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White House Says Ex-Terror Czar Has It All Wrong

Mon Mar 22, 2004 11:57 PM ET

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By David Morgan

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The White House on Monday sought to brand former anti-terrorism czar Richard Clarke as a disgruntled employee bent on damaging President Bush's war image with politically motivated assertions about the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Top officials including Vice President Dick Cheney and national security advisor Condoleezza Rice took to television and radio to deny Clarke's allegation that Bush ignored the al-Qaeda threat before the attacks and focused on Iraq rather than the Islamic militant group afterward.

Clarke, who quit his White House job a year ago after serving in four administrations, made the bombshell assertions in a new book and on Sunday in an interview with CBS' "60 Minutes." The book, "Against All Enemies," was released on Monday and climbed to No. 5 on amazon.com's bestsellers list.

His assault on Bush's credibility comes as the president has made his leadership on security and the war against terrorism a major theme of his re-election campaign.

Clarke told "60 Minutes" it was "outrageous that the president is running for re-election on the grounds that he's done such great things about terrorism. He ignored it."

But Cheney said Clarke was in no position to know.

"He wasn't in the loop, frankly, on a lot of this stuff," Cheney told conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh. The vice president also questioned Clarke's effectiveness in countering attacks on U.S. targets dating back to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld took issue with Clarke's claim that he pushed to bomb Iraq instead of Afghanistan after Sept. 11. "He is mistaken...that's just not true," Rumsfeld said.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan had harsher words for Clarke, the second former top administration official to criticize the Bush administration's focus on Iraq.

"His assertion that there was something we could have done to prevent the September 11 attacks from happening is deeply irresponsible. It's offensive and it's flat-out false," said McClellan. He told reporters Clarke refused to attend national security meetings.

He also said Clarke became critical of the war on terror after unsuccessfully seeking the No. 2 post at the Homeland Security Department. [Continued ...](#)



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"Clearly, this is more about politics and a book promotion than it is about policy," McClellan said. He noted Clarke's friendship with Rand Beers, a foreign policy adviser to Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry.

Beers later rose to Clarke's defense, telling CNN: "If Dick Clarke wasn't aware of what the administration was doing, then shame on the administration. This is a man who has the greatest amount of expertise on terrorism."

In Congress, Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson of Nebraska said lawmakers should not "let the White House brush this off as sour grapes," while Republican Sen. Don Nickles of Oklahoma suggested Clarke might have a "vendetta" against Bush.

Senate Democrats including New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote Bush to demand that Rice testify publicly before a commission probing the 2001 attacks. Rice has already spoken to the panel privately.

White House officials disputed Clarke's assertion that Bush pressed him to seek an Iraqi link with the Sept. 11 attacks ultimately blamed on al Qaeda. McClellan said Bush did not recall a meeting and added that White House records showed the president was not where Clarke said he was.

But Clarke gave PBS' "Newshour" on Monday a vivid description: "What happened was, the president with his finger in my face, saying: Iraq; a memo on Iraq and al Qaeda; a memo on Iraq and the attacks. Very vigorous, very intimidating."

McClellan said eliminating al Qaeda was the subject of Bush's "very first major policy directive." But the National Security Council did not approve the document until Sept. 4, 2001.

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Clarke's book follows one by Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, who asserted that Iraq was an overriding priority for Bush from the time he took office.

Clarke is one of several former government officials scheduled to testify this week before the Sept. 11 commission.

(Additional reporting by Charles Aldinger)

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