

Washington weighs terror's impact on presidential vote

A warning to the American people

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An article in the “Week in Review” section of Sunday’s *New York Times* by regular correspondent David Sanger constitutes a serious warning to the American people. Entitled “Calculating the Politics of Catastrophe,” the piece describes “obsessive” talk within political and national security circles about the possible electoral consequences of another terror attack in the United States.

While Sanger presents the issue purely as one of deep concern in the Bush and Kerry campaigns about the possibility of a “nightmarish, unpredictable event” that could shift the election one way or another, a much more serious question lies behind the discussion. Coming in the wake of further evidence of the deliberate stand-down of US defenses prior to the September 11, 2001, attacks, it must be asked: Will the Bush administration allow or facilitate another massive terror attack to help secure an electoral victory in 2004?

Sanger notes that in recent weeks the Bush administration has begun to talk in public about the possibility of such an attack, “perhaps to brace the country for the worst, perhaps to begin the political inoculation if domestic defenses fail.”

Last month, US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice gave an interview in which she warned, “I think we also have to take seriously that [terrorists] might try during the cycle leading up to the election to do something.” Rice continued, “In some ways, it seems like it would be too good to pass up for them, and so we are actively looking at that possibility, actively trying to make certain that we are responding appropriately.” Hinting that preparations to defend against a terror attack may not be successful, she added, “The hard thing about terrorism is that they only have

to be right once, and we have to be right 100 percent of the time. And nobody can be certain there won’t be another attack.”

One of the greatest concerns of officials in the administration is that another terror attack like that of September 11 may not boost Bush’s political fortunes, but instead have the opposite effect. The talk of a potential attack has led to “a kind of macabre game theory,” writes Sanger, “in which security experts and political operatives—two classes of people who typically do not interact much in Washington—are calculating what the political fallout of an attack might be.”

Of particular concern is the Spanish precedent. Immediately preceding elections held in March, a terror attack in Madrid produced a backlash of anger against the right-wing government of Jose Maria Aznar, leading to the victory of the Socialist Party (PSOE). The bombing was seen by many as a consequence of Aznar’s support for the US-led war in Iraq, a war opposed by the overwhelming majority of the Spanish people. Aznar’s attempt to exploit the bombings to push the agenda of his Popular Party backfired, leading to his defeat.

The result of the Spanish election was a deep blow to the Bush administration not only because it represented a repudiation of its Iraq policy—Spain has since begun the withdrawal of all its troops from Iraq. It also demonstrated that the population of the United States as well as Spain could respond in ways not sought or anticipated by the ruling elite.

Sanger quotes a senior administration official as saying, “The message the terrorists learned in Madrid is that attacks can change elections and change policy. It’s a very dangerous precedent to have out there.”

Immediately following the elections, administration officials and right-wing media pundits in the US denounced the Spanish population for learning the “wrong lesson” from the terrorist attacks and for “appeasing” terrorism.

According to Sanger, however, the Bush administration is making its own calculations over whether a terrorist attack can “change elections” in the US—in Bush’s favor.

He writes: “Mr. Bush’s political aides—speaking only on background, because no one dissects terror on the record—argue that the crazier the world gets, the more it plays to the theme of the campaign: Now more than ever, the country needs a president who has proved to be strong on terror.”

Indeed, the use of the politics of fear has been a staple of the Bush administration since September 11. Through such mechanisms as the color-coded warning system, combined with strategically timed and unsubstantiated reports of possibly imminent terrorist strikes, the administration has sought to influence political events, including the Congressional elections in 2002. Already, the Republican Party has begun airing ads seeking to exploit the September 11 attacks for political gain, presenting Kerry as “soft on terror.”

According to Sanger, the problem that Bush officials and Washington insiders are grappling with, however, is the possibility that any support generated by an attack could be shorter-lived than after September 11 “because the shock value would be gone, and because this time American defenses are supposed to be up. So within a month or so, the thinking goes, horror could give way to analysis about whether the billions spent on security were well spent—and if Mr. Bush focused on the right threats.”

The administration has recently come under attack from people like former counterterrorism head Richard Clark for ignoring terrorist threats before September 11 and for initiating a war in Iraq rather than focusing on defense from future attacks. Another terrorist attack would undoubtedly be seen by millions of Americans as a consequence of the administration’s criminal policy in Iraq and elsewhere.

“One reason the administration is so obsessed with security for the conventions,” writes Sanger, “is that those gatherings attract large concentrations of the American elite in two major cities. But they also may

be sufficiently far ahead of the election to allow time for predictable finger-pointing. Terrorists, some believe, might try to undertake an attack that could be credibly portrayed as a result of the Iraq war, rather than as a 9/11 replay.”

This concern suggests the obvious possibility that the administration could allow or facilitate an attack during a brief window of opportunity—immediately preceding the election—in order to stampede the American people behind Bush. If September 11 is any guide, they could count on the Democrats to raise no questions until well after the vote was held.

The talk of a terror attack on the eve of the November elections is not new. In December 2003, *New York Times* columnist William Safire made the prediction that “a major terror attack in the US” could be the “October surprise” for this year’s election. Shortly before Safire’s column appeared, General Tommy Franks—the former head of the US military’s Central Command who led the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—predicted that another terror attack on the scale of September 11 would result in the abrogation of the Constitution and the beginning of military rule in the US.

This last possibility—not suggested by Sanger—is particularly significant given the concerns over the uncertain electoral consequences of another terrorist attack. If such an attack could not be used confidently to manipulate the results of the elections, it could be used as a justification for abrogating the elections altogether.



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