



Good Times, Bad Times

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Colaboraciones n° 101

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Here is the *New York Times*, editorializing in high dudgeon on June 17:

Now President Bush should apologize to the American people. . . . Of all the ways Mr. Bush persuaded Americans to back the invasion of Iraq last year, the most plainly dishonest was his effort to link his war of choice with the battle against terrorists worldwide. . . . Mr. Bush and his top advisers . . . should have known all along that there was

no link between Iraq and Al Qaeda.

Here are excerpts from a front-page article by Thom Shanker in the *New York Times* one week later, on June 25:

Contacts between Iraqi intelligence agents and Osama bin Laden when he was in Sudan in the mid-1990s were part of a broad effort by Baghdad to work with organizations opposing the

Saudi ruling family, according to a newly disclosed document obtained by the Americans in Iraq.

...

The new document, which appears to have circulated only since April, was provided to the New York Times several weeks ago. . . .

A translation of the new Iraqi document was reviewed by a Pentagon working group in the spring . . .

The task force concluded that the document "appeared authentic," and that it "corroborates and expands on previous reporting" about contacts between Iraqi intelligence and Mr. bin Laden in Sudan, according to the task force's analysis. . . .

The document, which asserts that Mr. bin Laden "was approached by our side," states that Mr. bin Laden previously "had some reservations about being labeled an Iraqi operative," but was now willing to meet in Sudan, and that "presidential approval" was granted to the Iraqi security service to proceed. . . .

The document is of interest to American officials as a detailed, if limited, snapshot of communications between Iraqi intelligence and Mr. bin Laden, but this view ends with Mr. bin Laden's departure from Sudan. At that point, Iraqi intelligence officers began "seeking other channels through which to handle the relationship, in light of his current location," the document states. Members of the Pentagon task force that reviewed the document said it described no formal alliance being reached between Mr. bin Laden and Iraqi intelligence.

The Iraqi document itself states that "co-operation between the two organizations should be allowed to develop freely through discussion and agreement." . . .

The Iraqi document states that Mr. bin Laden's organization in Sudan was called "The Advice and Reform Commission." The Iraqis were cued to make their approach to Mr. bin Laden in 1994 after a Sudanese official visited Uday Hussein, the leader's son, as well as the director of Iraqi intelligence, and indicated that Mr. bin Laden was willing to meet in Sudan.

A former director of operations for Iraqi intelligence Directorate 4 met with Mr. bin Laden on Feb. 19, 1995, the document states.

So much for "no link between Iraq and al Qaeda." So much for the claim of the *Times* editorial, and of its page-one headline the same day mischaracterizing the 9/11 Commission staff report. We look forward to the editors' apology.

More important, we look forward to the Bush administration seriously and relentlessly engaging the debate over the Saddam-al Qaeda terror connection. We hope we do not wait in vain.

Vice President Cheney did sally forth last week, the day after the release of the 9/11 Commission staff report. But he hasn't much followed up since then, and others have been mostly silent. Does the Bush team really think it can command majority support for the war in Iraq if it allows its opponents an uncontested

field to make the case that Saddam had no significant links to terrorists? After all, the situation on the ground in Iraq is likely to remain ambiguous over the next few months. So simply depending on things to turn out well after the June 30 turnover of power is, to say the least, politically risky. Large caches of weapons of mass destruction are unlikely to turn up soon. This does not mean Saddam's history of concealing his weapons programs from inspectors was not a solid ground for his removal. But it does mean that the WMD issue is not a likely winner for the administration.

The terror link issue, by contrast, should be a clear winner. Saddam

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and Osama had a "relationship" in the past, and sought continuing "cooperation" between their two "organizations." Could the president of the United States have simply left Saddam in power, with sanctions coming off, reconstituting his weapons programs, confident that Saddam and al Qaeda would not work together again in the future? Would this have been a reasonable course of action?

This is a genuinely important debate for the country to have in this election year. It is a good debate for the Bush administration--if it has the wit and the nerve to engage it.



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