



Bush Administration's First Memo on al-Qaeda Declassified

January 25, 2001 Richard Clarke Memo: "We urgently need . . . a Principals level review on the al Qida network."

Document Central to Clarke-Rice Dispute on Bush Terrorism Policy Pre-9/11

"A Comprehensive Strategy to Fight Al-Qaeda"? Rice versus Clinton on January 2001 Clarke Memo

Washington, D.C., September 27, 2006 - In a series of recent public statements, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has again denied that the Clinton administration presented the incoming administration of President George W. Bush with a "comprehensive strategy" against al-Qaeda. Rice's denials were prompted by a September 22 Fox News interview with Bill Clinton in which the former president asserted that he had "left a comprehensive anti-terror strategy" with the incoming Bush administration in January 2001. In a September 25 interview, Rice told the *New York Post*, "We were not left a comprehensive strategy to fight al-Qaida," adding that, "Nobody organized this country or the international community to fight the terrorist threat that was upon us until 9/11."

The crux of the issue is a [January 25, 2001, memo on al-Qaeda](#) from counterterrorism coordinator Richard Clarke to National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, the first terrorism strategy paper of the Bush administration. The document was central to the debate over pre-9/11 Bush administration policy on terrorism and figured prominently in the 9/11 hearings held in 2004. A declassified copy of the Clarke memo was [first posted](#) on the Web by the National Security Archive in February 2005.

Clarke's memo, [described below](#), "urgently" requested a high-level National Security Council review on al-Qaeda and included two attachments: a declassified December 2000 "[Strategy for Eliminating the Threat from the Jihadist Networks of al-Qida: Status and Prospects](#)" and the September 1998 "Pol-Mil Plan for al-Qida," the so-called Delenda Plan, which remains classified.

Below are excerpts from the recent statements of former President Clinton and Secretary Rice:

Former President Bill Clinton on Fox News, September 22, 2006:

CLINTON: And I think it's very interesting that all the conservative Republicans, who now say I didn't do enough, claimed that I was too obsessed with bin Laden. All of President Bush's neo-cons thought I was too obsessed with bin Laden. They had no meetings on bin Laden for nine months after I left office. All the right-wingers who now say I didn't do enough said I did too much — same people.

...

WALLACE: Do you think you did enough, sir?

CLINTON: No, because I didn't get him.

WALLACE: Right.

CLINTON: But at least I tried. That's the difference in me and some, including all the right-wingers who are attacking me now. They ridiculed me for trying. They had eight months to try. They did not try. I tried.

So I tried and failed. When I failed, I left a comprehensive anti-terror strategy and the best guy in the country, Dick Clarke, who got demoted.

...

CLINTON: What did I do? What did I do? I worked hard to try to kill him. I authorized a finding for the CIA to kill him. We contracted with people to kill him. I got closer to killing him than anybody has gotten since. And if I were still president, we'd have more than 20,000 troops there trying to kill him.

Now, I've never criticized President Bush, and I don't think this is useful. But you know we do have a government that thinks Afghanistan is only one-seventh as important as Iraq.

And you ask me about terror and Al Qaida with that sort of dismissive thing? When all you have to do is read Richard Clarke's book to look at what we did in a comprehensive, systematic way to try to protect the country against terror.

And you've got that little smirk on your face and you think you're so clever. But I had responsibility for trying to protect this country. I tried and I failed to get bin Laden. I regret it. But I did try. And I did everything I thought I responsibly could.

The entire military was against sending Special Forces in to Afghanistan and refueling by helicopter. And no one thought we could do it otherwise, because we could not get the CIA and the FBI to certify that Al Qaida was responsible while I was president.

Condoleezza Rice Interview with *New York Post* Editorial Board:

QUESTION: By now I assume you've seen Bill Clinton's performances. How do you respond to his specific accusation that the eight months before 9/11 the Bush Administration, in his words, didn't even try to go after al-Qaida?

SECRETARY RICE: I'd just say read the 9/11 report. We went through this. We went through this argument. The fact of the matter is I think the 9/11 Commission got it about right. **Nobody organized this country or the international community to fight the terrorist threat that was upon us until 9/11.** I would be the first to say that because, you know, we didn't fight the war on terror in the way that we're fighting it now. We just weren't organized as a country either domestically or as a leader internationally.

But what we did in the eight months was at least as aggressive as what the Clinton Administration did in the preceding years. In fact, it is not true that Richard Clarke was fired. Richard Clarke was the counterterrorism czar when 9/11 happened and he left when he did not become Deputy Director of Homeland Security some several months later. **We were not left a comprehensive strategy to fight al-Qaida. For instance, big pieces were missing, like an approach to Pakistan that might work, because without Pakistan you weren't going to get Afghanistan. And there were reasons that nobody could think of actually going in and taking out the Taliban, either the Clinton Administration or the Bush Administration, because it's true you couldn't get basing rights in Uzbekistan and that was the long pole in the tent.**

So I would make the divide September 11, 2001 when the attack on this country mobilized us to fight the war on terror in a very different way. **But the notion that somehow for eight months the Bush Administration sat there and didn't do that is just flatly false.** And you know, I think that the 9/11 Commission understood that.

QUESTION: So you're saying Bill Clinton is a liar?

SECRETARY RICE: No, I'm just saying that, look, there was a lot of passion in that interview and I'm not going to – I would just suggest that you go back and read the 9/11 Commission report on the efforts of the Bush Administration in the eight months, things like working to get an armed Predator that actually turned out to be extraordinarily important, working to get a strategy that would allow us to get better cooperation from Pakistan and from the Central Asians, but essentially continuing the strategy that had been left to us by the Clinton Administration, including with the same counterterrorism czar who was Richard Clarke. But I think this is not a very fruitful discussion because we've been through it; the 9/11 Commission has turned over every rock and we know exactly what they said.

Original Post - February 10, 2005

Bush Administration's First Memo on al-Qaeda Declassified January 25, 2001 Richard Clarke Memo: "We urgently need . . . a Principals level review on the al Qida network."

Washington, D.C., February 10, 2005 - The National Security Archive today posted the widely-debated, but previously unavailable, [January 25, 2001, memo from counterterrorism coordinator Richard Clarke to national security advisor Condoleezza Rice](#) - the first terrorism strategy paper of the Bush administration. The document was central to debates in the 9/11 hearings over the Bush administration's policies and actions on terrorism before September 11, 2001. Clarke's memo requests an immediate meeting of the National Security Council's Principals Committee to discuss broad strategies for combating al-Qaeda by giving counterterrorism aid to the Northern Alliance and Uzbekistan, expanding the counterterrorism budget and responding to the *U.S.S. Cole* attack. Despite Clarke's request, there was no Principals Committee meeting on al-Qaeda until September 4, 2001.

The January 25, 2001, memo, recently released to the National Security Archive by the National Security Council, bears a declassification stamp of April 7, 2004, one day prior to Rice's testimony before the 9/11 Commission on April 8, 2004. Responding to claims that she ignored the al-Qaeda threat before September 11, Rice stated in a March 22, 2004 *Washington Post* op-ed, "No al Qaeda plan was turned over to the new administration."

Two days after Rice's March 22 op-ed, Clarke told the 9/11 Commission, "there's a lot of debate about whether it's a plan or a strategy or a series of options -- but all of the things we recommended

back in January were those things on the table in September. They were done. They were done after September 11th. They were all done. I didn't really understand why they couldn't have been done in February."

Also attached to the original Clarke memo are two Clinton-era documents relating to al-Qaeda. The first, "[Tab A December 2000 Paper: Strategy for Eliminating the Threat from the Jihadist Networks of al-Qida: Status and Prospects](#)," was released to the National Security Archive along with the Clarke memo. "Tab B, September 1998 Paper: Pol-Mil Plan for al-Qida," also known as the Delenda Plan, was attached to the original memo, but was not released to the Archive and remains under request with the National Security Council.

Below are additional references to the January 25, 2001, memo from congressional debates and the 9/11 Commission testimonies of Richard Clarke and Condoleezza Rice.

Excerpts from:

[NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES](#)

[Eighth Public Hearing](#)

Wednesday, March 24, 2004

Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, DC

Chaired by: Thomas H. Kean

[See also [9/11 Commission Staff Statement - Intelligence Policy Staff Statement No. 7](#) by Alexis Albion, Michael Hurley, Dan Marcus, Lloyd Salvetti and Steve Dunne]

Testimony of Dan Marcus - 9/11 Commission staff member, general counsel:

In December 2000, the CIA developed initiatives -- moving off the *Cole* now -- based on the assumption that policy and money were no longer constraints. The result was the so-called Blue Sky memo, which we discussed earlier today. This was forwarded to the NSC staff.

As the Clinton administration drew to a close, the NSC counterterrorism staff developed another strategy paper; the first such comprehensive effort since the Delenda plan of 1998. The resulting paper, titled "[A Strategy for Eliminating the Threat from the Jihadist Networks of Al Qaida; Status and Prospects](#)," reviewed the threat, the records to date, incorporated the CIA's new ideas from the Blue Sky memo, and posed several near-term policy choices. The goal was to roll back Al Qaida over a period of three to five years, reducing it eventually to a rump group

like others formerly feared but now largely defunct terrorist organizations in the 1980s. Quote, "Continued anti-Al Qaida operations at the current level will prevent some attacks, but will not seriously attrite their ability to plan and conduct attacks," Clarke and his staff wrote.

...

Asked by Hadley to offer major initiatives, on **January 25, 2001** Clarke forwarded his **December 2000 strategy paper** and a copy of his 1998 Delenda plan to the new national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice. Clarke laid out a proposed agenda for urgent action by the new Administration: Approval of covert assistance to the Northern Alliance; significantly increase funding; choosing a standard of evidence for attributing responsibility for the *Cole* and deciding on a response; going forward with new Predator missions in the spring and preparation of an armed version; and more work on terrorist fundraising.

...

Clarke asked on several occasions for early principals meetings on these issues, and was frustrated that no early meeting was scheduled. No principals committee meetings on Al Qaida were held until September 4th, 2001. Rice and Hadley said this was because the deputies committee needed to work through many issues relating to the new policy on Al Qaida. The principals committee did meet frequently before September 11th on other subjects, Rice told us, including Russia, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East peace process. Rice and Hadley told us that, although the Clinton administration had worked very hard on the Al Qaida program, its policies on Al Qaida, quote, "had run out of gas," and they therefore set about developing a new presidential directive and a new, comprehensive policy on terrorism.

Testimony of Richard Clarke, former White House counterterrorism coordinator:

TIMOTHY ROEMER, Commission Member: OK. With my 15 minutes, let's move into the Bush administration.

On January 25th, we've seen a **memo that you've written to Dr. Rice urgently asking for a principals' review of Al Qaida**. You include helping the Northern Alliance, covert aid, significant new '02 budget authority to help fight Al

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**"'01 Memo to Rice
Warned of Qaeda
And Offered Plan"**

By Scott Shane

Qaida and a response to the *USS Cole*. You attach to this document both the Delenda Plan of 1998 and a **strategy paper from December 2000**.

Do you get a response to this urgent request for a principals meeting on these? And how does this affect your time frame for dealing with these important issues?

CLARKE: I did get a response, and the response was that in the Bush administration I should, and my committee, counterterrorism security group, should report to the deputies committee, which is a sub-Cabinet level committee, and not to the principals and that, therefore, it was inappropriate for me to be asking for a principals' meeting. Instead, there would be a deputies meeting.

ROEMER: So does this slow the process down to go to the deputies rather than to the principals or a small group as you had previously done?

CLARKE: It slowed it down enormously, by months. First of all, the deputies committee didn't meet urgently in January or February. Then when the deputies committee did meet, it took the issue of Al Qaida as part of a cluster of policy issues, including nuclear proliferation in South Asia, democratization in Pakistan, how to treat the various problems, including narcotics and other problems in Afghanistan, and launched on a series of deputies meetings extending over several months to address Al Qaida in the context of all of those inter-related issues. That process probably ended, I think in July of 2001. So we were ready for a principals meeting in July. But the principals calendar was full and then they went on vacation, many of them in August, so we couldn't meet in August, and therefore the principals met in September.

...

ROEMER: You then wrote a memo on September 4th to Dr. Rice expressing some of these frustrations several months later, if you say the time frame is May or June when you decided to resign. A memo comes out that we have seen on September the 4th. You are blunt in blasting DOD for not willingly using the force and the power. You blast the CIA for blocking Predator. You urge policy-makers to imagine a day after hundreds of Americans lay dead at home or abroad after a terrorist attack and ask themselves what else they could have done. You write this on September the 4th, seven days before September 11th.

New York Times
(archive)
February 12, 2005

**"Verbatim: What
Clarke Really Said,
When He Said It"**

Washington Post
(archive)
February 20, 2005

**"From the Archives,
but Still News"**

By Michael Getler
Washington Post
(archive)
February 20, 2005

CLARKE: That's right.

ROEMER: What else could have been done, Mr. Clarke?

CLARKE: Well, all of the things that we recommended in the plan or strategy -- there's a lot of debate about whether it's a plan or a strategy or a series of options -- but all of the things we recommended back in January were those things on the table in September. They were done. They were done after September 11th. They were all done. I didn't really understand why they couldn't have been done in February.

...

SLADE GORTON, Commission member: Now, since my yellow light is on, at this point my final question will be this: Assuming that the recommendations that you made on January 25th of 2001, based on Delenda, based on Blue Sky, including aid to the Northern Alliance, which had been an agenda item at this point for two and a half years without any action, assuming that there had been more Predator reconnaissance missions, assuming that that had all been adopted say on January 26th, year 2001, is there the remotest chance that it would have prevented 9/11?

CLARKE: No.

GORTON: It just would have allowed our response, after 9/11, to be perhaps a little bit faster?

CLARKE: Well, the response would have begun before 9/11.

GORTON: Yes, but there was no recommendation, on your part or anyone else's part, that we declare war and attempt to invade Afghanistan prior to 9/11?

CLARKE: That's right.

...

TIMOTHY J. ROEMER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Having served on the joint inquiry, the only person of this 9/11 panel to have served on the inquiry, I can say in open session to some of Mr. Fielding's inquiries that as the joint inquiry asked for information on the National Security Council and we requested that the National Security Adviser Dr. Rice come before the joint inquiry and answer those questions. She refused. And she didn't come. She didn't come before the 9/11 commission. And when we asked for some

questions to be answered, Mr. Hadley answered those questions in a written form. So I think part of the answer might be that we didn't have access to the January 25th memo. We didn't have access to the September 4th memo. We didn't have access to many of the documents and the e-mails. We're not only talking about Mr. Clarke being before the 9/11 commission for more than 15 hours, but I think in talking to the staff, we have hundreds of documents and e-mails that we didn't previously have, which hopefully informs us to ask Mr. Clarke and ask Dr. Rice the tough questions.

Debate over the January 25, 2001 memo in Congress:

Congressional Record: March 25, 2004 (Senate) [Page S3122-S3123]

From the Congressional Record Online via [GPO Access](#) [DOCID:cr25mr04-92]

Excerpt from the Senate floor on March 26, 2004, Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY):

Also in this August 2002 interview, Clarke noted the Bush administration, in mid-January of 2001--before the 9/11 attack--decided to do two things to respond to the threat of terrorism: "One, to vigorously pursue the existing policy, including all the lethal covert action finds which we have now made public, to some extent; the second thing the administration decided to do was to initiate a process to look at these issues which had been on the table for a couple of years and get them decided."

In other words, what Clarke was saying in 2002 to members of the press was that the Bush administration's response to the war on terror was much more aggressive than it was under the Clinton years.

Now he is singing an entirely different tune. This is a man who lacks credibility. He may be an intelligent man, he may be a dedicated public servant, but clearly he has a grudge of some sort against the Bush administration. If he was unable to develop a more robust response during the Clinton years, he would only be able to blame himself. He was in charge of counterterrorism during those 8 years. How could the Bush administration be to blame in 8 months for the previous administration's failure over 8 years to truly declare war on al-Qaida?

Congressional Record: March 30, 2004 (Senate) [Page S3315-S3317]

**From the Congressional Record Online via [GPO Access](#)
[DOCID:cr30mr04-151]**

Excerpt from the Senate floor on March 30, 2004, Senator Tom Daschle (D-SD):

In Mr. Clarke's case, clear and troubling double standards are being applied. Last year, when the administration was being criticized for the President's misleading statement about Niger and uranium, the White House unexpectedly declassified portions of the National Intelligence Estimate.

When the administration wants to bolster its public case, there is little that appears too sensitive to be declassified.

Now, people around the President want to release parts of Mr. Clarke's earlier testimony in 2002. According to news reports, the CIA is already working on declassifying that testimony--at the administration's request.

And last week several documents were declassified literally overnight, not in an effort to provide information on a pressing policy matter to the American people, but in an apparent effort to discredit a public servant who gave 30 years of service to the American Government.

I'll support declassifying Mr. Clarke's testimony before the Joint Inquiry, but the administration shouldn't be selective. Consistent with our need to protect sources and methods, we should declassify his entire testimony. And to make sure that the American people have access to the full record as they consider this question, we should also declassify [his January 25 memo](#) to Dr. Rice, the September 4, 2001 National Security Directive dealing with terrorism, Dr. Rice's testimony to the 9-11 Commission, the still-classified 28 pages from the House-Senate inquiry relating to Saudi Arabia, and a list of the dates and topics of all National Security Council meetings before September 4, 2001.

Congressional Record: March 31, 2004 (House) [Page H1772-H1779]

**From the Congressional Record Online via [GPO Access](#)
[DOCID:cr31mr04-105])**

Excerpt from the House floor on March 31, 2004, Representative Frank Pallone (D-NJ):

Now, this past Sunday, Clarke said he would support the declassification of his testimony before the joint intelligence panels if the administration also declassifies the National

Security Adviser's testimony before the 9/11 Commission and the declassification of the January 25, 2001, memo that Clarke sent to Rice laying out a terrorism strategy, a strategy that was not approved until months later.

Madam Speaker, House Democrats really want a full accounting of the events leading up to the September 11 attacks, including the extent to which a preoccupation with Iraq affected efforts to deal with the threat posed by al Qaeda. It is nice to see the White House has finally stopped stonewalling the commission and now says that it will provide the public testimony the commission is requesting. But Americans need to be able to fully evaluate the decisions of government leaders, especially when it comes to the life and death decisions of war and peace.

Excerpts from:

**NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON
THE UNITED STATES**

Ninth Public Hearing

Thursday, April 8, 2004

Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, DC

Chaired by: Thomas H. Kean

Testimony of national security advisor Condoleezza Rice:

MR. BOB KERREY, Committee Member: Well, I think it's an unfortunate figure of speech because I think -- especially after the attack on the *Cole* on the 12th of August -- October 2000. It would have been a swatting a fly. It would not have been -- we did not need to wait to get a strategic plan. Dick Clarke had in his memo on the 20th of January overt military operations as a -- he turned that memo around in 24 hours, Dr. Clarke. There were a lot of plans in place in the Clinton administration, military plans in the Clinton administration. In fact, just since we're in the mood to declassify stuff, he included in his January 25th memo two appendixes: Appendix A, "Strategy for the Elimination of the Jihadist Threat of al Qaeda;" Appendix B, "Political- Military Plan for al Qaeda."

So I just -- why didn't we respond to the *Cole*? Why didn't we swat that fly?

MS. RICE: I believe that there is a question of whether or not you respond in a tactical sense or whether you respond in a strategic sense, whether or not you decide that you are going to respond to every attack with minimal use of military force and go after every -- on a kind of tit-for-tat basis. By the way, in that memo, Dick Clarke talks about not doing this tit for tat, doing this on a time of our choosing.

...

Yes, the *Cole* had happened. We received, I think, on January 25th the same assessment or roughly the same assessment of who was responsible for the *Cole* that Sandy Berger talked to you about. It was preliminary. It was not clear. But that was not the reason that we felt that we did not want to, quote, "respond to the *Cole*."

We knew that the options that had been employed by the Clinton administration had been standoff options. The President had -- meaning missile strikes, or perhaps bombers would have been possible, long-range bombers, although getting in place the apparatus to use long-range bombers is even a matter of whether you have basing in the region.

We knew that Osama bin Laden had been, in something that was provided to me, bragging that he was going to withstand any response, and then he was going to emerge and come out stronger. We --
...We simply believed that the best approach was to put in place a plan that was going to eliminate this threat, not respond to it, tit-for-tat.

...

MS. RICE: The fact is that what we were presented on January the 25th was a set of ideas -- and a paper, most of which was about what the Clinton administration had done, and something called the Delenda plan, which had been considered in 1998 and never adopted.

...

We decided to take a different track. We decided to put together a strategic approach to this that would get the regional powers -- the problem wasn't that you didn't have a good counterterrorism person. The problem was you didn't have approach against al Qaeda because you didn't have an approach against Afghanistan, and you didn't have an approach against Afghanistan because you didn't have an approach against Pakistan. And until we could get that right, we didn't have a policy.

...

In the memorandum that Dick Clarke sent me on January 25th, he mentions sleeper cells. There is no mention or recommendation of anything that needs to be done about them. And the FBI was pursuing them. And usually when things come to me it's because I'm supposed to do something about it, and there was no indication that the FBI was not adequately pursuing the sleeper cells.

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