

Bush Sells Sizzle in War of Terror

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In the wake of the mutilations of American bodies in Falluja, the U.S. vowed last week to pacify the Iraqi city with a force that will be “overwhelming.” Somewhere in a cave (or in a U.S. holding cell), Osama bin Laden was no doubt glad to hear it.

An overwhelming U.S. “pacification” of Falluja will only make future Al Qaeda recruitment drives easier.

In fact, this is one of the key points made by Richard Clarke, the former top anti-terrorism adviser in the Bush administration whose revelations have recently stunned Washington and infuriated the White House.

It's easy to see why Clarke gets under George W. Bush's skin. Clarke is, in many ways, what Bush only purports to be — a really tough guy determined to defeat terrorism.

The world could use a guy like that.

Clarke has thought long and hard about the terrorism the U.S. faces, and he has some ideas about countering it. Bush's approach, on the other hand, seems to be mostly gimmickry — showing up on an aircraft carrier in a flight-suit or appearing in Iraq with a plate of turkey. With Bush, it's all sizzle and flash; he's the Janet Jackson of anti-terrorism.

It's not just that Bush has done nothing to solve the problem of terrorism; he actually appears to have made it worse.

Prior to 9/11, Clarke had tried in vain for months to get the Bush administration to pay attention to Al Qaeda. Even after 9/11, Bush failed to focus fully on pursuing bin Laden, invading Iraq instead.

The effect of that invasion, Clarke contends in his book *Against All Enemies*, has been to “inflare Islamic opinion and further radicalize Muslim youth into heightened hatred of America.”

That seems borne out by the horrific events in Falluja. We can condemn the perpetrators all we like, but that intense Iraqi hatred of America is clearly linked to the fact that 130,000 U.S. troops are occupying their country.

Of course, many in Falluja condemned what happened.

Shop-owner Muhammad Khalifa denounced the mutilations and closed his shop in protest. As he told the *New York Times*: “We may hate Americans. We may hate them with all our hearts. But all men are creatures of God.” Don't forget, he's a moderate.

Clarke contends the Iraq invasion has already helped bin Laden. “Nothing America could have done would have provided Al Qaeda ... a better recruitment device than our unprovoked invasion of an oil-rich Arab country.”

Bush's anti-terrorism strategy could be dismissed as simply misguided and counterproductive. But evidence provided by Clarke, and by former U.S. treasury secretary Paul O'Neill, suggests something worse — an opportunistic use of 9/11 to further an agenda about Iraq that was already in the works and that had no plausible connection to terrorism.

It's the combination of the Clarke and O'Neill accounts — both insiders with impeccable credentials — that provides such a damning indictment of Bush's "war on terror."

O'Neill revealed that, months before 9/11, the top people in the Bush administration were already focused on overthrowing Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

Clarke's account adds telling detail about the speed and dexterity with which the administration switched the focus immediately after Sept. 11 from Al Qaeda to the man in the palace in Baghdad.

On the morning of Sept. 12, Clarke arrived at the White House expecting "a round of meetings examining what the next attacks could be ... Instead I walked into a series of discussions about Iraq."

Clarke describes himself as "incredulous," and then recalls that he "realized with almost a sharp physical pain that (Defence Secretary Donald) Rumsfeld and (Deputy Defence Secretary Paul) Wolfowitz were going to try to take advantage of this national tragedy to promote their agenda about Iraq."

That evening, Clarke encountered the president in the White House situation room. Clarke says Bush pulled him and a few others into a conference room and urged them to review everything to "see if Saddam did this. See if he's linked in any way ..."

Clarke is a nuts-and-bolts guy who's into the mechanics of foiling terrorist strikes. He's crawled through underground tunnels to learn how to keep connector switches working during an attack.

But for an anti-terrorism technocrat, he also seems to have a shrewd grasp of the bigger picture, of what drives terrorism.

"If we could achieve a Middle East peace," Clarke notes, "much of the popular support for Al Qaeda and much of the hatred for America would evaporate overnight."

Don't count on anything that insightful from the president. Instead expect the flashy, feel-good approach to anti-terrorism: The world is divided into good and evil. And we're good.