

MARCH 25

The media politics of 9/11

For 30 months, 9/11 was a huge political blessing for George W. Bush. This week, the media halo fell off. Within the space of a few days, culminating with his testimony to the Sept. 11 commission Wednesday afternoon, former counter-terrorism chief Richard Clarke did serious damage to a public-relations scam that the White House has been running for two and a half years.

We may forget just how badly President Bush was doing until Sept. 11, 2001. That morning, a front-page Philadelphia Inquirer story told of dire political straits; his negative rating among the nation's crucial independent swing voters stood at 53 percent, according to the latest survey by nonpartisan pollster John Zogby.

On Sept. 12, Bush's media stature and poll numbers were soaring. Suddenly, news outlets all over the country boosted the president as a great leader, sometimes likening him to FDR. For many months, the overall media coverage of President Bush was reverential.

With intimidation in the air, all but a few mainstream journalists tamped down criticisms and lacquered on adulation. A kind of war-mentality sheen covered public surfaces. Guided by Bush's top strategist Karl Rove, the administration strived to exploit the tragedy of 9/11 at every turn.

In the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, as the extent of prewar lies forced the Bush administration into a defensive crouch, reliance on images and rhetoric about Sept. 11 was more important than ever. For the Bush team, frequent invocation of 9/11 seemed dependable as a fortified version of patriotism – the last, and most promising, refuge of scoundrels.

The anger that we're now hearing from the White House is the sound of an administration being hoisted by its own 9/11 petard.

The Bush estate has bet the political farm on 9/11. True, the focus of initial TV commercials on Sept. 11 imagery can always be adjusted later. But the Bush-Cheney campaign must remain inseparably tied to 9/11. The Republican Party's national convention was scheduled unusually late on the calendar in Manhattan – until early

September – to indelibly link the Bush-Cheney ticket to Sept. 11.

Hitting the USS Bush at the time of the spring equinox, the current media gale has not been all that harsh. But the media upheaval is striking because of its contrast with the very favorable political climate that the Bush political vessel has been able to create and navigate in relation to 9/11 until this spring.

Bush's prior media problems with Iraq war policy are helping to compound his 9/11 media debacle of recent days. Now, with Clarke recounting the administration's fixation on Iraq in the immediate aftermath of Sept. 11, there's extra public outrage about the new firsthand evidence that Bush was eager to pursue his discredited Iraq obsession even while the World Trade Center was on fire.

For the Bush-Cheney-Rove administration, the parallels and negative synergies between Iraq and 9/11 issues include the common thread of extreme dishonesty. On Monday – while a typical Wall Street Journal editorial sputtered that the Sept. 11 commission had been hijacked "to provide a vehicle to embarrass the Bush administration" – the same newspaper's front page was featuring a lead article about Sept. 11 events politely headlined "Government Accounts of 9/11 Reveal Gaps, Inconsistencies." Based on the article's meticulous reporting, a less circumspect headline could have been: "Bush, Cheney and Top Aides Now Tangled Up in 9/11 Deceptions."

This week, news departments that were slow on the uptake quickly found themselves out of step. On Monday, while the Washington Post front-paged a major substantive article about Clarke's charges, the New York Times buried its coverage of the subject on a back page. (The anemic Times article carried the byline of Judith Miller, who rendered invaluable prewar service to the Bush administration by reporting the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq – based on anonymous sourcing. Miller's source turned out to be the Pentagon's favorite handpicked Iraqi exile "leader," Ahmed Chalabi.) After badly lagging behind the Post, on Tuesday the Times played catch-up on the Clarke story.

Whether the Bush campaign can regain control of 9/11 as a political football remains to be seen. We should never forget that real people died on that day, and real people are still dying in Iraq because of depraved political games in Washington.

People in positions of enormous power are never more dangerous than when they see their power seriously threatened. The counterattacks on Clarke have only just begun. And during the next several months, the Bush-Cheney-Rove administration is sure to reach into its very large bag of media tricks.