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THEY SAID IT

Despite their enthusiasm, al-Zarqawi, al-Maqdisi, and Abu Muntassir did not appear to be natural revolutionaries. Their first operation was in Zarqa, in 1993, a former Jordanian intelligence official told me, when al-Zarqawi dispatched one of their men to a local cinema with orders to blow it up because it was showing pornographic films. But the hapless would-be bomber apparently got so distracted by what was happening on the screen that he forgot about his bomb. It exploded and blew off his legs.

--"The Short, Violent Life on Abu Musab al-Zarqawi," Mary Anne Weaver, *The Atlantic Monthly*, July/August, 2006.

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AL-ZARQAWI DEAD.

Now, we are fully aware of President Bush's cautionary warning against becoming too optimistic about the positive consequences that could result from the death of what's his name, the terrorist mindermast, as Monty Python's Scotland Yard sleuths would have called him. And not only that, we are happy that President Bush's comments on the topic seems to be in line with Talleyrand's famous admonition against zeal, given that we have been critical of him in the past for poor expectation management. So, good job, George.

Having said that, we would now like to express our own belief that sending the "Prince of al-Qaeda in Iraq" off to play at houghmagandy with 72 virgins with bags over their heads is not only a very good thing but may well mark a turning point, or paradigm shift in the war in Iraq. So if you want to get your hopes and expectations up over this thing, go ahead. We believe that you will not be disappointed.

Even under normal circumstances this guy's death would set the terrorist cause in Iraq back a good bit. He was, after all, a threefer. He was the brains behind the bloodiest faction within the insurgency, the intellectual, the planner, the strategist, the thinker, which is arguably a type that is not easy to come by among the ruderal ranks of sadistic Arab killers. He was also the gang's day-to-day, operational leader, the go-to fellah, the person who kept it all together. And finally, he was a player himself, a guy who would pitch in and help, get his hands bloody so to speak, cut off a head now and then just to show he had what it takes to murder a totally helpless person who is blindfolded and has his hands tied behind his back. So even under the best of circumstances, it will take a little while to get the Iraqi version of Murder Inc. back up and running smoothly, especially since several of the movement's capos were apparently captured or killed in the raids that followed in the wake of one that got the big guy.

But there's an additional problem for "al-Qaeda in Iraq" with regards to the death of Zack-the-knife, that being that he seems to have left things in kind of a mess. He may well have been a great, hands-on leader and an imaginative creator of new ways to kill defenseless human beings. But his strategy for winning the conflict with "America in Iraq" was in shambles when he died.

You see, he was the genius who came up with the idea that if you kill enough Americans, the U.S. military will turn tail and run. Among other things, this plan, which was modeled on the American defeat in Vietnam, badly underestimated the courage of America's fighting men and women; the ability of a ragtag crew of murderers to inflict the kind of casualties on the U.S. military that would give rise to a serious debate over surrender and withdrawal; the strategic importance to the United States of Iraq when compared to the strategic unimportance of holding onto Vietnam in the mid 1970s; and the rather paltry political clout of the anti-war crowd in the United States today when compared to the hefty political importance of their anti-Vietnam war counterparts in the good-old-days of liberal supremacy.

Zarqawi apparently began to realize these flaws in his strategy some time ago, so with all the innovative genius of Wiley Coyote, he came up with a Plan B, which was based on the idea that if he killed enough innocent Shi'ites in a variety of grotesque ways, a civil war would break out in Iraq and this would destroy all chances of forming a duly elected government there and prompt the Americans to pack up and leave.

This plan had a slightly better chance of working than the prior one. But it turned out to have serious drawbacks, one of which may well have led directly to the death of its creator. The problem was that the plan violated a cardinal rule of guerrilla warfare as noted by Chairman Mao, which is to promote friendly relations with the indigenous population so that the insurgents can concentrate on the primary task of killing the real enemy without having to worry about trouble from the natives. Mao put it this way: "The people are like water and the army is like fish." In

al-Zarqawi's Iraq, the people are still like water but the insurgent fish are increasingly viewed in many areas as an unwelcome alien species that is a threat to the ecosystem, like the Northern Snakehead is to the Potomac River.

So the bottom line at the present for the surviving big shots in "al-Qaeda in Iraq" is that they not only must choose a new leader but they must come up with a new plan, which is likely to make the task of finding a new leader much more difficult because it will involve disputes over a variety of fundamental issues.

Does it make sense, for example, to continue the indiscriminate killing of Shi'ite civilians in hopes of starting a civil war, in light of the fact that a civil war seems increasingly unlikely and the further fact that these killings have made the environment exceedingly unsafe for imported terrorists and have also made a number of important financial supporters of "al-Qaeda in Iraq" uneasy, including Osama bin Laden? Should the focus be directed at American soldiers or at senior officials in the new Iraqi government? Indeed, what purpose is the killing intended to serve? Is it designed to weaken the opposition directly, to strengthen the hand of the antiwar crowd in the United States, or to attract bloodthirsty followers from around the globe to the cause of martyrdom?

Our guess is that this discussion is going to create rifts within "al-Qaeda in Iraq" that will have an impact on its operational efficiency as well as on its security over the coming months. Moreover, this discussion will occur at a time when the organization will be in considerable danger, as the newly appointed Iraqi Ministers of Defense and Interior begin the job of demonstrating to their countrymen and to the world that they are capable of creating a safe and orderly Iraq. And to make matters worse for "al-Qaeda in Iraq", these new ministers have recently discovered what has been described in the press as a "treasure trove" of "leads" in the rubble of al-Zarqawi's "safe house" and as a result of various raids at other sites that followed in the wake of the air attack.

It is worth remembering when considering all of this that there is another important front in the war in Iraq, that being the good old U.S. of A. As indicated above, the insurgents are no longer as confident as they once were about achieving victory on this battlefield. But, as al-Zarqawi himself indicated not too long ago, the insurgents still harbor hope that the Democrats will eventually come to power and that they will be considerably more friendly to the idea of throwing in the towel in Iraq.

On this latter point, al-Zarqawi was certainly correct. The antiwar flame still burns brightly among Democrats and they would almost certainly quit Iraq if they were in charge. But if nothing else, the all-too-evident ambivalence among Democrats last week over whether to cheer or mourn the Zarqawi death provided a strong indication that their anti-war commitment is based on political opportunism rather than on principle and would likely disappear like a friar's lantern if it ever begins to look as though the United States is going to succeed in defeating the insurgency.

Of course, the liberal press did its best to bolster the belief that al-Zarqawi's death was of little or no importance to the overall war effort. Among my favorite examples of this were the following headlines: ABC's "Al-Zarqawi's Killing: More Harm Than Good?"; Reuters' "Zarqawi Found, but bin Laden Still Eludes US;" and the AP's "Analysis: Threat Will Outlive Zarqawi." And who could help but appreciate the following paragraph from the AP's obituary on Al-Zarqawi:

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi rose from the life of a street thug in Jordan to become the symbol of "holy war" in Iraq, masterminding the bloodiest suicide bombings of the insurgency, beheading hostages and helping push Iraq into a spiral of sectarian violence with vicious attacks against Shiites.

To which James Taranto of the "Best of the Web" posed the question: "Does the AP really think that going from street thug to mass murderer is a 'rise'?"

Stay tuned for more such rot from the liberal media. In the meantime, it is our view that those who greeted al-Zarqawi's death last week as an unvarnished good and a great victory for American forces in Iraq need not be concerned about Democratic ambivalence or naysayers' protestations to the contrary, if for no other reason than the fact that a world with one less bloody killer in it is a better world indeed, even if the Democrats are incapable of understanding this.

WHAT IF BUSH KNOWS WHAT HE'S DOING?

Let's take a moment to see if we have the story straight. The way the tale is presently told, in the nearly five years since September 11, 2001, President Bush has gone from the heroic warrior leader who held a fragile nation together at its darkest hour to a hapless and dissolute bumbler who has prosecuted a war, perhaps boldly and bravely, but unquestionably ineffectually.

On the political left, he is decried as dishonest and incompetent at best and criminal at worst. In some circles on the right, he is seen as overly preoccupied with politics, unwilling to prosecute the war as aggressively as necessary. In others he is the brave leader with a tragic, Shakespearean flaw that compels him to remain loyal to subordinates who have failed him, and which, in turn, precludes him from making the changes in strategy and tactics that might salvage an otherwise unsalvageable foreign entanglement.

Some on both sides see him as toting water for nefarious domestic and foreign constituencies whose goals and loyalties are different from those of "average Americans." And even those who have generally supported him and his policies nonetheless believe that he has made serious mistakes that have jeopardized the effort against the Islamist terrorists and needlessly endangered the nation.

But what if this story is wrong? What if the critics and analysts have simply repeated the same lines so many times now that they have come to accept them as facts rather than opinions? What if these critics are now incapable of questioning either the accuracy of their narrative or the biases on which it is predicated? What if the confidence President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and the rest always seem to radiate is not the effect of delusion, as has generally been assumed, but of an actual, well-founded knowledge that the war is not only winnable but is being won even as the press and politicians lament inevitable defeat?

Two weeks ago, when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced a policy shift on the administration's part and notified the Islamic Republic that the United States would be open to direct negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear weapons program, she and her boss were roundly criticized from both the right and the left. Last week, the criticism grew sharper, as the details of the offer made to the Mad Mullahs slowly dribbled out to reporters covering Foggy Bottom.

According to scores of critics, the deal offered by the Bush administration was, in fact, "worse" than anyone could have anticipated, neither precluding future Iranian enrichment of uranium nor denying the Mullahs access to established nuclear technology. The offer was so risible in the eyes of many hawks that they belittled it as reeking of Clintonian feebleness. "I suppose it's only a matter of time," lamented the former Reagan national security aide Michael Ledeen, "before Condi borrows one of Albright's big hats, and goes to Tehran to dance with their dictator."

The standard criticism of the offer to the Mullahs is that negotiations will ultimately achieve little, as experience has shown, but will allow the Iranians time to continue their race toward nuclear status even as they pretend to be dickering over the terms by which they'll forfeit that race. The Iranians are, the general consensus has concluded, simply stalling.

While there is no doubt that the Iranians are, indeed, stalling and do hope to build their bomb while we're sitting at the negotiating table, the real question is whether such dithering is actually in the Mullahs' best interest. What if the Bush administration is also delaying? What if instead of dancing the usual diplomatic tango, innocent of the fact that his partner is faithless, the President is well aware both of the Iranians' treachery and their ultimate ambitions? What if he understands their sense of eschatological destiny; their belief that their crusade against the West represents the penultimate stage in the Shiite Rapture; their conviction that a nuclear bomb plays a fundamental role in the fulfillment of their destiny and the inauguration of the last days? What if, in other words, Bush is playing the Iranians just as they believe they are playing him?

Why would Bush be playing the Iranians? What could he possibly hope to gain from a delay? Well, for starters, he could be operating under the belief that the Mullah's grip on power continues to be tenuous at best. The ethnic uprisings that we noted last week and the week before have continued, and unrest continues to spread, showing up in surprising and, for the regime, unnerving places. Last Tuesday, the National Council of Resistance in Iran reported that the former Iranian president and current Council of Guardians member Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani was chased out of the Shiite holy city of Qom, the onetime center of the Khomeinist revolution, by an angry mob. To wit:

Speech by Hashemi Rafsanjani, head of the regime's Council for the State Exigency and second powerful man in the clerical regime was disrupted by protests in the holly city of Qom yesterday. In face of the chaos created he had to break up his speech and leave the town immediately. He was planned to address another meeting in the town but it had to be cancelled.

Aftab, the state-run internet site, reported that "protests were organized and the protesters were located in six different places

and each one was protected by three.” The news website added that a number of young people and local residents went to the meeting place as soon as the news broke out in the town and started chanting anti-regime slogans.

Now, you can rest assured that if we are aware of these events inside of Iran, President Bush is too. In fact, the President is likely one of only a handful of people in the world who knows if the Mullahs’ incessant whining about “foreign provocateurs” causing all of the unrest is accurate or a paranoid delusion.

In any case, the unrest in Iran is not the only or even the most important reason why President Bush might want to delay a final reckoning with the Mullahs, even knowing that they will continue to push forward with their nuclear weapons program. The fact of the matter is that the Iranians – like the Syrians, the Saudis, the Egyptians, etc. – are deathly afraid that the Americans might succeed in Iraq, for they know full well that a stable, America-friendly regime on their borders will provide a beacon of hope to the eternally oppressed people of the region. Moreover American success in establishing a stable government in Iraq (and Afghanistan, for that matter) would permit President Bush and the United States armed forces to turn their attention elsewhere and to focus more aggressively on other fronts in the broader war on terror.

Throughout this war on terror, the “experts” have had a great deal of advice for President Bush and a great deal of criticism for him when he’s ignored that advice. Fortunately, the experts have been wrong far more often than he has. They said, for example, that it was impossible to win a land war in Afghanistan, that two of the greatest empires in modern history had failed, and that the Americans would as well. Indeed, we are, as columnist Mark Steyn is fond of reminding us, still waiting, some 55 months later, for the dreaded “Afghan Winter” to ravage the American invaders much as it did the Brits and the Soviets before them.

Next they claimed that Iraq was a distraction from the “real” war on terror, that secularist Baathists and the religio-fanatic al Qaedaists would have nothing to do with one another, and that the Shiite Iranians and the Sunni Arabs would sooner kill one another than collaborate to eliminate their common enemy. And they were wrong.

Now they claim that the death of the one man who proved all their assumptions about Iraq wrong, the man who bridged the purportedly unbridgeable chasm between Sunni and Shiite, secularist and Islamist, is hardly anything to get all worked up about and will likely not affect the outcome of the greater war effort. But what if they’re wrong again?

Certainly, one may argue that the killing of Zarqawi – as an isolated event – is not likely to change the fortunes of either side in this war and therefore can’t be considered “conflict altering.” But that’s entirely beside the point, since it was not an isolated event. Zarqawi’s death was part of a succession of developments both inside and outside of Iraq that suggest the way the wars in Iraq and against Islamist terror in general are going.

Aside from the elimination of Zarqawi, in just the last couple of weeks alone:

- The makeup of the Iraqi government was finalized, providing the Iraqis with a defense minister and an interior minister, who together may now set about the tasks of securing and defending the nation’s borders;
- Terror cells in Toronto and Atlanta were rolled up and attacks prevented;
- The loyalty of the al Qaedaists in Iraq was broken, with someone on the inside giving up the “big dog”;
- And dissension was sown among those insurgents who remain to fight the Americans, since they now know that someone (or more than one someone) in their midst is a traitor to the cause.

As for Zarqawi himself, it would be easy, as the experts are once again demonstrating, to underestimate the significance of the operation against him. But no matter what they say, it was a big deal. The aforementioned Michael Ledeen, who has more than earned his reputation as a skeptic of the Bush administration's handling of the campaign against the Islamists, suggested that the events of last Wednesday may well have been a far bigger deal than almost anyone else will acknowledge. He wrote:

We have probably just lived through the greatest global counterterrorist operation in history. In Iraq alone, some 16 or 17 terror cells were attacked at the same time as Zarqawi was killed. And the wave of arrests — just yesterday the Swiss reported they had broken up a cell planning to attack an El Al passenger plane — is like nothing I have seen before, bespeaking an encouraging degree of international cooperation. It goes hand in hand with the devastating campaign in Iraq against the terrorist leadership. Zarqawi is just the latest to fall; most of his top associates had been eliminated over the course of the past several months.

In our opinion, it is occasionally worth reminding ourselves of a few conclusions about this war and about those who are waging it on our behalf that we and others have drawn but which have, over time, largely been forgotten or ignored.

First, it is important to remember that despite what the critics and the Vietnam fetishists insist, the military campaigns against both al Qaeda and the Iraqi insurgency are being won and won handily. The problems that still exist in Iraq are predominantly political, not military in nature. This should hardly come as a surprise, since the political tasks undertaken by the Iraqi people at our direction are difficult under any conditions, let alone in a country that has known nothing but murderous tyranny for better than three decades and has precious little history of consensual government. Nonetheless, the daily reports of car bombings and atrocities perpetrated against both

soldiers and civilians, make it easy to lose sight of the fact that both the conventional war and the successor guerilla war have been handled remarkably well by the American and British armed forces.

Second, we should always remember who our leaders in this war are and, more to the point, who they are not. As we have noted more than once in these pages, George W. Bush is not Lyndon Johnson. Dick Cheney is not Hubert Humphrey. And Donald Rumsfeld is not Robert McNamara. Johnson was defeated by the war before his troops were. He quit and left his troops overseas and left his successor a mess. Bush, by contrast, soldiers on and, if nothing else, remains perpetually optimistic. And while criticism of Rumsfeld has been severe, he retains the support of both the President and the Vice President, the latter of whom, it must be remembered, was himself a highly successful and well respected Secretary of Defense.

Bush is not Jimmy Carter, who sat helplessly as the nation's enemies did as they pleased. Last week, the historian Victor Davis Hanson reminded us all of the impotency of the Carter administration, writing that “an embassy was stormed; Khomeinism was birthed; Afghanistan was invaded; a holocaust continued full-bore in Cambodia; Central America was in the midst of a Communist insurrection; and we were reduced to boycotting the Olympics.”

Nor is Bush Bill Clinton, in spite of the complaints of those who would have him be more direct with the Mullahs. Clearly, this President is less concerned about what is popular than what he believes to be right. Unlike his predecessor, Bush has not succumbed to the delusion that war can be fought “cleanly” from 30,000 feet. And he will not abandon the commitments this nation has made at the first scent of blood, only to see a failed state develop and emerge as a sanctuary for our enemies, as Clinton did in Somalia.

Finally, we should keep in mind the fact that George W. Bush will not be president forever and, moreover, will have no official successor to continue his policies and see his plans to their fruition. No president has a guarantee that his policies will be continued after his

term has ended, but for Bush, this reality is especially harsh, since his vice president has eschewed seeking the presidency for himself. Of all the presumed candidates to replace him, only two – the senior Senator from Arizona and the former mayor of New York – appear even remotely likely to continue Bush’s aggressive pursuit of the enemy. And neither of these two will have a particularly easy time winning their party’s nomination, much less the presidency.

What this means, of course, is that the President is operating on a deadline. If he is to ensure that his successor is unable to undo what he has done, he will have to complete the tasks he has undertaken before his term expires, and preferably before his successor is elected. Needless to say, that doesn’t leave him a great deal of time.

In sum then, President Bush should be expected to continue to prosecute the campaign against al Qaeda and its collaborators in Iraq much as he has up to this point. Additionally, he can be expected to do so with his command structure largely intact. There is little risk that this president, who quite clearly values loyalty, will change proverbial horses midstream. Lastly, if there is any change to the President’s strategy over the next several months, we suspect that it will be to move more aggressively. Time’s a’wasting, as they say.

We know that all of these points tend to contradict the standard narrative incessantly drummed into our heads by the usual suspects in the mainstream press and in both political parties. But what if the usual suspects are wrong?

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