

Top Focus Before 9/11 Wasn't on Terrorism

Rice Speech Cited Missile Defense

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On Sept. 11, 2001, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice was scheduled to outline a Bush administration policy that would address "the threats and problems of today and the day after, not the world of yesterday" -- but the focus was largely on missile defense, not terrorism from Islamic radicals.

The speech provides telling insight into the administration's thinking on the very day that the United States suffered the most devastating attack since the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor. The address was designed to promote missile defense as the cornerstone of a new national security strategy, and contained no mention of al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden or Islamic extremist groups, according to former U.S. officials who have seen the text.

The speech was postponed in the chaos of the day, part of which Rice spent in a bunker. It mentioned terrorism, but did so in the context used in other Bush administration speeches in early 2001: as one of the dangers from rogue nations, such as Iraq, that might use weapons of terror, rather than from the cells of extremists now considered the main security threat to the United States.

The text also implicitly challenged the Clinton administration's policy, saying it did not do enough about the real threat -- long-range missiles.

"We need to worry about the suitcase bomb, the car bomb and the vial of sarin released in the subway," according to excerpts of the speech provided to The Washington Post. "[But] why put deadbolt locks on your doors and stock up on cans of mace and then decide to leave your windows open?"

The text of Rice's Sept. 11 speech, which was never delivered, broadly reflects Bush administration foreign policy pronouncements during the eight months leading to the attacks, according to a review of speeches, news conferences and media appearances. Although the administration did address terrorism, it devoted far more attention to pushing missile defense, a controversial idea both at home and abroad, the review shows.

Al Qaeda and Islamic terrorism rated lower on the list of priorities, as outlined by officials in their own public statements on policy.

The question of whether the administration was properly focused on the terrorist threat before Sept. 11 is central to a building political storm in Washington, as a commission investigating the attacks prepares to take public testimony from Rice. Last week, President Bush's former counterterrorism chief, Richard A. Clarke, accused the administration of failing to take seriously enough the danger from al Qaeda -- a charge the White House strenuously disputes.

The White House declined to release the complete text of Rice's speech, since it was not given. The White House did confirm the accuracy of excerpts given to The Post, and former U.S. officials provided a detailed summary of the speech.

"The president's commitment to fighting terrorism isn't measured by the number of speeches, but by the concrete actions taken to fight the threat," said James R. Wilkinson, deputy national security adviser for communications, when asked about the speech. "The first major foreign policy directive of this administration was the new strategy to eliminate al Qaeda that the White House ordered soon after taking office. It was eliminating al Qaeda, not missile defense, not Iraq, and not the [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty," he said.

The administration requested such a directive in May 2001, but it did not take shape until a week before Sept. 11, according to a staff report of the commission investigating attacks. Bush signed the final directive in October, weeks after the attack.

A review of major public pronouncements in the first eight months of 2001 found relatively few extensive statements by Bush, Vice President Cheney or Rice about al Qaeda, bin Laden or other Islamic extremist groups.

The president set the tone. In his first address to Congress, on Feb. 27, 2001, Bush acknowledged the danger of bomb-wielding terrorists, but also promoted missile defense as the priority in protecting the United States.

"Our nation also needs a clear strategy to confront the threats of the 21st century, threats that are more widespread and less certain. They range from terrorists who threaten with bombs to tyrants and rogue nations intent on developing weapons of mass destruction. To protect our own people, our allies and friends, we must develop and we must deploy effective missile defenses," he said. Later this year, the administration plans to put into operation the first phase of a system to intercept and destroy incoming ballistic missiles.

In most public comments about Afghanistan before Sept. 11, Bush talked mainly about limited freedoms afforded under Taliban rule. One of the few presidential statements citing bin Laden and al Qaeda was on June 30, 2001, in a letter renewing Clinton administration-era sanctions on the Taliban.

During the summer of 2001, as al Qaeda operatives were in flight training and finalizing plans for the attacks, the administration's public focus was on other matters.

After his first meeting with NATO heads of state in Brussels in June 2001, Bush outlined the five top defense issues discussed with the closest U.S. allies. Missile defense was at the top of the list, followed by developing a NATO relationship with Russia, working in common purpose with Europe, increased defense spending in NATO countries, and enlarging the alliance to include former East European countries. The only reference to extremists was in Macedonia, where Bush said regional forces were seeking to subvert a new democracy.

Top officials continued that public focus right up to the eve of the al Qaeda attacks. On Aug. 2, 2001, Cheney emphasized the bold new U.S. plan for a 21st century approach to security. "We're fundamentally transforming the U.S. strategic relationship around the world as we look at missile defenses and modifications to our offensive strategic arms," he said at a news conference with Republican congressional leaders on Capitol Hill.

And two days before Sept. 11, appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press," Rice said the administration was ready "to get serious about the business of dealing with this emergent threat. Ballistic missiles are ubiquitous now."

In the speech prepared for Sept. 11, Rice intended to point out that the United States had spent \$11 billion on counterterrorism, about twice as much as it spent on missile defense, during the previous year, although the speech did not point out that that was when President Bill Clinton was still in office.

Rice's text noted that Bush appointed Cheney to oversee a coordinated national effort to protect against a terrorist attack using weapons of mass destruction. At the time, the U.S. concern about terror was heavily focused on Iraq and rogue states, and missile defense was viewed as a weapon against that terrorism -- a different interpretation of the leading threats and responses that would take hold after jetliners hit the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

In April 2002, Rice followed through on her postponed Sept. 11 speaking engagement at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. But the speech she delivered did not contain any of the original text, former U.S. officials said.

In the revamped speech, Rice's focus was on the threat of international terrorists -- and missile defense was mentioned only once, almost in passing.

"An earthquake of the magnitude of 9/11 can shift the tectonic plates of international politics," she noted.

Staff researcher Lucy Shackelford and staff writer Mark Stencel contributed to this report.

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