

PLAYING PAKISTAN

The NYDN captured both aspects of McCain's mistakes last night on Pakistan (Update: here's a much better article from Strobel and Landay).

The one that leapt out was McCain, kinda like George Bush in 2000, getting the name of Pakistan's president wrong. (Bush didn't know it.)

"Now, the new president of Pakistan, Qadari (it's actually Asif Ali Zardari), has got his hands full," McCain said.

He also said, "I don't think that Sen. Obama understands that there was a failed state in Pakistan when Musharraf came to power," referring to former President Pervez Musharraf, who took power in a coup 1999. Although Pakistan sure had problems, many people didn't regard the country, then a nuclear-armed one, as a failed state.

Admittedly, I once starred as the villain of a Matt Bai novel because of my obsession with Pakistan, so I'm surely biased.

But unlike McCain's mangling of Ahmadinejad's name, I think these two mistakes ought to qualify as a significant issue.

Central to the debate over who has better judgment in foreign affairs, after all, is whether or not it was correct to draw troops away from Afghanistan in 2002 and dump them into Bush's war of choice. McCain maintains that was a smart decision, whereas Obama has been saying we should have—and still have to—focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan for some time.

McCain botching the name of a guy who just became Pakistan's president—that I don't so much mind (though someone following closely enough to understand Benazir Bhutto's role in the country would have known Zardari's name from his time as First Gentleman).

But for someone running on a neocon platform of supporting the spread of democracy to explain away Musharraf's coup by claiming Pakistan was a failed state is just inexcusable. If you don't even know which countries have democratic elections and which don't, after all, you're bound to find yourself invading Venezuela in the name of democracy (heh). Furthermore, if Pakistan had **been** a failed state at any time since 1998, when it tested nukes, it would completely undermine the logic behind McCain's myopic focus on Iraq and Iran at the expense of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In other words, McCain's mistakes on Pakistan last night ought to be definitive proof that Obama's claim—that McCain has focused unwisely on Iraq to the detriment of the more urgent central Asian war—is correct.

And while we're talking about Pakistan, it's worth looking at how well Eliza Doolittle learns.

In spite of the fact that McCain botched Zardari's name, Bhutto's widower was kind enough to invest time in educating Alaska's idiot savant—in a moment in which Palin performed much better than the purportedly skilled professional (either of them actually—the current president or the hopeful one).

On entering a room filled with several Pakistani officials this afternoon, Palin was immediately greeted by Sherry Rehman, the Information Minister. "And how does one keep looking that good when one is that busy?," Rehman asked, drawing friendly laughter from the room when she complimented Palin.

"Oh, thank you," Palin said. Pakistan's recently-elected president, Asif Ali Zardari, entered the room seconds later. Palin rose to shake his hand, saying she was 'honoured' to meet him.

Zardari then called her "gorgeous" and said: "Now I know why the whole of

America is crazy about you." "You are so nice," Palin said, smiling. "Thank you."

A handler from Zardari's entourage then told the two politicians to keep shaking hands for the cameras. **"If he's insisting, I might hug,"** Zardari said. Palin smiled politely. [my emphasis]

And, curiously, this smarmy interaction with Pakistan's new president seems to have been all it took for Palin to gain confidence in this one foreign policy issue.

Palin's apparent disagreement with McCain's position on Pakistan [in saying she would pursue terrorists across the border even while McCain was attacking Obama for that same policy] came as the Alaska governor was picking up a couple of cheesesteaks at Tony Luke's in South Philadelphia. She was approached by a man wearing a Temple University t-shirt, who later identified himself as Michael Rovito.

"How about the Pakistan situation?" Rovito asked. "What's your thoughts about that."

"In Pakistan?" Palin responded.

"What's going on over there, like Waziristian?"

"It's working with Zardari to make sure that we're all working together to stop the guys from coming in over the border," Palin said. "And we'll go from there."

"Waziristan is blowing up," Rovito replied.

"Yeah, it is," Palin said. "And the economy there is blowing up, too."

"So we do cross-border, like from Afghanistan to Pakistan, you think?"

Rovito asked.

"If that's what we have to do stop the terrorists from coming any further in, absolutely, we should," Palin said.

Frankly, I applaud Palin for taking enough away from getting ogled by Zardari to engage in a coherent discussion of Waziristan. Trust me, it can be distracting trying to learn while someone's trying to feel you up.

But it ought to really raise concern that Palin—who so obviously is just synthesizing this as she goes—has a more coherent understanding of Pakistan than McCain does. In this performance of My Fair Lady, Doolittle is **already** lapping Henry Higgins.

And given the importance of getting Pakistan right, that ought to be a big concern.