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## Bin Laden's Victory

By Richard Cohen  
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NEW YORK -- I hear Osama bin Laden laughing. I heard him all day on Sunday and Monday as the mass murder of Sept. 11, 2001, was memorialized at the Pentagon and in that field in Pennsylvania and especially here, where the most people died and where countless cameras recorded it all for posterity and an abiding, everlasting anger. He laughs, the madman does, whenever George Bush says, as he has over and over, that America is "winning this war on terror." Bin Laden knows better. He has already won.

It is not merely that bin Laden has not been captured or killed and that videotapes keep coming out of his hideout like taunts. It is, rather, that his initial strategy has borne fruit. It was always his intention to draw the Americans into Afghanistan, where, as had been done to the Soviets, they could be mauled by the fierce mujaheddin. He tried and failed when he blew up the USS Cole off Aden at 11:15 a.m. on Oct. 12, 2000, killing 17 sailors and crippling the ship. But he succeeded beyond his wildest expectations when the United States responded to the Sept. 11 attacks by invading Afghanistan and, in a beat, then going to war in Iraq. It remains mired in both countries to this day.

From bin Laden's standpoint, this has been a glorious victory, made possible, it has to be said, by the totally unforeseen incompetence of the Bush administration. It was so intent on going to war in Iraq that it would not finish the job in Afghanistan. So, to bin Laden's absolute amazement -- I am guessing here -- the United States took on his enemy, the secular and ungodly Saddam Hussein, whom bin Laden himself would gladly have murdered. It has to be a wonderful thing when your enemy vanquishes your enemy.

On "Meet the Press" on Sunday, Dick Cheney said that if he had it to do all over again, he would still go to war in Iraq -- "we'd do exactly the same thing," he said. Why? Is the man incapable of learning from experience? We now know from umpteen reports that there was no link between bin Laden and Hussein. We now know, the Weekly Standard notwithstanding, that Mohamed Atta did not meet in Prague with

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someone from Iraqi intelligence. We now know that Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction and that the Iraq war -- which has cost America more than 2,500 lives, 20,000 casualties, the respect of the world and billions of dollars -- is for naught. Talleyrand said of the Bourbons that they forgot nothing and learned nothing. It will be said of Cheney that he forgot everything and learned nothing.

How did bin Laden get so lucky? How did he get so fortunate in his choice of enemies? The Bush administration not only validated his wildest dreams -- dreams that even some of his aides thought were unrealistic -- but went even further. By using torture, by the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, by employing "extraordinary renditions" of suspects to countries where they could be tortured, by insisting on going it almost alone in Iraq, by telling the international community to shove it, by declaring a war for an *idée fixe* -- this fierce obsession with Hussein goes back a long way -- the United States has made itself reviled in much of the world.

And here at home, here in the United States of America, it will be a long time before lots of people trust their government again. Little wonder that 16 percent of respondents said in a recent poll that it was "very likely" that the government played some role in the Sept. 11 attacks to justify a war in the Middle East. This is a shocking figure, a measure not just of irrational thinking but of the cost of the Bush administration's mauling of the truth in its mad march to war. Bush has damaged his country more than bin Laden ever could on his own.

I was here on Sept. 11, 2001 -- downtown when the twin towers collapsed. My instantaneous reaction -- the thought that came to my mind as I heard the sound of the buildings coming down -- was for revenge. I would, to this day, kill Osama bin Laden with my own hands. But as much as I hate the man, I have to recognize that from his vantage point, from his mountain fastness somewhere on the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier, he has won. What he had set out to do, he has done. That is more than we can say.

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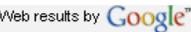
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