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What did Bush really know?

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THE anger was ferocious, as was the White House's riposte to criticism that President George W. Bush and his top advisers knew more than the American people about hijacking threats before Sept 11.

All this was triggered by a disclosure that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) told Bush last August, more than a month before the Sept 11 tragedy, that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda operatives might try to hijack airplanes and crash into high-profile targets in the US itself, not just American targets overseas as the White House insisted.

A week is a long time in politics, and politics is full of tricks and messy business, one way or another, all the time.

Bush was all smiles when he received Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Fresh September 11 revelations rocked his presidency, the first serious upheaval since his position became unassailable after the terrorist attacks. Now, he grimaces more often. The past feeling of elation has disappeared.

Though Bush's critics, Democratic legislators and politicians, have moderated their tone over the inability of the White House intelligence agencies, CIA and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in particular, to piece together strong hints last summer and grasp the nature of terrorist threats ahead of the Sept 11 attacks, the President has had a lot on his mind since Dr Mahathir left Washington!

It has emerged that the CIA, FBI and White House knew all along that al-Qaeda was seeking ways to bring its fight to America itself - far longer than previously acknowledged - and that Osama's martyrs were being trained as pilots in the US and were contemplating airborne suicide attacks. It was unimaginable, it couldn't be. Perhaps, a failure of the imagination! The FBI has now confirmed that the Sept 11 attacks cost al-Qaeda only STG200,000 (RM1.1 million) to orchestrate. It shows how disciplined and careful the martyrs (to the Arabs) and terrorists (to Americans and others) were in managing their money as they burrowed into the US without raising suspicion, and there was not much to alert the authorities.

The blame game has begun in earnest. The Democrats are trying to turn the political bonfire into a firestorm. It does seem the Republicans and the Democrats are into full-throated debates in the run-up to the November congressional elections which could affect the results. The Republicans now control the House of Representatives, while the Senate is 50-50.

I believe whatever the cost to national unity and the bipartisan stand against the war on terrorism, the Democrats will exploit the issue through the coming campaign.

I do not believe it will backfire on the Democrats - even if it's proved that Bush was telling the truth that he did not know about the attacks, adding: "I would have done everything in my power to protect the American people had I known that the enemy was going to use airplanes to kill on that fateful morning ..."

If you ask me whether I believe Bush, I will say "Yes, I do."

Perhaps if there were lapses in detecting the Sept 11 plots, it would have been by the President's assistants and advisers. Bush should not be blamed though he takes full responsibility for what happened.

In the land of the "Mother of Democracy" and "Mecca of Media Freedom", I must say this has been a curious eight months in politics and journalism.

Even overseas observers have noticed that the fog of war on terrorism

has never been so thick as over Washington DC and London (America's deputy sheriff in Europe).

For all the talk of freedom of information, never was information on the prosecution of a war so shrouded in secrecy. So much for media freedom.

What do the American newspapers have to say about all this? The pro-Democratic Party New York Times says everything points to a government failure to recognise that Osama bin Laden's network might attack targets within the US after years of operating overseas.

The whole Government dropped the ball and, even now, it is not doing nearly enough to ensure that it doesn't happen again.

The Washington Post, whose editors and reporters met Dr Mahathir and wrote less than 10 paragraphs and buried them in an inside page (no accompanying picture either with Bush or even a mugshot), noted via Howard Kurtz, its media specialist writer, "scepticism and even indignation in their (journalists') voices, as they demanded detailed explanations from Condoleezza Rice (National Security Adviser) and Ari Fleischer (Presidential Press Secretary and Spokesman).

I watched the grilling on TV in my hotel room in New York, and I can say this, I would not have liked to be in their shoes. It was far different from eight months ago when Bush, riding on an unprecedented wave of popularity, national approval and open display of patriotism, was treated with deference by the US media. Kurtz said the Bush administration was likely never to face a more hostile press corps than last Saturday.

Vicious politics has returned to Washington with a vengeance and all over the land many Americans, because they love to hate or, should I say, strongly disapproved of Bush's hair-thin victory, find that the criticism resonates with them.

Democrats still assert that Bush stole the election from them in Miami. In Florida, the President faces criticism for ignoring Latin Americans despite promising during the 2000 campaign that he would make relations with South America a "fundamental commitment of my presidency". His younger brother Jeb is seeking re-election in November as governor.

Politics is not an exact science. It can never be, otherwise people like me would be out of jobs. When Bill Clinton was the victim, many Americans hated this kind of robust politics by which he was discredited (Monica Lewinsky, the impeachment and other scandals) simply because they still wanted to love him.

As New York Times columnist R.W. Apple Jr says: "If George W. Bush turns out to be a victim, many may hate it more because they crave unity above everything, especially where the war is concerned. It is one thing to blame institutions like the CIA or FBI or criticise co-ordination between them, as many in both parties are doing, but reaching into the Oval Office is something else, at least in the view of many voters."

As he rightly said, that old question is back, the one made famous by former Senator Howard H. Baker Jr during Watergate.

In one form or another, it was used by every network anchor and by dozens of members of Congress who last week said what the nation needed to find out was: "What did President Bush know and when did he know it?"

Bush has taken some heavy knocks. How damaging they are depends on the success of the vengeful Democrats and the media's manipulation of the information which appears to surface or rather re-emerge at a devastatingly awkward time for the president, the run-up to the November polls.

Perhaps, the problem with the superpower is that it has too much information. That's what is wrong!

As I write this in London, I read that al-Qaeda operatives or terrorists, or whatever you want to call them, are "almost certain" to

launch more devastating attacks on the US and they have also singled out Britain as a target for revenge.

Since this information came from the American Vice President Dick Cheney, I had better not take it lightly - hence, I am flying out of London as soon as I have finished faxing this article. It is a chilling thought, in case MI5 and MI6 also miss signals and pooh-pooh Osama's vow to punish Britain which supports the US and is always siding with the Jews and Israel.

The Democrats and the media are whacking Bush, and Osama vows to attack Britain. The story has it all. It is unwise, I think, to seem to hardly care. The strange thing is that it always seems to happen at a time one least expects it.

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