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Interview of the National Security Advisor by Network Correspondents

INTERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR BY NETWORK CORRESPONDENTS

Office of the National Security Advisor

4:53 P.M. EST

Q Well, you know that Richard Clarke is now claiming he sent you a letter a week before September 11th, claiming that hundreds would die. Do you recall this letter?

DR. RICE: What Dick Clarke did, was when he sent up the information to prepare the September 4th meeting, he said, we -- this is all a good plan, essentially -- I'm paraphrasing -- but I've had so much experience with the bureaucracy -- not in this administration, but for his entire period of time -- they'll try to chip that away here, they'll try to chip that away there, they'll try to chip at it away here, they'll try to chip at it away -- it was kind of a, be sure to push them on all of these things; I worry that one day we'll be looking at lots of deaths. But it wasn't, there's going to be an attack on September 11th, okay, it wasn't.

The fact is that I have heard that Dick Clarke has apparently said that he thought the attack was coming in the United States. He never communicated that to anyone. We all said that all of the intelligence pointed to an overseas attack, Persian Gulf, perhaps the Genoa -- G8 leaders conference. There was information about a potential attack against Israel. When Dick Clarke's counterterrorism strategy group -- which was the crisis management group -- met, the entire series of recommendations were about buttoning down the troops abroad, buttoning down the embassies abroad. It was all where the threat reporting was. It's not to blame anybody that nobody was -- that people weren't looking inside, but the threat reporting was abroad.

Now, Andy Card and I called Dick Clarke in on July 5th, because of the threat spike and the fact that there hadn't been information about the United States, and said, well, why don't you call the domestic agencies together, which he did. In fact he sent me, on September 15th, a kind of interesting email.

Q Of which year?

DR. RICE: September 15th, 2001, so three days after the -- four days after the attack. "Note to CDR." That's me. "When the era of national unity begins to crack in the near future, it is possible that some will start asking questions like, did the White House do a good job of making sure that intelligence about terrorist threats got to the FAA and other domestic law-enforcement authorities."

He then attaches the paper, which he sent to me in July, reporting on his meeting. The last line here is, "Thus, the White House did ensure that domestic law enforcement, including FAA, knew that the CSG believed that a major al Qaeda attack was coming, and it could be in the U.S., and we did ask special measures be taken."

So make what you will of it. His assessment on September 15th was that we've taken the measures that we needed to take to button down the country. That had been -- the meeting that he had had been in response to a request directly from Andy Card and me to get the agencies together.

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Q Is that something you can give us a copy of?

DR. RICE: I can probably get the -- I read you the unclassified sentences. We can get you that.

Q But then how do you square that, then, with saying that since those warnings had gone out to domestic agencies, that there was no indication that there was any threat domestically?

DR. RICE: There wasn't. The threat reporting was all about abroad. But just my instincts, and the instincts of others were, well, just in case, maybe you'd better call together the domestic agencies and make sure that everybody is buttoned up at home, too, because you can't rule out that there might be something in the United States. And so that's when they got together the FAA and -- and in fact, the truth of the matter is, the FAA, the FBI and all -- whenever there are these threat spikes, they really understand that something could happen. So we just took this special step, just to make sure.

Q I want to go back on the genesis of this, because he has been saying, my warnings, my warnings, my warnings were ignored -- and Dr. Tenet's, in his defense. The genesis for this directive came from you and Andy?

DR. RICE: For him to get the counterterrorism strategy group together and bring these domestic agencies in one more time -- he had domestic agencies in the group -- to bring those domestic agencies in, one more time, and post them, and say, make sure you're paying attention at home, too. Andy Card and I had a meeting in here with him on July 5th, after we had been in a threat briefing with the President.

But again, I want to emphasize, the threat reporting was about an attack abroad. It was the Persian Gulf. It was -- the most specific ones had to do with potentially Israel, which obviously we passed to the Israelis. And then there were a lot of very specific ones about the G8 and Genoa. And so we did a lot of things with the Italians to change that threat profile.

But Dick Clarke -- the notion that somehow nobody was doing anything during this June, July period of time is just false. Secretaries Powell and Rumsfeld and I have a 7:15 a.m. phone call every morning. We were dealing with this. George Tenet was in with the President every morning dealing with the threat reporting. Dick Clarke was having his CSG meet, I think, almost daily during this period. And after all, that was the crisis support -- crisis management group. That was the group that was supposed to be stimulating the agencies, and saying, are you doing all you're doing, all you're doing all you're supposed to be. That's why you had a crisis manager in Dick Clarke. So no, the warnings were not ignored.

But the threat warnings, the actual intelligence information related to the outside. And we did a lot of very dramatic things, among them the -- I think it was the fifth fleet was actually taken out of port. Colin gave some of this yesterday in his testimony. A lot of the embassies were buttoned down. Some were periodically closed to deal with the threat. They sent threat warnings to Americans traveling in those regions. So we were reacting to the threat warnings quite aggressively.

Q Dr. Rice, with all your efforts today and yesterday, and by not just you, but everybody in this building, wouldn't it have been best, or do you regret now that you didn't testify in public before the commission? Especially you could have gone after Richard Clarke. Richard Armitage said today that he thinks if it were up to you, you would have testified; you really were taking orders from the Counsel's Office. Is that the way it is?

DR. RICE: The fact is, it's not a matter of personal preference. But this -- I did, after all, spend four-plus hours with the commission in a setting that preserved the separation of powers between the executive and the legislature. I'm happy to spend more time, wherever they like, whenever they like, however much time they'd like.

The problem is that there is a legal and a constitutional problem, and my testifying before what is basically a congressional body, because it was constituted under Article II. So I accept that it's my responsibility to get as much information to them as I possibly can, but it's also my responsibility to protect the precedence of this office.

* * * * *

DR. RICE: Let me be very clear. I really want people to know this story. And one of the reasons that I'm speaking to you and to the press is that the American people need to have an answer to the scurrilous allegations that somehow the President of the United States was not attentive to the terrorism threat, and has since then fought a war on terrorism in an ineffective way. There needs to be an answer to that.

There especially needs to be an answer to that, given that Dick Clarke seems to have had a very different view in August of 2002. He seems to have had a very different view in this memo of September 15th. He seems to have had a very different view when he, as I understand it, though I haven't seen this, when he testified in the joint inquiry, according to what they said on the Hill today. He had a very different view when he came and sat right there, and asked me to go to Tom Ridge and support him for Deputy Homeland Secretary, because he supported what the President was doing. He seemed to have a very different view when we had lunch right at that table three weeks before the war in Iraq. And he didn't say a word about Iraq being a potential disaster for the war on terrorism.

So he can't have it both ways. This book is 180 degrees from everything else that he said. And he just can't have it both ways.

Q When he left the administration, can you talk to us about those circumstances? It seemed, first of all, that the movement to Director of Cyber-Security was a demotion. Was it? And was he basically asked to leave for ineffectiveness or inefficiency? Were you totally happy with the job he was doing?

DR. RICE: I can't get into personnel matters. But let me just say, I don't think we thought it was a demotion. It was a reorganization, because they got a Homeland Security Department, they got a Homeland Security staff here that didn't exist when Dick first became the national advisor -- Special Advisor on Cyber-Security.

At that time he reported solely to me. But we decided that Cyber-Security was really something that belonged mostly in Homeland. And so when it moved to Tom, Tom's organization looked different. I mean, when Tom was the Assistant to the President, not when he became Homeland Secretary. And so it was a reorganization.

But I don't think anybody doubted Dick's talents. And in fact, he had become really interested in and focused on cyber-security. And it was a good thing, because the United States really didn't have a policy and plan to deal with cyber-security. And in his NSC organization, he had sort of created this incubator for cyber-security. And it was frankly taking more and more of his energy and more and more of his time. I think he was actually giving a speech on cyber-security when September 11th happened.

And so when I reorganized, coming in, I said, Dick, this span of control is now too big. We're going to have to hive off cyber-security, and we're going to have to reconcentrate things on terrorism. And then there was also organized crime and -- the group on organized crime, then there was counterterrorism, then there was cyber-security. And I said, this is all -- the span of control is too big. And it was very clear to me that Dick's interests were toward cyber-security. So he kept the terrorism portfolio, and he was going to start looking for somebody to replace him. But I wanted somebody experienced in that area, precisely to carry on the Clinton administration policy.

Q But part of this is, of course, in the nuance of things that -- and you say he charges that nothing was done, but he doesn't charge that nothing was done. What he charges is that terrorism was a top priority -- in what he said today -- in the Clinton administration, that it wasn't an urgent priority. And that was -- those are the words he used today, and it's a nuance that he's using to sort of make those distinctions.

DR. RICE: Well, what I would like to know is what does that mean? What does it mean for it to be an urgent -- what does it mean for it to be an urgent priority? We were continuing all the things that they were doing, all of the authorities for the intelligence agencies were in place. The CSG was continuing to meet. The President wrote to Musharraf. I met with the Foreign Minister from Pakistan. We met with the Uzbeks a couple of times. All of the things that you could do to push forward the current strategy on a kind of daily basis were being done.

We also were determined to develop a new strategy, more comprehensive. I think he said in the August, 2002, we're going to add to the Clinton administration's strategy. Fine, I can accept that wording. But to change the focus from something that was kind of rolling back al Qaeda, that really didn't have options, for instance, for going after the Taliban. We had a kind of three-phased approach: You give the Taliban one more chance diplomatically; they don't do that, then you try to overthrow them, but not just with the Northern Alliance, which is trapped up there in less than 10 percent of the country, but you do it with trying to develop relations with tribes to the South.

And by the way, that turned out to be really prescient because when we started the war, one of the problems we had was we had better ties with the North than we had with the South and it was hard to get the South going, and the South is the center of gravity in Afghanistan.

So the -- so we're pursuing this different strategy, changing the way we deal, thinking about changing the way we deal with Pakistan. So parallel tracks.

Now, when we get the threat spike, it gets real urgent. It's every day. It's, Colin, what have you done with the embassies? It's, Don, are the forces locked down? It's, Dick, go have a meeting with the domestic agencies even though there's no threat here. I don't know what it means that it was not an urgent priority.

Does it mean that it was not the only priority? Well, yes, we did have, for instance, in February, a little problem with the Chinese about an airplane. Yes, that took people's attention for awhile. We had -- I've been struck that people said, I don't think we should have been dealing with Iraq. We had no-fly zones in Iraq where our pilots were at risk any time they went up against Saddam Hussein's forces, which caused, if people will remember, a pretty bad dustup on February 16th when we were in Mexico. So it's not as if that wasn't something that was important.

We were building new relationships with Russia and with China, which, by the way, turned out to be essential when we needed to be in Central Asia. To have a good relationship with Russia turns out to have been essential to being able to be in Central Asia.

So, urgent priority? Absolutely. Only priority? No. There were other things that we needed --

MR. McCORMACK: We have time for one quick one, guys.

Q I don't think I've had one. Can I -- can we just go to one other subject, which is this directive that Dick Clarke has been talking about that came out shortly after September 11th?

MR. McCORMACK: September 17th.

Q September 17th. He's suggesting that it was basically giving a green light -- in a footnote, it gave a green light to go after Iraq, as well. It essentially -- it gave you some cover on Iraq.

DR. RICE: Let me go over a couple of facts. The President asked if Iraq was complicit. Anybody should have asked whether Iraq was complicit given our history with Iraq. He was told by George Tenet, by the time we got ready to go to Camp David, there was no evidence of that, and I mean complicit in 9/11.

We go to Camp David. It's the map of Afghanistan that we roll out, not the map of Iraq. There are discussions on the side about Iraq, and there are kind of two kinds of discussions that take place about Iraq. One is, it's a global war on terrorism; should we be trying to do something in other places, as well, to demonstrate that it's a global war on terrorism? And after all, we have the threat from Iraq, should we deal with that?

Not a single principal at that table recommended to the President that we do Iraq. And the President, in fact, in his directive, says it's Afghanistan.

The other question, though, is what if Iraq does something? The United States is in a somewhat vulnerable state. He's still shooting at our airplanes. What if he brings the pilot down? There had been some work done

by the Defense Department about how to respond, could you -- if a pilot came down. What if they threatened our interests -- contingency plans for that. And that kind of makes sense in the context.

But the idea that we were somehow sitting there thinking, boy, we really wish we could do Iraq, not Afghanistan, is just patently false.

Now, what's happened here is that Dick has -- Dick Clarke has -- as a lot of people do, it's not just Dick Clarke -- they have a narrow view of the war on terrorism: it's about killing bin Laden in Afghanistan. We think it's a broad war on terrorism, that you have to make their role smaller, you have to take away the places where they can operate, you have to take away a center of gravity of instability in the Middle East like Iraq, you have to deal with weapons of mass destruction states, you have to, in the ultimate, make the Middle East better.

And so that's really the debate here. But --

Q Just to follow up on that, does it show that -- some are suggesting, including Clarke, I think, that it shows that the administration was at least somewhat focused on, or had in the back of its head Iraq, one year away --

DR. RICE: If you didn't have in the back of your head that you had pilots flying over Iraq in the middle of an American period of vulnerability, and that you had troops sitting in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that he might take a potshot at, I don't know what you were doing. This is called the -- the United States was in the Suez and the Soviet Union invaded Hungary. I mean, why wouldn't you be thinking about that potential?

And there was this broader discussion of, should we think about this, should we try to do something early in Iraq? That got off the table very early. We were looking -- the President was looking for real contingencies should they threaten our interests.

I want to say one final thing, and I know we have to go. But that final thing is, looking back, the January 25th memo that Dick Clarke gave to me is remarkable for some of the things that are not in it. There is, at the end of a long description of things, some mention of terrorist cells in the United States -- or sleeper cells in the United States. There's no recommendation about what to do about them.

And, in fact, I learn after the fact that they had done an after action report on the Millennium plot, which apparently had a lot of recommendations and so forth. It wasn't briefed to us in the transition; it wasn't briefed to us as a part of that June 25h memo -- January 25th memo. As a matter of fact, the first time that I can find that we saw that document was when Dick sent it to Steve Hadley and Larry Thompson two or three days after September 11th.

MR. McCORMACK: September 17th.

DR. RICE: September 15th?

MR. McCORMACK: Seventeenth.

DR. RICE: Seventeenth.

MR. McCORMACK: Yes.

DR. RICE: So, he now cites how well they've managed the Millennium plot, but that never appears in what's briefed to us.

Q Can you respond to one quick thing that Ben Veniste asked of Armitage?

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q He says -- he asked Armitage about Clarke saying that he got the feeling that when he first mentioned al

Qaeda to you early in the administration, that he got the feeling from body language that you had never heard the phrase before.

DR. RICE: Do you really want me to respond to that?

Q I'm honor-bound to ask.

DR. RICE: All right.

MR. McCORMACK: This is a family program.

DR. RICE: All right, this is arrogant in the extreme. I'm a specialist in international politics. I've heard of a few things before I met Dick Clarke. And there was, in fact, a radio interview quite a few months before. But I --

Q You find the question insulting.

DR. RICE: I find the question insulting. I really do. And I find it peculiar that --

Q I meant nothing by it.

DR. RICE: I know you didn't. I find it peculiar that Dick Clarke is sitting there reading my body language. I guess that -- I didn't know he was good at that, too.

MR. McCORMACK: All right, guys. Thank you, very much.

Q Thank you, very much.

Q Can I ask you about what contingency plans -- you brought up troops in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Is that -- were you concerned that the Iraqis might take advantage of us and go after --

DR. RICE: I'm just saying -- no, I'm just saying when the President said, and contingency plans if Iraq should threaten our interest would mean some things -- I'm just making the case that we had an Iraq problem, as well, because we have forces in the Persian Gulf, because we're flying the no-fly zone. It's not like Iraq isn't an issue.

Q No, and the idea being that he would take advantage of the cover of our operation in Afghanistan to go after troops in Kuwait or something like that.

DR. RICE: I think that was one of his concerns, but this notion that --

Q Saudi Arabia.

DR. RICE: -- that there was a strategic decision to invade Iraq, is just, you know --

Q Thank you.

DR. RICE: Bye.

END 5:21 P.M. EST

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