



2008

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Arquilla, John

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/41675>



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## Where's Osama this election?

John Arquilla

Published 4:00 am, Thursday, October 30, 2008

The silence coming from the caves is deafening. Having toppled the sitting Spanish government by staging an attack in Madrid days before an election in March 2004, and apparently helping George W. Bush win re-election in November of that year - thanks to the timely release of an oddly meditative videotape - Osama bin Laden seems to be sitting this one out.

Why? Do the terrorists lack the ability to mount a major attack? Is it getting too risky to hand-carry messages via a chain of couriers who may come under surveillance? Do they think our economic meltdown alone will defeat us? Is bin Laden dead? Just tired of the media game? Or is he waiting to see whether Sen. Barack Obama wins the American presidency, so he can deliberately subject a young, inexperienced president to the "Biden test?"

The answer to all of the above is almost certainly "no." Al Qaeda has been hurt in Iraq, and harried recently by Hellfire missiles and, on occasion, by American Special Operations forces in its Waziristan haven. But the terror network retains an ability to mount new strikes, as can be seen by the latest series of attacks against high officials in Iraq, the insurgent offensive in Afghanistan, and by violent actions perpetrated in other countries around the world. As to the ability to keep putting out messages, a steady stream of propaganda continues to be emitted.

Then why hasn't al Qaeda gone for the hat trick, the chance to tip an election for yet a third time? Probably because bin Laden still can't resolve two nagging questions of his own: "What effect will an attack or a taped message have this time around?" and "Which candidate should al Qaeda want to see win the election?" The answers to these questions may be less obvious than one might think.

For example, Charlie Black, the former confidant and campaign adviser to Sen. John McCain, publicly took the position that an al Qaeda attack would inevitably benefit his candidate. Black said this - and was banished for doing so - based on the probably correct belief that the bin Laden videotape before the 2004 election hurt Democratic candidate John Kerry, who was somehow perceived as being less tough on terror than President Bush.

But the terrorists may be wondering whether this would still be the case in 2008. Even if neither Black nor anybody else is asking the question, bin Laden may. And he might conclude that it is just as likely that the reaction of "Joe American" to a new attack or a provocative message would be to question the competence of the party in charge that has failed to track down the al Qaeda leader in more than seven years. Why would the Democratic candidate be punished at the polls for the failure of a Republican commander in chief?

This line of reasoning brings us to the second question, about whether bin Laden actually has a preferred candidate whom he would like to see in the Oval Office. Here, too, the answer is hard to parse. The conventional wisdom is that he would want to keep the Republicans in the White House, as they might be more likely to keep alienating the Muslim world, and less likely to bring an end to the costly American occupation of Iraq.

A further benefit of a Republican win would be that McCain has shown great caution - where Obama has been aggressive - about the whole idea of taking the war to al Qaeda in its haven on sovereign Pakistani soil.

And yet bin Laden may also see merit in an Obama victory. If the Democratic candidate wins, the United States would be more likely to get out of Iraq - which might allow al Qaeda to declare victory there. Obama's activist approach to Pakistan's federally administered tribal areas could spark upheaval in that country - a Muslim land with nukes. Fostering chaos there could be the object of al Qaeda's deep strategic game.

Then also there is the tantalizing possibility that a President Obama might actually emphasize diplomacy enough to take the war on terrorism down the path to peace. Bin Laden himself has made some peace overtures in the past, and so might be tempted to walk this path, or allow the reconcilable elements in his network to do so.

In the end, then, it may be that Osama bin Laden has not tried to influence this election because he and his advisers remain undecided about which effect they should strive to achieve. Still, as the election approaches, it will take steely resolve for him to abstain from casting his "vote."

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