

The Rice Version

Editorial

In her long-awaited public testimony yesterday, Condoleezza Rice, the most diligent of public servants, made it clear that under her direction the Bush administration touched all the proper bases in planning an antiterror program. The State Department was told to “work with” other countries. F.B.I. field offices were “tasked” to increase surveillance on known terrorists. Warnings were issued, meetings were held. But Ms. Rice was utterly unconvincing when she tried to portray Al Qaeda as anything approaching a top concern for the White House.

If President Bush were not making 9/11 the center of his re-election campaign, it might be possible for the country to settle on a realistic vision of how the White House handled the threat posed by Al Qaeda before the terrible attacks on New York and Washington occurred. The administration tried to behave responsibly, but it missed the boat.

Ms. Rice was at her weakest in her testimony before the independent commission investigating the 9/11 attacks when she attempted to portray Mr. Bush himself as a hands-on administrator with a particular concern about terror threats. Her description of the president as tired of “swatting flies” and spoiling for a real fight with Osama bin Laden was especially poorly chosen. “Can you tell me one example where the president swatted a fly when it came to Al Qaeda prior to 9/11?” asked former Senator Bob Kerrey.

The administration argument that it had only gotten intelligence about potential terrorist attacks abroad in the summer of 2001 was rather drastically undermined when Ms. Rice revealed, under questioning, that the briefing given Mr. Bush by the C.I.A. on Aug. 6, 2001, was titled “Bin Laden Determined to Attack Inside the United States.” Ms. Rice continues to insist that the information was “historical” rather than a warning of something likely to occur. The briefing memo has been withheld from the public, but the White House is doing the right thing in rethinking that position. It should also rethink the president’s insistence on answering the committee’s questions only briefly, in private and—most strangely—only in the company of Vice President Dick Cheney.

The question of most concern to the public, and particularly the tortured families of the 9/11 victims, was whether the attack could have been averted if Al Qaeda had been something more than one policy concern among many for the administration. Certainly, if the president had reacted quickly and aggressively to the C.I.A.’s August briefing, he might have convened a cabinet meeting and directed every official to come up with immediate antiterrorism plans—including the totally out-of-the-loop transportation secretary, Norman Mineta. But even if Mr. Bush had attempted to move the federal bureaucracy with optimum energy, it’s likely the short-term outcome would have been more warnings issued and more studies planned.

The central role of the F.B.I. in failing to predict the attacks is one of the many things on which Ms. Rice seems to basically agree with Richard Clarke, the administration’s former counterterrorism coordinator turned chief critic. Both officials drew pictures of an agency that dragged its feet and failed to report information from field agents that would have pointed to a possible terrorist attack from the sky. The Bush administration, after some early resistance, has tried since 9/11 to get the F.B.I. and C.I.A. to share information with each other and the rest of the administration. It will be important to hear the investigating committee’s thoughts on what further action is needed to retool the F.B.I. for the modern world.

If Ms. Rice were not set on burnishing the commander in chief’s image as the hero of 9/11, she might have been able to admit that Mr. Bush is a hierarchical manager who expects his immediate underlings to run things, and who guessed wrong about what de-

served the administration's most immediate and intense attention. The president and his top foreign policy advisers came into office determined to build a missile defense shield, fixated on Iraq as the top problem in the Middle East and greatly concerned about China. But there's no reason to doubt Ms. Rice's contention that after 9/11, Mr. Bush unequivocally picked Afghanistan as the first military target. Given the overwhelming evidence of the partnership between the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, any other decision would have been inconceivably irresponsible.

The real challenge came after the Afghan invasion, when Mr. Bush had to decide what to do next—rethink the outdated world view his advisers had brought into office, or snap back into old reflexes and go after Iraq, the enemy of the last generation. It was then that he chose the wrong path.