

THE BUCK STOPS . . . WHERE?

Stop blaming your henchmen, Mr. President.

By Fred Kaplan

And so it seems I, too, have underestimated the president. This past Wednesday, I wrote a column holding George W. Bush responsible for our recent disasters—the torture at Abu Ghraib and the whole plethora of strategic errors in Iraq. My main argument was that Bush has placed too much trust, for far too long, in the judgment of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, despite his ceaseless string of bad judgments.

However, two news stories that have since come to my attention—one that appeared on the same day, the other more than two months ago—suggest not merely that Bush is guilty of “failing to recognize failure” (as my headline put it) but that he is directly culpable for the sins in question, no less so than his properly beleaguered defense chief.

The first story, written by Mark Matthews in the May 12 *Baltimore Sun*, quotes Secretary of State Colin Powell—on the record—as saying Bush knew about the International Committee of the Red Cross reports that were filed many months ago about the savagery at the prison. Powell is quoted as saying:

We kept the president informed of the concerns that were raised by the ICRC and other international organizations as part of my regular briefings of the president, and advised him that we had to follow these issues, and when we got notes sent to us or reports sent to us . . . we had to respond to them.

Powell adds that he, Rumsfeld, and Condoleezza Rice kept Bush “fully informed of the concerns that were being expressed, not in specific details but in general terms.” (Thanks to Joshua Micah Marshall, whose blog alerted me to the *Sun* story.)

So much for Rumsfeld’s protective claim, at last week’s hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, that he had failed to bring the matter to the president’s attention. No wonder Bush, in turn, rode out to the Pentagon and praised his servant-secretary for doing a “superb” job.

It’s amazing, by the way, how Colin Powell seems to have scuttled his good-soldier routine altogether, criticizing his president at first quasi-anonymously (through Bob Woodward’s new book), then through close aides (Wil Hylton’s GQ article), and now straight up in the *Baltimore Sun*. One wonders when he’ll go all the way and start making campaign appearances for John Kerry.

The second news story that heaves more burdens on the president comes from an NBC News broadcast by Jim Miklaszewski on March 2. Apparently, Bush had three opportunities, long before the war, to destroy a terrorist camp in northern Iraq run by Abu Musab Zarqawi, the al-Qaida associate who recently cut off the head of Nicholas Berg. But the White House decided not to carry out the attack because, as the story puts it:

[T]he administration feared [that] destroying the terrorist camp in Iraq could undercut its case for war against Saddam.

The implications of this are more shocking, in their way, than the news from Abu Ghraib. Bush promoted the invasion of Iraq as a vital battle in the war on terrorism, a continuation of our response to 9/11. Here was a chance to wipe out a high-ranking terrorist. And Bush didn’t take advantage of it because doing so might also wipe out a rationale for invasion.

The story gets worse in its details. As far back as June 2002, U.S. intelligence reported that Zarqawi had set up a weapons lab at Kirma in northern Iraq that was capable of producing ricin and cyanide. The Pentagon drew up an attack plan involving cruise missiles and smart bombs. The White House turned it down. In October 2002, intelligence reported that Zarqawi was preparing to use his bio-weapons in Europe. The Pentagon drew up another attack plan. The White House again demurred. In January 2003, police in London arrested terrorist suspects connected to the camp. The Pentagon devised another attack plan. Again, the White House killed the plan, not Zarqawi.

When the war finally started in March, the camp was attacked early on. But by that time, Zarqawi and his followers had departed.

This camp was in the Kurdish enclave of Iraq. The U.S. military had been mounting airstrikes against various targets throughout Iraq—mainly air-defense sites—for the previous few years. It would not have been a major escalation to destroy this camp, especially after the war against al-Qaida in Afghanistan. The Kurds, whose autonomy had been shielded by U.S. air power since the end of the 1991 war, wouldn't have minded and could even have helped.

But the problem, from Bush's perspective, was that this was the only tangible evidence of terrorists in Iraq. Colin Powell even showed the location of the camp on a map during his famous Feb. 5 briefing at the U.N. Security Council. The camp was in an area of Iraq that Saddam didn't control. But never mind, it was *something*. To wipe it out ahead of time might lead some people—in Congress, the United Nations, and the American public—to conclude that Saddam's links to terrorists were finished, that maybe the war wasn't necessary. So Bush let it be.

In the two years since the Pentagon's first attack plan, Zarqawi has been linked not just to Berg's execution but, according to NBC, 700 other killings in Iraq. If Bush had carried out that attack back in June 2002, the killings might not have happened. More: The case for war (as the White House feared) might not have seemed so compelling. Indeed, the war itself might not have happened.

One ambiguity does remain. The NBC story reported that "the White House" declined to carry out the airstrikes. Who was "the White House"? If it wasn't George W. Bush—if it was, say, Dick Cheney—then we crash into a very different conclusion: not that Bush was directly culpable, but that he was more out of touch than his most cynical critics have imagined. It's a tossup which is more disturbing: a president who passes up the chance to kill a top-level enemy in the war on terrorism for the sake of pursuing a reckless diversion in Iraq—or a president who leaves a government's most profound decision, the choice of war or peace, to his aides.