

## OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Charlie McCarthy Hearings

By MAUREEN DOWD

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**F**ollowing is the text of a letter sent yesterday to Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton of the Sept. 11 commission from Alberto R. Gonzales, counsel to President Bush.

While we continue to hold to the principles underlying the Constitutional separation of powers, that the appropriate and patriotic action for the Commission is to shut down and stop pestering us, the President is prepared, in the interest of comity and popularity, to testify, subject to the conditions set forth below.

The President at all times, even on trips to the men's room, will be accompanied by the Vice President.

The Commission must agree in writing that it will not pose any questions directly to the President. Mr. Bush's statements will be restricted to asides on Dick Cheney's brushoffs, as in "Just like he said," "Roger that" and "Ditto."

Another necessary condition, in keeping with the tenets of executive privilege: Mr. Cheney will require that the Commission observe the rules of his favorite show from the Eisenhower Administration, "What's My Line?" The panelists, in the manner of Dorothy Kilgallen and Bennett Cerf, must try to guess what the President and Vice President didn't know and when they didn't know it through questions that elicit a "yes" or "no."

After 10 "no" answers, the panel will not be allowed to question Mr. Cheney or anyone else in the Administration ever again. In the mystery-guest round, Richard Ben-Veniste, Bob Kerrey and other Democrats on the Commission will be blindfolded.

(Or Mr. Cheney is willing to follow the precedent of Garry Moore and Bess Meyerson, using "I've Got A Secret" rules: The Vice President will whisper a secret about the Administration's inadequate response to terrorism in the President's ear and each panelist will have 30 seconds to question Mr. Cheney in an attempt to guess the secret, which he will not reveal even if they guess right.)

As an additional accommodation, the President and Vice President have now agreed to take a "pinky oath," looping little fingers with each other, while reserving the right to cross the index and middle fingers of their remaining hands and hide them behind their backs.

We must deny your request that Mr. Cheney bring along a PowerPoint presentation depicting who was in and out of the loop, in accordance with separation-of-PowerPoint principles. The Vice President has decreed that the loop of influence is under the cone of silence.

The White House is taking the extraordinary step of bowing to public opinion — even though Mr. Cheney states that he doesn't

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give two hoots about public opinion. Therefore, the Vice President will only entertain questions about negligence in fighting terrorism concerning the critical period between Jan. 21, 1993, and Jan. 20, 2001. As President Bush stated on Tuesday, March 30, the Commission must gain "a complete picture of the months and years before Sept. 11."

The Vice President will not address any queries about why no one reacted to George Tenet's daily "hair on fire" alarms to the President about a coming Al Qaeda attack; or why the President was so consumed with chopping and burning cedar on his Crawford ranch that he ignored the warning in an Aug. 6, 2001, briefing that Al Qaeda might try to hijack aircraft; or why the President asked for a plan to combat Al Qaeda in May and then never followed up while Richard Clarke's aggressive plan was suffocated by second-raters; or why the President was never briefed by his counterterrorism chief on anything but cybersecurity until Sept. 11; or why the Administration-in-amber made so many cold war assumptions, such as thinking that terrorists had to be sponsored by a state even as terrorists had taken over a state; or why the President went along with the Vice President and the neocons to fool the American public into believing that Saddam had a hand in the 9/11 attacks; or why the Administration chose to undercut the war on terrorism and inflame the Arab world by attacking Iraq, without a plan to protect our perilously overextended forces or to exit with a realistic hope that a democracy will be left behind.

The Commission must not, under any circumstances, ask the Vice President why American soldiers and civilians in Iraq are being greeted with barbarous infernos rather than flowery bouquets.

Finally, we request that when the President finishes with this painful teeth-pulling visit, the Commission shall offer him a lollipop.

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