

# BHUTTO AND STATE

Jeff pointed to this really fascinating Novak column this morning. I find it fascinating, first of all, because the portion of the column based on Novak's typical leak...

That attitude led a Bhutto agent to inform a high-ranking State Department official that her camp no longer viewed the backstage U.S. effort to broker a power-sharing agreement between Musharraf and the former prime minister as a good-faith effort toward democracy. It was, according to the written complaint, an attempt to preserve the politically endangered Musharraf as George W. Bush's man in Islamabad.

[snip]

In early December, a former Pakistani government official supporting Bhutto visited a senior U.S. government official to renew Bhutto's security requests. He got a brushoff, a mind-set reflected Dec. 6 at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

... seems like the counter-part to the leaks that serve as the basis for this AP story.

Senior U.S. diplomats had multiple conversations, including at least two private face-to-face meetings, with top members of Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party to discuss threats on the Pakistani opposition leader's life and review her security arrangements after a suicide bombing marred her initial return to Pakistan from exile in October, the officials told The Associated Press.

[snip]

The officials said Bhutto and her aides were concerned, particularly after the

October attack, but were adamant that in the absence of a specific and credible threat there would be few, if any, changes to her campaign schedule ahead of parliamentary elections.

[snip]

In the meetings with U.S. officials, Bhutto aides did not ask the United States to help protect her but did inquire about the feasibility of hiring private U.S. or British bodyguards, an idea discouraged by the Americans who argued that a noticeable Western security detail would increase the threat and might become a target itself, the officials said.

[snip]

Instead, the U.S. diplomats recommended as many as five reputable local Pakistani and regional firms that could be contracted to supplement Bhutto's security and urged the party to limit the size, scope and type of her public appearances, upgrade armoring on vehicles in which she might travel and require her to wear protective clothing, the officials said.

However, there was no indication that Bhutto's team – including her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, who attended at least one of the meetings – had followed through on the most critical of the recommendations, including the hiring of private guards and reducing her visibility in large crowds like the one in Rawalpindi where she was killed.

[snip]

The State Department, meanwhile, angrily denied suggestions that U.S. officials had ignored or minimized the threat to Bhutto even as they were encouraging reconciliation between her and Pakistani

President Pervez Musharraf.

On one side, you've got Bhutto's people saying the State Department blew off requests for help with security. On the other side, you've got US officials (one source is specifically described as an intelligence official) claiming they were helping Bhutto's people, but that Bhutto (and specifically, her husband) didn't do the things necessary to ensure her security. (I recommend you read through the whole AP article, which goes on at some length to portray the steps the US allegedly took to secure Bhutto's safety.)

Do you get the feeling we're going to be hearing more about how US action or inaction led to Bhutto's death? The State Department sure seems touchy about the issue.

Novak, for his part, lays a lot of blame with Richard Boucher.

Richard Boucher, assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, was asked to respond to fears by nonpartisan American observers of a rigged election. His reply: "I do think they can have a good election. They can have a credible election. They can have a transparent and a fair election. It's not going to be a perfect election." Boucher's words echoed through corridors of power in Islamabad. The Americans' not demanding perfection signaled that they would settle for less. Without Benazir Bhutto around, it is apt to be a lot less.

Well it's not clear that Boucher is either the "high-ranking State Department official" or the "senior U.S. government official" named in Novak's piece, he may well be either or both of them. (Here's a question. Novak's source on this appears to be Bhutto's folks. If so, why not name the officials in question?) In any case, Bhutto's folks appear to be preparing to make

the case that the State Department's public claim to be supporting democracy were just a sham.

And the purpose of Novak's column—particularly the inclusion of this detail—seems designed to send a message that Bhutto's folks are prepared to provide evidence of State's bad faith regarding the Pakistani election.

When I last saw Bhutto, over coffee in August at Manhattan's Pierre Hotel, she was deeply concerned about U.S. ambivalence but asked me not to write about it. She had not heard from Musharraf for three weeks after their secret July meeting in Abu Dhabi. She feared the Pakistani military strongman was not being prodded from Washington.