

White House calls Clarke's 2002 testimony too sensitive

Last week's attempts to discredit Richard Clarke's inflammatory statements have been denied

By Frank Davies
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WASHINGTON — Don't expect to read anytime soon what Richard Clarke said two years ago about the Bush administration's efforts against terrorism, despite Republican requests to declassify his testimony in an effort to discredit him.

Behind closed doors Clarke gave an exhaustive, 10-year overview of counterterrorism with details, names and other sensitive information the CIA and White House has consistently refused to release, say three people who heard the testimony or read it later.

"Knowing what he said, it's going to be very difficult to declassify much of that testimony," said Eleanor Hill, staff director of the congressional investigation into the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

On June 11, 2002, Clarke was the leadoff witness before the joint inquiry on Capitol Hill. His testimony took six hours and filled 191 pages.

Republicans complain that Clarke's testimony then is very different from his recent criticism that Bush did not focus on terrorism before the Sept. 11 attacks. Some Democrats who have read both see no inconsistencies.

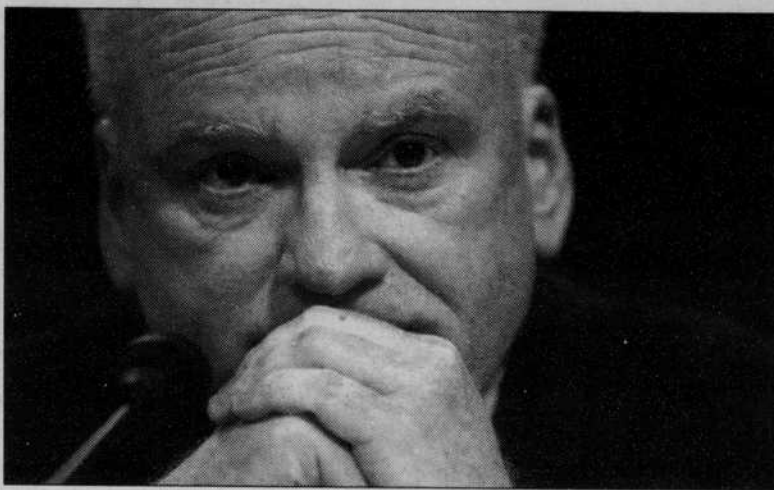
What's lost in the furor is that Clarke's testimony in 2002 "covered some of the most highly classified, sensitive programs in the intelligence community," said Tim Roemer, the only member of both the current Sept. 11 Commission and the congressional inquiry.

"For seven months last year the administration said this absolutely could not be declassified," Roemer, a former Democratic congressman, said. "To do so now would not only be wrong, it would look very political."

Republican leaders in Congress Tuesday pressed ahead with their request to declassify as much as possible of Clarke's testimony.

Rep. Porter Goss, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said through a spokesperson that he believes Clarke, a counterterrorism adviser for 10 years, did contradict his closed-door testimony with his public remarks last week before the Sept. 11 Commission.

Goss, a Sanibel, Fla., Republican, asked the executive branch to begin a review of Clarke's earlier testimony and recommend what can be declassified. He said he did not need



Chuck Kennedy (KRT)

Former administration counterterrorism chief Richard Clarke testifies before the 9-11 Commission on March 24, 2004, in Washington, D.C.

committee approval.

Rep. Jane Harman of California, ranking Democrat on Intelligence, objected, saying Goss was overstepping his authority.

"This is a stunning violation of House rules that can only feed the impression that sensitive materials are being selectively declassified for political reasons," Harman said.

Harman also said White House officials should remove themselves from any declassification decisions because of a conflict of interest.

In the Senate, Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., said again that Clarke has told "two very different stories" — a non-critical appraisal of the Bush administration efforts in 2002, followed by his assessment last week that Bush did not see terrorism as an urgent problem.

Other Republicans suggested Clarke committed perjury.

Minority Tom Daschle, D-S.D., said "not one shred of evidence was given, but that wasn't the point. The point was to have the perjury accusation on television and in the newspapers."

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., the ranking member of Senate Intelligence, said he reviewed Clarke's 2002 testimony and "found nothing very different from what he's saying now."

Because of his longevity in the White House, Clarke was a natural leadoff witness in June 2002. According to two staffers who spoke on condition of anonymity, Clarke delved into sensitive covert actions, disputes about how to get Osama bin Laden, and use of the Predator drone for such attacks.

One staffer said that at least 90 percent of the testimony dealt with issues and events before Bush became president in January 2001.

Roemer said members of the joint inquiry quizzed Clarke in detail on many events because the Bush administration had refused to release relevant National Security Council documents.

Hill would not discuss the substance of the testimony, but said it was so sensitive that she would be surprised if much of it comes out.

"And that's a problem, because to fairly judge somebody's credibility, it has to be in the context of everything he said that day," added Hill, a former federal prosecutor.

Hill battled intelligence agencies for seven months over declassifying data before the joint inquiry's final report was released in July 2003. Dozens of pages on covert actions and the possible involvement of Saudi Arabia in Sept. 11 were blacked out.

Clarke has said the entire testimony should be released, along with documents such as his recommendations in 2001 for more aggressive actions against al-Qaida terrorists. The White House refused to give those documents to the joint inquiry, but has given more to the independent commission.

"There's a lengthy paper trail of e-mails, memos and documents that will help test Clarke's credibility," Roemer said.

The joint inquiry in Congress asked to interview national security adviser Condoleezza Rice in May 2002 "to obtain a better understanding of the development of counterterrorism policy in the Bush administration."

The White House refused, and Rice's deputy, Stephen Hadley, responded to written questions instead.

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