

# Two loud words

**By William Rivers Pitt**

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**T**here have always been ‘third-rail’ issues in American politics, subjects that, if touched upon, will lead to certain political death. For a long while, and until very recently, Social Security was one of these issues.

A new one, surrounding the attacks of September 11, has been born in this political season. If September 11 is discussed, the only allowable sub-topic to be broached is whether or not the Bush administration is capable of keeping us safe from another onslaught.

Friday’s edition of the Boston Globe had a case in point on the front page. An article titled ‘For Bush, Readiness is Key Issue’ stated that, “In speech after speech, President Bush has emphasized his administration’s pledge never to forget the lessons of Sept. 11. He says the top goal of his administration is to prevent another attack.” The Globe article contained, in the next paragraph, the standardized rejoinder: “And while Democratic opponents of the administration are unanimous in their hope that that vulnerability is not exposed with deadly results, they have also argued that Bush has done far too little to protect the country from another attack. He has refused to adequately reimburse state and local officials for homeland security costs, they argue, and has ignored dangerous gaps in air cargo and port security.”

Thus, the ‘preparedness-gap’ becomes the whittled-down talking point du jour. This is a whiff of colossal proportions, the implications of which will echo down the halls of history unless someone develops enough spine to speak the truth into a large microphone. The talking point is not difficult to manage. It was splashed in gaudy multi-point font across the front page of the New York Post in May of 2002.

Two words: ‘Bush Knew.’

It is, frankly, amazing that this has fallen down the memory hole. Recall two headlines from that period. The first, from the UK Guardian on May 19, 2002, was titled ‘Bush Knew of Terrorist Plot to Hijack US Planes.’ The first three paragraphs of this story read:

“George Bush received specific warnings in the weeks before 11 September that an attack inside the United States was being planned by Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda network, US government sources said yesterday. In a top-secret intelligence memo headlined ‘Bin Laden determined to strike in the US’, the President was told on 6 August that the Saudi-born

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terrorist hoped to 'bring the fight to America' in retaliation for missile strikes on al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan in 1998. Bush and his aides, who are facing withering criticism for failing to act on a series of warnings, have previously said intelligence experts had not advised them domestic targets were considered at risk. However, they have admitted they were specifically told that hijacks were being planned."

Another story on the topic came from the New York Times on May 15, 2002, and was titled 'Bush Was Warned bin Laden Wanted to Hijack Planes.'

Unlike the Guardian piece, the Times chose to lead the article with the Bush administration's cover story; one the administration has stuck with to this day:

"The White House said tonight that President Bush had been warned by American intelligence agencies in early August that Osama bin Laden was seeking to hijack aircraft but that the warnings did not contemplate the possibility that the hijackers would turn the planes into guided missiles for a terrorist attack. 'It is widely known that we had information that bin Laden wanted to attack the United States or United States interests abroad,' Ari Fleischer, the president's press secretary, said this evening. 'The president was also provided information about bin Laden wanting to engage in hijacking in the traditional pre-9/11 sense, not for the use of suicide bombing, not for the use of an airplane as a missile.'"

Yes, we were warned, said the Bush administration, but who could have conceived of terrorists using airplanes for suicide bombings?

A lot of people, actually.

According to a Time Magazine story that appeared on Friday, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice is balking at requests to testify before Thomas Kean's September 11 commission under oath. She also wants her testimony to be taken behind closed doors, and not in public. The crux of her hesitation would appear on the surface to be her comments of May 16 2002, in which she used the above-referenced excuse that no one "could have predicted that they would try to use a hijacked airplane as a missile." If that excuse is reflective of reality, why does she fear to testify under oath?

Perhaps Ms. Rice fears testifying because too many facts are now in hand, thanks in no small part to the work of 9/11 widows like Kristen Breitweiser, which fly in the face of the administration's demurrals. For example, in 1993, a \$150,000 study was commissioned by the Pentagon to investigate the possibility of an airplane being used to bomb national landmarks. A draft document of this was circulated throughout the Pentagon, the Justice Department and to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. In 1994, a disgruntled Federal Express employee broke into the cockpit of a DC-10 with plans to crash it into a company building in Memphis.

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That same year, a lone pilot crashed a small plane into a tree on the White House grounds, narrowly missing the residence. An Air France flight was hijacked by members of the Armed Islamic Group, which intended to crash the plane into the Eiffel Tower. In September 1999, a report titled "The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism" was prepared for U.S. intelligence by the Federal Research Division, an arm of the Library of Congress. It stated, "Suicide bombers belonging to al Qaeda's Martyrdom Battalion could crash-land an aircraft packed with high explosives (C-4 and Semtex) into the Pentagon, the headquarters of the CIA, or the White House."

Throughout the spring and early summer of 2001, intelligence agencies flooded the government with warnings of possible terrorist attacks against American targets, including commercial aircraft, by al Qaeda and other groups. A July 5, 2001 White House gathering of the FAA, the Coast Guard, the FBI, Secret Service and INS had a top counter-terrorism official, Richard Clarke, state that "Something really spectacular is going to happen here, and it's going to happen soon." Donald Kerrick, who is a three-star general, was a deputy National Security Advisor in the late Clinton administration. He stayed on into the Bush administration. When the Bush administration came in, he wrote a memo about terrorism, al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. The memo said, "We will be struck again." As a result of writing that memo, he was not invited to any more meetings.

In a late November interview, former Clinton advisor Sidney Blumenthal said, "Richard Clarke was Director of Counter-Terrorism in the National Security Council. He has since left. Clark urgently tried to draw the attention of the Bush administration to the threat of al Qaeda. Right at the present, the Bush administration is trying to withhold documents from the 9/11 bipartisan commission. I believe one of the things that they do not want to be known is what happened on August 6, 2001. It was on that day that George W. Bush received his last, and one of the few, briefings on terrorism. I believe he told Richard Clarke that he didn't want to be briefed on this again, even though Clarke was panicked about the alarms he was hearing regarding potential attacks. Bush was blithe, indifferent, ultimately irresponsible."

"The public has a right to know what happened on August 6," continued Blumenthal, "what Bush did, what Condi Rice did, what all the rest of them did, and what Richard Clarke's memos and statements were. Then the public will be able to judge exactly what this presidency has done."

George W. Bush is going to run in 2004 on the idea that his administration is the only one capable of protecting us from another attack like the ones that took place on September 11. Yet the record to date is clear. Not only did they fail in spectacular fashion to deal with those first threats, not only has their reaction caused us to be less safe, not only have they failed

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to sufficiently bolster our defenses, but they used the aftermath of the attacks to ram through policies they couldn't have dreamed of achieving on September 10. It is one of the most remarkable turnabouts in American political history: Never before has an administration used so grisly a personal failure to such excellent effect.

Never mind the final insult: They received all these warnings and went on vacation for a month down in Texas. The August 6 briefing might as well have happened in a vacuum. September 11 could have and should have been prevented. Why? Because Bush knew.

This administration must not be allowed to ride their criminal negligence into a second term. Someone needs to say those two words. Loudly. After all, Bush has proven with Social Security, and with September 11, that third rails can be danced across. All it takes is a little boldness. ●

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