

RICHARD CLARKE REMINDS CHENEY AND CONDI OF THEIR INCOMPETENCE

When I saw Condi saying, "unless you were there, in a position of responsibility, you cannot possibly imagine the dilemmas we faced in trying to protect Americans," to Stanford students, my instinct was to remind everyone that she was forced to admit, "I believe the title was 'Bin Laden determined to attack inside the United States.'"

Richard Clarke, after listening to Cheney and Condi make similar statements for a month, has a similar instinct (and of course, he's in a position to make the argument more strongly than I). Today, he's got an op-ed reminding readers of how Cheney and Condi refused to take terrorism seriously until it was too late. And once they did, they overreacted.

He describes the panic with which Cheney responded on 9/11.

I remember that morning, too. Shortly after the second World Trade Center tower was hit, I burst in on Rice (then the president's national security adviser) and Cheney in the vice president's office and remember glimpsing horror on his face.

And then he catalogs how the excessiveness of Cheney's and Condi's response led to more failures (click through for his discussion of the Iraq debacle).

On detention, the Bush team leaped to the assumption that U.S. courts and prisons would not work. Before the terrorist attacks, the U.S. counterterrorism program of the 1990s

had arrested al-Qaeda terrorists and others around the world and had a 100 percent conviction rate in the U.S. justice system. Yet the American system was abandoned, again as part of a pattern of immediately adopting the most extreme response available. Camps were established around the world, notably in Guantanamo Bay, where prisoners were held without being charged or tried. They became symbols of American overreach, held up as proof that al-Qaeda's anti-American propaganda was right.

Similarly, with regard to interrogation, administration officials conducted no meaningful professional analysis of which techniques worked and which did not. The FBI, which had successfully questioned al-Qaeda terrorists, was effectively excluded from interrogations. Instead, there was the immediate and unwarranted assumption that extreme measures – such as waterboarding one detainee 183 times – would be the most effective.

Finally, on wiretapping, rather than beef up the procedures available under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), the administration again moved to the extreme, listening in on communications here at home without legal process. FISA did need some modification, but it also allowed for the quick issuance of court orders, as when President Clinton took stepped-up defensive measures in late 1999 under the heightened threat of the new millennium.

Yes, Dick Cheney and Condoleezza Rice may have been surprised by the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 – but it was because they had not listened. And their surprise led them to adopt extreme

counterterrorism techniques – but it was because they rejected, without analysis, the tactics the Clinton administration had used. The measures they uncritically adopted, which they simply assumed were the best available, were in fact unnecessary and counterproductive.

"I'll freely admit that watching a coordinated, devastating attack on our country from an underground bunker at the White House can affect how you view your responsibilities," Cheney said in his recent **speech**. But this defense does not stand up. The Bush administration's response actually undermined the principles and values America has always stood for in the world, values that should have survived this traumatic event. The White House thought that 9/11 changed everything. It may have changed many things, but it did not change the Constitution, which the vice president, the national security adviser and all of us who were in the White House that tragic day had pledged to protect and preserve.

Richard Clarke was there, in a position of responsibility, Condi. Only he didn't have the same feeling, I guess, because he was not totally unprepared to deal with that position of responsibility.