

Bush-Bin Laden Symbiosis Reborn

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Just as Sylvester and Tweety Bird achieved lasting Hollywood fame from their comical cartoon chases, the less amusing duo of George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden continue to benefit each other by reviving their long-distance rivalry, one posturing against the other in a way that helps them both.

In a new video, al-Qaeda leader bin Laden again taunts Bush, the United States — and then the Democrats for not forcing an American withdrawal from Iraq, which should help guarantee that the Democrats won't dare press for a withdrawal from Iraq.

At a summit of Pacific Rim leaders in Sydney, Australia, President Bush then did his part, highlighting bin Laden's Iraq comments:

"I found it interesting that on the tape Iraq was mentioned, which is a reminder that Iraq is part of the war against extremists. If al-Qaeda bothers to mention Iraq, it's because they want to achieve their objectives in Iraq, which is to drive us out."

Except that U.S. intelligence has long concluded that al-Qaeda really wants the opposite: to bog the United States down in a hopeless, bloody war in Iraq that has been a boon for recruiting young jihadists, raising money and protecting al-Qaeda's leadership holed up in base camps inside Pakistan.

Bin Laden continues to play the role of another cartoon character, Walt Disney's Brer Rabbit, who escaped one famously tight spot by begging not to be thrown into the briar patch when that was exactly where he wanted to go. [For more details on this Bush-bin Laden symbiosis, see Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.]

Cole Attack

At least since the attack on the USS Cole in October 2000, al-Qaeda's strategy has been to draw the United States militarily into the Middle East as a way both to enhance al-Qaeda's status in the Muslim world and to weaken the Americans by draining their resources and damaging their army.

However, the Clinton administration couldn't verify that al-Qaeda was behind the Cole attack until January 2001 and then turned over the evidence to the incoming Bush team, which didn't act because it had other priorities.

By summer 2001, U.S. intelligence was picking up chatter indicating that al-Qaeda was disappointed by the lack of a response to the Cole provocation but was confident that the next blow would force Washington's hand.

That next attack on Sept. 11, 2001, did compel an American military reaction, but al-Qaeda may have miscalculated as an effective U.S. counter-attack ousted al-Qaeda's Taliban allies in Afghanistan and cornered bin Laden and other top leaders at Tora Bora.

At that crucial point, however, Bush failed to dispatch sufficient U.S. troops to seal off bin Laden's escape routes, allowing many of al-Qaeda's top leaders to flee into the rugged tribal region of Pakistan.

To al-Qaeda's relief and amazement, Bush also began diverting key U.S. military resources away from Afghanistan toward Iraq, whose secular Sunni leader Saddam Hussein was an enemy of al-Qaeda's Sunni fundamentalists.

Bush's invasion of Iraq not only eliminated a key Sunni rival in Hussein but rallied thousands of angry Muslims to al-Qaeda's banner. Soon, al-Qaeda even had an affiliate in Iraq led by Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

As al-Qaeda gained strength in the Islamic world, bin Laden came to see Bush as a something of a strategic ally. When Bush found himself in a tight battle with Democratic Sen. John Kerry, bin Laden issued a videotape denouncing Bush on the Friday before Election 2004.

The tape had the predictable effect of giving Bush a last-minute boost in the polls, which CIA analysts concluded was precisely bin Laden's intent. Bin Laden wanted to keep Bush around as a foil for another four years. [See Neck Deep for details.]

Prolonged War

Also, contrary to Bush's repeated assertions that al-Qaeda wants U.S. troops to leave Iraq so it can establish a safe haven there, the terrorist group's internal messages, which have been intercepted by U.S. intelligence, reveal that al-Qaeda fears most the impact of a sudden American withdrawal.

A July 9, 2005, letter attributed to al-Qaeda's second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri warned that a rapid U.S. pullout could cause al-Qaeda's new recruits, who traveled to Iraq to wage war on the Americans, to simply give up the fight and go home.

"The mujahedeen must not have their mission end with the expulsion of the Americans from Iraq, and then lay down their weapons, and silence the fighting zeal," wrote Zawahiri, who worried that a premature departure of the Americans also might leave the depleted ranks of al-Qaeda foreign fighters at the mercy of angry Iraqis.

Another internal communique revealed that al-Qaeda's real wish was for the United States to stay in Iraq indefinitely, so the terrorist group could continue recruiting and training young jihadists while buying time to overcome the hostility of Iraqis toward outsiders.

In a letter to Zarqawi, dated Dec. 11, 2005, "Atiyah," another top aide to bin Laden, described the hard work needed to overcome the animosity of Sunni tribal leaders. In that context, Atiyah said the continued American presence was crucial.

"Prolonging the war is in our interest," Atiyah wrote in a letter captured when Zarqawi was killed in June 2006. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Al-Qaeda's Fragile Foothold."]

So, the interests of President Bush and Osama bin Laden continue to dovetail perfectly. The open-ended “war on terror” has allowed Bush to consolidate previously unimaginable powers for a U.S. chief executive. Simultaneously, bin Laden has emerged as a hero to many Muslims offended by the American occupation of Arab lands.

Now, as Bush faces another Democratic challenge to his plans for continuing the Iraq War, bin Laden shows up again, essentially berating the Democrats for not forcing U.S. troop withdrawals.

“The vast majority of you [Americans] want it [the Iraq War] stopped,” bin Laden said. “Thus you elected the Democratic Party for this purpose, but the Democrats haven’t made a move worth mentioning.”

That means if the Democrats do renew their efforts toward forcing American troop withdrawals, Bush and his supporters can simply accuse the Democrats of following bin Laden’s orders or playing into bin Laden’s hands.

The reality may be the opposite, but a few Republican floor speeches and a couple of well-placed op-eds should be enough to spook the already nervous Democrats.

Fox News commentator Sean Hannity offered a taste of how the new bin Laden tape will be used against both Democrats and the American Left.

“One of the things that also struck me is the language specifically that he [bin Laden] used,” Hannity said. “He seemed to adopt the very same language that is being used by the hard Left in this country, as he describes what’s going on in Iraq as a ‘civil war’; he actually used the word ‘neocons’; he talked about global warming; he denounces capitalism and corporations.”

In other words, any similarity in language between bin Laden and what many Americans say in common conversations will be used to discredit them. They will become bin Laden’s fellow travelers.

All the better to get Bush and bin Laden what they both really want: a prolonged war in Iraq — and possibly a U.S. attack on the Shiite government of Iran.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush, can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq and Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & ‘Project Truth’ are also available there.

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