

At the center of a storm

By Bill Berkowitz

workingforchange.com | August 9, 2004

Whenever political junkies get together to chat about Election 2000, at some point the conversation turns to the exploits of Katherine Harris. As Florida's Secretary of State, Katherine Harris rose overnight out of virtual anonymity to the center of a political hurricane surrounding the disputed 2000 presidential election.

In 2002, recovered from her electoral travail, which she detailed copiously in her book "Center of the Storm: Practicing Principled Leadership in Times of Crisis" <http://www.abetitles1.com/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=279870134> >," Katherine Harris ran and was elected to Congress. Now, Rep. Harris is experiencing more anguish: She appears to be at the center of another storm; this one having to do with the accuracy of remarks she made at a Bush rally in Florida and whether she leaked classified information.

On Monday, August 2, speaking at a rally for President Bush in Venice, Florida, Harris told the crowd that the administration had thwarted over 100 terrorist plots. She also claimed that "a plot existed to blow up the power grid in Carmel, Indiana," the Associated Press reported.

According to an August 4 AP story, Harris told the audience that while she was in the Midwest recently, "the mayor of Carmel told her how a man of Middle Eastern heritage had been arrested and hundreds of kilograms of explosives were found in his home. 'He had plans to blow up the area's entire power grid,' she was reported saying."

The major thing wrong with Harris' story: Carmel city officials in AP interviews claimed that they knew of no such plot. "We're aware of the comments we read in the paper," said Tim Green, assistant chief of police in Carmel, a town a short distance from Indianapolis. "We're not aware of any plans to blow up Carmel's power grid." Nancy Heck, a spokeswoman for Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard, said: "The mayor never talked to Katherine Harris. They never had that conversation."

Did Katherine Harris disclose classified information? Or it is a case of her not knowing what she's talking about? An August 4 press release from Harris' congressional office quotes her, saying "I regret that I had no knowledge of the sensitive nature of this situation." But she stood by her comments that the United States has thwarted potential attacks in the last three years, which she said was based on classified information.

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“Actually, it’s been more than 100,” she told the Sarasota Herald-Tribune on August 3, adding “It’s classified... obviously not classified to me... but things I can’t go into details about.” She said only the specifics of the thwarted attacks were classified. Her statement also pointed out the need “for each of us to remain alert and vigilant in fighting terrorism.”

“Katherine Harris is the reason why so many government officials have a credibility problem. Either they don’t know what they’re talking about or they are violating their own security rules, and who knows which is the case here,” Stephen Aftergood, editor of Secrecy News, a publication of the Federation of American Scientists, told me.

At an October, 2001, press availability alongside Chancellor Schroeder of Germany, President Bush was asked to talk about what prompted him “to write the memo to Congress about briefing on intelligence matters, why you think such restrictions are appropriate?” The president replied that he “felt it was important to send a clear signal to Congress that classified information must be held dear, that there’s a responsibility that if you receive a briefing of classified information, you have a responsibility. And some members did not accept that responsibility, somebody didn’t. So I took it upon myself to notify the leadership of the Congress that I intend to protect our troops.” The president also said that “it is unacceptable behavior to leak classified information when we have troops at risk.”

In a December 2001, U.S. Department of Justice report titled “Attorney General Ashcroft Announces Interagency Task Force to Review Ways to Combat Leaks of Classified Information,” the Attorney General made it clear that “leaks of classified information do substantial damage to the security interests of the nation,” the Daily Mis-Lead, a project of MoveOn.org, reported in early August.

And in an October, 2002 “Letter from Attorney General John Ashcroft to The Honorable J. Dennis Hastert” the Attorney General promised that uncompromising attention would be paid to the prosecution of leaks: “Until those who, without authority, reveal classified information are deterred by the real prospect of productive investigations and strict application of appropriate penalties, they will have no reason to stop their harmful actions.”

“Integrity is doing the right thing when no one else is around,” Katherine Harris said in a radio interview recently. “Hold steady and you’re gonna build that kind of character, and if it wasn’t for the difficult times, we would never have a chance to grow.”

After her recent remarks, Harris has clearly forged another growth opportunity. Will the president call Katherine Harris in to the oval office to find out what information she may have disclosed? Will Attorney General Ashcroft unleash the investigatory powers of his office and get to the bottom of the Harris revelations?

According to the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, “A staff member of the U.S. House Permanent

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Select Committee on Intelligence, which oversees the nation's intelligence operations, said he had heard of no such plot.”

“I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. If her comments about the Carmel, Indiana incident were true, I expect it to come out within hours or days,” said Aftergood. “And, it might call into question the future of her ability to receive classified information in the future.” Stay tuned.

Bill Berkowitz is a freelance writer covering right-wing groups and movements.