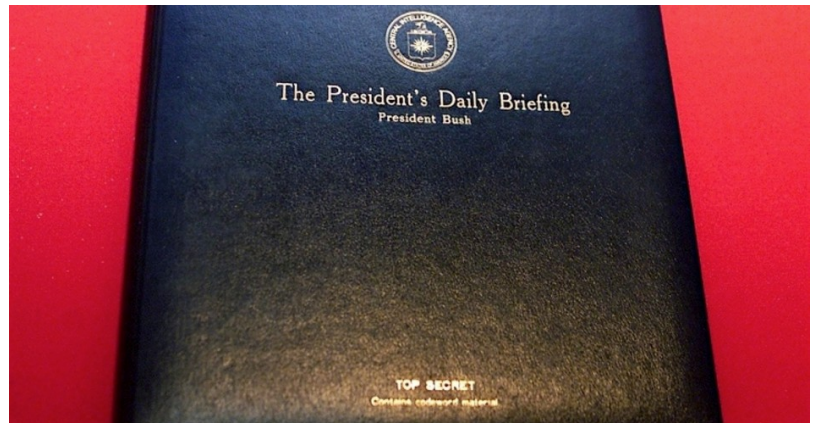




Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 14, 2012

Obama Skips Security Briefings; Bush Ignored Them

President Barack Obama reminds us quite often that our nation's security is very much on his mind. But not so much on his schedule, it turns out. Marc Thiessen, a fellow with the American Enterprise Institute and a weekly columnist for the *Washington Post*, found the president missed more than half his Presidential Daily Briefing [sessions](#) between the time he took office in January 2009 and mid-June of this year. The PDB sessions are the briefings a president receives on the most serious and urgent security threats the nation faces. The reports are classified, of course, and most Americans were probably unaware of the daily reports until we heard or read, long after the 9/11 attacks, of the now famous PDB report titled: "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S." The date on that report is August 6, 2001 — little more than one month before hijacked planes flew into the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.



The [Government Accountability Institute](#), described by Thiessen as "a new conservative investigative research organization," examined the president's schedule and found that in his first 1,225 days in office, President Obama attended 536, or 43.8 percent of the daily briefings. During 2011 and the first half of 2012, his attendance became even less frequent — falling to just over 38 percent.

Thiessen reports that when he asked National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor about the findings, Vietor did not "dispute the numbers." What he disputed was their significance, stating that the fact that the president does not attend his intelligence briefings on a daily basis is "not particularly interesting or useful." The president, Vietor said, reads the PDB report every day, whether or not he avails himself of the opportunity to question national security and intelligence officials about their findings and assumptions. "The president gets the information he needs from the intelligence community each day," Vietor told Thiessen in an e-mail.

As evidence of Obama's immersion in the details of the intelligence reports, Vietor referred to a *Washington Post* story published earlier this year that described the way the president conducts a PDB session. "Obama reads the PDB ahead of time and comes to the morning meeting with questions," the *Post* reported. "Intelligence briefers are there to answer those questions, expand on a point or raise a new issue.... One regular participant in the roughly 500 Oval Office sessions during Obama's presidency said the meetings show a president consistently participating in an exploration of foreign policy and intelligence issues." Yet that description magnifies, rather than minimizes, the importance of the president's presence at the meetings, Thiessen said.



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“Since Obama officials have actively promoted the way the president runs his daily intelligence meeting as evidence of his national security leadership (even releasing a photo of him receiving the briefing on an iPad), it is fair to ask why he skips the daily meeting so often,” Thiessen wrote, adding that former officials knowledgeable about the PDB process, say having the president at the meeting instead of just reading the report is important for both the president and the briefers.

“For the president, the meeting is an opportunity to ask questions of the briefers, probe assumptions and request additional information,” Thiessen wrote. “For those preparing the brief, meeting with the president on a daily basis gives them vital, direct feedback from the commander in chief about what is on his mind, how they can be more responsive to his needs, and what information he may have to feed back into the intelligence process. This process cannot be replicated on paper.”

With President Obama, Thiessen observed, “the regular morning meeting on intelligence is not so regular.” Whatever one might think about the president or the attendance figures, it’s hard to escape Thiessen’s conclusion: “When Obama forgoes this daily intelligence meeting, he is consciously placing other priorities ahead of national security.”

Thiessen compares this record with that of George W. Bush, who he says, based on what officials have told him, held his intelligence meetings “six days a week, no exceptions.” Yet another disturbing article concerning PDB reports was published this week and it had to do with those that came to President Bush prior to the famous PDB of August 6, 2001. In an op ed [article](#) in the *New York Times*, Kurt Eichenwald, a former *Times* reporter and currently a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair* magazine, claimed to have seen those still classified reports and found in them repeated warnings of an imminent al Qaeda attack that the Bush administration did not take seriously. Eichenwald maintains it was a political and ideological agenda that got in the way.

“An intelligence official and a member of the Bush administration,” he wrote, “both told me in interviews that the neoconservative leaders who had recently assumed power at the Pentagon were warning the White House that the C.I.A. had been fooled; according to this theory, Bin Laden was merely pretending to be planning an attack to distract the administration from Saddam Hussein, whom the neoconservatives saw as a greater threat. Intelligence officials, these sources said, protested that the idea of Bin Laden, an Islamic fundamentalist, conspiring with Mr. Hussein, an Iraqi secularist, was ridiculous, but the neoconservatives’ suspicions were nevertheless carrying the day.”

So while critics of the Bush foreign policy would later charge the president with allowing the goal of “regime change” in Iraq to impede the war against bin Laden and al Qaeda in Afghanistan, in the beginning it was the other way around: The neocon hawks were afraid the intelligence reports about al Qaeda’s plans would direct the president’s attention away from Saddam Hussein and the danger they insisted he posed. The CIA pushed back against efforts to downplay the al Qaeda threat.

“The U.S. is not the target of a disinformation campaign by Usama Bin Laden,” the PDB of June 29 warned. There was an al Qaeda plan for an attack on the United States and it was moving on track. The July 1 brief said the operation had been delayed, but “will occur soon.”

On July 9, “Ibn Al-Khattab, an extremist who was known for his brutality and his links to al Qaeda, told his followers that there would soon be very big news,” Eichenwald wrote. “Within 48 hours, an intelligence official told me, that information was conveyed to the White House, providing more data supporting the C.I.A.’s warnings. Still, the alarm bells didn’t sound.”

What might have been done if the “alarm bells” had sounded?



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“Throughout that summer,” wrote Eichenwald, “there were events that might have exposed the plans, had the government been on high alert. Indeed, even as the Aug. 6 brief was being prepared, Mohamed al-Kahtani, a Saudi believed to have been assigned a role in the 9/11 attacks, was stopped at an airport in Orlando, Fla., by a suspicious customs agent and sent back overseas on Aug. 4. Two weeks later, another co-conspirator, Zacarias Moussaoui, was arrested on immigration charges in Minnesota after arousing suspicions at a flight school. But the dots were not connected, and Washington did not react.”

Yet even after al Qaeda struck and in the absence of evidence tying Saddam Hussein to al Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration maintained its focus on regime change in Iraq and went forward with a what turned out to be a long and enormously costly war to remove weapons of mass destruction that were not there.

“Could the 9/11 attack have been stopped, had the Bush team reacted with urgency to the warnings contained in all of those daily briefs?” Eichenwald asked. “We can’t ever know. And that may be the most agonizing reality of all.”

Ever since 9/11, we have been told repeatedly that we are at war with al Qaeda and other terrorists determined to wreak great harm on the United States and hurt our people. But if Thiessen’s and Eichenwald’s accounts are accurate, the United States has for the last 12 years been led by one commander-in-chief who skips most of his security briefings and another who wouldn’t heed their warnings.

So who’s been minding the war?

Photo: The President’s Daily Briefing “PDB,” a top secret leather binder, in which President Bush received his daily intelligence reports was displayed on Feb. 15, 2002, at the “Spies: Secrets from CIA, KGB, and Hollywood” exhibit at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Foundation in Simi Valley, Calif. AP Images



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