

## WAR STORIES

**The Out-of-Towner**

While Bush vacationed, 9/11 warnings went unheard.

By Fred Kaplan

In an otherwise dry day of hearings before the 9/11 commission, one brief bit of dialogue set off a sudden flash of clarity on the basic question of how our government let disaster happen.

The revelation came this morning, when CIA Director George Tenet was on the stand. Timothy Roemer, a former Democratic congressman, asked him when he first found out about the report from the FBI's Minnesota field office that Zacarias Moussaoui, an Islamic jihadist, had been taking lessons on how to fly a 747. Tenet replied that he was briefed about the case on Aug. 23 or 24, 2001.

Roemer then asked Tenet if he mentioned Moussaoui to President Bush at one of their frequent morning briefings. Tenet replied, "I was not in briefings at this time." Bush, he noted, "was on vacation." He added that he didn't see the president at all in August 2001. During the entire month, Bush was at his ranch in Texas. "You never talked with him?" Roemer asked. "No," Tenet replied. By the way, for much of August, Tenet too was, as he put it, "on leave."

And there you have it. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice has made a big point of the fact that Tenet briefed the president nearly every day. Yet at the peak moment of threat, the two didn't talk at all. At a time when action was needed, and orders for action had to come from the top, the man at the top was resting undisturbed.

Throughout that summer, we now well know, Tenet, Richard Clarke, and several other officials were running around with their "hair on fire," warning that al-Qaida was about to unleash a monumental attack. On Aug. 6, Bush was given the now-famous President's Daily Brief (by one of Tenet's underlings), warning that this attack might take place "inside the United States." For the previous few years—as Philip Zelikow, the commission's staff director, revealed this morning—the CIA had issued several warnings that terrorists might fly commercial airplanes into buildings or cities.

And now, we learn today, at this peak moment, Tenet hears about Moussaoui. Someone might have added 2 + 2 + 2 and *possibly* busted up the conspiracy. But the president was down on the ranch, taking it easy. Tenet wasn't with him. Tenet never talked with him. Rice—as she has testified—wasn't with Bush, either. He was on his own and, willfully, out of touch.

A USA *Today* story, written right before Bush took off, reported that the vacation—scheduled to last from Aug. 3 to Sept. 3—would tie one of Richard Nixon's as the longest that any president had ever taken. A week before he left, Bush made a videotaped message for the Boy Scouts of America. On the tape, he said, "I'll be going to my ranch in Crawford, where I'll work and take a little time off. I think it is so important for the president to spend some time away from Washington, in the heartland of America."

Dana Milbank and Mike Allen of the *Washington Post* recently wrote a story recalling those halcyon days in Crawford. On Aug. 7, 2001, the day after the fateful PDB, Bush, they wrote, "was in an expansive mood . . . when he ran into reporters while playing golf." The president's aides emphasized that he was working, now and then, on a few issues—education, immigration, Social Security, and his impending decision on stem-cell research. On Aug. 29, less than a week after Tenet found out about Moussaoui, Bush gave a speech before the American Legion. The White House press office headlined the text of the address, "President Discusses Defense Priorities." Those priorities: boosting soldiers' pay and abandoning the Anti-Ballistic-Missile Treaty. Nothing about terrorism, Osama Bin Laden, hijackings. Nothing that reflected the PDB or Moussaoui.

Anyone who has ever spent time in Washington knows that the whole town takes off the month of August. Despite the "threat spike," August 2001, it seems, was no different.

Larry Johnson, a former CIA officer and the State Department's counterterrorism chief from 1989–93, explained on MSNBC this afternoon, during a break in the hearings, why the PDB—let alone the Moussaoui finding—should have compelled everyone to rush back to Washington. In his CIA days, Johnson wrote “about 40” PDBs. They're usually dispassionate in tone, a mere paragraph or two. The PDB of Aug. 6 was a page and a half. “That's the intelligence–community equivalent of writing *War and Peace*,” Johnson said. And the title—“Bin Laden Determined To Strike in U.S.”—was clearly designed to set off alarm bells. Johnson told his interviewer that when he read the declassified document, “I said ‘Holy smoke!’ This is such a dead-on ‘Mr. President, you've got to do something!’” (By the way, Johnson claimed he's a Republican who voted for Bush in 2000.)

Bush got back after Labor Day. That first day, Sept. 4, was when the “Principals Committee”—consisting of his Cabinet heads—met in the White House to discuss terrorism. As Dick Clarke has since complained, and Condi Rice and others have acknowledged, it was the first time Bush's principals held a meeting on the subject.

This morning, Roemer asked Tenet if he brought up the Moussaoui briefing at that meeting. No, Tenet replied. “It wasn't the appropriate place.” Roemer didn't follow up and ask, “Why not? Where *was* the appropriate place?” Perhaps he was too stunned. He sure looked it.

The official story about the PDB is that the CIA prepared it at the president's request. Bush had heard all Tenet's briefings about a possible al-Qaida attack overseas, the tale goes, and he wanted to know if Bin Laden might strike here. This story is almost certainly untrue. On March 19 of this year, Tenet told the 9/11 commission that the PDB had been prepared, as usual, at a CIA analyst's initiative. He later retracted that testimony, saying the president had asked for the briefing. Tenet embellished his new narrative, saying that the CIA officer who gave the briefing to Bush *and Condi Rice* started by reminding the president that he had requested it. But as Rice has since testified, she was not present during the briefing; she wasn't in Texas. Someone should ask: Was that the only part of the tale that Tenet made up? Or did he invent the whole thing—and, if so, on whose orders?

The distinction is important. If Bush asked for the briefing, it suggests that he at least cared about the subject; then the puzzle becomes why he didn't follow up on its conclusions. If he didn't ask for the briefing, then he comes off as simply aloof. (It's a toss-up which conclusion is more disturbing.)

Then again, it's easy to forget that before the terrorists struck, Bush was widely regarded as an unusually aloof president. Joe Conason has calculated that up until Sept. 11, 2001, Bush had spent 54 days at the ranch, 38 days at Camp David, and four days at the Bush compound in Kennebunkport—a total of 96 days, or about 40 percent of his presidency, outside of Washington.

Yet by that inference, Bush has remained a remarkably out-of-touch—or at least out-of-town—leader, even in the two and a half years since 9/11. Dana Milbank counts that through his entire term to date, Bush has spent 500 days—again, about 40 percent of his time in office—at the ranch, the retreat, or the compound.

The 9/11 commission has unveiled many critical problems in the FBI and the CIA. But the most critical problem may have been that the president was off duty.

**Update, April 15, 2004:** On Wednesday evening, after the hearings, a CIA spokesman called reporters to tell them Tenet had misspoken: It turns out he *did* brief Bush in August 2001, twice—on Aug. 17 and Aug. 31. Assuming the correction is true, it doesn't negate the point. The first briefing, which the spokesman described as uneventful, took place before Tenet learned about Moussaoui. The second occurred after the president returned to Washington.

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