

## Opinion

Wednesday, March 31, 2004



Marie Cocco

### 'Al-Qaida' didn't rush to Bush's lips

March 30, 2004

I really don't care what Condi Rice has to say.

I ignore the yarn the White House national security adviser spins about the level of concern the Bush team had about the terrorist threat from al-Qaida during its first months in office.

Because Rice isn't president of the United States. George W. Bush is. And so we must read his lips.

Here is what those lips said publicly about al-Qaida between Jan. 1, 2001, just before Bush was sworn in as president, and Sept. 10, 2001: Nothing.

There were zero references to al-Qaida during these months. That's according to Federal News Service, which transcribes every presidential utterance - speeches, news conferences, impromptu musings at photo ops, off-the-cuff remarks made striding toward a helicopter, official comments with foreign dignitaries. The search was conducted including the phrase "al Q" - to capture every possible spelling or

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translation for al-Qaida. Still nothing.

Of course, the president did mention terrorism, terrorists and counterterrorism 24 times before 9/11. But eight of these comments referred to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Another eight involved a range of terrorist threats, including ethnic terrorism in Macedonia and Basque separatists in Spain.

In the remaining eight references to terrorism, the new president offered his idea for how to combat it: the Reagan-era missile-defense system formerly known as Star Wars.

On Jan. 8, 2001, after a meeting in Austin, Texas, with congressional defense experts, the president-elect referred to missile defense as necessary to guard against "the real threats of the 21st century." In a Feb. 10, 2001, radio address, Bush said, "we must make sure our country itself is protected from attack from ballistic missiles and high-tech terrorists." On Feb. 27, in Bush's first address before a joint session of Congress, the new president delivered the clearest exposition of his thoughts on terrorism.

"Our nation also needs a clear strategy to confront the threats of the 21st century, threats that are more widespread and less certain. They range from terrorists who threaten with bombs to tyrants and rogue nations intent upon developing weapons of mass destruction," Bush said. "To protect our own people, our allies and friends, we must develop and deploy effective missile defenses."

During the spring and summer, Bush repeatedly pushed the missile-defense system - still not successfully tested - as the antidote to terror. He brought it up in conversations with Spanish president Jose Maria Aznar in Madrid; with Russian journalists on the eve of Bush's first meeting with Vladimir Putin and with Putin himself; with NATO leaders in Brussels and at the World Bank in Washington.

At the Genoa summit of western leaders in July - where, we now know, intelligence agencies feared a terrorist might try to slam an aircraft into the meeting - Bush pressed skeptical allies about going forward with "Star Wars" to fight terror.

Of course, there were other things on the president's mind. Like tax cuts. Bush promoted tax cuts or cutting taxes 81 times. He called for an end to the "death tax" - the inheritance tax levied on heirs to the wealthiest 2 percent of Americans - an additional 54 times. The president put in a word for health care 62 times.

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And there was always Saddam Hussein. Bush's first visit abroad, to Mexico, was dominated by news of renewed U.S. bombing of Iraqi targets. Days later, after his first chat with British Prime Minister Tony Blair at Camp David, Bush said they'd talked about keeping Hussein at bay. That was on Feb. 23, 2001.

It is possible that Bush was privately obsessed with terrorism and al-Qaida and chattered about it behind closed doors. It's just not likely. Presidents use public statements for a purpose: to promote their agenda and to prepare the public for what might come.

Bush is, by his own account, a plainspoken man. He says what he means and means what he says. He implores us often to take him at his word. And so we should.

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