

[Bush's gift]

The War Bin Laden Wanted

How the U.S. played into the terrorist's plan

By Paul W. Schroeder

GEORGE W. BUSH'S re-election campaign rests on three claims, distinct but always run together: that the United States is at war against terror, that it is winning the war, and that it can ultimately achieve victory but only under his leadership.

The second and third propositions are hotly debated. Critics of Bush contend that the U.S. is losing the struggle against terror on the most important fronts and that only new leadership can bring victory, but except for a few radicals, no one denies that the struggle against international terrorism in general and groups like al-Qaeda in particular constitutes a real war. The question comes up in the campaign only when Republicans such as Vice President Cheney charge that Democrats view terrorists as mere criminals and do not recognize that the country is at war. The charge, though false—no Democratic leader would commit political suicide by even hinting this—is effective politically.

Some experts on international law and foreign policy object to calling the struggle against terrorism a war, pointing for example to the legal problem of whether under international law a state can declare war on a non-state movement and claim the rights of war, or arguing that terrorism constitutes a tactic and that no one declares war against a tactic. Both arguments indicate the sloppy thinking that pervades

the rhetoric of the War on Terror. The first point, moreover, has important practical consequences for such questions as the treatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and elsewhere, and for our relations with allies, other states, and the UN. Yet these kinds of arguments seem too academic to matter. The general public can hardly understand them, much less let them influence their votes.

Other reasons, however—different, more powerful, highly practical, and astonishingly overlooked—argue against conceiving of the struggle as a war and, more important still, waging it as such. The reasons and the logic behind them are somewhat complicated, but the overall conclusion is simple: by conceiving of the struggle against international terrorism as a war, loudly proclaiming it as such, and waging it as one, we have given our enemies the war they wanted and aimed to provoke but could not get unless the United States gave it to them.

This conclusion is not about semantics or language but has enormous implications. It points to fundamentally faulty thinking as one of the central reasons that America is currently losing the struggle, and it means that a change in leadership in Washington, though essential, will not by itself turn the course of events. What is required is a new, different way of thinking about the struggle

against terrorism and from that a different way of waging it.

Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda repeatedly and publicly declared war on the United States and waged frequent attacks against its property, territory (including embassies abroad), and citizens for years before the spectacular attack on 9/11. This admission would seem to destroy my case at the outset and end the discussion. If bin Laden and al-Qaeda declared war on the United States and committed unmistakable acts of war against it, then obviously the U.S. had no choice but to declare war in reply, just as it had to do so against Japan after Pearl Harbor.

No, not really. Some other obvious facts also need consideration. First, states frequently wage real, serious wars of the conventional sort against other states without declaring war or putting their countries on a war footing. In the latter 20th century, this practice became the rule rather than the exception. Korea and Vietnam are only two of many examples. Second, revolutionary and terrorist organizations and movements have for centuries declared war on the governments or societies they wished to subvert and overthrow. Yet even while fighting them ruthlessly, states rarely made formal declarations of war against such movements. Instead, they treated these groups as criminals, revolutionaries, rebels, or tools of a hostile foreign



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power, not as organizations against which a recognized legitimate government declares and wages war.

The reasons are obvious. A revolutionary or terrorist movement has much to gain from getting a real government to declare war upon it. This gives the movement considerable status, putting it in some sense in the same league with the government with which it is now recognized as at war. No sensible government wishes to give such quasi-legitimacy to a movement it is trying to stamp out. Consider Napoleon's treatment of the insurrection in Spain from 1808 to 1813. The insurgents had powerful claims to belligerent status and even legitimacy. They maintained a government in a small corner of Spain, represented the former legitimate Bourbon government Napoleon had overthrown, included the regular Spanish army, and were supported and recognized by a major power, Great Britain. But Napoleon always insisted they were nothing but brigands, used this designation as justification for the brutal campaign he waged

against them, and acknowledged a state of war with them only when, defeated in Spain and on other fronts, he decided to cut his losses, evacuate Spain, and make peace with them and the Bourbon regime.

Other reasons further explain why legitimate governments have not declared war on terrorist or revolutionary organizations that waged war against them—for example, the fact that when one declares war one has to operate under the prevailing laws of war, and these can be constricting for a legitimate government, as the United States is currently finding out in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Thus declaring a war on terrorism and waging it as a genuine war has to be justified as an exception to a powerful rule, not accepted as the obvious response to a terrorist attack.

Readers may find this an impractical, academic argument and respond, "So what? This is a unique situation. Our country never faced a threat just like this before. Besides, what difference does it make what you call a campaign

against terrorism if in fact you intend to wage an all-out fight to exterminate terrorist organizations with every weapon at your command? In practical terms, that is war, whatever name you use for it, and it is good for the American public, the world, and the enemy to face it."

Again, not so fast. The issue is not whether the American public after 9/11 needed squarely to face the fact that the United States had been attacked by a dangerous enemy and had to fight back. It still needs to understand this—and does. Neither is the issue whether in fighting back the U.S. had a right to use military force against that enemy anywhere (though only where) it was sensible and practical to do so. Those points are not in dispute. The relevant, practical questions instead are, first, whether it was necessary to declare war on that enemy in order to confront the attack and fight back with every useful means, including military force. As just indicated, the historical and practical answer to that question is no. Second, was a public declaration of war against

terrorism in general needed to prepare psychologically for a serious campaign against the enemy? The reaction of the American public and virtually every other government and people to the 9/11 attack and the subsequent American counterattack makes clear that for this purpose a formal declaration was unnecessary. The support in America and abroad for a powerful campaign against al-Qaeda was overwhelming.

The only question left is the one central to the argument: did the American government, by constantly and solemnly declaring the nation at war against terrorism and repeatedly summoning the rest of the world to join up or else be ranked among America's enemies actually help or hurt the campaign against the terrorist enemy?

The natural response might be, "How could the declarations of war possibly have hurt? Even if they were not strictly necessary, they served to unite the American people and gird them for possible sacrifices and losses and to rally the rest of the world behind the American effort. What harm did they supposedly do?"

ASSUME THAT THE ENEMY'S DECISIONS HAVE A PURPOSIVE RATIONALITY BEHIND THEM, THAT HE HOPES TO ACHIEVE BY THEM SOME CONCRETE RESULT.

It was never in dispute that Osama bin Laden deliberately, repeatedly, and in the most spectacular way possible provoked a war with the United States. What should that tell us? Why did he do this? What was he after?

Once again this looks like an intellectual befogging the issue and ignoring the obvious. Osama bin Laden did this because America is his enemy. He hates America and its ideals, America stands in the way of his creating the kind of world he is fanatically determined to bring about, and so he declared war on

America and tried to destroy it and kill as many Americans as possible. This interpretation is perfectly understandable and defensible from a moral and emotional standpoint. Unfortunately, it is counterproductive from the standpoint of rational analysis and policy-making.

Two vital principles in foreign-policy thinking are, first, know the enemy—this means doing one's best to enter into his thought world and decision-making processes, to think from his presuppositions and standpoint—and second, expect a hidden agenda and look for it. Assume that the enemy's decisions and actions have a purposive rationality behind them, that he hopes to achieve by them some concrete result that is rational in terms of his goals and worldview, however fanatical, irrational, or simply evil his actions may seem.

Apply these two principles to the question here. Take for granted that Osama bin Laden is an evil fanatic, totally determined to pursue his goals and wholly unscrupulous in the means he is willing to use to reach them. But assume

also that he is highly intelligent, shrewd, patient, and focused in his strategy. Supposing this and knowing that he is the leader of a relatively small, highly secret terrorist organization, strong in devotion to its cause but weak in both numbers and weapons in comparison to the resources available to any major state, much less the world's one superpower, ask yourself: why would he go out of his way to challenge that superpower with its awesome array of resources and weapons, deliberately provoking it into declaring war to the death upon him and

his organization? The enormous risks are obvious. What were the potential gains?

Any serious and unemotional consideration of this question makes it apparent that the answer "He hates America and wants to destroy it" will not do. If that were his concrete strategy and end, that would make him a fool, which he is not. Any fairly intelligent person would know that an attack like that of 9/11, or even ten such attacks, would not suffice to defeat the United States or make it give up the struggle against terrorism and accept the unhindered spread of radical revolutionary Islam in the world. Any intelligent person would instead expect the attack on the American homeland to have precisely the political, psychological, and military effects it actually had—to mobilize the government, the American public, and many of its allies around the globe for an all-out struggle against al-Qaeda and international terrorism. Anyone with intelligence would also have anticipated the huge risks to himself and his organization from the inevitable counterattack—a military campaign by an overwhelmingly superior foe against his political base and secret camps in Afghanistan, blows to his cells wherever they could be found, international police, intelligence, and financial measures against his organization on a vastly increased scale, heavy pressure on regimes that had secretly supported or tolerated his activities to crack down on them, the imprisonment or death of anyone in al-Qaeda's ranks from bottom to top—in short, all the measures that the Bush administration carried out and has trumpeted as successes in the War on Terror. Why would bin Laden knowingly risk all this for the sake of an attack, however spectacular, that he knew would not seriously damage the United States as a nation?

Two replies frequently offered need to be considered before getting to the real answer. Each, though superficially more plausible than “He did it because he’s evil,” is fundamentally no more satisfactory. The first is that bin Laden did it to demonstrate the power, bravery, skill, and fanatical resolve of his organization and thereby gain new recruits and allies. This is undoubtedly true in a sense but far too vague. As just noted, the overwhelming surface probability was that the attack would result in gravely weakening and threatening al-Qaeda. That is certainly what the Bush administration confidently promised. Why precisely did bin Laden expect, against all probabilities, that the attack would eventually expand and strengthen his organization and cause?

The second reply is that the 9/11 operation was intended as only one step in a long campaign against the United States, a kind of dress rehearsal for worse blows, perhaps with weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, biological, or chemical. Once again, this argument makes no sense. If one intends to start a long campaign to destroy the enemy, one does not begin with an action that can be expected to galvanize rather than cripple the enemy and make him more prepared to anticipate, prevent, and counter new attacks. It would be as if Japan in 1941, having decided to fight the United States and needing first of all to cripple American naval power in the Pacific, chose to attack by bombing buildings in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The only sensible answer, once the foolish and inadequate ones are discarded, is that Osama bin Laden anticipated the American reaction and wanted it. His purpose in attacking the United States directly in its homeland was to get the American government to do what it had not done in response to his previous attacks: to declare an all-out war against him and al-Qaeda and a

worldwide War on Terror led and organized by the United States, with every other country in the world summoned to follow and support or be considered an enemy. That seems to deepen the puzzle. Why thus deliberately multiply the ranks of his enemies and organize their efforts under the leadership of a single, powerful, aroused country?

The answer, if one thinks about it free from emotion and preoccupation with oneself, is clear. Deliberately provoking the United States into open, declared war against him, his forces, radical Islamism, and worldwide terrorism was bin Laden’s way of expanding a struggle he was already waging but losing, one he could not win on account of its insoluble contradictions, into a larger war free from internal contradictions that he could hope ultimately to win. To put it in a nutshell, Osama bin Laden needed the United States as a declared enemy to enable him to win his war against his primary enemies and thus achieve his goals.

To understand this, we need once again to take bin Laden’s fanatical ideology and his hatred for the United States and the West for granted and concentrate on his situation and the purposive rationality behind his tactics. Consider his central goal—a Muslim world ruled by true Islamic law and teaching, purged of all evil, materialist, secular, infidel, and heretical influences. Of course he regards the West, especially the United States, as the source of many of the evils corrupting and oppressing Islam and would like ideally to destroy it, but the immediate obstacles to achieving his vision and the main foes to be overcome have always lain within the Muslim world itself. (There is a good parallel here with 16th-century Europe. The Ottoman Turks were the great military and religious threat to Christendom, but the most bitter quarrels and wars were between Christians of different creeds, churches, rulers, and countries.) The

obstacles he faced consisted of the divisions in sects, beliefs, and world visions within Islam; hostile governments ruling in Islamic countries, virtually all of whom regarded his kind of Islamic radicalism as a threat to their rule and were determined to repress it; and the attitude of most Muslims, loyal to their creed but unwilling to sacrifice what security and well-being they had in his kind of *jihad*. Osama bin Laden tried to overcome these obstacles and foes directly but the struggle, besides being difficult, dangerous, and largely unsuccessful, was inherently divisive and counterproductive. It meant pitting Muslim against Muslim, alienating more followers and potential recruits to the movement than it attracted, and giving free rein to the spread within Islam of infidel influences from outside while Muslims fought each other.

There was, however, one good way to overcome these obstacles—that is, to unite Muslims of divergent beliefs, sects, and visions against a single foe; to discredit, paralyze, and possibly overthrow secular Muslim governments; and to galvanize more believers into that suicidal zeal that al-Qaeda and its kindred organizations need as a baby needs its mother’s milk. That way was to make the United States, already the Great Satan in much of the Muslim world for a variety of reasons—its support of Israel against the Palestinians, its support of corrupt dictatorships and secular regimes, its encouragement of Iraq’s war against Iran and toleration of Saddam Hussein’s atrocities, its later conquest, humiliation, and ongoing punishment of the Iraqi people through sanctions, its long record of imperialism, its greed for Arab oil, its military occupation of sacred Muslim soil, its penetration of Muslim societies with its decadent culture and values—declare open war on him and his followers united in a true, heroic Islamic resistance movement.

The solution, further, was if possible to provoke the U.S. into actually attacking Muslim countries, using its awesome weapons against pitifully outmatched Muslim forces, destroying and humiliating them, killing and wounding civilians and destroying much property, occupying more Muslim land, and miring itself in an attempt to control what it had conquered and to impose its secular values and institutions on Arab and Muslim societies. From this would arise the chance to demonstrate that faithful Muslims under leaders and movements like bin Laden and al-Qaeda could be David to America's Goliath. If they could not immediately slay the oppressor, they could survive its onslaught, grow and spread despite it, and gradually reduce it to a helpless giant, isolated from its former friends, trapped in an interminable occupation of hostile territory and peoples, with its armed forces stretched thin and its awesome weapons unusable, while al-Qaeda and similar groups could continue to launch even bolder attacks against it or anyone still associated with it.

That, I believe, is a reasonable rendition of Osama bin Laden's hopes and strategy. It was a tremendous gamble, of course, and he could not possibly have predicted exactly how it would turn out. But it is beyond doubt that his gamble succeeded, that for more than three years after 9/11 things have generally been going his way, and that he could not have achieved this huge, improbable victory without indispensable American help. In declaring and waging a War on Terror with al-Qaeda as its initial announced focus and the United States as its self-acclaimed World Leader, America gave bin Laden precisely the war he needed and wanted.

One can anticipate at least three reactions to this conclusion (three that are printable, that is). Starting with the least important, they are:

1. This is all hindsight, Monday-morning quarterbacking.
2. Given the circumstances, there was nothing else the United States could have done.
3. Even if this is all true, it is water under the bridge, useless in deciding what to do now.

The first is easy to answer. Hindsight is a good exercise in politics, especially for the public at election time—but this is not that. Quite a few observers warned about these dangers at the time, and I was among them. In an article written just after 9/11 and published in November 2001 (“The Risks of Victory,” *The National Interest*, Winter 2001/2002) I argued, among other things, against allowing a necessary and justified military campaign in Afghanistan to draw us into leading a general War on Terror in the wider Middle East and the world. More warnings were included in my “Iraq: The Case Against Preventive War,” appearing in this journal in October 2002. Mine was only one voice in a steady, growing chorus, though one always drowned out by crowds of raucous hawks.

The second objection has a little more substance. Certainly 9/11 required strong action including military measures against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and the natural, inevitable war psychology pervading the country had to be reckoned with. Yet as was pointed out earlier, these needs required actions like those taken initially more than words. As far as the public rhetoric and justification was concerned, nothing hindered the administration from conceiving and explaining the undertaking differently both to the American public and the world, especially the Arab-Muslim world that was Osama bin Laden's real target.

There is little point now in drafting the kind of address Bush should have

delivered to Congress and the public. But one can readily imagine an American president (though not Bush) persuasively making the two cardinal points. First, the United States intended to pursue al-Qaeda with all the weapons at its command on grounds of legitimate self-defense and, while respecting the rights of other countries, would allow no one to interfere with these actions. It would not, however, dignify al-Qaeda's atrocious crimes by calling them acts of war or give Osama bin Laden and his fellow criminals what they obviously wanted, a pretext to portray themselves as soldiers in a holy war against the United States. Instead, it would pursue them ruthlessly the way civilized nations had always pursued criminal organizations, as international outlaws and pirates, enemies of all governments and of civilization itself, and it expected other countries to co-operate in this struggle.

Second, the United States recognized that though it was the direct target of this attack and that in one sense it represented al-Qaeda's final enemy and target, it was not the country most menaced by the current threat from al-Qaeda and international terrorism generally. As bin Laden well knew, neither this attack nor possible future ones, tragic though the individual deaths and losses were, could really hurt the United States, much less deter it from its purpose of hunting down the criminals behind the atrocities. The attack instead had already had just the opposite effect. It had strengthened the country and united Americans and their friends throughout the world for a long struggle against him and his fellow terrorist criminals. America's government, institutions, and civil society were rock solid. It had no home-grown terrorist organizations to fear or ethnic and religious differences for terrorists to exploit. Its relatively small

Muslim population was well integrated and overwhelmingly loyal to the United States, thankful for its blessings and freedoms.

Many other countries in the world could not say this, especially the Arab and Muslim countries that Osama bin Laden wanted to subvert and revolutionize as he had already done in Afghanistan. These countries and governments had the most to fear from al-Qaeda and international terrorism; they and not the United States were the real targets of the 9/11 attack. Even America's European allies and friends, sound though their countries and institutions were for the most part, had more to fear directly from terrorism than the United States, given their large unassimilated Muslim populations and their proximity to the Middle East. The United States was, of course, vitally concerned with the general problem of international terrorism. It had interests around the world to protect, including those in the Middle East and other threatened regions. Nonetheless, this was not first and foremost America's problem, nor was it America's place primarily to provide the solution. The terrorists wanted to make the United States appear an imperialist Great Satan imposing its will and its solutions on others and forcing them to follow its lead. America would not fall into that trap. The U.S. had a particular right and duty to its citizens and the world to pursue al-Qaeda and exterminate it as a criminal organization. It would help, advise, support, and even where specifically desired lead others in the global struggle against terrorism. But it would not try to force others who had an even greater and more immediate stake in that struggle to do what their own self-interest ought to compel them to do, nor would it try to dictate the kinds of internal measures and reforms they needed to take to combat the common enemy.

That kind of language would have done everything language can do both to free the United States to attack al-Qaeda and to put pressure on other governments, especially in the Middle East, to confront their own problems and responsibilities and seek help if necessary from the United States, rather than hiding behind it. It also would have undercut the al-Qaeda strategy of making the United States into the main enemy, helped place responsibilities where they belonged, and galvanized genuine world support in the struggle against terrorism. What is more, it would have been entirely consistent with the campaign against terrorism the United States actually waged at the outset. That was very much an international effort, a largely proxy war directed but not mainly fought by the U.S. and focused strictly on destroying al-Qaeda's organization and governmental base—until this focus was foolishly abandoned to attack Iraq.

To heighten the irony, this kind of language would have conformed to the actual wartime policies the administration has followed. Let us be honest: the

egy possible. It would mean that the administration had so ruined America's position that nothing could now remedy it. But it is not true. This administration's policy deserves harsh condemnation for the reckless incompetence that has made the way out now much more painful and costly, but a way out still lies in recognizing that the United States needs to abandon not the struggle against international terrorism but the conception of that struggle as a war fought and led mainly by the United States, making itself the chief target of the enemy.

This is a change only a new administration could make, though obviously not during the electoral campaign, when it would be suicidal. Once in office, however, it could claim that it had found things to be even worse than it knew and could make the kind of 180-degree turn Bush executed after his election. A gradual disengagement from Iraq and re-concentration on Afghanistan and Pakistan in the pursuit of al-Qaeda, a devolution of tasks onto the UN and NATO on the grounds that even the best meant efforts of the United States are frus-

THE "WAR ON TERROR" IN AMERICA IS **BASICALLY A SHAM**, A CHARADE.

"War on Terror" in America is basically a sham, a charade. While great, even ultimate sacrifices have been demanded of relatively few, chiefly those in the armed forces, for the overwhelming majority of Americans having the country at war has meant massive tax cuts, exhortations to spend and consume, enormous deficits, politics and government spending as usual—in short, no wartime sacrifice at all. The rest of the world knows this and sees the hypocrisy, if we do not.

As for the last reply, that this argument now represents water under the bridge, useless for current or future policy, if that were true, it would constitute the most devastating indictment of the Bush strat-

trated by the fact that it is seen as the enemy by too many in the region, a willingness to admit past mistakes and agree to focus co-operatively on other problems as well—all this would become possible, though not easy, if only the current American war mentality and psyche gave way to a saner one. This still could happen—but of course not under Bush. ■

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Hide & Sheik

Why bin Laden continues to elude us

By Eric S. Margolis

They seek him here, they seek him
there,
Those Frenchies seek him
everywhere.
Is he in heaven, or is he in hell
That damned elusive
Pimpernel?

—Baroness Orczy

WHY CAN'T OSAMA BIN LADEN, the Scarlet Pimpernel of the Hindu Kush, be found? One would assume that 20,000 U.S. troops, an even larger contingent of U.S.-paid Afghan mercenaries, four divisions of Pakistan's crack army, and a host of intelligence agents backed by every sort of high-tech satellite, aircraft, drone, and surveillance device in the American arsenal could find one extremely tall man in a wasteland of barren mountains and scrub. How can it be that a man with a \$25 million reward on his turbaned head has not been betrayed in the three years the U.S. has been hunting him in either dirt-poor Afghanistan or Pakistan, where per capita incomes are \$197 and \$462 respectively?

First, because Osama bin Laden and his chief of staff, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, may not be in Pakistan or Afghanistan at all but are hidden elsewhere in a remote part the Muslim world. Or they might both be dead, with their legend sustained by disciples through bogus tape recordings.

But U.S. intelligence and most observers of Islamic militancy, including this author, believe that al-Qaeda's senior

leadership is alive and hiding somewhere in the wild no-man's-land straddling the Pakistani-Afghan border, being sheltered and guarded by friendly Pushtun tribesmen. That or in Pakistan's equally wild Baluchistan province, where many men are well over six feet tall.

The most important reason Sheik Osama—as he is known to most Muslims—has not been caught is that he is a beloved, venerated national hero to Pushtun Afghans and to nearly all Pakistanis. In fact, most of the Muslim world has come to share this view. Only the pro-Western elites who rule most Islamic nations in alliance with the U.S. do not share this adulation—unsurprisingly, since bin Laden has made it his personal *jihad* to overthrow them.

Distasteful as it is to Americans, Osama bin Laden is the only figure in the entire Muslim world who speaks with true popular authority, commands both political and religious legitimacy, and, in the view of many, is the sole defender of Islam against what is increasingly seen, rightly or wrongly, as an all-out assault by the United States.

In the U.S., bin Laden is rightly seen as a maniacal terrorist and mass murderer. But our politicians and media have utterly failed to explain the bin Laden phenomenon. No effort has been made to understand why he has become the spear-point of a growing insurrection. Nor have they explained to Americans how the Bush administration's ideological *Anschluss* with Ariel Sharon's Likud Party in Israel brings the wrath of

Islam down on America's head. It's politically safer to keep repeating Bush's inane mantra that al-Qaeda hates America because of its freedoms.

In the days after the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. put a gun to Pakistan's head, threatening to declare it a terrorist state, call in vital loans, embargo all trade and spare parts, even unleash India against Pakistan if Islamabad did not declare war on the Taliban—its Afghan creation—hunt down al-Qaeda, and allow U.S. armed forces to operate from bases there.

The Taliban resisted U.S. demands for weeks; Pakistan caved in after one phone call from Washington. The new Musharraf regime, which the U.S. before 9/11 had denounced as an unwelcome military dictatorship, abandoned its Afghan protégés, fired senior generals regarded as too Islamist, opened the doors to U.S. bases, and put its intelligence agency ISI, probably the best in the Third World, under U.S. tutelage.

Musharraf found himself in an impossible position, forced to maneuver between the demands of Washington and the passions of his people. Prompted by the carrot of over \$3 billion in new U.S. aid—not counting covert bribes—and the stick of becoming a South Asian Cuba, he bowed to American requests with what to most Pakistanis seemed untoward alacrity and zeal.

Hundreds of al-Qaeda suspects were apprehended. Pakistan's noisy Islamic parties, strong supporters of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, were repressed. The