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THE NEW YORK TIMES OP-ED SATURDAY, MARCH 27, 2004

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DAVID BROOKS

See
Dick
Spin

Warren Bass, Michael Hurley and Alexis Albion are not exactly household names. But they are a few of the authors of the outstanding interim reports released by the 9/11 commission this week. In clear, substantive and credible prose, these staff reports describe the errors successive administrations made leading up to the terror attacks. More than that, they describe the ambiguities and constraints policy makers wrestled with.

But, of course, these reports were eclipsed. This was the week the Richard Clarke circus came to town.

It should be said that Clarke used to be capable of the sort of balanced analysis contained in these reports. Indeed, he was a major source for them. But that was the old Richard Clarke. That was the Richard Clarke who could weigh the pros and cons of the Clinton and Bush terror strategies. That was the Clarke who expressed frustration at the glacial pace of the pre-9/11 antiterror policy process, but who also, in 2001, sent out e-mail praising the White House for alerting agencies to a possible attack, and who praised the Bush team for "vigorously" pursuing the Clinton strategy while deciding to quintuple the C.I.A.'s anti-Qaeda budget.

But that wonky Richard Clarke doesn't become a prime-time media sensation or sell hundreds of thousands of books. Because in this country, we speak only one language when it comes to public affairs, the lan-

The Richard Clarke
soap opera eclipses
serious issues.

guage of partisan warfare. So out goes Mr. Wonk. Clarke turns himself into an anti-Bush attack machine, and we get a case study of how serious bipartisan concern gets turned into a week of civil war.

Compared with the commission reports, Clarke's book, "Against All Enemies," is as subtle as an episode of the Power Rangers. See Dick Clarke courageously take control of the government in the middle of the terror attacks! See him heroically lead a teleconference! Behold his White House conversations! Everything he says is farsighted and brave! Everything the Bushies say is incorrect. And he remembers it all perfectly!

Clarke manages to absolve Bill Clinton for many of his mistakes — or Clarke says the vast right-wing conspiracy is to blame. What about Clinton's decision not to bomb Al Qaeda's terrorist camps when we had a chance? Not a mistake, Clarke now says. We had higher priorities, like the former Yugoslavia.

All of Bush's errors, on the other hand, are magnified. Shrieking passages about Bush's stupidity are inserted into Clarke's tendentious prose. In 2002, Clarke said there was "no plan on Al Qaeda that was passed from the Clinton administration to the Bush administration." But now Clinton is portrayed as the Winston Churchill of the antiterror brigades, and Bush is Neville Chamberlain.

And this week Clarke goes on a book tour and hypes it up another notch. Time's Romesh Ratnesar recently compared Clarke's book with the representations he is making of it up and down the TV dial. Ratnesar found that Clarke is sexing up his own stories to score political points.

So here we are in a familiar spot. Instead of talking about the bipartisan failures and systematic shortcomings of our terror policy, we're seething at one another about one man. It's the Clinton scandals and Bork hearings all over again — except this time the pretext for our hatred just happens to be security policy. Conservatives, including myself, believe that Clarke has turned himself into a mendacious glory-hound whose claims are contradictory. Liberals see him as the Erin Brockovich of the Bush years.

There's plenty of blame to go around. Clarke deserves blame for his shrill partisanship. The media deserve blame for neglecting the commission reports (The Times is an honorable exception). Most important, the administration deserves blame. Instead of focusing on the substantive commission reports and treating Clarke with the back of its hand, the Bush administration got right in the mud with him.

Meanwhile, actual policy matters get tossed about in the rolling seas. Though we never really had a discussion about it, now everybody is embracing pre-emptive action against potential terrorist threats.

This has not been a good week for American politics. It's been another week (the 4,000th in a row, I believe) in which serious issues were treated as a soap opera. If you want to live the soap opera, buy Clarke's book. If you want something serious, read the commission reports. You'll find them at www.9-11commission.gov. □

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Why Nobody Saw 9/11 Coming

By Peter R. Neumann

Did the Bush administration, before the 9/11 attacks, fail to take terrorism seriously enough? At first the contention seems unlikely. Isn't this the most hawkish administration in living memory? Wasn't it President Bush who coined the phrase "war on terror"?

Yet in the current hearings on the attacks — and in the controversy surrounding the new book by Richard A. Clarke, the administration's first counterterrorism chief — the words "neglect" and "failure" keep cropping up.

And there is something to these accusations — although perhaps not in the sense that the people making them intend. The administration's early failures on terrorism cannot be pinned down to individual instances of "neglect." To understand what really went wrong, we need to go back to the last decades of the cold war, when people like Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, and Vice President Dick Cheney first started to make sense of terrorism.

In the 1970's and 80's, the predominant view among Washington hawks was that none of the various terrorist groups that operated in Western Europe and the Middle East was truly independent. They were all connected through a vast terrorist network, which was created and supported by the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. The Communists' aim, the hawks believed, was to destabilize the Western societies without being directly linked to violence.

It all seemed to make perfect sense, and books like "The Terror Network" by Claire Sterling, which argued the network hypothesis with considerable force and conviction, became essential reading for anyone who wanted to make his way in the Reagan White House.

The idea that the sinister hand of the Kremlin was behind groups like the Italian Red Brigades and even the Irish Republican Army revealed the deep sense of paranoia within political circles at the time. More important, the idea of the Commu-

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nist terrorism network buttressed the conservative fixation on states as the only major actors in the international political system.

According to the classically "realist" mindset, only states can pose a significant threat to the national security of other states, because lesser actors simply do not have the capacity, sophistication and resources to do so. Hence, if terrorists suddenly became effective in destabilizing countries like Italy, they couldn't possibly have acted on their own. They must have had state sponsors, and it was only by tackling the state sponsors (in this case, the Soviet bloc), that you could root out the terrorists.

During the cold war, the paradigm of "state-sponsored terrorism" was useful, if not entirely correct. Most terrorists did receive help from states, and there were some links between disparate groups, although not to the extent that many in the United States believed. And some of the worst atrocities — like the 1983 attack on United States military headquarters in Beirut — were in fact carried out by groups that had been created by "rogue states" like Iran, Libya and Syria.

With the end of the cold war, however, things changed. While there was no longer a prime state sponsor for any "terror network," there was also no longer any need for one. It became easy to travel from one country to another. Money could be collected and transferred around the globe. Cell phones and the Internet made it possible to maintain tight control of an elusive group that could move its "headquarters" across continents. In fact, by the end of the decade, it seemed as if the model of state-sponsored terrorism had effectively been reversed: Al Qaeda was now in charge of a state — Afghanistan under the Taliban — rather than vice versa.

But the Washington hawks failed to see what was happening. The world around them had changed, but their paradigm hadn't. For them, states continued to be the only real movers and shakers in the international system, and any serious "strategic" threat to America's security could only come from an established nation.

Consider an article in the January/February 2000 issue of Foreign Affairs magazine by Condoleezza Rice, titled "Campaign 2000 — Promoting the National Interest." Ms. Rice, spelling out the foreign policy priorities of a Bush White House,

10 years after, a
cold-war mentality
was still in place.

argued that after years of drift under the Clinton administration, United States foreign policy had to concentrate on the "real challenges" to American security. This included renewing "strong and intimate relationships" with allies, and focusing on "big powers, particularly Russia and China." In Ms. Rice's view, the threat of non-state terrorism was a secondary problem — in her to do list" it was under the category of "rogue regimes," to be tackled best by dealing "decisively with the threat of hostile powers."

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that there was relatively little interest in Al Qaeda when the Bush team

took over. For most of 2001, the national security agenda really consisted of only two items, neither of which had anything to do with the terrorist threat of radical Islam. First, the administration increased its efforts to bring about regime change in Iraq, which was believed to be the prime source of instability in a region of great strategic importance.

The second goal was a more competitive stance toward China. Missile defense — this time against attack by China and North Korea — was put back on the table. Even the collision of an American spy plane with a Chinese fighter in 2001 is an indication of the administration's mindset — intelligence resources were deployed not to find Osama bin Laden, but to monitor what many White House hawks considered the most likely future challenger of American power.

Sept. 11, 2001, brought about a quick re-orientation of foreign policy. What didn't change, however, was the state-centered mindset of

the people who were in charge. According to Mr. Clarke, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld immediately suspected Saddam Hussein, and suggested military strikes against Iraq. While cooler heads prevailed at the time, and there was a real effort to track down and destroy the Qaeda network, there was also a reluctance to abandon the idea that terrorism had to be state-based. Hence the administration's insistence that there must be an "axis of evil" — a group of states critical in sustaining the terrorists. It was an attempt to reconcile the new, confusing reality with long-established paradigm of state sponsorship.

In the end, the 9/11 hearings are likely to find that the intelligence failure that led to the horrific attacks stemmed from the longstanding problems of wrongly placed agents, failed communications between government departments and lack of resources. But it was also a failure of vision — one for which the current administration must take responsibility. □



Milan Trenc

How Good Intelligence
Falls on Deaf Ears

By David Kahn

The testimony of Richard A. Clarke illustrates the perennial problem with intelligence: how do you get leaders to accept information they do not want to believe?

Mr. Clarke, President Bush's former counterterrorism chief, on Wednesday told the commission investigating the Sept. 11 attacks that "this administration, while listening to me, either didn't believe that there was an urgent problem or was unprepared to act as though there was an urgent problem." This assessment parallels the president's reluctance to accept the findings of David A. Kay, his weapons inspector, who found no evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction before the United States invaded.

President Bush is not the first leader to refuse to accept unpalatable truths. In 427 B.C., the Athenians re-

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fused to believe at first that their vassal state of Mytilene had revolted; the delay cost them dearly. In 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm's government rejected evidence that Britain would remain neutral if Germany invaded Belgium in violation of a treaty. Germany marched in and Britain declared war. In 1938, the Japanese refused to abandon their preconceptions of superiority over the Russians even

A short history
of leaders who
ignored bad news.

though they lost a border clash to the Soviets. The next year, the Russians sent them reeling again on the Khalka River.

In 1941, Stalin disregarded reports that Hitler was about to attack Russia; millions of unnecessary deaths followed. In 1944, a Luftwaffe intelligence officer laid a photomosaic before Hitler showing that the Soviet

Union had assembled the greatest artillery concentration of all time. Hitler swept it furiously from the desk. In 1973, Israeli intelligence believed that Egypt, having lost the 1967 war and having expelled Soviet advisers, would not attack. But on Yom Kippur it did. And during Vietnam intelligence reports that the conflict was unwinnable were rejected by President Richard M. Nixon. All these refusals to face facts cost gold and blood.

Two centuries ago, Carl von Clausewitz concluded that "most intelligence is false." A century later, the chief of the German general staff, Alfred von Schlieffen, added a psychological explanation for this: "The higher commander generally makes himself a picture of friend and foe, in the painting of which personal wishes provide

the main elements. If incoming reports appear to correspond with this picture, they are laid by with satisfaction. If they contradict it, they are discarded as entirely false."

Of course, the response is not limited to the realm of politics and statecraft. People believe what they want to believe. Edna St. Vincent Millay asked her reader to "Pity me that the heart is slow to learn/What the swift mind beholds at every turn." A little boy begged of Shoeless Joe Jackson, on hearing that he had betrayed a World Series for money, "Say it ain't so, Joe."

Intelligence cannot discover everything or foresee all. Such expectations exceed human capacity. People ask, "Why didn't we intercept their communications?" Perhaps we did. But

even if we had, they would probably not have revealed anything like, "Tomorrow we fly into the World Trade Center" but only something like "Tomorrow is the day!" The best we can do is prepare as much as possible. After Pearl Harbor, the commanders there, Adm. Husband E. Kimmel and Gen. Walter C. Short, complained that they did not have all the intelligence needed to alert them to the attack. Regardless of whether this was true, there was no excuse for them not to be ready.

Intelligence will always be incomplete; it will often run counter to what people want it to say. Leaders, however, are paid to overcome these obstacles. They can only lead when they deal with reality — and then take steps to help us plan for the worst. □

NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Will We Say 'Never Again' Yet Again?

ALONG THE CHAD-SUDAN BORDER For decades, whenever the topic of genocide has come up, the refrain has been, "Never again."

Yet right now, the government of Sudan is engaging in genocide against three large African tribes in its Darfur region here. Some 1,000 people are being killed a week, tribeswomen are being systematically raped, 700,000 people have been driven from their homes, and Sudan's Army is even bombing the survivors.

And the world yawns. So what do we tell refugees like Muhammad Yakob Hussein, who lives in the open desert here because his home was burned and his family members killed in Sudan? He now risks being shot whenever he goes to a well to fetch water. Do we advise such refugees that "never again" meant nothing more than that a Führer named Hitler will never again con-

struct death camps in Germany?

Interviews with refugees like Mr. Hussein — as well as with aid workers and U.N. officials — leave no doubt that attacks in Darfur are not simply random atrocities. Rather, as a senior U.N. official, Mukesh Kapila, put it, "It is an organized attempt to do away with a group of people."

"All I have left is this jalabiya," or cloak, said Mr. Hussein, who claimed to be 70 but looked younger (ages here tend to be vague aspirations, and they usually emerge in multiples of 10). Mr. Hussein said he'd fled three days earlier after an attack in which his three brothers were killed and all his livestock stolen: "Everything is lost. They burned everything."

Another man, Khamis Muhammad Issa, a strapping 21-year-old, was left with something more than his clothes — a bullet in the back. He showed me the bulge of the bullet under the skin. The bullet wiggled under my touch. "They came in the night and burned my village," he said. "I was

running away and they fired. I fell, and they thought I was dead."

In my last column, I called these actions "ethnic cleansing." But let's be blunt: Sudan's behavior also easily meets the definition of genocide in Article 2 of the 1948 convention against genocide. That convention not only authorizes but also obligates the nations ratifying it — including the U.S. — to stand up to genocide.

The killings are being orchestrated by the Arab-dominated Sudanese government, partly through the Janjaweed militia, made up of Arab raiders armed by the government. The victims are non-Arabs: blacks in the Zaghawa, Massaliet and Fur tribes. "The Arabs want to get rid of anyone with black skin," Youssef Yakob Abdullah said. In the area of Darfur that he fled, "there are no blacks left," he said.

In Darfur, the fighting is not over religion, for the victims as well as the killers are Muslims. It is more ethnic and racial, reflecting some of the an-

cient tension between herdsmen (the Arabs in Darfur) and farmers (the black Africans, although they herd as well). The Arabs and non-Arabs compete for water and forage, made scarce by environmental degradation and the spread of the desert.

In her superb book on the history of

Small steps could
save lives in Sudan.

genocide, "A Problem from Hell," Samantha Power focuses on the astonishing fact that U.S. leaders always denounce massacres in the abstract or after they are over — but, until Kosovo, never intervened in the 20th century to stop genocide and "rarely even made a point of condemning it as

it occurred." The U.S. excuses now are the same ones we used when Armenians were killed in 1915 and Bosnians and Rwandans died in the 1990's: the bloodshed is in a remote area; we have other priorities; standing up for the victims may compromise other foreign policy interests.

I'm not arguing that we should invade Sudan. But one of the lessons of history is that very modest efforts can save large numbers of lives. Nothing is so effective in curbing ethnic cleansing as calling attention to it.

President Bush could mention Darfur or meet a refugee. The deputy secretary of state could visit the border areas here in Chad. We could raise the issue before the U.N. And the onus is not just on the U.S.: it's shameful that African and Muslim countries don't offer at least a whisper of protest at the slaughter of fellow Africans and Muslims.

Are the world's pledges of "never again" really going to ring hollow one more time? □

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