

The Bush administration and the killing of Zarqawi

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The Bush administration and the US media are going all out to portray the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as a major victory for the American military and the recently installed government in Baghdad.

The attempt to parlay the death of the Islamist terrorist into a propaganda coup for the US and its proxy government in Baghdad is an obscene spectacle, combining cynicism and desperation.

Early Thursday morning, US time, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, flanked by Gen. George Casey, the top US commander in Iraq, and Zalmay Khalilzad, the American ambassador, held a press conference in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone to announce that the Jordanian-born terrorist had been killed, along with five other people, in a US air attack on a "safe house" outside of Baqubah, a town northeast of Baghdad.

Maliki boasted that Zarqawi had been "terminated." A US military spokesman later acknowledged that among those killed by two 500-pound bombs dropped Wednesday evening were a woman and a child.

President Bush wasted no time in attempting to seize on the news to divert public attention from revelations of American massacres and, he hoped, staunch the sharp decline in his administration's approval ratings, largely the product of broad and growing popular opposition in the US to the war.

In remarks made Thursday morning from the White House, Bush declared that "justice" had been "delivered" to the "operational commander of the terrorist movement in Iraq." He praised the "courage and professionalism" of "the finest military in the world."

He went on to caution against any expectations that the death and destruction in Iraq would recede, or that American troops would be coming home any time

soon. "Zarqawi is dead," he said, "but the difficult and necessary mission in Iraq continues. We can expect the terrorists and insurgents to carry on without him." Warning of "tough days ahead," he demanded the "continued patience of the American people."

The Democrats quickly joined in hailing the killing of Zarqawi. Senator Joseph Biden, who has announced his intention to run for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, told CNN that the killing was "good news." He went on to praise the US military.

According to their own statements, US military and intelligence forces had been tracking Zarqawi for some time, having (presumably through torture) extracted from captured members of his group, Al Qaeda in Iraq, critical information about his movements. Why did they decide to move now? No doubt the timing of the attack was bound up with mounting signs of political crisis within the Bush administration and demoralization among US troops occupying Iraq.

Only a few days before, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki was publicly denouncing the US military for a callous disregard for Iraqi life. Responding to the execution of 24 Iraqi civilians by US Marines in Haditha, Maliki called such atrocities a "daily phenomenon," and charged that the American forces "do not respect the Iraqi people.... They crush them with their vehicles and kill them just on suspicion or a hunch."

As for Zarqawi, he was one of those shadowy figures, well known to US intelligence, whose real allegiance at any given time is difficult to pin down. A fanatical Sunni Muslim fundamentalist, he represented an extremely reactionary element within Iraq. To the extent that he was involved in the numerous atrocities laid at his feet by Washington, his role was to undermine the Iraqi resistance and incite sectarian civil war between the Sunnis and Shiites.

Zarqawi began his career as a jihadist, like Osama bin Laden and so many others who subsequently turned against the US, by traveling to Afghanistan, in early 1989, to join the US-backed mujahidin guerilla war against the Soviet military occupation.

Even before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration was vastly exaggerating Zarqawi's role in the country in order to justify its illegal intervention. In his now notorious speech before the United Nations Security Council in February of 2003, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell singled out Zarqawi as the personification of an alliance between the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda—a claim which the Council on Foreign Relations in an article posted Thursday on its web site said, diplomatically avoiding the word "lie," was "later disproved."

As the Iraqi resistance grew in the aftermath of the invasion, the Bush administration, with the media and the Democratic Party trailing behind, sought to identify all armed opposition to the US occupiers with Zarqawi, in an effort to discredit as terrorists the Iraqis who were fighting to rid themselves of foreign invaders.

At the same time, actions attributed to Zarqawi at key points gave a boost to US interests. In February of 2004, amid signs that the Shiite population was on the verge of joining the armed resistance being fought mainly in Sunni areas, a public letter, allegedly authored by Zarqawi, called for Sunnis to provoke a civil war with the Shiites. Several weeks later, suicide bombings at Shiite mosques in Karbala and Baghdad were blamed on what the US called the "Zarqawi network."

In May of 2004, shortly after the publication of gruesome photos of torture at Abu Ghraib, American businessman Nicholas Berg was kidnapped in Iraq and, according to the US, personally decapitated by Zarqawi. Berg had been held and questioned by the US military for 13 days before he was released and, shortly thereafter, kidnapped by those who subsequently killed him. The murky circumstances of this crime, and the role of American authorities, have never been explained.

When such atrocities failed either to stem the Iraqi resistance or halt the growth of antiwar sentiment within the US, and Washington grew desperate to install a government in Baghdad with some semblance of authority and stability, Zarqawi's actions came

increasingly to be seen as an obstacle to American requirements.

The Bush administration knows full well that Zarqawi never exercised the influence which it attributed to him. This is one reason for the cautionary remarks from Bush and other administration spokesmen about the impact of his elimination on the dire situation facing the US in Iraq.

The American web site *Stratfor*, which supports the US occupation and has close ties to elements within the US military and intelligence establishment, said in an article posted Thursday: "[M]ost estimates place the number of foreign jihadists operating in Iraq at between 800 and 1,000 at any given time—a mere fraction of the overall insurgency, which is estimated to be 15,000 to 20,000 strong."

The article went on to note that Zarqawi's organization had increasingly come into conflict with Iraqi nationalist groups within the resistance.

In one of the few discordant comments in a day-long barrage of media euphoria, reporter and author Nir Rosen put it this way in an interview on CNN: "The myth of Zarqawi was an American creation." He went on to explain that the US had deliberately exaggerated Zarqawi's role in order to discredit the Iraqi insurgency, and concluded that his absence would not improve the US position in Iraq.

There was another critical comment, remarkable for its bluntness and principled content. Michael Berg, whose son Nicholas allegedly died at Zarqawi's hands, left the CNN anchor speechless when asked for his reaction to the news of the terrorist's death. "There was no Al Qaeda in Iraq before Bush invaded," he said. "I am not saying Saddam Hussein is a good man, but under him 30,000 Iraqis were dying every year, now 60,000 are dying.... Why is Iraq better off with Bush as king than with Saddam Hussein?"



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