

JANE MAYER TO MARC THIESSEN: YOUR GUYS' IGNORANCE GOT US ATTACKED

Jane Mayer has a great general purpose slapdown of torture apologist Marc Thiessen love letter to torture. She hits on most of the weaknesses of Thiessen's arguments: his false claims about what prevented the 2006 liquid explosive plane plot, apologists' very selective examination of what counts as an attack on American, the silence about Ibn Sheik al-Libi's (and others') false confessions, demonstrably false claims that no one at Gitmo was ever tortured.

But there's a point she makes that really ought to be the focus of push back against all torture apologists: the Bush Administration ignored repeated warnings about the imminent al Qaeda attack in 2001, and any ignorance about al Qaeda—which Thiessen claims was general—belongs to Bush's top leaders, not the intelligence community.

Thiessen, citing [Michael] McConnell, claims that before the C.I.A. began interrogating detainees the U.S. knew "virtually nothing" about Al Qaeda. But McConnell was not in the government in the years immediately before 9/11. He retired as the director of the National Security Agency in 1996, and did not rejoin the government until 2007. Evidently, he missed a few developments during his time in the private sector, such as the C.I.A.'s founding, in 1996, of its bin Laden unit—the only unit devoted to a single figure. There was also bin Laden's declaration of war on America, in 1996, and his 1998 indictment in New York, after Al Qaeda's bombing of two U.S. embassies in East Africa. The subsequent federal trial of

the bombing suspects, in New York, produced thousands of pages of documents exposing the internal workings of Al Qaeda. A state's witness at the trial, a former Al Qaeda member named Jamal al-Fadl, supplied the F.B.I. with invaluable information about the group, including its attempts to obtain nuclear weapons. (Fadl did so without any coercion other than the hope of a future plea bargain. Indeed, the F.B.I., without using violence, has persuaded dozens of other suspected terrorists to cooperate, including, most recently, the Christmas Day bomber.)

In order to make the case that America was blind to the threat of Al Qaeda in the days before 9/11, Thiessen skips over the scandalous amount of intelligence that reached the Bush White House before the attacks. In February, 2001, the C.I.A.'s director, George Tenet, called Al Qaeda "the most immediate and serious threat" to the country. Richard Clarke, then the country's counterterrorism chief, tried without success to get Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national-security adviser, to hold a Cabinet-level meeting on Al Qaeda. Thomas Pickard, then the F.B.I.'s acting director, has testified that Attorney General John Ashcroft told him that he wanted to hear no more about Al Qaeda. On August 6, 2001, Bush did nothing in response to a briefing entitled "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in the U.S." As Tenet later put it, "The system was blinking red."

(I would add that refusal of Thiessen's precious CIA to share information about Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar also prevented us from acting on the biggest lead that could have prevented the attack.)

This point is not repeated enough, perhaps out

of some sense of comity toward a guy, Cheney, who has spent the last year (really, his entire life) breaking every rule of comity in DC.

Out of ignorance of al Qaeda, arrogance that only loyal insiders should participate in setting security priorities, and plain old bad judgment about the potential threat of terrorists, the Bush Administration failed to act on clear warnings that we would be hit on 9/11. Those are, not surprisingly, precisely the same characteristics drove us to ignore our experts on interrogation and instead follow the word of a bunch of hucksters who wanted to get rich off of torturing other human beings.

Every time someone like Thiessen attempts to push his propaganda, we really ought to be asking why we should trust the propagandist of the guys who are still trying to overcompensate for having failed in the first place.