

PAKISTAN FOR BUSH

## July Surprise?

by John B. Judis, Spencer Ackerman &amp; Massoud Ansari

Late last month, President Bush lost his greatest advantage in his bid for reelection. A poll conducted by ABC News and *The Washington Post* discovered that challenger John Kerry was running even with the president on the critical question of whom voters trust to handle the war on terrorism. Largely as a result of the deteriorating occupation of Iraq, Bush lost what was, in April, a seemingly prohibitive 21-point advantage on his signature issue. But, even as the president's poll numbers were sliding, his administration was implementing a plan to insure the public's confidence in his hunt for Al Qaeda.

This spring, the administration significantly increased its pressure on Pakistan to kill or capture Osama bin Laden, his deputy, Ayman Al Zawahiri, or the Taliban's Mullah Mohammed Omar, all of whom are believed to be hiding in the lawless tribal areas of Pakistan. A succession of high-level American officials—from outgoing CIA Director George Tenet to Secretary of State Colin Powell to Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca to State Department counterterrorism chief Cofer Black to a top CIA South Asia official—have visited Pakistan in recent months to urge General Pervez Musharraf's government to do more in the war on terrorism. In April, Zalmay Khalilzad, the American ambassador to Afghanistan, publicly chided the Pakistanis for providing a “sanctuary” for Al Qaeda and Taliban forces crossing the Afghan border. “The problem has not been solved and needs to be solved, the sooner the better,” he said.

This public pressure would be appropriate, even laudable, had it not been accompanied by an unseemly private insistence that the Pakistanis deliver these high-value targets (HVTs) before Americans go to the polls in November. The Bush administration denies it has geared the war on terrorism to the electoral calendar. “Our attitude and actions have been the same since September 11 in terms of getting high-value targets off the street, and that doesn't change because of an election,” says National Security Council spokesman Sean McCormack. But *The New Republic* has learned that Pakistani security officials have been told they must produce HVTs by the election. According to one source in Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), “The Pakistani government is really desperate and wants to flush out bin Laden and his associates after the latest pressures from the U.S. administration to deliver before the [upcoming] U.S. elections.” Introducing target dates for Al Qaeda captures is a new twist in U.S.-Pakistani counterterrorism relations—according to a recently departed intelligence official, “no timetable[s]” were discussed in 2002 or 2003—but the November election is apparently bringing a new deadline pressure to the hunt. Another official, this one from the Pakistani Interior Ministry, which is responsible for internal security, explains, “The Musharraf government has a history of rescuing the Bush administration. They now want Musharraf to bail them out when they are facing hard times in the coming elections.” (These sources insisted on remaining anonymous. Under Pakistan's Official Secrets Act, an official leaking information to the press can be imprisoned for up to ten years.)

A third source, an official who works under ISI's director, Lieutenant General Ehsan ul-Haq, informed TNR that the Pakistanis “have been told at every level that apprehension or killing of HVTs before [the] election is [an] absolute must.” What's more, this source claims that Bush administration officials have told their Pakistani counterparts they have a date in mind for announcing this achievement: “The last ten days of July deadline has been given repeatedly by visitors to Islamabad and during [ul-Haq's] meetings in Washington.” Says McCormack: “I'm aware of no such comment.” But according to this ISI official, a White House aide told ul-Haq last spring that “it would be best if the arrest or killing of [any] HVT were announced on twenty-six, twenty-seven,

or twenty-eight July”—the first three days of the Democratic National Convention in Boston.

The Bush administration has matched this public and private pressure with enticements and implicit threats. During his March visit to Islamabad, Powell designated Pakistan a major non-NATO ally, a status that allows its military to purchase a wider array of U.S. weaponry. Powell pointedly refused to criticize Musharraf for pardoning nuclear physicist A.Q. Khan—who, the previous month, had admitted exporting nuclear secrets to Iran, North Korea, and Libya—declaring Khan’s transgressions an “internal” Pakistani issue. In addition, the administration is pushing a five-year, \$3 billion aid package for Pakistan through Congress over Democratic concerns about the country’s proliferation of nuclear technology and lack of democratic reform.

But Powell conspicuously did not commit the United States to selling F-16s to Pakistan, which it desperately wants in order to tilt the regional balance of power against India. And the Pakistanis fear that, if they don’t produce an HVT, they won’t get the planes. Equally, they fear that, if they don’t deliver, either Bush or a prospective Kerry administration would turn its attention to the apparent role of Pakistan’s security establishment in facilitating Khan’s illicit proliferation network. One Pakistani general recently in Washington confided in a journalist, “If we don’t find these guys by the election, they are going to stick this whole nuclear mess up our asshole.”

Pakistani perceptions of U.S. politics reinforce these worries. “In Pakistan, there has been a folk belief that, whenever there’s a Republican administration in office, relations with Pakistan have been very good,” says Khalid Hasan, a U.S. correspondent for the Lahore-based *Daily Times*. By contrast, there’s also a “folk belief that the Democrats are always pro-India.” Recent history has validated those beliefs. The Clinton administration inherited close ties to Pakistan, forged a decade earlier in collaboration against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But, by the time Clinton left office, the United States had tilted toward India, and Pakistan was under U.S. sanctions for its nuclear activities. All this has given Musharraf reason not just to respond to pressure from Bush, but to feel invested in him—and to worry that Kerry, who called the Khan affair a “disaster,” and who has proposed tough new curbs on nuclear proliferation, would adopt an icier line.

Bush’s strategy could work. In large part because of the increased U.S. pressure, Musharraf has, over the last several months, significantly increased military activity in the tribal areas—regions that enjoy considerable autonomy from Islamabad and where, until Musharraf sided with the United States in the war on terrorism, Pakistani soldiers had never set foot in the nation’s 50-year history. Thousands of Pakistani troops fought a pitched battle in late March against tribesmen and their Al Qaeda affiliates in South Waziristan in hopes of capturing Zawahiri. The fighting escalated significantly in June. Attacks on army camps in the tribal areas brought fierce retaliation, leaving over 100 tribal and foreign militants and Pakistani soldiers dead in three days. Last month, Pakistan killed a powerful Waziristan warlord and Qaeda ally, Nek Mohammed, in a dramatic rocket attack that villagers said bore American fingerprints. (They claim a U.S. spy plane had been circling overhead.) Through these efforts, the Pakistanis could bring in bin Laden, Mullah Omar, or Zawahiri—a significant victory in the war on terrorism that would bolster Bush’s reputation among voters.

But there is a reason many Pakistanis and some American officials had previously been reluctant to carry the war on terrorism into the tribal areas. A Pakistani offensive in that region, aided by American high-tech weaponry and perhaps Special Forces, could unite tribal chieftains against the central government and precipitate a border war without actually capturing any of the HVTs. Military action in the tribal areas “has a domestic fallout, both religious and ethnic,” Pakistani Foreign Minister Mian Khursheed Mehmood Kasuri complained to the *Los Angeles Times* last year. Some American intelligence officials agree. “Pakistan just can’t risk a civil war in that area of their country.

They can't afford a western border that is unstable," says a senior intelligence official, who anonymously authored the recent *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror* and who says he has not heard that the current pressures on Pakistan are geared to the election. "We may be at the point where [Musharraf] has done almost as much as he can."

Pushing Musharraf to go after Al Qaeda in the tribal areas may be a good idea despite the risks. But, if that is the case, it was a good idea in 2002 and 2003. Why the switch now? Top Pakistanis think they know: This year, the president's reelection is at stake.

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