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Ridge reveals clashes on alerts

By Mimi Hall, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The Bush administration periodically put the USA on high alert for terrorist attacks even though then-Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge argued there was only flimsy evidence to justify raising the threat level, Ridge now says.

Ridge, who resigned Feb. 1, said Tuesday that he often disagreed with administration officials who wanted to elevate the threat level to orange, or "high" risk of terrorist attack, but was overruled.

His comments at a Washington forum describe spirited debates over terrorist intelligence and provide rare insight into the inner workings of the nation's homeland security apparatus.

Ridge said he wanted to "debunk the myth" that his agency was responsible for repeatedly raising the alert under a color-coded system he unveiled in 2002.



"More often than not we were the least inclined to raise it," Ridge told reporters. "Sometimes we disagreed with the intelligence assessment. Sometimes we thought even if the intelligence was good, you don't necessarily put the country on (alert). ... There were times when some people were really aggressive about raising it, and we said, 'For that?' "

Revising or scrapping the color-coded alert system is under review by new Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff. Department spokesman Brian Roehrkasse said "improvements and adjustments" may be announced within the next few months.

AP

Ridge The threat level was last raised on a nationwide scale in December 2003, to orange from yellow — or "elevated" risk — where the alert level is now. In most cases, Ridge said Homeland Security officials didn't want to raise the level because they knew local governments and businesses would have to spend money putting temporary security upgrades in place.

"You have to use that tool of communication very sparingly," Ridge said at the forum, which was attended by seven other former department leaders.

The level is raised if a majority on the President's Homeland Security Advisory Council favors it and President Bush concurs. Among those on the council with Ridge were Attorney General John Ashcroft, FBI chief Robert Mueller, CIA director George Tenet, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Ridge and Ashcroft publicly clashed over how to communicate threat information to the public. But Ridge has never before discussed internal dissention over the threat level.

The color-coded system was controversial from the start. Polls showed the public found it confusing.

Contributing: Associated Press

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