

Gunsmoke

Where the 9/11 probe needs to go from here.

By Michael Tomasky

For a group of people who have spent a lot of time over the last 25 years or so lecturing the rest of us about “personal responsibility,” Republicans sure don’t seem to have any passion for displaying any of their own.

It’s incredible that President Bush could go before reporters—as he just did—and assert that the August 2001 Presidential Daily Briefing said “nothing about an attack on America.” In the narrowest possible sense, arguably true; the briefing said nothing about a specific attack on a specific place on a specific date. But it clearly said quite a lot about the potential for future attacks, and Bush danced around this (which is a distinct advantage of taking about four questions).

The fact that he tried not to answer questions wasn’t so remarkable; all politicians try not to answer questions. But what was disturbing was his manner. We saw the usual mental confusion and frighteningly long pauses as his mind scoured its grim landscape for an appropriate word. But the main thing we saw was an appalling nonchalance about the most tragic day in the history of this country. We didn’t have information, Bush said; it was all about vague intentions, and we couldn’t act on intentions.

Ponder, by the way, the audacity of that: We were pushed into war over Saddam Hussein’s supposed intentions, at least as they were described to us by the administration. Those intentions, which weren’t even true, were worth 600-plus American lives. Osama bin Laden’s intentions, which were quite real, were vague, ignorable, and not worth the attention of serious people.

Bush and every top member of his administration managed to evade any questions of responsibility for September 11 for many months. But the net is tightening now. The accretion of detail on what this administration wasn’t doing before 9/11 has been, if not yet quite conclusive, pretty devastating. The transportation secretary and the head of the Federal Aviation Administration weren’t told to go on high alert. Bush spent August, when he wasn’t swatting Titleists, brooding about stem-cell research. Condoleezza Rice has been discredited (again).

This week, it will be John Ashcroft’s turn, and what we already know about his lack of interest in counterterrorism measures at the Justice Department before 9/11 gives us ample reason to look forward to Bob Kerrey and Richard Ben-Veniste getting their 10 minutes with him.

Will this accretion of detail be enough to turn public opinion decisively toward the conclusion that the administration failed the nation? There’s a paradoxical logic that takes hold in situations like this by which such details, while damning, also lead toward a desire on the part of the media to find “the smoking gun” that will seal the case definitively. In this instance, the smoking gun would probably be nothing short of a secret document that said something like, “al-Qaeda to attack skyscraper; preventive action not recommended.”

Since it’s highly unlikely that any such document exists, it’s not impossible to imagine that a few weeks down the road, the media, and the 9/11 commission, will conclude that there is no smoking gun and decide that it’s time to begin the “healing” process.

The key question we still don’t have an answer to is how Bush reacted to the Presidential Daily Briefing. In Sunday’s *Washington Post*, Dana Milbank and Walter Pincus noted that an administration official who agreed to a conference call with reporters to try to spin the briefing was forthcoming in some respects but refused to answer two questions: whether Bush asked any questions about the material in the briefing, and

whether Bush or any other high administration officials followed up on the briefing by seeking additional information or by requesting any specific action.

These were supposedly “confidential” pieces of information. But it’s exactly the information that the country needs to know. As James P. Pinkerton—who once worked for the first President Bush—put it in a column he wrote last Friday, “If you knew that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had received a memo a month before Pearl Harbor entitled, ‘Japanese Determined to Attack the United States in the Pacific,’ and that he had done nothing about that information, would that knowledge change your perception of FDR as a wise war leader?”

“Tarnished” is a mild way of saying what such a revelation would have done to Roosevelt’s reputation. Bush deserves the same.

Journalists ought to remember what any prosecutor knows: You don’t often find the smoking gun—but you win lots of convictions on the accumulation of other evidence.

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