

Still, there is no evidence that she or anyone else in the White House anticipated anything like the trouble we've seen since Baghdad “fell” a year ago. And many of the things that have brought the trouble—electronically contagious sentiment, elusively fluid terrorist networks, widely available recipes for homemade weapons—will similarly haunt a heavy-handed approach anywhere else in the world. Iraq is a microcosm of the administration's larger war on terrorism, and the verdict is coming in.

All the technological trends that are making hatred more lethal (not just in communications, but in biotechnology and other realms) will continue for a long time. A sound strategy for fighting terrorism in this environment will require extreme creativity—more than President Bush or his presumptive opponent, Senator John Kerry, has shown.

Yesterday Ms. Rice, praising the counterterrorism strategy adopted after 9/11, said, “Bold and comprehensive changes are sometimes only possible in the wake of catastrophic events—events which create a new consensus that allows us to transcend old ways of thinking and acting.” Let's hope Iraq doesn't have to completely implode for America to transcend the administration's archaic worldview.