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Arquilla, John

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Will Osama rock the vote? / The American presidential election could be decided by a terrorist attack on U.S. soil

John Arquilla

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Howard Dean and Wesley Clark keep saying that the war on Iraq was a big mistake -- and John Kerry seems to agree with them -- but only Osama bin Laden can prove them right. If, by the November election, the al Qaeda mastermind is able to mount another large terrorist attack inside the United States, bin Laden will show that Iraq has been a fatal distraction from the more pressing business of ripping apart his network. And George Bush will lose his job.

Such are the electoral fortunes of war.

Just as a president's popularity rises or falls with the economic tides, the course of a conflict can win or lose voters by the millions. Our history is replete with examples. The most dramatic involved Abraham Lincoln. In the summer of 1864, Confederate forces had stymied Union offensives in both the eastern and western theaters of operations. By August, Lincoln was convinced he would lose the coming election. The matter weighed so heavily on his mind he drafted a concession speech.

But in September, General William T. Sherman was finally able to send his famous telegram, "Atlanta is ours, and fairly won."

So, it turned out in November, was Lincoln's re-election assured.

Lyndon Johnson was not so lucky. Even though American forces were able to blunt the Tet Offensive in 1968, the very fact that the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army were still able, after nearly three years of hard fighting against us, to mount such a broad-based series of attacks was enough to bring down LBJ. Despite the fact that the Viet Cong were permanently crippled by U.S. counterattacks, Johnson quit his re-election run after New Hampshire. He said he felt "like a hitchhiker caught in a hailstorm on a Texas highway." His chosen successor, Hubert Humphrey, went on to lose narrowly to Richard Nixon.

George W. Bush's situation resembles an amalgam of both Lincoln's and Johnson's.

Earlier this year, Baghdad fell to General Tommy Franks at least as showily as Atlanta did to General Sherman, signifying that the war in Iraq had been "fairly won." An insurgency continues to pose nettlesome security problems, but American forces have suffered losses only in the handful -- and in the past couple of months have been skillfully employing both small-team networking skills and new swarming tactics to turn the tide of battle on the ground. This mitigates the electoral risks of the continuing occupation and puts Bush on Lincoln-esque ground when it comes to Iraq. He may not have a telegram from Sherman, but he has Saddam Hussein in custody being checked for lice.

Yet the ghost of LBJ also looms for Bush, as the unconventional al Qaeda war drags on. Like Johnson vs. the Viet Cong, Bush faces enemy forces still on their feet, despite the remarkable American campaign in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 that toppled the Taliban from power with just a few hundred special forces troops on horseback, tightly networked with attack aircraft and remotely piloted vehicles.

Since then, however, al Qaeda has been able to resume the offensive in a series of attacks even more wide-ranging than Tet, mounting devastating strikes in Bali in 2002, then in Saudi Arabia and Turkey in 2003.

In electoral terms, though, acts of terrorism in these far-off places and the trickle of combat casualties among U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan will have little impact on voters as long as Bush can point to a 3-year-long record of perfect "homeland security" since 9/11. There have been no new terrorist attacks on American soil. He can claim, with much justification, that the American people are indeed more secure, even if the price of that security is that we have become a somewhat more guarded society.

Further, Bush seems able to shrug off the demands of the terror war from time to time and devote great energy to a range of other issues such as trade, senior care and immigration policy. He is no "prisoner of the Rose Garden" -- the fate that befell Jimmy Carter during 1980, when the hostage crisis with Iran crippled his ability to deal with other matters and played a big part in his landslide loss to Ronald Reagan that fall.

All the Democrats who would be president this year face the most daunting of challenges: how to attack a seemingly successful war leader. Their problems are compounded by divisions among them about whether we should have gone to war in Iraq in the first place. Rather than concentrate on areas of agreement - - for example, their general consensus that the world community should be embraced rather than stiff-armed -- they have continued to squabble about their shifting positions on the propriety of the campaign in Iraq. There is an unseemliness to the bickering that is hardly likely to mobilize voters to their cause.

There are points to be made and won about there being no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Though several of the candidates opposed the war from the outset, Howard Dean and Wesley Clark seem positioned to gain the most from exposing the speciousness of the Bush team's argument in favor of invading Iraq. Senators Edwards, Kerry, and Lieberman, who voted to authorize the president to go to war in Iraq, have necessarily weaker positions on the issue.

But none of these Democratic candidates can land a telling blow. Bush will simply absorb the hit on the weapons of mass destruction issue and say, "We're still looking for them!" Given that Hussein is such a toweringly unsympathetic figure, and the situation on the ground is actually improving, there are simply not many votes that will change because of Iraq.

Which brings us back to bin Laden.

Only he can crack Bush's carapace, and only with a major attack in the United States. Will al Qaeda do it? The outcome of the November election hinges on the answer.

Given what is known from the strikes that continue to be mounted in other parts of the world, it seems likely that al Qaeda and its affiliates still command the resources and manpower necessary for conducting a major attack in the United States. Such a strike would require lengthy planning and preparation, but bin Laden is enough of a forward thinker to have laid the groundwork for such a terrorist demonstration many months, or even a few years, ago.

Another aircraft-based attack inside the United States would have devastating psychological effects upon us, but bin Laden knows that we are best prepared to thwart him in this area. So he may create a variation on a theme, say, by attacking our aircraft with shoulder-mounted missiles. This follows a trend begun with the attack on an Israeli jet taking off from Mombasa, Kenya, and continued more recently in attacks on commercial aircraft operating out of Baghdad International. More likely, though, bin Laden will try to strike in some area where we haven't concentrated our attention and defenses.

The main point is, if bin Laden has the capability to launch an attack on America this year, he will. It must be an irresistible temptation to know that, from his remote cave, he could possibly exert a decisive influence on the political succession in the United States.

A change in American leadership might also help to end the occupation of Iraq and reduce the shadow of U.S. power in other corners of the Muslim world. In much the same way, the election of George McClellan instead of Lincoln in 1864 would have had enormous effects, the most likely being an effort to bring about a negotiated end to the Civil War.

So, whatever drama may seem to be lacking in the grinding attrition of the Democratic primaries, they will nevertheless play an important role as a catalyst for the tense but largely hidden set piece going on at the same time. Al Qaeda operatives may be gathering

to launch a pre-election attack on the United States while "hunter-killer" teams of special forces will be redoubling their efforts to capture or kill bin Laden and root out his operatives before they can strike.

Few novels or films can conjure up such powerful forces.

Perhaps this explains the bitterness of the infighting among the Democratic candidates. On some unspoken level, they must know that Osama bin Laden may yet "rock the vote," to the ultimate benefit of whoever can survive their struggles against each other.

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