



RICE TO TESTIFY PUBLICLY BEFORE 9/11 PANEL

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After initially citing executive privilege and refusing to testify publicly, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice has reversed course and agreed to appear before the 9/11 commission, an independent panel investigating whether the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks could have been prevented.

President Bush's national security adviser will appear Thursday before the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, which was created by Congress in November 2002. Its mission: to determine why the government was unprepared for the events of Sept. 11, 2001.

National security adviser

As national security adviser, Rice's job is to analyze and respond to any dangers the United States faces from terrorists or other countries.

The president's supporters hope Rice's testimony will put to rest charges the White House ignored the threat of terrorists, like Osama bin Laden's group al-Qaida, before Sept. 11.

Rice's 2-and-a-half-hour testimony will be carried live on most television networks. Rice will be sworn in under oath, and after making an initial statement, she will be questioned by the ten-member panel.

Possible rebuttal to Clarke's criticisms

Rice is expected to challenge claims made by former counterterrorism chief Richard Clarke in his recent book "Against All Enemies: Inside America's War On Terror" and in his testimony before the panel last month.

Clarke said the Bush administration did not take seriously enough the possibility terrorists might attack, choosing instead to focus on more traditional threats like long-range missiles in countries like Russia and China.

"I believe the Bush administration in the first eight months considered terrorism an important issue, but not an urgent issue," Clarke testified.

Clarke also said the war on terror was derailed because the Bush administration focused so heavily on invading Iraq -- a country the White House claimed had weapons of mass destruction

and ties to al-Qaida. To date, no such weapons have been found.

Members of the Bush administration -- including Rice -- spent the past several weeks trying to discredit much of what Clarke said on and before his official testimony.

“Before Sept. 11, we closely monitored threats to our nation. President Bush revived the practice of meeting with the director of the CIA every day -- meetings that I attended. And I personally met with George Tenet regularly and frequently reviewed aspects of the counterterror effort,” Rice wrote in an editorial in *The Washington Post*.

White House officials have said that Rice will argue that the Bush administration did not ignore possible signs that the 9/11 attacks would occur and that it was in the process of devising a plan to combat terror and al-Qaida. Rice will argue that the public should not judge the president and his advisers on their pre-9/11 policies based on what happened on Sept. 11, 2001.

Could the terrorist attacks have been prevented?

Last month the 9/11 commission released an interim report looking at the problems that all administrations have had fighting terrorism and the mistakes made -- including problems using diplomacy to try to stop Osama bin Laden.

Two leaders of the 9/11 commission, Republican Thomas Kean and Democrat Lee Hamilton, have already suggested the attacks could have been prevented.

"The whole story might have been different," Kean said on NBC News, "if we had been able to put those people on the watch list of the airlines, the two who were in the country; again, if we'd stopped some of these people at the borders; if we had acted earlier on al-Qaida when al-Qaida was smaller and just getting started."

All of this puts tremendous pressure on Rice, not only to refute Clarke's charges, but also to restore the president's credibility as he faces reelection.

Members of the panel are expected to ask Rice some tough questions, especially about whether anti-terrorism was a high priority before Sept. 11, 2001 and whether the administration missed warnings from the Central Intelligence Agency and the outgoing Clinton administration about the gathering terrorist threat.

Rice is not expected to publicly apologize -- as Clarke did -- over the government's failure to prevent the attacks.

Reluctant testimony

Rice's public testimony almost didn't happen at all. For months, the Bush administration argued with the 9/11 commission over how or whether she would testify. Rice spoke to the panel in February, privately and not under oath.

The president initially said Rice would not testify publicly because it would violate executive privilege -- the rule that says the president's aides do not have to testify about private conversations with the president. Unlike Cabinet secretaries, who often testify before Congress, the national security adviser is expected to be an independent advice-giver to the president, above any political fray.

But after Clarke's explosive testimony, public pressure mounted and President Bush reversed course.

"Now the commission and leaders of the United States Congress have given written assurances that the appearance of the national security adviser will not be used as precedent in the conduct of future inquiries," he said.

Mr. Bush, who initially opposed the creation of the 9/11 commission, told reporters he looks forward to Rice's testimony.

"She's a very smart, capable person who knows exactly what took place and will lay out the facts. That's what the American people want," he said.

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