

Electing to deal with terror threat

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He couldn't say where.

He couldn't say when.

He couldn't say who.

He couldn't say how.

So why did Tom Ridge even bother coming out before the microphones and cameras yesterday, stirring up public anxiety about a pre-election terror attack?

It wasn't as if the Bush administration's homeland security secretary had any useful information to share. All he had was another eerie-sounding warning and the same ol' advice we've been getting since the morning of Sept. 12, 2001:

Stay vigilant.

Report anything scary you might see.

Well, OK.

"Credible reporting now indicates that al-Qaida is moving forward with its plans to carry out a large-scale attack in the United States in an effort to disrupt our democratic process," Ridge warned darkly.

But how credible is Ridge's supposed evidence of a pre-election attack? Will the bad guys hit one of the political conventions this summer? Or will they wait until November and strike close to Election Day?

I have no idea. And neither, I promise you, does Tom Ridge. Or John Ashcroft, Or Dick Cheney. Or any of the other Bush administration officials who are shooting these vague warnings around.

If a terror attack were as certain and as imminent as Ridge is making out, wouldn't he raise the color-coded terror threat immediately?

He's leaving it at yellow, right where it is.

And when he was asked straight out yesterday, Ridge could only shrug.

"Mr. Secretary, do you have any specific credible intelligence that terrorists are targeting either the Democratic Convention or the Republican Convention?"

"We do not," he had to admit.

Watch carefully now. Something cynical is happening here.

With each new pointless warning, with each new breathless plea, those around George W. Bush are trying to link the terrorists with the Democrats.

Al-Qaida wants to "influence the American election," we are told. The terrorists hope to "pull another Spain," where the ruling party was voted out after the Madrid subway was bombed.

The implication isn't accidental, and it gets real ugly real fast: A vote for John Kerry, we are supposed to conclude, is a vote for Osama bin Laden.

Now this is preposterous, of course.

Kerry's terror-fighting plans are at least as tough as Bush's. Across a long public career, he has never been soft on terrorism. And honestly, no one has a clue what Osama thinks of the U.S. election, if he thinks anything at all.

Osama doesn't endorse, whatever Karl Rove might imply.

Plus, you'd have to say that al-Qaida hasn't done too badly under George W. Bush, and not just because Bush was president during the 9/11 terror attacks.

Bin Laden is still a free man. So is bin Laden's chief deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. And so is Mullah Mohammed Omar, the supreme Taliban leader and bin Laden's most important ally.

And the war in Iraq has turned that country into a hotbed of terrorists from across the Middle East. The war and the occupation have been a rhetorical bonanza for al-Qaida and like-minded groups.

American soldiers, controlling an oil-rich Muslim country! Killing innocent civilians, leaving embittered relatives behind! The Abu Ghraib prison-torture photos!

Can't you hear the terror recruiters now?

Leave it to New York to bring some sense to all this.

At police headquarters yesterday, Commissioner Ray Kelly came out of his office after Tom Ridge was done in Washington.

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Kelly didn't pretend to know what the terrorists are planning - or who they'd vote for if they could.

He said the only thing a big-city cop can ever say at such a time: His department will be ready at the end of August when the Republican National Convention comes to town.

Then, without being impolite to anyone in Washington, the New York police commissioner scoffed at the notion that al-Qaida has a candidate for U.S. president.

"No," Kelly said plainly, "the information is not that they are trying to influence the election in a certain way."

It's just that the terrorists have been emboldened. They could strike any time. And we'd better be ready for them.

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