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## Assessing Clinton's Culpability for September 11

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As Republicans swept the 2002 Mid-Term Elections, they did so by wrapping themselves in the flag and by portraying the Democrats as weak on National Security. Though hardly a new claim, this has taken on new significance since September 11. What then should we make of Republican claims relating to the culpability of President Bill Clinton for the worst terrorist attacks in history?

Since the decent of the two towers on September 11, many have questioned the apparent lapses in security that allowed such a catastrophe to occur. The smoke was still billowing in downtown Manhattan when the political repercussions began in earnest, with some attempting to blame the attacks on budgetary cuts and codes of conduct imposed on the CIA by Bill Clinton. Congressman Rohrabacher of California blamed Clinton for "*letting the Taliban go, over and over again.*"<sup>1</sup> Rush Limbaugh pressed that Clinton "*be held culpable for not doing enough when he was Commander in Chief,*"<sup>2</sup> and former Senator Bob Kerrey said Clinton had erred in his response to previous attacks and "*should have treated them as an attack on the United States.*"<sup>3</sup>

Since leaving office in January 2001, former President of the United States, Bill Clinton, has repeatedly referred to the events of September 11 as "*the dark side of Globalism,*"<sup>4</sup> the antithesis of a world enhanced by improved telecommunications, scientific advances and increased democracy. Globalism of course, had been Clinton's vehicle to enhance US exports in the early 1990s as he sought to strengthen the American economy through a policy of Engagement and Enlargement. Clinton had made economic competitiveness the centrepiece of his 1992 presidential campaign and had vowed to "*make the economic security of our nation a primary goal of our foreign policy.*"<sup>5</sup> As President, Clinton was adamant that all the organs of government be directed to assist him in this task, including the Central Intelligence Agency.

When considering Clinton's dealings with the CIA, one must recall that at the time of his 1992 election, the Cold War was over and the direction of American foreign policy was uncertain. Even Henry Kissinger noted, "*The new President must find a role for an America that can neither dominate nor retreat.*"<sup>6</sup> Serious questions were posed over the future of the CIA, which came under pressure to justify its budget. With the end of the Cold War the CIA would have been forced to change, regardless of who President. Clinton's focus on domestic matters only served to exacerbate the situation.

It was believed that Clinton would curtail the CIA, as many in Congress felt the CIA had "*lost its traditional enemy without finding a new role.*"<sup>7</sup> Reflecting these concerns, Clinton's team "*discussed plans to cut the Intelligence budget by about a quarter of the total by 1998.*"<sup>8</sup> Bureaucracies however are resistant to change, and the CIA was no exception, insisting that America needed to increase its intelligence capabilities in light of a new, unstable world. Ultimately, CIA recruitment was frozen and staff levels were cut by 24% by 1994, twice the rate

recommended by the National Performance Review. *"By 1997, 1,000 analysts had retired from the CIA, scaling the agency back to 1977 levels."*<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, it was George W. Bush's father who initiated many of the changes that Clinton would implement. In the early 1990s, Bush conducted an examination of the Intelligence Community and instigated a steady series of budgetary cuts from its historic high of \$30 billion in 1991, to \$28 billion by 1993.<sup>10</sup> Bush also began the reallocation of resources *"away from old Cold War concerns toward new economic targets, as the world marketplace became an ever more important battlefield for America."*<sup>11</sup> During the Cold War, up to 60% of CIA resources were targeted on the USSR. By 1993, that figure had dropped to 13%.<sup>12</sup> CIA analysts would continue to investigate weapons proliferation and traditional espionage activities, but they would now develop an enhanced role in the area of economic espionage.

Clinton realised that the CIA could assist his policy of *Engagement and Enlargement*, by aiding American companies in the global market. During the Cold War, economic intelligence accounted for 10% of CIA activity, under Clinton that figure would rise to 40%. The CIA had always engaged in economic intelligence gathering, but now this would help justify their budget and assist the President in his efforts to forge domestic renewal. Seizing the initiative, the CIA identified 72 cases of unfair competition in the first 17 months of the Clinton Administration. It also revealed that between 1986 and 1992, it *"had identified 250 cases of aggressive lobbying by foreign governments on behalf of their domestic industries that were competing against U.S. firms for business overseas."*<sup>13</sup> This convinced officials that the CIA should be tasked with commercial espionage, and revealed the extent of economic espionage before Clinton's election.

What Clinton did was to make past practices official, if sometimes undeclared, policy. This was done in part through a 1995 National Security Strategy statement that noted *"collection and analysis can help level the economic playing field by identifying threats to U.S. companies from foreign intelligence services."*<sup>14</sup> The CIA claimed to have uncovered bribes affecting \$30 billion in foreign contracts from 1992 to 1995<sup>15</sup>, giving credence to Secretary of State Christopher's declaration that *"Our national security is inseparable from our economic security."* The weight of America's national security apparatus was brought to bear in maintaining economic security, as under Clinton, economic intelligence gathering became policy. Economic intelligence became one of the few growth areas at the CIA in the 1990s, proving the Agency could adapt to ever changing circumstances.

Whilst economic security was the priority of the Clinton White House, the Administration was not immune to the horrors associated with National Security. During his time in office, the World Trade Centre in New York was bombed, the US barracks at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia were destroyed, explosions rocked the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, Tanzania and the USS *Cole* was attacked in Yemen. Warren Christopher would summarise the situation perfectly; *"Fanatics would plan attacks in one country, execute them in another and flee to a third when the deed was done."*<sup>17</sup>

One must recall however, that whilst such attacks occurred, massive terrorist attacks on American soil remained a hypothetical danger in the 1990s. Despite this, Clinton doubled counter terrorist spending across 40 departments and agencies and officially recognised the anger such actions posed. Presidential Decision Directive 35 set out the Clinton Administration's intelligence collection priorities on March 2, 1995. This represented an elevation in status for a danger that had previously received little attention. This marked the Clinton Administration as *"the first to undertake a systematic anti-terrorist effort, in terms of resources and anti-terrorist activity."* Clinton also devoted some of his highest-profile foreign policy speeches on the

subject, including an address to mark the United Nations' 50th anniversary, when he spoke of the terrorists who had *"plotted to destroy the very hall we gather in today."*<sup>20</sup>

It is clear that terrorism was a threat, but it was not the administration's main concern, for in the 1980s and 1990s, only 871 Americans died in terrorist attacks at home and overseas. According to Paul R. Pillar of the CIA's counter terrorism centre, *"fewer Americans die from it than drown in bathtubs."*<sup>21</sup> That is not to say that the Administration did not consider the threat from terrorism, merely that it was one of a series of threats that had to be considered. Despite the elevated status afforded to terrorism, a common sentiment following September 11 was that the CIA had failed to do enough to prevent the atrocities. Clearly, the terrorists achieved their mission despite the best efforts of the CIA. This success meant, *"Those measures, which were hardly insignificant, were by definition not enough."*<sup>22</sup> However, Clinton's second term National Security Adviser, Samuel Berger, refutes Republican criticism. *"This was an urgent priority for the Clinton Administration and the intelligence community specifically engaged in an intensive effort directed at bin Laden across a range of fronts."*<sup>23</sup> This including a 1998 directive for the CIA to use lethal force to pre-empt terrorist attacks on America planned by bin Laden.

Yet it must be remembered that Al Qaeda was not a constant threat throughout Clinton's term in office and became a major threat only in later years, ironically, when Clinton was in a weakened political position. Internationally, his pleas for Saudi Arabia to deal with bin Laden had been rejected and at home, a Republican dominated Congress was moving to impeach him. Many who have lamented Clinton's inability to eliminate bin Laden, lambasted his efforts to strike at the Al Qaeda leadership as attempts to divert attention from his own domestic political concerns. *"He was criticized for those cruise missile attacks,"* Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle has stated. *"He was accused of doing things that had nothing to do with foreign policy as he was trying to respond."*<sup>24</sup> Also, many who now champion President George W. Bush's attacks on bin Laden as *"the evil one,"*<sup>25</sup> previously attacked Clinton for concentrating too heavily on bin Laden in the fight against terrorism. Those who assert that Clinton should or could have been more assertive in office are guilty of forgetting or conveniently ignoring their response at the time.

September 11, 2001 did not mark the first assault on Clinton's foreign policy. Indeed during his first two years, Clinton certainly paid too little attention to foreign policy, as he moved to ensure the domestic economy recovered, and *"domestic affairs consumed 75% of his time, foreign affairs less than a quarter."*<sup>26</sup> However, those who blame President Clinton for the terrorist attacks are choosing to forget that terrorists have targeted America for decades. During the Reagan years, Muslim radicals killed 49 people at the U.S. embassy in Beirut, 241 people in the 1983 destruction of the U.S. Marine Barracks in Beirut, several soldiers in a 1986 Berlin disco bombing and 270 people perished when Pan Am flight 103 was brought down in 1988.

The more one examines President Clinton's relationship with the CIA, the more one sees a policy of continuation rather than change. Increases in the use of CIA for economic surveillance began under President Bush, as did the cutbacks in the CIA budget. In May 1989, Bush made a statement that Clinton would echo many times in his presidency. Referring to the findings of National Security Directive NSD-23, Bush declared, *"we hope to move beyond containment, we are only at the beginning of our new path."*<sup>27</sup> Building upon Bush's calls to progress beyond Containment, Clinton espoused a policy of *Engagement and Enlargement* with which to address the new geopolitical landscape. Rejecting calls to eliminate the CIA as *"profoundly wrong,"*<sup>28</sup> Clinton utilised the CIA to advance the cause of his presidency; domestic renewal. *"Clinton rearranged the traditional priorities, raising economic issues to the same level of importance as strategic affairs."*<sup>29</sup>

The end of the Cold War removed any unifying thoughts from the minds of policy makers in Washington and the clarity of vision so crucial to a successful foreign policy failed to crystallize. That changed on September 11, 2001. During the 1990s, the events of September 11 were perceived as unthinkable, abstract possibilities devised by players of war games at the Pentagon. As such, it would have required incredible political leadership to muster government agencies and political enemies to fight terrorism and harder still to persuade the American people and civil liberties groups that new powers were necessary to prevent catastrophe. Clinton could have done more, and has admitted as much. However, "*it is difficult to locate another American President who was able to rouse a happy, populace to sacrifice their lives in the service of an abstraction.*"<sup>30</sup> Before September 11 there was no public support for losing American lives to suppress terrorism. Bill Clinton could not change these elements and neither could George W Bush. It took a disaster of epic proportions to shock America into the reality of the 21st Century.

[1] John Harris, "Conservatives Sound Refrain: It's Clinton's Fault," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2001, sec. A. p.15.

[2] Harris, "Conservatives Sound Refrain: It's Clinton's Fault," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2001, sec. A. p.15.

[3] Harris, "Conservatives Sound Refrain: It's Clinton's Fault," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2001, sec. A. p.15.

[4] President William Jefferson Clinton, "*Remarks as Transcribed,*" Labour Party Conference, Winter Gardens, Blackpool, October 2, 2002

[5] Bill Clinton, "*A New Era of Peril and Promise.*" Address before the Diplomatic Corps, Georgetown University, Washington DC, January 18, 1993.

[6] Henry Kissinger, "Clinton and the World," *Newsweek*, February 1, 1993, 12.

[7] Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only*. (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 541.

[8] Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only*, 540.

[9] Loch K. Johnson, "The CIA's Weakest Link," *The Washington Monthly*, July/August 2000.

[10] Loch K. Johnson, *Secret Agencies*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 49.

[11] Johnson, *Secret Agencies*, 147.

[12] Johnson, *Secret Agencies*, 54.

[13] Robert Windrem, "US Steps Up Commercial Spying," *NBC News*, 7 May 2000

[14] Windrem, "US Steps Up Commercial Spying," *NBC News*, 7 May 2000

[15] James Risen, "Clinton Reportedly Orders CIA to Focus on Trade Espionage," *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1995, A1.

[16] Johnson, *Secret Agencies*, 173.

[17] Johnson, *Secre*