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Rice, Clarke not really at odds

Sunday, April 11, 2004

Listening to Condoleezza Rice's testimony before the 9/11 commission Thursday put me in mind of something Sen. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.) said a week ago.



FRAN WOOD

Over coffee at a Starbucks in Hoboken, I had expressed concern that Rice's testimony might be so at odds with Richard Clarke's that it would leave the impression one of them was lying -- thereby dashing the confidence of many Americans that the commission will unearth reliable information about the causes of 9/11.

Not to worry, he said. Rice's and Clarke's testimonies wouldn't be that different.

"I think there is coloration in the way people perceive historical developments and facts," he said. "I think she's going to go out and say, 'Clarke says we didn't pay attention to this. Well, we did, and here are five examples.'"

He sure called that right.

"The essence," he continued, "is whether it was a priority of the highest proportions. That's how you determine whether we were doing a good job. It should have been a bunch of people sitting around a table really trying to get to the bottom of what should be top priority. Clarke reinforced what (President Bush's former Treasury Secretary) Paul O'Neill said -- that it never was, that Iraq always was."

While Corzine is no fan of the Bush administration, he doesn't think for a minute that 9/11 resulted from a lack of concern about al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden.

"I don't believe it was because (the administration) ignored it, just that they didn't put it at the same level," he said. "I think the president, like his father, thought intelligence operations were better than what they were."

On the other hand, he doesn't think the 9/11 commission would exist had public pressure not forced the president to establish it.

"The Bush administration has a done a pretty good job of defusing almost all

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issues," said Corzine. "They resist, and then, if it becomes a public brouhaha, they concede. But they never concede fully. There is an incredible pattern of the administration rejecting ideas, and then co-opting them."

He cited, as an example, the president's commission to examine the intelligence leading up to the war with Iraq, on which -- as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee -- he has issued a report.

"It's a very tightly controlled commission," he said, ticking off the constraints he believes will thwart an effective analysis -- lack of independence from the administration, no subpoena powers, limited scope, lack of authority to examine the role of policymakers in shaping intelligence as it was relayed to the president, and no mandate to produce a report for public examination.

"And their efforts don't come out until next March," he said, "which makes it another 'let's get this pushed off until after the election.'

"Meanwhile, Tony Blair put together (a comparable inquiry) at almost the same time we announced ours, and their report comes out in July. So (the Bush administration) sends a message they're prepared to look at this in full context, but it's going to be very ineffectual. Everything will have to be decided at the White House counsel's office, in terms of whether it's fair game to look at."

Even the 9/11 commission, he noted, with its independence, subpoena powers and security clearance to examine classified material, has had to repeatedly request the documents it needs to do its job.

"As we've seen over and over again with the Kean commission -- which I think has done a truly outstanding job -- they've had to push very hard."

Corzine believes people want answers.

"This is about fixing our intelligence operations," he said. "We clearly had a failure of incredible proportions pre-9/11, and -- in one form or another -- we had an incredible failure as it related to the information provided to decision makers on whether to go to war with Iraq."

Nor is there any indication those problems have been fixed, he added.

"Our intelligence operations continue to fail us. (In Iraq) we actually don't know whether we're fighting old-regime elements or terrorists or a combination -- or whether we're fighting just criminals. Obviously, we haven't been able to bring closure in an expeditious manner on the top leadership of al Qaeda.

"And if you listen to Richard Clarke, because of that delay this hybrid element has developed that's more threatening. So we continue to see some breakdown in our ability to deal with core intelligence issues.

"I think the 9/11 commission," said Corzine, "is another one of those things where they decided, 'We're going to lose this, so we'll co-opt it'."

What the administration may not have anticipated in appointing Kean -- "a terrific public servant under any circumstances" -- was a chairman who would demonstrate dogged determination in pursuit of answers.

"I think," Corzine said, smiling, "they got more than they bit off with Tom Kean."

Fran Wood is a Star-Ledger columnist.

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