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Bush Shoots for "Jaws," Delivers "Jaws 2"

By Keith Olbermann
MSNBC "Countdown"

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President claimed to stop four terror plots, but where is the evidence?

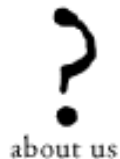
West Yorkshire in England has a new chief police constable.

Upon his appointment, Sir Norman Bettison made one of the strangest comments of the year:

"The threat of terrorism," he says, "is lurking out there like 'Jaws 2.'"

Sir Norman did not exactly mine the richest ore for his analogy of warning. A critic once said

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of the flopping sequel to the classic film: "You're gonna need a better screenplay."

But this obscure British police official has reminded us that terrorism is still being sold to the public in that country - and in this - as if it were a thrilling horror movie and we were the naughty teenagers about to be its victims.

And it underscores the fact that President Bush took this tack, exactly a week ago tonight, in his terror-related passage in the State of the Union.

A passage that was almost lost amid all the talk about Iraq and health care and bipartisanship and the fellow who saved the stranger from an oncoming subway train in New York City.

But a passage ludicrous and deceitful. Frightening in its hollow conviction.

Frightening, in that the president who spoke it tried for "Jaws" but got "Jaws 2."

I am indebted to David Swanson, press secretary for Dennis Kucinich's 2004 presidential campaign, who has blogged about the dubious 96 words in Mr. Bush's address this year and who has concluded that of the four counterterror claims the president made, he went 0-for-4.

"We cannot know the full extent of the attacks that we and our allies have prevented," Mr. Bush noted, "but here is some of what we do know: We stopped an al-Qaeda plot to fly a hijacked airplane into the tallest building on the West Coast."

This would of course, sir, be the purported plot to knock down the 73-story building in Los Angeles, the one once known as the Library Tower - the one you personally revealed so breathlessly a year ago next month.

It was embarrassing enough that you mistakenly referred to the structure as the "Liberty Tower."

But within hours it was also revealed that authorities in Los Angeles had had no idea you were going to make any of the details - whether serious or fanciful - public.

Who terrorized Southern California that day, Mr. Bush?

A year ago next month, the Los Angeles Times quoted a source - identified only by the labyrinthine description "a US official familiar with the operational aspects of the war on terrorism" - who insisted that the purported "Library Tower plot" was one of many al-Qaeda operations that had not gotten very far past the conceptual stage.

The former staff director of counterterrorism for the National Security Council, Roger Cressey - now a news analyst for NBC News and MSNBC - puts it a little more bluntly.

In our conversation, he put the "Library Tower story" into a category he called the "What-ifs" - as in the old "Saturday Night Live" sketches that tested the range of comic absurdity:

What if ... Superman had worked for the Nazis?

What if ... Spartacus had had a Piper Cub during the battle against the Romans in 70 BC.?

More ominously, the LA Times source who debunked the Library Tower story said that those

who could correctly measure the flimsiness of the scheme "feared political retaliation for providing a different characterization of the plan than that of the president."

But Mr. Bush, you're the decider.

And you decided that the Library Tower story should be scored as one for you.

And you continued with a second dubious claim of counterterror success. "We broke up a Southeast Asian terror cell grooming operatives for attacks inside the United States," you said.

Well, sir, you've apparently stumped the intelligence community completely with this one.

In his article, Mr. Swanson suggests that in the last week, there has been no reporting even hinting at what exactly you were talking about.

He hypothesizes that either you were claiming credit for a ring broken up in 1995 or that this was just the Library Tower story "by another name."

Another CIA source suggests to NBC News that since the Southeast Asian cell dreamed of a series of attacks on the same day, you declared the Library Tower one threat thwarted, and all their other ideas, a second threat thwarted.

Our colleague Mr. Cressey sums it up:

This "Southeast Asian cell" was indeed the tale of the Library Tower, simply repeated.

Repeated, Mr. Bush, in consecutive sentences in the State of the Union - in your constitutionally mandated status report on the condition and safety of the nation.

You showed us the same baby twice and claimed it was twins.

And then you said that was two for you.

Your third claim, sir, read thusly: "We uncovered an al-Qaeda cell developing anthrax to be used in attacks against America."

Again, the professionals in counterintelligence were startled to hear about this.

Last fall, two Washington Post articles cited sources in the FBI and other governmental agencies who said that hopes by foreign terrorists to use anthrax in this country were fanciful at best, farcical at worst.

And every effort to link the 2001 anthrax mailings in this country to foreign sources has also struck out. The entire investigation is barely still active.

Mr. Cressey goes a little further. Anything that might even resemble an al-Qaeda cell "developing anthrax," he says, was in the "dreaming" stages.

He used as a parallel those pathetic arrests outside Miami last year in which a few men wound up getting charged as terrorists because they couldn't tell the difference between an al-Qaeda operative and an FBI informant.

Their "ringleader" seemed to be much more interested in getting his "terrorist masters" to buy him a new car than in actually terrorizing anybody.

That's three for you, Mr. Bush.

"And just last August," you concluded, "British authorities uncovered a plot to blow up passenger planes bound for America over the Atlantic Ocean."

In a series of dramatic raids, 24 men were arrested.

Turned out, sir, a few of them actually had gone on the Internets to check out some flight schedules.

Turned out, sir, only a few of them actually had the passports needed to even get on the planes.

The plot to which President Bush referred was a plot without bombs.

It was a plot without any indication that the essence of the operation - the in-flight mixing of volatile chemicals carried on board in sports drink bottles - was even doable by amateurs or professional chemists.

It was a plot even without sufficient probable cause.

A third of the 24 arrested that day - exactly 90 days before the American midterm elections - have since been released.

The British had been watching those men for a year.

Before the week was out, their first statement, that the plot was "ready to go, in days," had been rendered inoperative.

British officials told NBC News of the lack of passports and plans; told us that they had wanted to keep the suspects under surveillance for at least another week.

Even an American official confirmed to NBC's investigative unit that there was "disagreement over the timing."

The British then went further. Sources inside their government told the English newspaper The Guardian that the raids had occurred only because the Pakistanis had arrested a man named Rasheed Raouf.

That Raouf had been arrested by Pakistan only because we had threatened to do it for them.

That the British had acted only because our government was willing - to quote that newspaper, The Guardian - to "ride roughshod" over the plans of British intelligence.

Oh, by the way, Mr. Bush, an anti-terrorism court in Pakistan reduced the charges against Mr. Raouf to possession of bomb-making materials and being there without proper documents.

Still, sir - evidently, that's close enough.

Score four for you!

Your totally black-and-white conclusions in the State of the Union were based on one gray area, and on three palettes on which the experts can't even see smudge, let alone gray.

It would all be laughable, Mr. Bush, were you not the president of the United States.

It would all be political hyperbole, Mr. Bush, if you had not, on this kind of "intelligence," taken us to war, now sought to escalate that war, and threatened new war in Iran and maybe even elsewhere.

What you gave us a week ago tonight, sir, was not intelligence, but rather a walk-through of how speculation and innuendo, guesswork and paranoia, daydreaming and fearmongering, combine in your mind and the minds of your government into proof of your derring-do and your success against the terrorists.

The ones who didn't have anthrax.

The ones who didn't have plane tickets or passports.

The ones who didn't have any clue, let alone any plots.

But they go now into our history books as the four terror schemes you've interrupted since 9/11.

They go into the collective consciousness as firm evidence of your diligence, of the necessity of your ham-handed treatment of our liberties, of the unavoidability of the 3,075 Americans dead in Iraq.

Congratulations, sir.

You are the hero of "Jaws 2."

You have kept the Piper Cub out of the hands of Spartacus.

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