

November 6, 2006

Bush Applauds Hussein Verdict

On the Campaign Trail, Both Parties Hail Court's Decision

By Peter Baker

GRAND ISLAND, Neb. — President Bush and politicians from both parties hailed the conviction of Saddam Hussein on Sunday but disagreed on its larger meaning as campaign strategists tried to gauge the political impact just 48 hours before hard-fought midterm elections.

Speaking in the shadow of Air Force One on a Texas tarmac and at later campaign events, Bush called the verdict a "landmark event" in Iraq's transition to democracy, and aides hoped it would be seen as vindication of his decision to go to war. Democrats were quick to agree that justice had been done for a vicious tyrant but argued it would not fix what they see as the debacle in Iraq.

The timing of the verdict, which had been scheduled weeks ago, stirred anxiety among Democrats who worried it could be a "November surprise" that would persuade Republicans to turn out, much as the release of an Osama bin Laden tape just before the 2004 election was credited with helping to put Bush over the top. Some voiced suspicions that the Bush administration had orchestrated the court schedule to influence the vote, a contention the White House rejected.

Some key strategists in both parties, however, said they doubted the verdict would make much difference. In a campaign that has been dominated by debate over the Iraq war, it provided a rare day of good news for Bush at a key moment, they said, but most voters had already made up their minds about how they view the situation there.

"It makes the environment incrementally better but only incrementally," said Ed Rogers, a Republican lobbyist close to the White House. "It reminds everybody of what a bad guy Saddam was. It reminds everybody of why we were there in the first place. I don't know that it drives any votes at this point. I wish it did, but it doesn't."

Hussein "was a brutal, evil dictator" who is "getting the punishment that he deserves," Sen. Charles E. Schumer (N.Y.), who runs the Senate Democratic campaign arm, said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press." But, he added, "I don't think his conviction makes much of a difference in this election, even though it's a very good thing that it happened."

Hussein has been a regular feature of Bush's stump speech for weeks as the president tells audiences that he made the right decision in removing the Iraqi leader from power and argues that the world is better off. By the time the verdict was announced in a Baghdad court, aides traveling with Bush on the campaign trail were ready with talking points.

White House press secretary Tony Snow was booked on television programs starting at 7 a.m., and his office sent e-mails touting other reactions.

"Saddam Hussein's trial is a milestone in the Iraqi people's efforts to replace the rule of a tyrant with the rule of law," Bush told reporters before leaving Texas for campaign stops here and in Topeka, Kan. "It's a major achievement for Iraq's young democracy and its constitutional government."

Although he did not predict whether it would help the reconciliation process in Iraq, Bush portrayed the trial as a chance to expunge Hussein's legacy. "The man who once struck fear in the hearts of Iraqis had to listen to free Iraqis recount the acts of torture and murder that he ordered against their families and against them," he said. "Today, the victims of this regime have received a measure of the justice which many thought would never come."

He then introduced the verdict into his campaign speech later in the day, using similar language. When he announced the verdict at a boisterous rally here in a hall filled with flags, cornhusks and hay bales, the crowd cheered.

Other Republicans, who have been on the defensive over the war as U.S. troop casualties spiked to a two-year high, quickly jumped on the bandwagon. "This verdict is a victory for justice and a victory for the Iraqi people and all freedom-loving people in the Middle East," said House Majority Leader John Boehner (Ohio). His whip, Roy Blunt (Mo.), said the world is "safer because Saddam Hussein sits on death row, not in a palace in Baghdad plotting to harm millions of innocent Americans and Iraqis."

Democrats praised the verdict while still bashing Bush. "Tragically, I believe today's verdict does not change the fact that the administration's policy in Iraq has been the most incompetent execution of American foreign policy in my lifetime," said House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (Md.). Senate Minority Leader Harry M. Reid (Nev.) said "the Iraqis have traded a dictator for chaos. Neither option is acceptable, especially when it is our troops who are caught in the middle."

Appearing on ABC's "This Week," Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean called the court's decision "a great verdict" and said Hussein "is a war criminal and he's getting what he deserves." But, Dean said, the war remains a mistake. "This was a miscalculation by people who didn't understand what they were getting into. And if they'd listened to Colin Powell and the rest of the military, they wouldn't have gotten into it."

Democratic leaders avoided publicly accusing the Bush administration of orchestrating the verdict's timing but privately some raised questions, and liberal Internet blogs have been full of angry discussion about it. The Iraqi court originally planned to render a verdict in October but delayed it until two days before the election, prompting a defense lawyer for Hussein to write a letter accusing Bush of manipulating the proceedings for campaign purposes.

Snow dismissed the suggestion as "preposterous" and absurd. "Are you smoking rope?" he replied when a reporter asked about timing manipulation aboard Air Force One on Saturday. "Are you telling me that in Iraq, that they're sitting around—I'm sorry, that the Iraqi judicial system is coming up with an October surprise?" Corrected on the date, he expressed incredulity, "A November surprise. Man, that's—wow."

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