

“The president ought to be ashamed”

Former Sen. Max Cleland blasts Bush’s “Nixonian” stonewalling of the 9/11 commission, his “lies” about Iraq, and his flight-suit photo op on the USS Lincoln after “hiding out” during Vietnam.

By Eric Boehlert

During his six years as a United States senator from the conservative state of Georgia, Max Cleland was known as a moderate Democrat. He drew the wrath of liberals in 2001 when he broke ranks with Democrats and voted for President Bush’s tax cuts, and last year he backed the resolution authorizing Bush to wage war with Iraq (though on that vote, at least, he was joined by some liberals).

Today, though, Cleland has emerged as one of the president’s harshest critics, especially about the war he voted to authorize. Today, he says, it’s a move he deeply regrets, as he scans the headlines from Baghdad. “I feel like I have been duped, I don’t mind telling you,” Cleland admits. “Everybody in the administration was selling this used car. The problem is all the wheels have fallen off the car and we’ve got a lemon.”

Cleland, perhaps known for being a triple amputee Vietnam vet, lost his Senate seat last November in a race that has gone down in history as typifying the GOP’s take-no-prisoners approach to politics. The disabled veteran was smeared as soft on terror because he didn’t back Bush’s version of homeland security legislation.

Now, outspoken and blunt, he’s furious about the White House’s handling of the war with Iraq, which he calls a disastrous “war of choice.” And he mocks the administration’s claims that Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden were allies. “They had a plan to go to war [with Iraq], and when 9/11 happened that’s what they did; they went to war.”

Meanwhile, as one of 10 commissioners serving on the independent panel created by Congress to investigate the 9/11 attacks, Cleland bemoans the administration’s “Nixonian” love of secrecy and its attempt to “slow walk” the commission into irrelevancy.

At the center of the secrecy debate are sensitive presidential daily briefings, or PDBs, that the commission wants to examine as part of its inquiry. Particularly important is the crucial Aug. 6, 2001 PDB, which warned of Osama bin Laden’s desire to hijack commercial planes in the United States. For months the White House resisted, and the commission hinted it might subpoena the document. A deal was finally cut last week, which Cleland opposed, allowing a handpicked subset of commissioners to be briefed on the PDBs.

“We shouldn’t be making deals,” Cleland complains. “If somebody wants to deal, we issue subpoenas. That’s the deal.”

Republicans say the partisan flavor of Cleland’s anti-Bush broadsides are easy to explain; he’s still stinging from his surprise reelection loss last November. Cleland denies it, but if he were still bitter, it would be easy to see why, considering he was the victim of a now-infamous attack ad, which even some Republicans objected to.

Cleland’s opponent, Saxby Chambliss, who sat out Vietnam with a bad knee, aired a spot featuring unflattering pictures of Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein . . . and Max Cleland. Chambliss charged Cleland, the Vietnam vet amputee, was soft on national security because he’d voted against creating the Homeland Security Act. In truth, Cleland co-wrote the legislation to create the Homeland Security Department, but objected to repeated attempts by the White House to deprive future Homeland Security employees of traditional civil service protection.

It’s hard to imagine any recent Democratic senator less soft on national security than Max Cleland, a reflection on the unlikely path he took to the U.S. Senate. In 1967 he volunteered for combat duty. The next year, during the siege of Khe Sahn, Cleland lost both his legs and his right hand to a Viet Cong grenade. Two years later, at the age of

28, he became the youngest person ever elected to the Georgia state Senate. In 1977 President Jimmy Carter appointed him to head the Veterans Administration. He later became Georgia's secretary of state. And in 1996, Georgia voters sent Cleland and his wheelchair to the Senate.

In a lengthy phone interview on Tuesday, Cleland wondered why Bob Woodward gets better access to White House documents than the 9/11 commission ("Just think about that"), blasted Bush on Iraq ("We've got an absolute disaster on our hands"), while constructing a viable exit strategy ("They're trying to make Iraq the 51st state.") He also talked about the trouble Democratic politicians are having getting elected in the South.

Q: Let's start with the 9/11 commission. What are your concerns about how it's dealing with the White House?

First of all, as someone who co-sponsored legislation creating the 9/11 commission, against great opposition from the White House, this independent commission should be independent and should not be making deals with anybody. I start from there. It's been painfully obvious the administration not only fought the creation of the commission but that their objective was the war in Iraq, and one of the notions that was built on was there was a direct connection between al Qaida and 9/11 and Saddam Hussein. There was not.

So therefore they didn't want the 9/11 commission to get going. What you have is the fear from the White House that the commission would uncover pretty quickly the fact that one of four legs that the war stood on was nonexistent. So they slow-walked it, and they continue to slow-walk it. They want to kick this can down past the elections. We should not be making any deals; we should stick to our original timetable of [completing the final report by] May. However, we're coming up on Thanksgiving here and we're still struggling over access issues. It should be a national scandal.

Q: What have some of the access problems been?

In May, the commission asked the FAA to give us the documents we're looking for. We've had to subpoena the FAA. We've now had to subpoena documents from Norad, which they have not given us. I for one think we ought to subpoena the White House for the presidential daily briefings, to know what the president knew, what the administration knew, and when they knew it so we can determine what changes ought to be made in our intelligence infrastructure, our warning system, so that we don't go through this kind of surprise attack again.

Now, it's not partisan; Bill Clinton has already agreed to come personally before the 9/11 commission. But a majority of the commission has agreed to a bad deal.

Q: And what is the deal?

A minority of the commissioners will be able to see a minority of the [PDB] documents that the White House has already said is pertinent. And then a minority of the commissioners themselves will have to brief the rest of the commissioners on what the White House thinks is appropriate.

Q: So the minority of commissioners will get a briefing on the documents?

Yes, but first they have to report to the White House what they're going to tell the other commissioners.

Q: 9/11 commission chairman Tom Kean has suggested if you issue subpoenas on the White House and they fight it, it's going to go to the courts and take months and months of legal wrangling.

Well, that's up to the president, he's made this decision. I say that decision compromised the mission of the 9/11 commission, pure and simple. Far from the commissioners being

able to fulfill their obligation to the Congress and the American people, and far from getting access to all the documents we need, the president of the United States is cherry-picking what information is shown to what minority of commissioners. Now this is ridiculous. That's not full and open access.

If you trust one commissioner you should trust them all. I don't understand it. You can say, 'I'm not going to show anything to anybody, and take me to court.' At least that's consistent. But it's not consistent at all to say we're going to parse out this information and we determine how many members of the commission get to see it.

Q: Let me read you something from AP regarding Philip Zelikow, who's executive director of the 9/11 commission. Quote, "He said the bipartisan panel asked specifically for pieces of the daily briefings that dealt with subjects such as terrorism, Al Qaeda and Usama bin Laden, the Saudi-born fugitive leader of the terror network. Other sections, such as those dealing with intelligence on topics and countries not related to terror threats, intentionally were left out of the request, Zelikow said."

That's correct, and that's fair.

Q: " "We asked for everything we wanted, and the White House has discovered hundreds of responsive PDB articles, and we are seeing all of them,' Zelikow said. 'None of those articles are being edited. We're seeing everything we asked to see. And our request was never the subject of negotiation.' "

Well, the request was put forward, but the president's decision and response to the request was negotiated time and time again by Tom Kean and [vice chairman] Lee Hamilton, going over to the White House with hat in hand several times, meeting with the lawyers first, and then with [chief of staff] Andy Card.

Secondly, you determine up front there are 22 PDB's in one stack and over 300 in a second stack. And then the White House says if you come in, and play nice and say nice things to us, then you'll be able to report back to the commission. And then maybe we'll take under consideration with our lawyer whether some elements of the PDB's in the second stack can go into the first stack. I mean come on!

It's Nixonian in the approach. The approach ought to be, "Yes, the 9/11 commission gets access to the documents, all the commissioners get access. Whatever items you request we'll be forthcoming in giving you."

Q: Why, in the end, do you think a majority of the commissioners agreed to the deal with the White House?

You'll have to ask each member of the commission. A couple of weeks ago I voted to subpoena the White House and I'll continue to vote to subpoena the documents.

Q: Doesn't the White House have a point though, in terms of these PDB's, which I don't think have ever been released before? And that if analysts writing them are concerned they could be made public one day, than they won't be as forthright with the president?

Let me walk you through this thing here. First of all, we're not talking about a prescription drug plan under Medicare here. We're talking about the most serious assault on the homeland of the United States since the British invaded during the war of 1812. This is the deal. The joint inquiry made up of Democrats and Republican members of Congress, they issued a report [this summer], but they couldn't get at the PDB's. They kicked the can down the street so that the 9/11 commission could get at the full story. That's the reason for this independent commission, with the time and energy and staff to get at all of this. Had the Joint Intelligence Committee been able to do its job, there wouldn't have even been a 9/11 commission.

We're coming down to the final [months] of the commission and we're still messing around with access issues. This is a key item. I don't think any independent commission

can let an agency or the White House dictate to it how many commissioners see what. So this “deal,” we shouldn’t be dealing. If somebody wants to deal, we issue subpoenas. That’s the deal. That was the deal with the FAA, that was the deal with Norad.

And the reason is principle. Clinton has agreed to cooperate with the commission and is eager to come before it. So why doesn’t this White House, which was on the bridge when the ship got attacked, why doesn’t this White House want to know everything that happened on their watch so that it can’t happen again? Why they want to play games with this commission, to make deals, I don’t know. It’s information control. It’s not transparency.

I don’t know if they’re hiding something. But the public will never know and the 9/11 commission will never know because under the current deal, a minority of commissioners will see a small number of documents and then brief the White House on what they’re going to tell the other commissioners. Wait a minute! That doesn’t make any sense at all.

Q: Can the commission finish its work by May?

I think it’s going to be increasingly difficult. I think the White House has made it darn near impossible to get full access to the documents by May, much less get a full report out analyzing those docs by May. This is a three- or four-year project, it really is. And to delay and deny at this point is to compromise the work of the commission from here on out. I can’t say, as a commissioner, to the Congress and the American people, that I had full access to all the documents pertaining to 9/11 and here’s the conclusion. I can’t say that.

Q: You’ve heard the claim, the Wall Street Journal editorial page and others have made it, that you are still upset about your 2002 reelection loss and that’s why you are so critical of the White House.

This doesn’t have anything to do with the 2002 election. It has everything to do with 9/11.

Q: So it’s not some sort of payback?

No. It’s all about 9/11. This is not a political witch hunt. This is the most serious independent investigation since the Warren Commission. And after watching History Channel shows on the Warren Commission last night, the Warren Commission blew it. I’m not going to be part of that. I’m not going to be part of looking at information only partially. I’m not going to be part of just coming to quick conclusions. I’m not going to be part of political pressure to do this or not do that. I’m not going to be part of that. This is serious.

Q: You say you think it should be a national scandal . . .

It is a national scandal. Here’s the deal. The administration made a connection on Sept. 11, and you can read Bob Woodward’s book [“Bush at War”]. He’s a private citizen. He got access to documents we don’t have yet! Just think about that. He’s a great reporter and a good guy. Bless his heart. But he got documents over two years ago, handwritten notes from Rumsfeld tying the terrorism attack into Iraq. This administration had a point of view the day that happened. If you look at 9/11 separately you realize it had nothing to do with Saddam Hussein. Except [vice president Dick] Cheney and [Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul] Wolfowitz put a plan together in ’92 to try to convince [president] Bush One to invade Iraq, but here’s what Bush One said about it, in his book “A World Transformed,” which I think is devastating:

“I firmly believed that we should not march into Baghdad. To occupy Iraq would instantly shatter our coalition, turning the whole Arab world against us and make a broken tyrant into a latter day Arab hero. Assigning young soldiers to a fruitless hunt

for a secretly entrenched dictator and condemning them to fight what would be an unwinnable urban guerilla war.”

Now, this administration bought the Cheney-Wolfowitz plan from '92 hook line and sinker. It was all about using 9/11 as an excuse to go into Baghdad, not as a reason.

Q: What's the significance?

Let's chase this rabbit into the ground here. They had a plan to go to war and when 9/11 happened that's what they did; they went to war. They pulled off their task force in Afghanistan, their Predator assets, and shifted them over to the war in Iraq. They took their eye off the 9/11 ball and transferred it to the Iraq ball. And that's a very strategic question that ultimately has got to be answered. I'm focused on 9/11 and the administration is not focused on it. They don't want to share information, and they didn't agree with the commission in the first place.

Q: For the commission's final report, will the White House have final say over what gets released publicly?

For national security reasons, yes, it will be vetted by the CIA and the national security apparatus. Please don't misunderstand here. We're not talking about releasing or even seeing full presidential daily briefings. I don't care about what the president was briefed on about China. Nobody on the commission is going to spill national secrets, nobody's going to give away methods of recruiting agents. As a matter of fact, it was administration officials who ratted out one of their own CIA agents in order to keep guys like Joseph Wilson quiet.

Q: What's your take on the situation in Iraq?

One word: Disaster. And when the secretary of defense puts out a memo to his top staff and says we don't have the metrics to determine whether we're winning or losing the war on terrorism? If the secretary of defense does not understand that we're losing our rear end in Iraq in order to save our face, he ought quit being secretary of defense. Because all you have to do is ask any Pfc. out there. They're sitting ducks with targets on their backs; they're getting blown up. The question more and more is, for what? And, when are we coming home?

The president is trying to find a reason, now that there's no weapons of mass destruction, no yellow cake coming from Niger, no connection with al-Qaida and no immediate threat to the United States, we now have a war of choice. I'm telling you we're in a mess. It's a disaster.

Q: If the pattern holds for the rest of the month, we'll have 100 U.S. soldiers killed during November.

We've lost more youngsters killed in Iraq in less than a year than we lost during the first three years of the Vietnam War. And people say there's no Vietnam analogy?

Q: Do you regret your vote last fall in favor of the resolution authorizing war?

I do. Because I sensed it was a political ploy rather than a ploy to genuinely protect the United States. It was just an attempt to get any resolution passed so the administration could say, just like Lyndon Johnson [with Vietnam], 'We got the approval of Congress.' And then, just like Lyndon Johnson, they went ahead and did whatever they wanted to do; massive buildup, putting the military on thin political ice, getting a bunch of kids killed.

Q: You were up for reelection at the time and you felt a pressure to vote yes?

Yes. They did this purposefully. I will say to you that I did think that it was worth a shot to give the president of the United States the authority to go to the United Nations and try to put together a coalition to try to find out if there were weapons of mass destruction. And if there were weapons of mass destruction, to destroy them.

Of course what I did not know was that the White House had the 1992 Cheney-Wolfowitz war plan on the front burner. I knew they wanted regime change. But I did not know that the Cheney-Wolfowitz war plan was what they were going to do with and that they hadn't figured out a plan B.

Q: I know you're a supporter of Sen. John Kerry.

I am yes, a big supporter.

Q: Do you think his vote last fall in favor of war has hurt him?

Yes, it's cost him. But he and I were trying to do the right thing and give the president of the United State the benefit of the doubt. After all, the vice president stood up at the VFW convention and said Iraq is building nuclear weapons. It was all part of cherry-picking the intelligence and boosting the case for war in Iraq, which they'd already decided to do. They were just looking for reasons. They kept saying there was a connection between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida. And the president said it's all about terrorism and the war on terrorism. Everybody in the administration was selling this used car. The problem is all the wheels have fallen off the car and we've got a lemon. Looking back, yeah, I regret that vote. I gave the president of the United States the benefit of the doubt. He took it as a blank check. I feel like I have been duped, I don't mind telling you. But the deal with Iraq was obvious. [White House political strategist] Karl Rove and those guys knew that all of a sudden the president's numbers shot up, so the Cheney-Wolfowitz plan fit with Karl Rove's plan; perpetual war keeps the president's numbers up and we'll cover over any attack on the president and any other issue. So they put that front and center and used it as a hammer. They even put me up there with Osama bin Laden and all that kind of stuff, and said I voted against Homeland Security when I was really one of the authors of the Homeland Security bills. So you can see how they used it as a hammer over members of Congress who were running.

And now we've got an absolute disaster on our hands. And now the president's numbers are falling and they don't know what to do about it. So the ground truth has overtaken the political B.S. and now the real truth of the war, the cost of the war, is coming out. The American people, one thing I know is, they do not fight wars of attrition well. And as Thomas Paine once said, "Time makes more converts than reason." As time goes on, this war will not be resolved.

Now, how does this relate to the 9/11 commission? If you slow-walk the 9/11 commission and keep kicking this can down the road, and keep making deals and denying access, within a year they'll have the election out of the way. So it's election-driven.

Q: What should the U.S. now do to improve the situation in Iraq?

You've got to go back and do what you didn't do in the first place. You didn't put together a U.N. coalition, you didn't get the vote of the National Security Council. You didn't bring along your NATO allies. As a matter of fact, all of Europe is laughing at us and the president is going into the teeth of 100,000 demonstrators against our transatlantic ally, the only one we've got left, Britain. This is a disaster.

Q: Do we need more troops in Iraq?

No, no, no. You've got to have an exit strategy. You've got to make this a U.N. protectorate with our NATO allies taking up the political and economic restoration of Iraq and we have to command our troops and withdraw our forces. We've got to give up our oil fields.

You've got to pull out. Don't try to make it the 51st state. That's what the White House was trying to do; they're trying to make Iraq the 51st state. The dream of Cheney and Wolfowitz was you create a base of operations in Iraq and then you attack Syria and Iran. I'm serious. You think this is nuts. It is nuts in the case of this particular cost of

blood and treasure that the American people are finding out and they're going south on this big time.

Q: When you were in the Senate you were known as a moderate Democrat; you voted in favor of the Bush tax cuts. It's clear your perception of the White House has changed dramatically.

Yeah, they lied to me. I know they lied flat-out about any connection to al-Qaida. Now al-Qaida is teaming up with Saddam loyalists and are doing what? Targeting Americans. They do have a target in common now and that's the 130,000 U.S. soldiers out there. And we lost two more yesterday.

Q: What was your reaction when you saw President Bush landing on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln in May to give a victory speech of sorts?

I'll tell you the truth. I thought, "Oh my God." A man who deliberately got out of going to Vietnam by hiding out in the National Guard and who did not even complete his National Guard tour of duty, now walks onto an aircraft carrier in a flight suit with helmet under his arm, as if he's Tom Cruise in "Top Gun," and "Mission Accomplished."

Q: What do you think now?

The president ought to be ashamed because real soldiers are out there fighting and dying for a disastrous policy that he created. I'm telling you this is serious business. And that has now all been acknowledged as a sham. We're in a helluva mess. And the worst part is the kids are getting killed every damn day, that's what gets me.

Q: I want to ask you about Democrats in the South. They just won the Louisiana governor's race, but the weeks earlier had not been good for Democrats in Mississippi and Kentucky. There's a lot of concerns in Democratic circles that the South is essentially gone, which could relegate Democrats almost to a permanent minority party. As someone who won lots of elections in the South, what do you think Democrats have to do to win statewide elections?

I think these states have their own peculiarities of local issues. In Georgia, with the president being 70 percent popular and coming in targeting me as hostile to national security, putting me up there with Osama bin Laden, and raising millions of dollars, and Karl Rove pumping in millions of dollars to [former Georgia GOP chief] Ralph Reed down there, and using Georgia as a test case for voter turnout and capturing the white male anger, the backlash at the governor for taking the Confederate banner off the state flag, that was powerful and it took out me and the governor.

When you mobilize the entire Republican apparatus and you energize it with race and the good ole boys in the South, that's tough to beat. That's the Nixon 1968 "Southern strategy." And the Republicans have adopted the Southern strategy.

Meanwhile, the Florida seat is open now. Bob Graham said to heck with it and I understand that. And we'll see how Florida pans out. With Jeb Bush as governor it'd be tough to get a Democrat there. Georgia has an open seat and you're probably looking at a Republican taking that.

Democrats in the South have to do a better job organizing themselves and not take things for granted. I think we in Georgia took for granted that our base would be organized. It's now obvious the Republicans have set a new standard with Ralph Reed and Karl Rove in charge, they nationalize local elections.