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Talking Back...to Presidents, Dictators and Assorted Scoundrels

I come here tonight at such a crossroads for our country, both domestically and internationally, an intersection of domestic and international concerns. So it's wonderful for me to be here and let my hair down a little bit and explain why I think we've got some really serious challenges. One of the reasons I wrote *Talking Back* was precisely because I feel that we, in the news media, have to do a better job of holding ourselves and our government to account, both in foreign and domestic policy.

I wanted to look back and examine my own role. I went back over all of the transcripts of stories that I had written during the run-up to the Iraq war, for instance, and tried to ask myself, "Before 9/11 did we do enough? What was I, in particular, doing? What were my colleagues doing when we covered Colin Powell?" Some of you may have seen the former secretary's first interview since he left the State Department where he confessed, more or less, to Barbara Walters last week that he now views his presentation to the United Nations before the war as a permanent blot on his record of public service. Now, this is a man who served two tours of duty in Vietnam, was the deputy national security advisor, was the national security advisor when I first met him in the early Reagan years, was then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs under both Bush 41 and Bill Clinton and then, of course, served as secretary of state. So for him to say that he viewed that period as a blot on his record is certainly attention-getting, and it only reinforces my own concerns about the role that we all play—and I don't think any-

one is exempt.

Not to reach any judgment, because it's not my position to reach judgment about the war itself, but I think as an analyst I can speak to the way that the war has progressed, the occupation, the planning, or lack of planning, the deployment—certainly that is part of my role as

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a journalist. But more particularly, I write and examine what it is that happened before the war, and if I can take it back a little bit further, what happened before 9/11. I covered the White House when the World Trade Center came under attack in 1993 and one of the top White House officials in Bill Clinton's administration said to me after that attack, "We dodged the bullet, didn't we?" And they thought they'd dodged the bullet because there were far fewer casualties than anyone might have imagined and because the building itself did not come down. Well, that is part of the attitude that permitted all of us, both in government and out, to be far too relaxed about this spreading,

metastasizing Islamic fundamentalism.

I remember years and years ago I was speaking at the Foreign Policy Association in New York, one of your associated groups, with similarly interested citizens, in foreign policy. NBC correspondents and anchors participate every year in a Great Decisions lunch at the Foreign Policy Association. In that year, back in the '80s, a former colleague of mine, Garrick Utley, whom many of you may remember as the Chief Foreign Correspondent for CNN and before that as anchor on *Meet the Press* and NBC, was asked by the audience, "What are the issues that we're not paying enough attention to?" I was talking, I thought fairly knowledgeably, about the East-West conflict and arms control and the things that I really cared about, covering the Reagan summit with Mikhail Gorbachev, and Garrick said, "We're not paying enough attention to the rise of Islamic fundamentalists." He had traveled and seen it first hand and he was really [concerned] about that.

I think, the first network correspondent to write about Osama bin Laden was back in early 1997. Osama was eventually indicted *in absentia* for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Then, of course, we had the experience with the attacks on the embassies in Tanzania and in Nairobi and then the attack on the *USS Cole* in October 2000. Through all of this period we were writing about Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda but how seriously were we really paying attention?

Just to give you an example, when I

went back to look at a couple of things we had written on September 10, 2001, I had done a story on an important subject, but it was a domestic subject and the reason it was a domestic subject most likely was because we really weren't focused as much as we have been since 9/11 on foreign policies. The story that I

of the summer of 2001 until September 11.

What was happening on September 11? Well, within minutes of the first attack in our newsroom I started calling sources and two top intelligence officials said to me that it was terrorism, this was not an accident. It was apparent to them even before the second plane that this was, in fact, probably the work of Osama bin Laden. In going back over the transcripts, I said that to Tom Brokaw and Katie Couric in our coverage by 9:33 on that morning. So, it was no great mystery that this was the root cause, it's just that we really had been lulled into not thinking it was a direct threat to the homeland. It was hard to even imagine.

9/11 changed everything, and in looking back over the coverage of the Iraq war and what preceded the Iraq war I think it creates an obvious sense, of patriotism and an emotional response in the news media, if you will. Rallying around the flag. That's understandable. But did we suspend disbelief to too great an extent in analyzing the claims by various parties as to what the predicate for war was?

Also looking back, I get a lot of questions about this, and on a radio program earlier today, a lot of hostile questions about this. I have to tell you that the French intelligence service and the Russian intelligence service and Hans Blix and certainly David Kay, the former weapons inspectors, all believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Why? Because it is very hard rationally to understand how and why he would have forgone the potential of \$300 billion in oil revenues over more than a decade if he did not plan to hide something, because it would have been so easy to fully meet the U.N. resolutions and get rid of the sanctions. Certainly the United States had very little support,

except for Great Britain, of course, for continuing the sanctions, and sanctions were really at risk when this administration took over. Saddam Hussein did not disclose in December 2002, with that declaration which was so patently false to every objective observer, including Hans Blix, who denounced it at the United Nations in the days and weeks to follow. It wasn't really a mystery about weapons of mass destruction, we thought, the real policy question was a bigger and more profound question, which is what to do about it. If he's cheating, if you're assuming that he cheats, which even most of the Democratic leaders in Congress assumed, was it a right choice to go to war or should we have continued the inspections? What were the policy choices? And that's where I feel that we failed to fully explore the many options during that period.

Now, what I try to deal with in the book and what I wanted to talk to you about tonight was the way foreign policy was being conducted by this administration, because I think it's instructive. Very clearly, as Bob Woodward has written in *Bush at War* and others have exposed, there was a headlong rush to do something about Iraq. Woodward reported accurately that, in fact, at that very first meeting on September 14 at Camp David there were people from the Pentagon—Paul Wolfowitz if not Rumsfeld himself—who were initially pushing for an Iraq option, not an Afghanistan option. And we now know from all of the commissions and reports since, that there were people at the State Department who were being gradually marginalized. And that is also a story that I try to tell in the book. How in the Middle East and other areas, how Colin Powell, for all of his power and popularity, became gradually marginalized because the national security process was so heavily weighted towards the so-called hardliners' towards the vice president, Rumsfeld, the national security advisor, now our secretary of state, who were pretty much letting the



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wrote on September 10, 2001 was about a rising trend of abuse of teenagers—run-away children who were being swept up into pornography rings. It was a major domestic issue and it was a focused story in Seattle. Looking back, as serious a subject as that is, I have to ask myself why, as chief foreign affairs correspondent, I was filling in for someone else and doing that story. But more damaging is the record of that summer, the overall record, because that was the summer of Chandra Levy, and I was assigned periodically to write stories about the missing intern, the California congressman, whether or not there was some connection—which, of course, was never proved—but that was the tabloid-mania

predominance of evidence and access to the president rest with the vice president. So, it's a fascinating tale that has brought the presidency to a very interesting stage.

Now we have a pretty dramatic shift in foreign policy and the way it is being conducted. We saw what happened with

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Korea in the last forty-eight hours, the on-again, off-again agreement with the six-party talks. When Bill Clinton left the presidency he made a choice which he and I discussed after he left the presidency. He had to make the choice, he felt, that he could do either North Korean diplomacy or the Middle East. Yasser Arafat persuaded him that there was a real payoff to be gained by Middle East diplomacy so Clinton focused his last two weeks with his intensive Camp David process to try to reach an agreement, which he thought was in the bag. Well, Arafat disappointed him. We recall Abba Eban when he said so famously that, "Arafat never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity." The track record of Yasser Arafat was one of the great disappointments of the Clinton presidency. So he did not go to Pyongyang as Madeleine Albright and others had been suggesting. It was also exacerbated by the fact that the Bush-Gore election had not been decided and Clinton felt that it really would be challenging to this country during that whole process, and challenging politically for him, to have left the country, especially to go to Pyongyang, which was pretty contro-

versial. So, North Korea was not decided.

At the beginning of the Bush administration we saw this change of diplomacy and, with great fanfare, the declaration of the Axis of Evil countries. So, North Korea and Iran were not subject to negotiation in all of the initiatives, started by people in the Clinton administration, but initiatives that Colin Powell wanted to pursue in North Korea as well were almost immediately negated by the White House. It was that period when the South Korean president came in March of 2001, and in the Oval Office Powell was contradicted and had to go out and tell the press corps that his stated position as secretary of state was wrong and that there were going to be no further negotiations with North Korea.

Now, you can certainly argue that the North Koreans had cheated, they had misled the Clinton administration, and had continued to develop nuclear weapons, and so that validated the Bush approach. That said, it is the first of several instances where the secretary of state found that he did not speak for the president. The most obvious that followed was with Ariel Sharon. I was in Sharon's back yard waiting for Powell and Sharon to come out and have a news briefing after their first meeting in Jerusalem when my cell phone rang. It was my colleague at the White House telling me that Ari Fleischer, the press secretary, had just held a press briefing and he completely contradicted the policies that Powell was there to try to leverage with Sharon. It was another humiliation, and it made it that much more difficult to be personally engaged in Middle East diplomacy.

Powell was criticized towards the end of his tenure for not doing shuttle diplomacy, for not being engaged enough, but I think that the roots of that really were in those early months of the Bush administration when he felt that the vice president and the defense secretary had

better access to the president and really spoke for the president and put forth his views more than the secretary of state.

Powell made one final appeal in August/September 2002, going to the president one-on-one and pleading with him to go to the United Nations, and he did succeed in a dramatic speech on September 12, 2002 to the United Nations when the president had agreed in his war council to ask for a resolution. This is something that Tony Blair wanted desperately and needed politically. Powell had persuaded Bush to go up against the hardliners, go to the United Nations, for an actual fit with the timetable of the war planners because they needed time for deployment. So it did not really bother them that they were going to the United Nations for what they thought would be a fairly useless exercise because they didn't want to attack during Ramadan in November, they wanted to wait until the spring, so it fit their timetable with getting things repositioned.

But when the president got up to speak at the United Nations that day and was reading from the teleprompter and Powell was sitting in the audience in the General Assembly, he did not read the line that was in the prepared text about seeking a U.N. resolution, about seeking approval and permission of the world body, and Powell could only imagine that his rivals in the administration had gotten to the president to change his mind. But George Bush remembered his commitment and so he ad-libbed it a few sentences later and did live up to the commitment to go to the United Nations. We suddenly saw the way that the whole U.N. debate evolved, and it was not a great moment for diplomacy.

But what we're seeing now is a change, what with Condi Rice [going] to Europe, and there was a lot of hand kissing with Chirac and a lot of hugging with Schroeder. Aren't things interesting in Germany these days? Rice said that the time for diplomacy is now, and we're hear-

ing a very different message from the administration. Clearly they cannot pursue their policies in the Middle East and Iraq without support from Europe, and I think they've learned that lesson.

I have been trying to examine the role of the media in all these issues because I think that we've learned some very important lessons, and what we're seeing now is that the president's Iraq policy is, indeed, threatened not just by the facts on the ground but by declining support here at home. The polling is perilous right now for the president, both in foreign and domestic policy, and his agenda is at stake. His first initiatives, with Congress coming back, are not going to be the repeal of the estate tax; some of his economic policies are now in question not due to any particular flaw in Iraq, but because of the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, and the focus now is the administration's response—the delayed response [to Hurricane Katrina].

Which brings me to the work of my colleagues in the Gulf. In any examination of the press and of its flaws and our shared responsibilities for some of the things that have not been reported as aggressively as we would like, and our reluctance, I say that collectively, to talk back to the people in power, we could not, I don't think, fault my colleagues in all the networks for the role that they are playing right now. I have to tell you I have never been prouder of Brian Williams, our anchor, and other colleagues in the Gulf, and I don't say that to just brag about NBC because it also goes to what Ted Koppel did on *Nightline*, what Anderson Cooper has done on CNN and Shepard Smith on Fox. People were on the ground and were witnessing horrors that were not at all matched by the official pronouncements either from Baton Rouge or Washington or from the mayor of New Orleans.

So I'm not here to suggest that there is fault in any particular corner; it is a

collective failure. It is the failure to take care of our most vulnerable citizens. If news anchors and print and television journalists of all kinds do not describe what we are seeing, the pictures we are taking, the things we see that we can't even show you on television, if we don't do that, then we really have no role in this society. When Brian was questioning the former head of FEMA, Mike Brown, and was standing there when we were all seeing the video of what was happening at the Convention Center, what was happening around the Convention Center—there was no food, insufficient water, no supplies—and the former head of FEMA said, "It's very disturbing. I'm only learning about it now," that's just mind-boggling.

The reason why I think we all have to be concerned, to bring it back to 9/11 and our shared horror at what happened to all of us as a nation, is that when we created—"we" as the government—created Homeland Security the whole point was to federalize first responders. Not that local people wouldn't still be responsible; the City of New Orleans had to have an emergency evacuation plan on file with FEMA, which now means that FEMA is part of Homeland Security. That is a federal role.

Now I know from talking to Washington officials in the Bush administration, they feel very strongly that the governor resisted letting the federalized National Guard take over and letting the 82nd Airborne come in, that the mayor didn't properly use the school buses (we saw the floating school buses). The fact that he said to Tim Russert on *Meet the Press* he didn't know that there were 900 passenger seats on Amtrak at his disposal on the Saturday before the storm hit: How could he not have known that? Who was responsible in the local government for not telling him that? But I still go back to asking, "Why didn't the government, the Washington Homeland Security people, say to the mayor of New Orleans,

72 hours in advance—or longer in advance, because we were all watching the storm for six days—What is your plan? You filed a plan, how far have you come to meet the plan? Do you need more buses? Do you need trains? Why didn't anyone at any level of government figure that the people being left behind were the people who need their checks? And if you looked at the calendar you would know that people would be reluctant to go without their checks, even if they had gasoline or cars, which they didn't have. So, you really have to ask yourselves how vulnerable are we? Is FEMA ready for this next storm that is progressing and gaining strength as it goes out to the Gulf of Mexico but can then turn back? That's

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the role that we need to play.

I write about this because I've been raised as a journalist to keep my own thoughts to myself, to not respond emotionally to events, to speak in the third person. It was very hard to write a book where I try to dig deeper and talk more personally about what it felt like to be in Jonestown in Guyana, and how I had a delayed reaction to it much later because I wasn't permitting myself, within the conventions of journalism in which I was raised, to even acknowledge my feelings. I do have concerns about my colleagues

who have been working these extraordinary hours under terrible conditions and being affected by it—that is our job. The real concern has to be with the people in that region and for rebuilding provisions.

So the bad polls for the president right now I think, reflect more concerns over gas prices than this problem with the delayed response to Katrina. I think that he has challenges because of Iraq. It's very early in his second term and there are many, many tools at his disposal, including personal diplomacy. He made with his fifth visit [to the Gulf of

Mexico] today. But we're seeing pretty big changes—Korea, Iran, the very strident speech from the new president of Iran at the United Nations, and domestic challenges here at home, certainly economic challenges due to the disaster of this first hurricane, and we don't know what the impact on the oil refineries from this second storm will be.

It's a time when we need the World Affairs Council and involved citizens such as yourself, and more than ever we need journalists willing to talk back to power and challenge authority. We need

people to be smarter, we need these wonderful high school students to get all the support and help that they need with scholarship aid to go to fine universities and become the next leaders, the next generation. I want to thank all of you – who care about public policy, who care about our electoral system.

I want to thank all of you for caring as you do about our society.

Thank you all very much.

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