

A bit late for Tenet's insights

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

A bane of editorial writers must be their occasional brush with futility. Sometimes the best intended advice falls flat.

Thus it was, as Democrats flooded into San Diego last week for their state convention, a lead editorial urged them to avoid Bush-bashing. Voters crave serious solutions to the nation's problems, it said - better stick to talk of immigration reform,

Social Security and the war in Iraq.

It was as if the writer knew no one was listening. Indeed, the third paragraph raised the white flag of surrender. "There will be plenty of Bush-bashing and hand-wringing over Iraq," the editorial predicted of the Democratic swarm, "and perhaps some unfounded gloom about the economy. And then more Bush-bashing."

This proved a fairly accurate forecast. There was Bush-bashing aplenty through the weekend those hell-raisers were in town. What no one could have foreseen, though, was its source. The most scathing assault yet leveled against George W. Bush and his close associates came from someone a continent removed from the San Diego Convention Center. It was by his once-trusted CIA director, George Tenet.

Tenet's break with Bush had been leaked a day or two earlier. There were news stories about a book for which the retired top spy was paid a seven-figure advance - a tell-all bitterly detailing this administration's misuse of intelligence while fomenting war in the Middle East. And as weary delegates made their way to the airport at convention's ends, Tenet was dumping his dirt via an extended appearance on CBS' "Sixty Minutes."

This was not just another in the string of recent defections by disgruntled GOP legislators or second-tier administration functionaries. Here was a lead player on whose judgment Bush, Cheney, et al. had relied for making war.

To lose Tenet is to lose the war's justification - possibly to forfeit the underpinnings of a Bush legacy. This is Damon denouncing Pythias, Cardinal Wolsey walking out on Henry VIII, Coach Rockne calling an offside against the Gipper.

Tenet's book, "At the Center of the Storm," defends his management of the CIA against charges that its failures gave administration leaders their right to attack Iraq. He makes the same point others have done - that Bush's people were so gung-ho for war that they didn't seek honest intelligence.

He was dumbfounded, Tenet writes, by something the hawkish Richard Perle said on the morning after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks - "Iraq will have to pay a price for what happened yesterday." That comment - which Perle calls inaccurate - was as perplexing to Tenet as Vice President Dick Cheney's insistence that Saddam Hussein was assembling nuclear weapons. The CIA lacked evidence for either conclusion.

Then why didn't Tenet blow a whistle? Why did he assure Bush the case for WMDs was "a slam-dunk?" Why did he sit mute at the United Nations while Colin Powell put final touches on a nonexistent case for armed conflict?

Why, since he saw Bush nearly every morning, did he never unload the truth? And why, on Dec. 14, 2004, did Tenet accept a presidential Medal of Freedom tendered for reasons he knew to be nonsense?

He makes none of this clear - either in his book or on TV. Rather, the swarthy Tenet comes across as a peevish, arrogant fellow - morally, if not mentally troubled. With a straight face, he tells TV viewers that in all of government, only intelligence officers can be relied upon for the truth.

Tenet is at his enigmatic best in discussing torture. "We don't torture people. We do not torture people," he repeats four times when challenged by "Sixty Minutes" interviewer Scott Pelley - as if to honor the Nazi Goebbels' theory that anything uttered often enough will be accepted as truth.

"Then what is meant by your term 'enhanced interrogation'?" Pelley persists. It saved lives, Tenet argues - and what we did was approved by the attorney general.

He may be alone at this juncture in claiming Alberto Gonzales' support as a timely coup.

CNN's Larry King took his turn a day later. Getting down to specifics, he asks if "water-boarding" might not be construed as torture. (This procedure has induced more than one death.)

"I don't discuss techniques," is Tenet's response.

What about sleep deprivation, or subjecting a prisoner to extreme cold?

"I do not discuss techniques."

Such rigidity may checkmate the media. But Congress has techniques of its own. While he totes up those book royalties, a House subpoena could soon let George Tenet know for sure whether we torture people.

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