

The Blame Game

By Tom Barry | October 11, 2006

Stumping for Republican candidates across the country in recent weeks, Vice President Dick Cheney has honed in on a particular message: Terrorists are “still lethal, still desperately trying to hit us again,” and Democrats are no good at security (*Washington Post*, October 8, 2006). The administration and the Republican Party are again hawking the security issue prior to elections. Not only are they saying that they are the only ones who can be trusted to protect the nation’s security, but they are also trying to burnish their own security credentials by tarnishing those of the Clinton administration.

As part of this campaign, conservative pundits have attacked the record of former President Bill Clinton, arguing that he missed chances to destroy terrorist networks. During a highly publicized September 24 interview with Fox News’ Chris Wallace, Clinton accused Wallace and Fox of undertaking a “conservative hit job” on his administration’s national security record and of neglecting to adequately question President George W. Bush’s antiterrorism efforts.

Just as the former president thought it necessary to establish the political context for the debate over who bears responsibility for not preventing 9/11, it is also helpful to put the current fear-mongering campaign into recent historical context—especially since none of the pre-9/11 efforts had anything to do with terrorism.

Early in his first term, Clinton faced a concerted attack on his administration for being supposedly weak on defense when several hawkish congressional figures and outside pressure groups tried to revive Reagan-era missile defense programs. In May 1993, Clinton’s Secretary of Defense Les Aspin produced the administration’s first Quadrennial Defense Review, a periodic Pentagon study assessing the country’s national defense posture. Hailed by the administration as a “bottom-up review” of defense needs and priorities, the assessment concluded that plans for a full-blown missile defense system were neither technically feasible, nor financially possible. Aspin ordered the closure of the

Pentagon’s Strategic Defense Initiative Office, downgrading the plans by assigning them to a new Ballistic Missile Defense Organization.

This outraged several hardline defense outfits like the Center for Security Policy (CSP) and High Frontier, as well as the defense lobby led by Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, and TRW. With their Republican allies a minority in Congress, the missile defense lobby mobilized a coordinated grassroots congressional and media campaign to boost support for a combination of national and regional missile defense systems. Joining CSP in orchestrating the campaign were a number of other rightist policy outfits, including the American Conservative Union, the S.A.F.E. Foundation, the Coalition to Protect Americans Now, and Americans for Missile Defense, which together represented a formidable coalition of social conservatives, neoconservatives, unionists, and hardline Republican nationalists.

The Coalition to Protect Americans Now revived Reagan’s window-of-vulnerability claim in its demand to abolish arms control treaties and construct a defense system to “protect our families from ballistic missile attack.” It sponsored a website featuring a map of the United States where, by selecting a town’s location, a reader could receive often misleading information about which countries had or soon supposedly would have the capability to strike it with an intercontinental missile.

Further enflaming the hardliners was a 1995 CIA National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that asserted that apart from Russia or China, no rogue state could possibly pose a long-range missile threat to the United States before 2010. In response, congressional hawks, who after the 1996 elections controlled both houses of Congress, promoted a Team B-type evaluation of the NIE, resulting in the creation of a blue-ribbon panel known as the Gates Commission (after its chairman, former CIA Director Robert Gates). In its 1996 report, the commission concluded that the technical obstacles facing rogue states in developing intercontinental missile capability were even greater than those described by the CIA.

Unsatisfied with this outcome, the “peace-through-strength” lobby pushed their congressional allies to establish various “independent” commissions. Congressional figures affiliated with CSP successfully lobbied for the creation of two commissions, both to be headed by Donald Rumsfeld, to examine the ballistic missile threat and space-based defense capabilities. The unstated agenda of these commissions was to increase pressure on the Clinton administration to support new weapons programs and substantially increase major military spending. Both of the so-called “Rumsfeld Commissions,” which undertook their work in the second half of the 1990s, assumed that the country faced near-term threats from a “strategic competitor” such as China, or a “rogue” like North Korea.

Both commissions received funding from defense spending bills, using taxpayer revenues to subsidize them. Although billed as independent and nonpartisan, the two commissions—guided by Rumsfeld and his top deputy Stephen Cambone—served to reinforce the positions of administration critics and military boosters.

The Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States issued its report on July 15, 1998. The report contended that “rogue states” such as Iraq, North Korea, or Iran could deploy ballistic missiles within “five years of a decision to do

so,” contrary to the CIA’s estimate that it would take at least 10-15 years.

Although initially challenged by the director of central intelligence, a little more than a year later, in September 1999 the CIA released a new NIE that was substantially more alarmist than its previous one. It predicted that North Korea could test a ballistic missile capable of hitting the United States “at any time” and that Iran could test such a weapon “in the next few years.” Commenting on the new threat assessment, Rep. Curt Weldon (R-PA), a main sponsor of the Rumsfeld Commission, congratulated himself: “It was the largest turnaround ever in the history of the [intelligence] agency.” House Majority Leader Newt Gingrich (R-GA) was similarly ecstatic, saying the commission’s conclusion was the “most important warning about our national security system since the end of the Cold War.”

Although CIA officials argued that the new estimate was the result of “improved trade-craft,” many experts attributed the revision to pressure from hardline Republicans, the considerable influence of Rumsfeld, and a campaign by Israel to focus attention on what the Likud government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saw as a rising missile threat from Iran. A few years later, Joseph Cirincione, then-director of the nonproliferation program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, argued that the CIA’s 1995 NIE “holds up pretty well in hindsight.” He accused Weldon and other Republican hawks of developing “a conscious political strategy” to attack the CIA’s estimate because “it stood in the way of a passionate belief in missile defense.”

The second Rumsfeld Commission, the Commission to Assess United States National Security Space Management and Organization, was not so much a critique of the government’s NIEs as an all-out exhortation to militarize space. The commission found in its January 2001 report that it is “possible to project power through and from space in response to events anywhere in the world ... Having this capability would give the United States a much

stronger deterrent and, in a conflict, an extraordinary military advantage.”

Paralleling a similar assessment prepared by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) in its *Rebuilding America's Defenses* report (2000), the Rumsfeld space commission argued that because the United States is without peer among “space-faring” nations, the country is all the more vulnerable to “state and non-state actors hostile to the United States and its interests.” In other words, U.S. enemies would seek to destroy the U.S. economy together with its ability to fight high-tech wars by attacking global positioning satellites and other “space assets.”

Another commission, chaired by the controversial former director of central intelligence, John Deutch, was established in 1998 to assess whether the Clinton administration was failing to adequately monitor and counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, particularly in China. The Deutch Commission questioned the administration’s ability to assure China’s compliance with nuclear export controls and expressed alarm that U.S. bond traders might be helping to finance China’s weapons industry.

Rep. Christopher Cox (R-CA) led another commission on China. A recipient of CSP’s annual “Keeper of the Flame” award, Cox identified Chinese-Americans as suspects in leaking nuclear weapons data to the Chinese military. His commission, called the House Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/National Concerns with the People’s Republic of China, issued a report in January 1999 accusing China of large-scale nuclear espionage. The report successfully sparked widespread fear among the public and policymakers that China was stealing U.S. nuclear secrets through payments to highly placed nuclear weapons scientists such as Wen Ho Lee, who worked at the Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory—and was later cleared of espionage charges.

Paralleling the congressional efforts were campaigns by various hardline and neoconservative pressure

groups. PNAC and the Heritage Foundation issued a joint statement in August 1999 strongly criticizing what they perceived as the lack of a firm U.S. commitment to Taiwan. “Efforts by the Clinton administration to pressure Taipei to cede its sovereignty and to adopt Beijing’s understanding of ‘One China’ are dangerous and directly at odds with American strategic interests, past U.S. policy, and American democratic ideals,” argued the statement.

Concerned that the Clinton administration was doing nothing to address the viability of an aging nuclear weapons stockpile, Sen. Jon Kyl (R-AZ) insisted in 1998 that the Department of Defense create yet another independent evaluation commission—the Panel to Assess the Reliability, Safety, and Security of the U.S. Nuclear Stockpile, or the “Foster Panel” after its chair John Foster. Kyl, a proponent of flexible uses of nuclear weapons, was among the leading opponents of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which had Clinton’s full support.

In the early 1970s, Foster had been a key instigator within the Ford administration’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board for establishing the Team B exercise. Foster directed the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in the early 1960s and was also a member of the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) in the 1970s. Foster also had strong connections with defense industries. Predictably, his panel recommended that the U.S. government authorize the speedy production of new nukes, smaller nukes, and high-tech nuclear weapons that could reach precise targets.

The Middle East also occupied center stage for the threat escalators during this time—but not because of the threat of non-state Islamist terrorists. Through PNAC, CSP, and the Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf (CPSG), the neoconservatives pressured Clinton to authorize support for the Iraqi expatriates of the Iraqi National Congress (INC) under the leadership of Ahmed Chalabi and to plan military operations that would overthrow Saddam Hussein. Congressional Republicans also mounted anti-Hussein initiatives in 1998. Randy Scheunemann, later a PNAC board member, served

at the time as the national security aide to House Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-MS), drafting the Iraq Liberation Act, a bill cosponsored by Lott and Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), which allocated \$98 million to the INC and made the overthrow of Hussein official government policy.

While they succeeded in pressuring Clinton on many fronts, neoconservatives and allied hardliners failed to push his administration to fully adopt many issues on their agenda. They saw Clinton as soft on Israeli security and despised his sponsorship of the Oslo Accords and his criticism of the rightist Likud policies.

The irony is that despite all the current rhetoric about how Democrats have failed to take terrorism seriously—a failure that purportedly goes back to

the early days of the Clinton presidency—hawkish Republicans and their neoconservative allies spent the better part of the 1990s advocating policies that doubtless distracted key policymakers from paying adequate attention to real security issues. Conservatives were raising the alarm over space weapons, China, Iraq, North Korea—not terrorism, a threat they chose to ignore. When George W. Bush arrived in office, his administration focused on all the issues that his party had put in the pipeline, instead of on more pressing concerns.

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