

The 9/11 Commission – Sins of Omission

James S. Henry

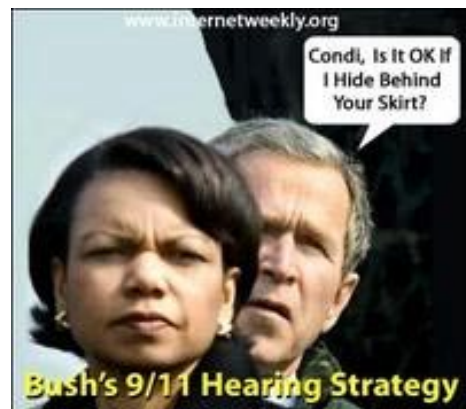
April 10, 2004

SubmergingMarkets™, 2004

© James S. Henry, SubmergingMarkets™,2004

This week's hearings by the 9/11 Commission was almost upstaged by the growing Iraq insurgency, but millions of Americans still tuned in last Thursday to hear President Bush's **National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice** respond to the charges that have been made by her former direct report, White House counter-terrorism czar **Richard Clarke**.

Such public cross-examination of senior officials no doubt makes for good election-year television. But beyond identifying some tantalizing "might-have-beens," it is not yet clear that the 9/11 Commission is on the trail of any significant new policies that would actually help us prevent **future 9/11s**.



This is not really surprising. The fact is that the most important government failings that were responsible for 9/11 have been pretty obvious to the naked eye for some time, even without the Commission's efforts.

They involve a combination of (1) **deep-seated structural problems** at the national's vast law enforcement, intelligence, and military bureaucracies, and (2)

misguided policy choices and blind-spots that have in most cases had very strong **bipartisan support**.

TAKING AL-QAEDA SERIOUSLY?

In retrospect, it is easy to say that al-Qaeda's threat should have been taken more seriously by both the Bush and Clinton Administrations. But this is not something that we really need to have the 9/11 Commission to tell us.

Unfortunately, the fact is that **9/11 probably had to happen** before the US was prepared to make most of the really significant policy changes that were necessary. These included invading Afghanistan to eliminate the Taliban's refuge for al-Qaeda, starting to break down the age-old institutional rivalries between the FBI and CIA, and with foreign intelligence services, and developing new, multi-\$billion systems for policing airline security and the nation's borders. Absent 9/11, most of these steps were simply **inconceivable**.

This remains true, whether or not President Bush and his top advisors had had a few more Cabinet-level meetings on al-Qaeda before 9/11, whether or not he was warned in August 2001 that an attack might soon be coming **somewhere** in the US, and whether or not Bush and Clinton had ordered a few more cruise missile replies to pre-9/11 al-Qaeda attacks like the one on the U.S.S. Cole.

Certainly it remains true, whether or not Condi Rice had permitted the blustery Mr. Clarke to brief the President of the United States personally on all the gory details of the persistent but maddeningly-imprecise threat from al-Qaeda. She probably knew that that would have been Dick Clarke's last day on the job.

TAKING DICK CLARKE SERIOUSLY?

For what it is worth, **Dick Clarke** strikes us as one of those dedicated, hard-charging mid-level managers, whose bosses have an absolute duty to protect from any direct exposure to the CEO, for his sake, the CEO's sake, and their own.



He works all hours, has an extraordinary degree of commitment and enthusiasm, and is absolutely convinced that he has seen a light that no one else sees. This kind of passion is invaluable, especially in otherwise soulless, risk-averse bureaucracies. But such folks also tend to be "know-it-alls" with no political skills. They are their own worst enemies.

In that sense, I suspect that the worst decision Condi Rice made was actually to keep Dick on simply because he was an "expert." If she'd replaced him immediately with someone a little less forward-leaning and more diplomatic, then well yes, why not: ***perhaps 9/11 could have been prevented....!!!***

DIVING INTO IRAQ?

It is now clear that Dick Clarke was absolutely right about at least one thing -- the US obsession with Iraq, including the failure to win multilateral support for our actions there and the associated failure to follow through in Afghanistan. As he has argued, and as becomes more clear every day, this may be distracting us from the global war on terrorism, even as it helps terrorist groups recruit more members. The Bush Administration's pre-9/11 obsession with Iraq has been noted not only by Clarke, but also by Paul H. O'Neill, and many others. Clearly, a Gore Administration was unlikely to have launched such an aggressive war, and it certainly would not have

However, we should also not forget that when Gore and Howard Deane opposed the war in the fall of 2002, they *did stand* virtually alone. The vast majority of leading Democrats, including **Senators Kerry, Lieberman, Shumer, Clinton, and Edwards, as well as**



Congressman Gephardt, and for that matter, 9/11 Commission member Bob Kerrey, all supported the War Resolution in November 2002, mainly, we suspect, because the War was very popular with key interest groups, like the Israeli lobby. When push came to shove in March 2003, ***none of these leading Democrats*** insisted upon UN support for the war, either. So most mainstream Democrats cannot deny at responsibility for the current Iraq debacle.

In any case, here's another key policy lesson for avoiding future 9/11s: **uh, duh, don't launch aggressive, illegal, poorly-planned wars that end up**

antagonizing the entire Arab World! Once again, we probably did not need the 9/11 Commission to teach us this lesson, either.

WHERE'S THE "DEMAND-SIDE APPROACH?"

The basic anti-terrorism strategy adopted by both the Bush and Clinton Administrations -- and implicitly supported by Rice, Clarke, and most other so-called "national security" experts, most of whom know zero about economic development -- has focused almost exclusively on a "supply side" approach to terrorism. This IS a matter where the 9/11 Commission could have an opportunity to break new ground. At least so far, however, it is wearing the same old blinders.

Thus, rather than focus on the root causes of terrorism, which requires a political, diplomatic, and economic-development response, **the Commission's members, as well as the administration officials and critics who have testified before it** have all treated 9/11 and terrorism in general as kind of "**security and interdiction**" problem -- exclusively a problem for law enforcement, border patrol, intelligence agencies, and the military.

This is essentially the same one-sided approach that both major parties have adopted for more than fifty years with respect to the so-called "**war on drugs,**" with very mixed results on the actual level of drug use, and lots of collateral damage. e should expect no more success in the war on terrorism than we've seen in this costly, timeless effort.

Do our intelligence agencies really believe that it is **just pure coincidence** that several of the most popular "breeding grounds" for terrorists are impoverished places like Afghanistan, Egypt, Pakistan, Yemen, Lebanon, the Sudan, Palestine, Morocco, and Indonesia, where there is massive unemployment among young males, high population growth rates, limited funding for public, secular or technical education?

Do they believe that "terrorists" are just innately evil people, delivered wholesale from the Gates of Hell?

Is there really nothing that can be done to improve living conditions and the education systems in these countries, and to win converts on the ideological battlefield, rather than the military one?

After all, the US economic assistance to all these Islamic countries combined -- the home to more than 600 million people -- over the last three decades is less than the economic aid that the US has provided to the State of Israel alone - a country with just 6.4 million people.

It is an even smaller fraction of the \$200 billion a year that we are devoting to the military/ supply-side approaches to the Iraq War, the Afghan War, the Office of Homeland Security, and other supply-side initiatives. Surely this constitutes a significant blind spot in US anti-terrorist policy.

EVENHANDEDNESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Finally, another key driving force behind the strong antipathy felt for the US in the Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Of course this plays a direct role in fostering terrorism, in the case of anti-Israel groups like Hamas and HezBollah. But while al-Qaeda's leaders claim to be inspired by radical religious doctrines that have little to do with this conflict, there is little doubt that it has played a major role in helping them to raise money and recruit followers. The Clinton Administration made a serious attempt to bring about a negotiated solution, at least during its last two years. Especially since the al-Aqsa intifada began in September 2000, the conflict has degenerated, and the Bush Administration has basically sided with Israel on such matters as the "security wall" and Sharon's disengagement plan. In his book on the anti-terrorism threat, Richard Clarke paid almost no attention to the issue -- indeed, he made it clear that at several points in his career, he had gone out of his way to support Israel.

For the sake of preventing future 9/11s, therefore, will the 9/11 Commission devote some attention to these root "demand-side" causes of terrorism? Or will it restrict its attention to endless speculation about might-have-beens, inter-party finger-pointing, and the inevitable imperfections of the supply-side approach?



© James S. Henry, SubmergingMarkets™,2004