

How Does the Saudi Relationship With the Bush Family Affect U.S. Foreign Policy?

dialogues

How Does the Saudi Relationship With the Bush Family Affect U.S. Foreign Policy?

Clinton's Saudi policies were no different than Bush's.

By Rachel Bronson and Craig Unger

Updated Thursday, July 8, 2004, at 12:59 PM PT

From: Craig Unger

To: Rachel Bronson

Subject: Bush Has Given the Saudis a Free Pass

Posted Tuesday, July 6, 2004, at 9:47 AM PT

Rachel,

As far as I'm concerned, the elephant in the living room in American politics is that never before has a president of the United States been tied so closely to a foreign power that harbors and supports our mortal enemies. I'm talking about the Bush family relationship with the Saudis, of course. I believe that insofar as the Saudis have played a key role in fostering Islamist terrorism, Bush is compromised in leading a real war against terror.

Don't get me wrong. I understand that we're an oil-dependent nation that has to have a strong relationship with the oil-rich Saudis. But that shouldn't mean we have to give the Saudis a free pass. Bush has done exactly that and continues to—even though he is posing as Mr. Macho Tough Guy Wartime President.

How are the Bushes compromised? In *House of Bush, House of Saud*, I trace more than \$1.4 billion in contracts and investments from the House of Saud to companies in which the Bushes and their friends have had key roles. (Michael Moore uses this figure in *Fahrenheit 9/11*.) Saudi money bailed out Harken Energy when George W. Bush was on its board of directors. That's how he made his fortune. Bush 41 and James Baker traveled to Saudi Arabia repeatedly for the Carlyle Group to woo Saudi investors and win contracts. The Bush family remains close to Prince Bandar, even though Bandar's wife actually funded two 9/11 hijackers—indirectly and inadvertently, of course. Indirect and inadvertent—that's the Saudi way.

Has it ever occurred to the Bushes that the Saudi families they consort with contributed—indirectly and inadvertently—to the same Islamic charities cited as funneling money to terrorists? I doubt it.

Let's focus on the most glaring favor the Bush administration did for the Saudis, which I discuss both in my book and in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Right after the horrifying events of Sept. 11, when there were still restrictions on U.S. airspace, the White House authorized the evacuation of at least 142 people, most of them Saudi. About two dozen were members of the Bin Laden family.

Let's think about what this really means. The biggest crime in American history had just taken place. A massive criminal investigation was under way. These flights should have been a focus of that investigation—not a privilege granted to friends of the Bushes. I don't mean to suggest that the people on board were necessarily guilty of anything, but many of them certainly should have been the subjects of serious interviews done through formal investigative procedures. There is no evidence that happened. But it is unquestionable that the Saudis were given White House authorization to fly.

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Perhaps it was merely grotesque incompetence, but at some horribly ugly moment in the Bush White House, someone made a decision about whether to really try to get to the bottom of this horrifying crime or to perform a favor of convenience for Bush's Saudi friends. Can anyone possibly defend this? Can you, Rachel?

Craig

From: Rachel Bronson

To: Craig Unger

Subject: Did Bush Give the Saudis a Free Pass?

Posted Tuesday, July 6, 2004, at 10:25 AM PT

I'm looking forward to the opportunity provided by **Slate** to really dig deeply into the issue of U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia. I read your book carefully and have followed closely much of your commentary.

Let's get right to the heart of your concern. You write:

I understand that we're an oil-dependent nation that has to have a strong relationship with the oil-rich Saudis. But that shouldn't mean we have to give the Saudis a free pass.

I agree. But I'm not sure what free pass Bush has given them. I think the Bush administration has made a series of very serious and consequential mistakes, especially when it comes to the postwar planning in Iraq and how it is fighting the war on terror. But where is the free pass for the Saudis?

You mention that Saudis were allowed to leave the United States soon after Sept. 11. In Michael Moore's film, he interviews an FBI agent who was very disappointed that Saudis on those flights weren't carefully screened. But here's what a 9/11 staff commission report says about these flights (the 9/11 commission reports have been considered very fair and are often critical of the Bush administration, so I take their views pretty seriously):

The Saudi flights were screened by law enforcement officials, primarily the FBI, to ensure that people on these flights did not pose a threat to national security, and that nobody of interest to the FBI with regard to the 9/11 investigation was allowed to leave the country.

Twenty-two of the 26 people on the flight that took most of the Bin Ladens out of the country were interviewed by the FBI, and "many were asked detailed questions." Those on the flights had their names checked against the FBI database, and there was no suspicious activity, at least as far as the 9/11 commission is concerned, associated with those names. Richard Clarke, hardly a fan of the administration and hardly a lightweight when it comes to counterterrorism, knew of the flights and their passengers. Everything was handled "in a professional manner."

So, while I'm willing to be convinced that there was something underhanded going on, I haven't yet seen anything that would convince me.

Is Bush compromised by his Saudi money? \$1.4 billion *is* a lot of money. But what did Bush do that other presidents would not have done, given the money he received? The fact that Bush 43 declared war against Iraq actually argues against the idea of Bush being in the Saudis' pocket. The Saudis were way out in front arguing against this war. They didn't want it; they worried about the post-conflict environment, about chaos on their border if things went badly, about a democratically elected Shiite neighbor if things went well. Yes, Saudi Arabia provided the United States with enormous help in the war, but they didn't want it. They, for some reason, thought we could instigate a coup in Iraq, something I still think was

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entirely unrealistic, given that we had already tried that and it hadn't worked. Operation Iraqi Freedom went directly against a key Saudi Arabian foreign policy preference. That hardly suggests that Bush is in their pocket.

Finally, I believe the focus on the Bushes starts the story much too late.

The Saudis have been close friends of many Republican administrations. The Republicans, after all, are a party of big business, and oil is a heck of a big business. Adnan Khashoggi, an infamous world-renowned Saudi arms dealer, was a big supporter of Richard Nixon. In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia had extraordinarily good relations with the Reagan administration. Saudi Arabia has been closely involved with U.S. politics for decades. Bush may have taken it to a new level, but it is still not at all clear to me that it has mattered all that much.

Rachel

From: Craig Unger

To: Rachel Bronson

Subject: Entering the End-Game Stage

Posted Tuesday, July 6, 2004, at 2:00 PM PT

After months on the talk show circuit, it's a rare pleasure to encounter someone who is not from the Jerry Springer school of politics. That said, I will try to stick to the facts.

It's not hard to argue that the Bush administration has given a pass to the Saudis. Consider the confirmation hearings of Robert Jordan as U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia just 10 days after 9/11. "Tragedies of this magnitude show us who our real friends are. ... " Jordan said. "We seek to build an international coalition against terrorism. They have answered that call superbly."

Not a word, of course, about the role of Saudis in the attacks that killed 3,000 people. Or how wealthy Saudis helped fund terrorism.

Jordan, a former lawyer at Baker Botts (that's James Baker's firm), was accompanied at the hearing by another Baker Botts partner who helped expand the firm's Middle East practice. That's a basic point that my book and *Fahrenheit 9/11* share—cracking down on the Saudi role in terror takes a back seat to oil-industry interests.

Jordan's sentiments have been echoed repeatedly by the Bush White House. There's been enormous Saudi resistance toward investigating Saudi charities that fund terrorism, but nothing about that from the White House. In Ron Suskind's *The Price of Loyalty*, former Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neill makes it clear that the Saudis have not been cooperative.

In addition, every time the Saudis say they're going to crack down on al-Qaida, something happens that shows the Saudis are really being torn in two directions at once. For example, after various al-Qaida terrorist attacks, Interior Minister Prince Nayef and Crown Prince Abdullah have actually pointed the finger at Zionists rather than at al-Qaida. But nary a peep out of the White House.

At least you're agnostic about the Saudi evacuation. The 9/11 commission has been tougher on the administration than I expected, but remember that it's a bipartisan commission that is supposed to come up with a consensus—not a great recipe if you're looking for truth. Not surprisingly, there are divisions within the commission on partisan lines. Not surprisingly, their interim report on the Saudi evacuation is deeply unsatisfying.

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Let me give just one example. The report says that the first Saudi flight took place on Sept. 14. But the first flight actually took place a day earlier, on Sept. 13, when restrictions on private planes were still in place. That means it took place when permission to fly was required from the highest levels of our government. I gave them this information months ago. Since then it has been corroborated by airport authorities in Tampa, Fla. When the commission knowingly omits crucial information, that suggests politics is involved.

Then there's Richard Clarke. True, he is a fierce critic of the Bush White House who has said that the Saudi evacuation was correct. But Clarke is also a brilliant and savvy bureaucrat who has been candid in saying he was part of that decision. Do you really expect him to characterize what he did as stupid or wrong? When I interviewed him, he told me that he granted approval for the Saudi departure contingent on it being vetted by the FBI. In the end, he said, "I have no idea if they did a good job." Given the FBI's sorry history, I have a hard time believing in their infallibility. One of the commission's findings is that the FBI did not even check the Saudi passengers against their terror watch list—an astonishing and horrifying oversight just a few days after 9/11.

Finally, there's the Iraq war. On this score, I agree with you completely. George W. Bush is not his father's son, and as a result I believe the Bush-Saud relationship has entered the end-game stage. I bet Bush Sr. and James Baker are secretly horrified at what young Bush has done.

I also believe Bush's policies are leaving the United States with the worst of both worlds. On the one hand, we are giving the Saudis a pass on terrorism. On the other, thanks to the Iraq war, no moderate Arab leader can risk being friends with us. The U.S.-Saudi relationship may be coming to an end. And when it comes to our energy needs, that could leave us running on empty.

Craig

From: Rachel Bronson

To: Craig Unger

Subject: Cold War Blinders Are the Problem

Posted Wednesday, July 7, 2004, at 7:57 AM PT

You'll have to forgive me, but I still don't see how terror has taken a back seat to oil interests. Michael Moore tries to make the point, but he never really connects the dots. What I do see is that Cold War blinders—not oil interests—prevented this administration from taking terrorism seriously. The administration came to power believing that terrorism was more of a Clinton obsession than a national security threat. We were the big superpower. We had to worry about potential peer competitors like China and a possibly resurgent Russia, not annoying little asymmetric threats like terrorism. Clinton administration officials couldn't get anyone in the incoming Bush administration to focus on terrorism. Because of oil? No, I think because they had all left power during the Reagan and Bush I eras and had their Cold War glasses on, and they weren't prepared for the new threat of the day. They willfully ignored the threat because it was a Clinton-era problem.

On the debate about whether the Saudis left the country on Sept. 13 or Sept. 14, your book does dig into this question. But according to the 9/11 commission report, "[W]e have found no credible evidence that any chartered flights of Saudi Arabian nationals departed the United States before the reopening of national airspace." Clark has come out very, very hard on the FBI, and so your posting makes a lot of sense, and as you point out, the FBI might not have even checked the requisite databases. But the 9/11 commission has gone back and run those names and found that even if the FBI had done so, the names would

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have been given an OK. I'll stick with the 9/11 commission on this one. But even if one doesn't, the problem would be an incompetent FBI, not oil wealth and greed.

On Ambassador Jordan: I think you're identifying a larger problem with our ambassadors, which is that across the board they are increasingly political appointees (i.e., friends of the president) rather than being longtime foreign service officers. Margaret Tutwiler, now head of public diplomacy, was made ambassador to Morocco without ever having worked in the foreign service (although she did work at the State Department in public affairs under Bush the father). Wyche Fowler, Robert Jordan's predecessor, was made ambassador to Saudi Arabia under Clinton after serving 16 years in the House and Senate. So, I think you've hit upon something. I don't have too much of a problem with an ambassador to Saudi Arabia having a strong background in oil. It's an asset. But we should demand that our ambassadors come from within the foreign service and have served at length in the region to which they are assigned. Secretary of State Powell made that a priority when he took his current position, and I support him on it.

The fact that Bush the father and son have pursued very different policies toward Iraq suggests to me that this isn't all about the Bushes and their connection to oil and the Saudis. If it were, you'd expect to see the same behavior. Unless, of course, you argue that Bush the father *didn't* overthrow Saddam because of reasons of oil, and Bush the son *did* for reasons of oil, in which case it's not a very interesting argument.

But here's a larger issue for U.S. policymakers: You say that the U.S.-Saudi relationship could be entering the end-game. On that, we agree. Too many Saudi and American officials give the impression that this relationship can coast on autopilot. In fact, it is a Cold War relationship, built on a Cold War rationale. Left to coast on autopilot, the serious problems in the relationship could cause the relationship to collapse now that the Cold War is over. After all, Saudi Arabia is a country that doesn't let women drive, uses the Quran as its constitution, and beheads people. There's not a lot to keep us working together. Oil interests alone will not keep this relationship glued together.

But here's my question to you: Is it good for the United States and the world if the U.S.-Saudi Arabian relationship collapses? The thought terrifies me. With Saudi Arabia and the United States on different sides of a war, we will indeed enter a true clash of civilizations. We are not there yet. But a real clash of civilizations will be ugly and extraordinarily dangerous. I believe we need to find a way to both work on the same side.

Skeptics will say this can never happen; we're already on opposite sides. I disagree. Since May 2003, when Saudi Arabia experienced its own terrorist attacks, the ruling family has come down hard on terrorism. The most radical clerics have been rounded up—by some counts, up to 2,000 people. Charities are now either shut down or have been reorganized so that they can be closely monitored. Anecdotal evidence that I've collected suggests that in Pakistan and the West Bank, officials see a drop in Saudi money to Hamas and Pakistan's *madrassahs*. There are now running gun battles in the streets of Riyadh between al-Qaida and Saudi forces. Even though the Saudi crown prince and other members of the ruling family have tried to pin some of this on Israel and Zionists—a fact that I agree the Bush administration should come down harder against, because it's so absurd and only fosters hate—they are going after al-Qaida cells and charities, much as we've been asking them to. The Saudis most certainly haven't just blamed the terrorism on Zionists and then swept it under the rug. There is now unprecedented information-sharing between Saudi Arabia and U.S. intelligence services. Do we need to stay on top of this? Absolutely. Will Saudi Arabia get distracted? They could if we, too, lose our focus, as we are prone to do.

Administration officials have become much more positive toward Saudi Arabia since May 2003. Appropriately, they were not terribly generous toward the Saudis before then,

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suggesting the "free pass" simply wasn't there. At no point before May 2003 did the administration come out in a coordinated fashion and try to stop the constant attacks on the kingdom in the press. After 2003, when Saudi behavior changed, the administration began making much more positive statements. It would be useful to know what you'd need to see in order to believe Saudi Arabia is *not* getting a free pass.

The problems we see today are a product of policy choices from the 1980s that were left to fester by everyone in the 1990s, through sins of omission and commission, a point I'd be happy to expand upon in our next exchange.

Rachel

From: Craig Unger

To: Rachel Bronson

Subject: Family Ties

Posted Wednesday, July 7, 2004, at 1:03 PM PT

Your point is well taken that many Bush administration figures had their Cold War blinders on when they came into office. Condi Rice certainly comes to mind.

But after 9/11? Put yourself in Bush's shoes. It's Sept. 13, 2001. Three thousand people are dead. You're meeting with Prince Bandar on the Truman Balcony at the White House. You both light up Cohibas. You have two possible ways of dealing with this meeting.

On the one hand, Bandar has been friends with your dad for 20 years. Mom just loves it when he drops by Kennebunkport, takes over the kitchen, and cooks up a storm. She calls him Bandar Bush and even allows Bandar—and only Bandar—to smoke those awful stogies in the house. Bar doesn't do that for just *anyone*. Bandar stuck by Dad through Iran-Contra, ran covert ops, and even went to war on the same side as him in the Gulf in 1991. He was so great when your dad lost his job to Clinton. James Baker, who gave you your first summer job when you were a cheerleader at Andover, has made many tens of millions off his deals with the Saudis in the Carlyle Group. Your dad regularly traveled to Saudi Arabia for them as well—and the Saudis really came through with investments and contracts—\$1.4 billion worth! So one possibility is that you can meet with your old family friend Prince Bandar and ask him to help out.

On the other hand, your counterterrorism analysts—holdovers from the Clinton era who you really never meet with—have said that 15 out of 19 hijackers are Saudi, that Osama Bin Laden is Saudi, and that al-Qaida's origins and financing are Saudi. The House of Saud is the guardian of Wahhabi Islam, and they've let the militant Islamists get completely out of control. They even effectively financed terrorism in hopes of buying off al-Qaida, as they did other terrorist groups. So, based on this information, you could decide to get tough with the Saudis.

As Michael Moore puts it, "Who's your Daddy?"

I've never believed in a conspiracy about the Saudi evacuation. I've felt that a "groupthink" about the Saudis emerged from the Bush-Baker crowd, and it was all part of a stew that included crony capitalism and rank incompetence. President Bush owes both his personal and political fortunes to the Saudis. How could he guess that alliances with the Saudis overseen by his father and James Baker failed to take note of the terrorist threat from Wahhabi Islamists? His father and James Baker were *giants*, the most powerful men on earth. Surely, it was not possible that Prince Bandar and Princess Haifa, such longtime friends of the family, could possibly have been connected to the attacks.

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And so, rather than say a word to the Saudis, Bush immediately went after Iraq—which had nothing to do with 9/11. Having knowledge about oil is, as you say, not a bad thing. However, sharing financial interests with the Saudis that blind you to the dark side of Wahhabi terror—that's disaster.

I also take issue with your unquestioning acceptance of the statements of the 9/11 commission. Sure, their report will be perceived as authoritative and will be said to be reasonably tough on Bush. But the whole concept of bipartisan investigative bodies is wildly overrated. With a few exceptions—Watergate—it's like teaming up the best oncologists in the world with their esteemed colleagues at Philip Morris to get to the bottom of what causes lung cancer. The real goal of these commissions is to achieve an acceptable political consensus—which is very different from getting at the truth.

The sentence you cite from the commission is a case in point:

[W]e have found no credible evidence that any chartered flights of Saudi Arabian nationals departed the United States before the reopening of national airspace.

Let me explain. I never suggested that the Saudis *left the United States* before the reopening of airspace. Instead, I reported that the Saudi flights began *domestically* when there were still restrictions on airspace.

Remember the Sept. 13 flight from Tampa to Lexington? The one that the commission conveniently overlooked. That flight, the first one in the Saudi evacuation operation, required—and got—authorization from the White House. That's what's important. Sure, the entire evacuation operation took many days, and during that period restrictions on airspace were lifted. But the larger point is that the White House gave the Saudis a pass to fly when there were still restrictions on airspace and the rubble at the World Trade Center was very much ablaze. That point is absolutely incontrovertible and obfuscated by the commission's statement. What they write is completely true—but utterly misleading. And worse, it is intentionally misleading. This is exactly the kind of conclusion that you get from a politically compromised investigative body.

Of course, this statement and others like them make their way into the press and become part of the conventional wisdom about how the Saudi evacuation was just another conspiracy theory. By the way, I deal with a number of similar misconceptions in more depth on my [Web site](#), including *Newsweek's* error-filled reporting on the subject.

Let me throw the ball back in your court. I don't know if you share my assessment, but I think 9/11 probably would not have happened had there been no Saudi Arabia. Can you give any examples of Bush being tough on them?

One last note: I think you are being overly generous to Bush by congratulating him for not trying "to stop the constant attacks on the kingdom in the press." Wow! Bush didn't tear up the First Amendment. What a great guy! (And be honest, Rachel. Those Pentagon neocons were *kvelling* over the Saudi-terrorist revelations! Where do you think the leaks came from?)

Craig

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From: Rachel Bronson

To: Craig Unger

Subject: 9/11 Delayed an Attack on Iraq

Posted Thursday, July 8, 2004, at 6:35 AM PT

Craig,

You've raised a number of important issues, and it'll be hard to discuss each in the depth that they deserve. However, on the point of the Sept. 13 meeting that President Bush had with Prince Bandar: Michael Moore also makes a lot out of this, referring to the prince and the president smoking their cigars together in the ashes of the Pentagon.

Let's just make sure the facts are right. The 9/13 meeting was planned before 9/11. You may recall that over the summer of 2001, the Saudi and American governments were engaged in a rip-roaring fight over Bush's policy toward Israel. In August 2001, the Saudi crown prince threatened to sever relations. Bush responded with a letter to the crown prince stating that he believed the Palestinians should have a state, something he repeated publicly in June 2002. The proposal was stimulated by the Saudi threat to break relations, but also by escalating violence that was threatening to plunge the region into chaos, as well as increasing pressure inside the United States for the president to "do something." The Sept. 13 meeting was set up to talk about Israel/Palestinian issues. That agenda was obviously scrapped after 9/11. There were more immediate problems to speak about.

You paint a very nefarious picture of what they actually spoke about, referring to Barbara Bush's cooking and love for Bandar. But wouldn't you hope that immediately after Sept. 11, the president would summon the ambassador from Saudi Arabia to find out why 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi, determine whether the attack was state-sponsored, and, if not, to find out what information the Saudis had on these guys, what they intended to do about it, what they knew of Bin Laden's whereabouts, determine whether the Saudis will be helpful or not, begin brainstorming over how to handle it, etc. I certainly would. Would it have been better if they hadn't met? Wouldn't that have been giving the Saudis "a pass?"

Before 9/11, considerable funding, much of it from the Gulf and much of that from Saudi Arabia, went into Afghanistan and to radical cells across the globe. Of this, there is very little question. During the 1980s, the United States and Saudi Arabia poured about \$3 billion into Afghanistan. Three billion dollars!

After the end of the Cold War, Bush the father turned his attention elsewhere, notably to the unification of Germany and establishing workable relations with Russia. Somalia was the failed state that received any remaining attention. Afghanistan was left awash in weapons. Saudi Arabia allowed money to continue to flow in. They believed it was the only way to control politically what was going on. We believed we could just walk away from the mess. Neither side was right, and the consequences were very serious.

Clinton started to get very concerned about Afghanistan and al-Qaida toward the end of his tenure. The key question for me is what happened after 9/11. For the first 18 months, the Saudis moved slowly. After that, they got serious. I hold them accountable for not acting more quickly.

But they are now moving in the right direction. The Bush administration must stay on them, but they have come to realize that it's in their own self-interest to crack down on terrorism.

On your question of would 9/11 have happened without Saudi Arabia, al-Qaida would not have been well-financed without Gulf money, much of it from Saudi Arabia. The Taliban would not have been in power to harbor Bin Laden without Pakistan's military support. Osama Bin Laden would not have tapped such a core if the United States had invaded Iraq

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in 1997 (when the Clinton administration had planes in the air headed to attack Iraq, even had Syrian support, and turned the planes back when Saddam agreed to let weapons inspectors back in), or in 1998 (instead of bombing for four days in what became known as Operation Desert Fox), and then gotten its troops out of the kingdom. Al-Qaida would not have been so pervasive if many countries didn't turn a blind eye to them for years. Saudi Arabia is a major player in all this, but I'm more interested in what their policies have been since we've all come to realize the horrors of global terrorism. Richard Clarke realized it before most. But it was his job to focus on counterterrorism.

I'm not sure what exactly you're saying about Iraq and 9/11. Are you saying Bush attacked Iraq so he didn't have to discuss terrorism with Saudi Arabia? As I've said in prior postings, the Saudis didn't want an Iraq war. The war was no favor to them. For me, Iraq was never about the war on terror. Many in the Bush administration were gunning for Iraq before they took office. You only have to look back to a letter from 1998, arguing for then-President Clinton to take a harder line against Iraq (i.e., promote regime change). Those who signed it now play key roles in the administration. I believe that 9/11 delayed an attack on Iraq. I wasn't surprised when Paul O'Neill wrote in his book that the plan was on the shelf when they took office. In my mind, the fact that the administration grasped onto such a weak argument linking Iraq and terrorism suggests to me that they would have used any excuse.

Those who came into power believed that Saddam Hussein should have been removed in the 1990s. Should we have waited to go to war in Iraq? I argued that case in the *New York Times* in March 2003. Had we waited six months, I think we would have gotten more international support and been able to make a bit more headway on Afghanistan. But the war was not undertaken to appease the Saudis, if that's what's being suggested

On your point on the Saudi flight: Did they get preferential treatment? Probably. Whether we like it or not, Saudi Arabia and the United States have been very close political partners for a long time. Did anyone leave who wasn't screened? Not as far as I can tell. Were the names on the flights suspicious when run against known databases? Not according to those who have run the names. Was the FBI involved in the screening? Yes. Did they leave the United States before anyone else was allowed to leave? No.

Rachel

From: Craig Unger

To: Rachel Bronson

Subject: Too Cozy by Far

Posted Thursday, July 8, 2004, at 9:38 AM PT

Rachel,

I'm well aware that the Bush-Bandar meeting was planned before 9/11 to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian issue. I describe that in my book. And I'm not saying that Bush shouldn't have met with Bandar. I'm saying that 15 Saudis had just killed 3,000 people on American soil, and there is not an iota of evidence to suggest that Bush was tough with Bandar. Nefarious, you say. Cozy is more like it. Too cozy for me. The White House even let the Saudis fly that day. And you and everyone else are acting as if Richard Clarke was running the show—not Bush—when the White House has made such a point of saying that Clarke was out of the loop. I do not know if Bush discussed the Saudi evacuation, but if he wants to be known as our wartime president, he is either responsible—or he is irresponsible. Bush should have demanded transparency for the Islamist charities funding terrorism or the Saudi banks that were used. But he did nothing.

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Actually, you concede as much: "For the first 18 months [after 9/11], the Saudis moved slowly." How can you possibly excuse that? For a year and a half, Bush allows the Saudis to get away with murder, and when it is revealed that Bandar's wife inadvertently funded two of the hijackers, the first family consoles her. Look at Bandar's body language in that photo on the [Slate home page](#) where he is draped across an armchair in Crawford. Bandar is visiting his best friend's son, not being dressed down by the president of the United States. I am baffled. You are intellectually honest enough to say that the Saudis probably got preferential treatment in being allowed to fly. I suspect that if you had lost someone close to you, you might be more outraged at what I see as a colossal failure to start a serious criminal investigation.

Again, I'm well aware that the Saudis did not want the Iraq war. I think we largely agree on how it developed. My regrets if I was unclear. My book traces the history of the Iraq initiative back even further—to Paul Wolfowitz's policy papers in 1992. I meant that rather than attack the real source of terrorism, Bush used 9/11 as an excuse to launch a completely different and unrelated initiative—which I think is an utter disaster that we will be paying for for decades. On the one hand, he let the Saudis get away with murder. On the other, we have lost the support of any and all moderate Arabs just when we need them the most, and the instability Bush has brought to the Middle East severely jeopardizes our future relationship with the Saudis to satisfy our oil needs.

I would add that while it is true that the Saudis were against the war, this doesn't really answer the question of how Bush was tough on the Saudis. The war was undertaken for other reasons. I still haven't heard any examples of how he cracked down on the Saudi role in terror.

Finally, back to the flights, where we disagree. Was everyone screened? According to the 9/11 commission's preliminary report, 110 people were not asked any questions whatsoever. There's no indication that anyone was subjected to formal investigative procedures, in which interviews were recorded for the permanent record. The people who searched the databases were, of course, FBI agents. Does it surprise you that they give themselves a clean bill of health? And the fact that certain names might not have been in databases—what does that really mean? Think about it. Someone close to you has just been murdered. You know who did it. But the FBI tells you they are not going to bother interviewing people who aren't already in the database. I would be screaming that the crime just happened, so of course they are not in the database. If the FBI databases were so good, why didn't they stop the attacks?

I interviewed many FBI agents about the evacuation, and they fell into two camps. One set consisted of FBI officials who, on the record, told me again and again that they "played no role in facilitating the flights." Now, of course, they have changed their story. I still have many unanswered questions. But the experience of having been lied to for two years by the FBI, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the White House—who all denied that these flights took place at all—does make me suspicious.

Off the record, two agents who actually participated in the Saudi evacuation told me they had no time to perform a serious investigation and that they were constantly fighting with the Saudi Embassy, which didn't even want them to check the passports. In the end, they were told to identify everyone, but not much more than that. Let me end with a final question: Would it bother you if any of the Saudis were tied to terrorist funding or if they knew where Bin Laden was? If Bill Clinton or Al Gore had had such a close relationship with the Saudis and allowed this to happen, I think the Republicans would be screaming for their heads.

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From: Rachel Bronson

To: Craig Unger

Subject: Clinton's Saudi Policies Were No Different Than Bush's

Posted Thursday, July 8, 2004, at 12:54 PM PT

Craig,

As we conclude this debate, I think it's worth returning to the original question: Has the money that has flowed and the history that has passed between the House of Bush and the House of Saud affected the course of American politics to the detriment of the American people? I think we both agree that the administration has made some major missteps. But I don't think the evidence stacks up that it's because of a personal relationship between the families.

Had Saudi terrorists been able to leave the United States because Bush liked Bandar, that would be something. But there's no evidence that that's what happened. They were probably given preferential treatment and allowed to begin organizing themselves to leave when the airspace fully opened, but they didn't leave until it was opened, and their names did not match suspicious ones in the database when they were checked. More to the point, I don't believe any administration would have acted differently in such circumstances. They were given preferential treatment to start organizing themselves because Saudi Arabia is a long-standing close partner of the United States and had an ambassador with strong personal ties to each and every president since he became ambassador under Ronald Reagan.

Had Bush attacked Iraq because the Saudis wanted it or to divert attention from the Saudis, that would have been something, too. But we know that folks in this administration wanted to attack Saddam well before 9/11 for reasons having little to do with terrorism. Terrorism was something they added to their list after 9/11, but again with very little reference to Saudi Arabia. After 9/11, the administration was rightly or wrongly concerned that Saddam might pass WMD to terrorists. The Bush/Saud relationship has little if anything to do with this.

Before 9/11, did Bush pursue such a different policy toward Saudi Arabia than Clinton did? Clinton's relationship with Saudi Arabia around terrorism was relatively cordial, much to the chagrin of those in Clarke's shop. Clarke was pushing Clinton to come down harder on terrorist financing, but Clinton worried that if he did, it would have a significant and possibly unrecoverable negative effect on the global economy, and so he chose not to pursue the advice of Clarke on that one. There's no evidence that the Clinton folks were coming down hard on the Saudis and then Bush suddenly changed course. The Clinton folks, by the end, were much more concerned with terrorism than the Bush team was at the beginning of their tenure, but for reasons addressed earlier, it has less to do with money and ties than Cold War blinders.

On your larger question about how the United States has come down hard on terror, we've seen an enormous shift in how Saudi Arabia is dealing with terrorism. Sources working for the U.S. government in Riyadh report that over the course of 2001-03, reports from the FBI, Treasury, and intelligence agencies stated that "cooperation was very good" and went "far beyond what was expected." There is always more to be done, and cooperation can always be better, but there has been an enormous shift. A recent report by the Financial Action Task Force said that Saudi Arabia's response to terrorist financing was sound. It led Cofer Black, America's counterterrorism chief, and others to begin making positive statements about Saudi efforts in the war on terror. I detailed a litany of changes in Saudi policy in our first exchange.

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Saudi Arabia is struggling through enormous problems, some a result of bad domestic decisions, some a result of bad foreign policy decisions, in which we have sometimes been involved. Rather than focus on the connection between the families, which I don't think has led to policies very much different from Reagan's or Clinton's, I think we should probably better understand why the relationship between the two countries had been so good for so long and how to make sure that we don't devolve into a true clash of civilizations.

In the 1950s, American policy-makers decried the lack of positive political opposition in Saudi Arabia that could serve as an alternative to the current leadership. In 1964, in a meeting with Lyndon Johnson, Saudi King Feisal lamented that education in the kingdom wasn't good and foreign teachers were pursuing an agenda that wasn't in Saudi Arabia's national interest. The problems in Saudi Arabia have been there for decades. Unlike elsewhere in the world, we've done very little to support political and economic liberalization. For me, the question is: How can we help assure that in 10 years we are not in the same place we are now—bad educational institutions and political opportunities in Saudi Arabia that come back to hurt us. Some may say push for the fall of the regime. To me, that doesn't seem smart or helpful; it will bring us more danger. But we must become more creative in supporting nascent civil society and encouraging the regime, and many others, to do the same. But it is *very, very* hard to do. And, in fact, it might help to have personal contacts with the ruling regime in order to prod them in the right direction. Bush 41 may be a better emissary for this kind of change than anyone else because of his ties.

There is a huge debate going on inside Saudi Arabia about domestic reform. Is there anything we can do to help the reformists? Should we help? How much would it matter? These are the key questions. It's not clear to me that Bush's relationship with the Saudis affects their ability to address these questions.

On more specific issues that you raise, let me take those in turn:

On the meeting on the Sept. 13, you say it was cozy, too cozy. That implies that the president should not have met with Bandar. I think it's worth just stating that on the afternoon that 241 Marines were killed in Lebanon in 1983, President Reagan spoke by telephone with President Amin Gemayel of Lebanon. This is how high-stakes, high-level politics works. We may not like it, but it's not unusual.

You say that if the Clintons and Gores had had such close relations with the Saudis, the Republicans would be screaming. You are right; they would be. King Fahd, of course, did donate \$18 million to the University of Arkansas, but nothing like the \$1.4 billion you chart. But neither Bush 41 nor Clinton nor Bush 43 were really tough with the Saudis. This is because in the foreign policy realms we cared about at the time (i.e., Iraq, oil), they were, by and large, helping us. Their decisions in Afghanistan appeared questionable, but it wasn't a high enough priority to really draw attention.

On Richard Clarke, I do not believe he was running the show. In fact, all evidence points to the contrary. The point of my previous posting was that Richard Clarke understood the threat of terrorism well before most because it was his job to do so, and he was very good at it.

Finally, I should be big enough to let this pass, but I can't. You insinuate that had I lost someone close to me during 9/11, I would analyze the situation differently. You have no idea who I lost and how it affects my judgment. Such wild speculation and ascribing motives to it does not serve your analysis well, nor does it do a service to this debate. I will leave it at that.

I think we end up agreeing that the Bush administration has made some grave mistakes. We can also agree that there are real and serious problems in the U.S.-Saudi relationship

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and that we are not out of the woods by any stretch of the imagination. But when it comes to the importance of familial ties, it seems like we will agree to disagree. I'm glad we had the opportunity to air our differing views. There is perhaps no more important foreign policy issue of the day than this one.

Rachel

From: Craig Unger
To: Rachel Bronson
Subject: Clinton *Was* Tougher on the Saudis
Posted Thursday, July 8, 2004, at 12:59 PM PT

Rachel,

A few final words. First, my apologies if personalizing the 9/11 tragedy offended you. I guess for me it was one of those episodes where national security became far, far more than an abstract concern.

I hate to end by pointing out our areas of disagreement, but yes, I believe Clinton was far tougher on the Saudis than Bush was—and that, of course, was before the horrors of 9/11. And it was precisely in the area of Saudi financing of terrorism that Clinton cracked down on Saudi Arabia, giving enormous leeway to Richard Clarke, even over the protestations of such a powerful and highly regarded official as Secretary of the Treasury Robert Rubin. These actions by the Clinton administration were even said to lead to the nationalization of part of the Saudi banking industry. To the extent Clinton was not more aggressive, it was because he lost all his political capital in the Lewinsky scandal. Clinton and Sandy Berger were well-aware of the dangers of al-Qaida and gave Richard Clarke a free hand. Bush spent much of his time on vacation and had little time for terrorism even after being shown the famous Aug. 6 memo saying that Bin Laden planned to attack inside the United States.

That is where we disagree most. I frankly think you are giving a free pass to Bush—you don't cite anything he has done to crack down on the Saudis. And meanwhile, he's made it almost impossible for any moderate Arabs—even his close family friends in the region—to openly ally with the United States. Unfortunately, we will probably be paying for that for the next generation.

Craig

From: Rachel Bronson
To: Craig Unger
Subject: The Focus on Family Ties Is a Distraction
Posted Thursday, July 8, 2004, at 1:31 PM PT

Craig,

In private meetings, from what I've heard, Bush made it clear that the kingdom needed to shape up. In July 2002, the Defense Policy Board (informal advisers to the president and very close to him) actually debated a proposal suggesting that we invade Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Saudi Arabia was the subject of a major bad-publicity blitz. Saudi Arabian money became suspect at major banks across the globe. Much quiet diplomacy also occurred. Treasury sent teams over to address our terrorist-financing concerns. Counterterrorism teams went over as well. Our intelligence agencies went too, and they are now working very closely with the Saudis. Perhaps that's not enough. But the result has been exactly in the direction that I think we both want to see. So something seems to be

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working. You still haven't laid out what we've given them a pass on. What would you like to have seen, and would it have resulted in different behavior?

On the topic of "giving Bush a pass": Before 9/11, Bush didn't focus nearly enough on terrorism. Clarke makes a compelling argument when he points out that our state of alert in the summer of 2001 was nowhere near as high as it was around the millennium. Was it because Bush was connected to the Saudis? Or was it because he was always on vacation and his team was predisposed not to focus on it? I believe the latter. Look at Condoleezza Rice's article in *Foreign Affairs* before she became national security adviser. Terrorism is hardly mentioned, but when it is, it becomes a justification for a national ballistic missile defense system. The outgoing Clinton team was very frustrated that they couldn't get anyone to focus on terrorism. Look at the background of Cheney, Rumsfeld, and others. Rumsfeld had just chaired a major commission on ballistic missiles, hence his focus on building a national missile defense, which, incidentally, continues to take precious resources away from the war on terror. Rumsfeld's other main focus was getting the military to skip a generation of technology and embrace the revolution in military affairs. They were an experienced team and could have changed their focus once in power. Unfortunately, they didn't.

I think Clarke would have liked to go much further in closing down terrorist financing. He couldn't because of other Clinton concerns having to do with an open global economy. Lewinsky or no Lewinsky, there were deep structural issues that were only overcome after a severe terrorist attack. There is no doubt that Clarke had more running room under Clinton and that Bush shut him out. But even under Clinton, Clarke wasn't able to do all that he wanted or all that was apparently needed. But it doesn't seem to me that the evidence points to the fact that Clarke was shut out because he was fingering the Saudis and Bush didn't like it.

I fear that focusing too much on the House of Bush/ House of Saud inadvertently gives the administration a "free pass," to use your term, on things like homeland security, a problematic FBI, Iraq reconstruction, and Middle East policy, because it diverts attention away from these very compelling and serious issues. It also doesn't help us determine why relations are so close between successive American presidents and Saudi leaders, or what we can do about it.

It's been a pleasure.

Rachel

Rachel Bronson is a senior fellow and director of Middle East Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, where she is currently writing a book on U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia. Craig Unger is the author of [House of Bush, House of Saud](#): The Secret Relationship Between the World's Two Most Powerful Dynasties. He appears in Fahrenheit 9/11.