

The Osama Factor

by Dan Jacoby

Just before the 2004 election, Osama bin Laden released a videotape that is credited with giving George W. Bush a second term as President. Recently, pundits are again speculating over whether he will do it again just before the 2008 election, and what effect it will have.

Before delving a little deeper into this question (something the self-appointed pundits never seem to do), let us remember that over six years after bin Laden's group hijacked four planes and killed almost 3,000 Americans he is still a free man. In that time, George W. Bush has shifted his position from "Wanted, Dead or Alive" to "not that interested" to ... well, he seems to be ignoring bin Laden completely.

Could the two facts – bin Laden's videotape and Bush's nonchalance – be connected?

Clearly, Republicans believe that as long as they claim that bin Laden is the bogeyman, ready to pounce on us at any minute, Americans will be so scared that they'll vote Republican. Just as clearly, Republicans from Bush on down have no real interest in capturing or killing bin Laden. This makes sense, since as soon as bin Laden is no longer a bogeyman Republicans will have to find another campaign theme.

And Republicans don't have another theme. They can't use the economy, which for most Americans is in a deep recession. They can't use "social issues," since Americans are tired of that rhetoric. They can't use our continued occupation of Iraq; America rejected "stay the course" last fall, and polls show no change in that position. They failed on Social Security, and they have no ideas on healthcare. So there's nothing left but fear of bin Laden, which explains why Rudy Giuliani is always leading in Republican polls.

Meanwhile, since Republicans are clearly not interested in capturing or killing bin Laden, it is in his best interest to keep Republicans in power here in America. The last thing bin Laden wants is for America to pull its troops out of Iraq, freeing them to go into Afghanistan (and Pakistan!) and go after him and his top advisors. So it should not be surprising that he resurfaces every time there is a possibility that Democrats will ever achieve real political power here.

Is this a direct connection? Is there any evidence that Bush and bin Laden are actively cooperating? Of course not. But it is obvious that Bush and the Republicans want bin Laden to remain free, and it is equally obvious that bin Laden wants the Republicans to remain in power. And as long as Republicans' and bin Laden's self-interests coincide, their actions will continue to help each other.

Meanwhile, almost 4,000 Americans have died in Iraq, with no end in sight. And as long as bin Laden has any influence, that will not change. The only way to change it is to ignore both Bush and bin Laden, and make sure the 2008 election is not about fear but about real strength and real solutions.

Perhaps if someone with a long beard were to put that on a videotape...