

Bush, Bin Laden and Iraq

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Even strong supporters of President Bush's foreign policies are not blind to the merit of some of the opposing strategic arguments. Those who maintain that the invasion of Iraq was a diversion from the war on terror and that Bush was dead wrong to assert that Iraq was the frontline in the war at least deserve a nod to the respectability of their case. As for those who claim Bush is wrongheaded to push democracy on the Middle East, some weight of history seems on their side. And, to those who label advocates of the Bush Doctrine ignorant of the complexities inherent in the Islamic world, I plead *nolo contendere*.

But no less an authority than Osama bin Laden has settled the strategic argument, for he has now joined Bush's policy of doing battle with international "jihadism" in Iraq.

In his newest tape he has demanded that Iraqis refrain from voting in the upcoming elections and has declared those who do exercise the franchise to be apostates. In effect he has confirmed that what is really going on is an Islamic civil war. Bin Laden's vision of a restored caliphate and a resurrection of Saddam's fascistic absolutism are at war with acceptance of the need to reconcile Islam to modernity.

In contrast, Ayad Allawi, the interim Iraqi prime minister, believes in consent of the governed. There is no in between in that struggle. And on that score the issue should now be settled for Americans of all stripes.

It may once have been correct to claim that Iraq was not strategically significant. But neither were the fields at Waterloo, Gettysburg or Stalingrad until the contending armies met in those places. By accident or political design, insignificant places become enduring historical names. How strange that in his own twisted way bin Laden would align with Bush on the strategic importance of Iraq in waging this civil war.

Bin Laden has also taken Bush's bait by aligning himself with the upstart Zarqawi to make Iraq "do-or-die." At this point, Bin Laden and his team, while wreaking death and havoc, are falling well short of forcing the Coalition out Iraq or of inciting widespread sectarian strife between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

International terror networks and Saddam's dead-ender Ba'athists are in an embrace that may prove to be a suicide pact. If the Iraqi elections come off at the end of January, as they already have in Afghanistan, then millions of Muslims will have rejected absolutism and fear and bin Laden's game plan. And George Bush will have delivered the best sucker punch since Cassius Clay decked Sonny Liston.

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