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Ridge says he was pressured to raise terror alert

In book, ex-Homeland Security chief hints Bush aides wanted to sway vote

AP Associated Press
 updated 8:55 p.m. CT, Thurs., Aug 20, 2009

WASHINGTON - Former Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge claims in a new book that he was pressured by other members of President George W. Bush's Cabinet to raise the nation's terror alert level just before the 2004 presidential election.

Ridge says he objected to raising the security level despite the urgings of former Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and then-Attorney General John Ashcroft, according to a publicity release from Ridge's publisher. He said the episode convinced him to follow through with his plans to leave the administration; he resigned on Nov. 30, 2004.

Bush's former homeland security adviser, Frances Townsend, said Thursday that politics never played a role in determining alert levels.

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Ron Edmonds / AP

Tom Ridge, the former Homeland Security secretary, faced criticism in 2004 from Democrats who alleged that raising the alert level was designed to boost support for the Bush administration in an election year.

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Townsend said the videotapes contained "very graphic" and "threatening" messages.

Townsend said that anytime there was a discussion of changing the alert level, she first spoke with Ridge and then, if necessary, called a meeting of the Homeland Security council comprising the secretaries of defense and homeland security, the attorney general and CIA and FBI directors. The group then made a recommendation to the president about whether the color-coded threat level should be raised.

"Never were politics ever discussed in this context in my presence," she said.

Asked if there was any reason for Ridge to have felt pressured, Townsend said: "He was certainly not pressured. And, by the way, he didn't object when it was raised and he certainly didn't object when it wasn't raised."

'Security or politics?'

Ridge's publicist, Joe Rinaldi, said Ridge was out of town and was not doing interviews until his book, "The Test of Our Times: America Under Siege ... and How We Can Be Safe Again," is released on Sept. 1.

Ridge writes in the book that the bin Laden tape alone did not justify a change in the nation's security threat level but describes "a vigorous, some might say dramatic, discussion" on Oct. 30 to do so.

Video



Threat alert manipulated?

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"There was absolutely no support for that position within our department. None," he writes. "I wondered, 'Is this about security or politics?' Post-election analysis demonstrated a significant increase

in the president's approval rating in the days after the raising of the threat level."

Rumsfeld, in a statement issued late Thursday by his spokesman Keith Urbahn, dismissed the allegations.

"We have no idea what Tom Ridge's book actually says. The storyline advanced by his publisher seemingly to sell copies of the book is nonsense," the statement said.

In 2004, Ridge explained why he didn't feel the terror alert should be raised. "We don't have to go to (code level) orange to take action in response either to these tapes or just general action to improve security around the country," he said then.

In 2005, months after he resigned, Ridge said his agency has been the most reluctant to raise the alert level. "There were times when some people were really aggressive about raising it, and we said, 'For that?'" he said during a panel discussion in May 2005. But his book appears to be the first time he publicly attributes some of the pressure to politics.

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The Homeland Security Department, which Ridge was the first person to lead, faced criticism in 2004 from Democrats who alleged that raising the alert level was designed to boost support for the Bush administration during an election year.

Ridge, a former Republican congressman and governor of Pennsylvania, was widely named as a potential running mate to John McCain in 2008 before the GOP candidate choice Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin.

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