

DON'T WORRY, ISIKOFF SAYS, DC IS NOT CORRUPT AND DISHONEST

When the Village needs to plant a story to counter a growing narrative, they know who to call: Michael Isikoff. And true to form, Isikoff writes a review of Philip Shenon's book on the 9/11 Commission that—while it presents abundant evidence that agrees with Max Holland's post on the book—still tries to refute Holland's post.

Holland makes two main points in his post. First (as covered in this post), that Zelikow and Rove carried on back-channel communication after the Commission heads told him to stop. And, more generally, Holland argues that Zelikow used his position to,

... exploit[] his central position to negate or neutralize criticism of the Bush administration so that the White House would not bear, in November 2004, the political burden of failing to prevent the attacks.

To which, Isikoff scolds,

In any case, the suggestion by conspiracy theorists—who have seized on the evidence in Shenon's book—that Zelikow was serving as a secret White House "mole" is hard to sustain.

Nosiree, Zelikow wasn't the secret White House mole! While Isikoff includes a quote from Lee Hamilton, a Democrat with a long history of excusing Republican shortcomings, in which Hamilton vouches for Zelikow's interest in exposing all the facts, Isikoff also presents the following evidence that supports and expands on Holland's post:

- After Commission investigator Warren Bass found emails from Richard Clarke warning of "hundreds of Americans [lying] dead in several countries," Zelikow, "disparaged Clarke as an egomaniac and braggart who was unjustly slandering his friend Rice."
- Isikoff numbers "at least four" calls between Rove and Zelikow; Isikoff repeats Zelikow's excuse that these were related to Zelikow's academic job, but he doesn't include the allegation that Zelikow tried to have his Executive Secretary stop logging his calls.
- He repeats Shenon's claim that Rove specifically said that a report that blamed Bush for 9/11 could most easily sink his re-election bid.

So to make his argument that Zelikow wasn't a White House mole trying to prevent a critical report from hurting Bush's re-election chances, Isikoff provides the quote of someone not known for candid speech, lauding the report itself. But Isikoff doesn't refute the claim that Rove and Zelikow were communicating, he doesn't refute the claim that Rove thought a favorable report was important, and he even adds another witness describing Zelikow as "bullying" the Commission to protect the reputation of his gal Condi!

Now, to be fair, Isikoff does three more things that are perhaps designed to distract from the notion that Zelikow was a mole. First, he shows that Zelikow wasn't the only mole.

When Clarke finally did testify about his warnings to Rice, Shenon reports, White House counsel Alberto Gonzales and his aides feverishly drafted tough questions and phoned them in to GOP commissioners to undermine Clarke's credibility.

Then, he notes that George Tenet was remarkably quiet about all the "hair on fire" discussions he had with George Bush about impending terrorist threats.

Questioned in secret sessions by the panel, Tenet was unable to remember almost anything he said to Bush about Al Qaeda—or even that he had flown to Texas in August 2001 to brief the president at his ranch in Crawford.

Somehow, these details are supposed to refute the idea that the 9/11 Commission was designed to hide how badly Condi and Bush had botched 9/11? They prove that Zelikow wasn't the only mole, but they don't disprove that Zelikow was one of the moles for the Administration!

Finally, Isikoff makes a bid for the classic Republican defense: Bill Clinton did it.

Tenet also professed to be unaware of a highly classified December 1998 memo, discovered by the commission staff, in which Bill Clinton had authorized the CIA to recruit Afghan tribal leaders to kill bin Laden. To be sure, two months later, Clinton personally wrote out a second order crossing out the "kill bin Laden" directive and inserting more ambiguous language—one reason Tenet's agents might well have been confused about just what they could do. In the

end, Rove's concerns about the ultimate impact of the 9/11 commission report was overwrought. There was more than enough blame to go around.

Again, I'm not sure how Tenet's "forgetfulness" of two memos that proved Clinton was alert to the dangers of Al Qaeda really help Isikoff's case. Furthermore, whether or not one ambiguous passage amounts to "blame" for Clinton, that's not the question either Holland or Isikoff tackle. The question is whether the Bush Administration intervened to make sure the report didn't blame Bush for the attack. And it didn't. In spite of abundant warnings, in spite of scuttling Clinton's efforts (however inadequate) to respond to Al Qaeda, the report really didn't assign the Bush Administration the blame it deserved.

Now, understand, I'm sure Shenon's book (as distinct from Holland's post) is primarily focused on the wider political stonewalling, not just Zelikow's role in that process. But Isikoff purports to refute Holland's allegation that Zelikow used his role on the Committee to protect the White House. And in fact, he makes Holland's point stronger.