
Ex-Reno aide is face of Bush terror team; [SPORTS FINAL Edition]

JAMES GORDON MEEK DAILY NEWS WASHINGTON BUREAU. New York Daily News. New York, N.Y.: Aug 15, 2004. pg. 22

Full Text (503 words)

Copyright Daily News, L.P. Aug 15, 2004

WASHINGTON - President Bush's newest counterterror spin doctor was a top Clinton administration lawyer sacked by Attorney General John Ashcroft three years ago.

Blond, bejeweled Frances Fragos Townsend has emerged in recent weeks as the new face at the White House to wax stoic about the nation's most depressing concern: pre-election terrorism.

Her boomeranging political trajectory has amazed admirers and detractors alike.

Townsend, 42, started her career as an assistant district attorney in Brooklyn, worked for Rudy Giuliani when he was U.S. attorney in Manhattan and became a top intelligence aide to Clinton's attorney general, Janet Reno.

Asked last week whether it was surprising to see one of her closest aides as a public face of Bush's war on terror, Reno replied simply, "Yes."

Townsend was considered a bright and competent intelligence adviser to Reno - but also a power-hungry control freak whose abrasive style angered many, according to a dozen current and former law enforcement and intelligence officials who spoke with the Daily News.

She also was blamed for problems with FBI wiretap requests during the millennium threat and thwarted surveillance in the bungled Wen Ho Lee spy case. The flaps drew the wrath of the chief judge on the supersecretive federal court overseeing national security cases, sources said.

◀ "The FBI kept asking [to wiretap Lee], and Fran kept saying no," recalled an ex-intelligence official.

Sources said her perception as a Reno crony, combined with griping by disgruntled staff and rebukes by U.S. Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court Chief Judge Royce Lamberth, convinced Ashcroft to replace Townsend as head of the Office of Intelligence Policy and Review in May 2001.

"She was canned," said one Bush administration source. "There were complaints from the court that the process was broken, and it was."

Townsend was named the Coast Guard's intel chief after the 2001 attacks. "People thought they were sending her to Siberia," said one Clinton-era ally.

But many were stunned when Townsend became the National Security Council's terrorism expert in 2003 and Bush's terror spokeswoman this summer. Bush appointed her homeland security adviser in May.

One possible explanation for her dramatic reversal of fortune: Husband John Townsend, a prominent D.C. lawyer, graduated from Yale in 1968 with Bush. She also has been a registered Republican since at least 1995.

Townsend and White House officials did not respond to requests for an interview.

[At the Justice Department, one official said she drew scorn for "pushing to Olympian heights" a 1995 Reno directive erecting a legal "wall" prohibiting FBI agents from talking to agents working on parallel counterintelligence investigations.

["The wall . . . was Fran's creation," said an ex-law enforcement official. "We all expressed concern about DOJ's direction under Fran."

Others lauded her reforms at Justice and take-charge ethic. "I have enormous respect for Fran," said Beryl Howell, an ex- prosecutor who knew Townsend in New York. "She's very sharp and doesn't mince words."

Townsend "was one of the most effective people I worked with," Reno added. "I thought she did a fine job."

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[Illustration]

Caption: Townsend

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