

A Terrible Use of Terror

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, September 15, 2004

Last week, Vice President Cheney made a terrible use of terror, a political manipulation of tragedy and fear. He shocked thoughtful Americans by declaring that a vote for John Kerry is a vote "to get hit again" by terrorists. No one has ever accused Cheney of failing to speak his mind-after all, he cursed a senator who brought up the sore subject of Halliburton's no-bid contracts. But this incident stands out. Cheney has taken Kerry-bashing to a new extreme.

What's worse, his approach to fighting terrorism is dangerously misguided. Cheney stressed the need to "go on the offense" and fight terrorists abroad, not at home. This chorus, sung loud and long at the Republican convention, obscures half the truth. Going on the offense doesn't give license to ignore our defense. No football team has ever won the Super Bowl with a great quarterback but poor defensive line. And no country has ever been able to safeguard national security by launching wars offshore while leaving itself unprotected at home.

Yet a non-strategy of defenseless offense has been the hallmark of this administration. President Bush adamantly opposed the creation of the Department of Homeland Security when Senator Lieberman first proposed it after September 11, but in the face of overwhelming bipartisan support, he finally backed the idea. Likewise, Bush opposed the creation of the 9/11 Commission to investigate what made us vulnerable and prevent future attacks. Once again, faced with strong Congressional and public support for the Commission, especially from the surviving families, he relented, although he obstructed the Commission's work. He refused to turn over the August 2001 Presidential Daily Briefing warning of an imminent strike on American soil (which he eventually provided to the Commission, after sustained public outcry) and refused to testify before the Commission (which he also eventually did, sort of-he testified only in private, and only with Cheney at his side, and only for an hour).

Not only have Bush and Cheney tried to hide past failures. They haven't allocated the resources necessary to make homeland security more than just a buzzword. In *America the Vulnerable: How Our Government is Failing to Protect Us From Terrorism*, security expert Stephen Flynn presents startling facts. Although the CIA has concluded that weapons of mass destruction are most likely to enter the United States by sea, the federal government is spending more every three days to finance the war in Iraq than it has provided over the past three years to improve the security of US commercial seaports.

Port security is scary. But surely we're paying attention to nuclear, biological, and chemical agents, right? Wrong. Flynn says the Bush administration has slashed funds to dispose of radioactive materials, which could be used in constructing dirty bombs within the United States. And no federal program is monitoring how lethal germs are handled.

In front of cameras, politicians are quick to evoke the memory of the police officers and firefighters who died September 11th and praise first responders on the front lines for securing the homeland. But we need more than rhetoric. The effects of massive tax cuts for the wealthy have trickled down, leaving state and local governments strapped for cash, unable to provide police and fire departments adequate resources to address the terrorist threat on our streets and in our neighborhoods.

Cheney's accusation that a Kerry administration would leave us less safe than this administration is wrong on one more count. Going on the offense implies going after the right opponent. Today, our number one enemy is Al Qaeda, which had no substantial links to Iraq, at least until we invaded (now, it's become a worldwide reception center for terrorists). War in Iraq isn't War on Terror. Saying over and over that it is doesn't make it so.

In the 1970s, Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty was gutted when American coffers were used, instead, to fund Vietnam. Here we are again. The War on Terror has taken second place to deposing Saddam Hussein. Saddam was a wretched tyrant for 22 million people, but it's public policy nonsense to argue that the hundreds of billions of dollars and more than a thousand young lives we're spending in a failing military operation were warranted. As for security? After killing thousands of innocent civilians, enraging millions of Middle Eastern young men, exhausting our military, and alienating our allies, we're more vulnerable, not less. Let's hope Americans will be thoughtful in the weeks ahead, and able to separate fact from deadly fiction.