

DICK CHENEY'S COUNTERTERRORISM INCOMPETENCE CONTINUES TO ENDANGER US

When I was out tromping around Yosemite (!!) on Friday, one of Najibullah Zazi's co-conspirators, Zarein Ahmedzay, plead guilty to two terrorism-related charges.

Mark that up as yet another counterterrorism victory for civilian courts.

But it's more than that. As Isikoff and Hosenball emphasize, the government revealed on Friday that Zazi and Ahmedzay received instructions from two top al Qaeda figures—Saleh al-Somali and Rashid Rauf—in 2008. Here's how DOJ reveals the detail in their press release:

As Ahmedzay admitted during today's guilty plea allocution and as reflected in previous government filings and the guilty plea allocution of co-defendant Najibullah Zazi, Ahmedzay, Zazi and a third individual agreed to travel to Afghanistan to join the Taliban and fight against United States and allied forces. In furtherance of their plans, they flew from Newark Liberty International Airport in Newark, N.J., to Peshawar, Pakistan at the end of August 2008. Ahmedzay and the third individual attempted to enter Afghanistan but were turned back at the border and returned to Peshawar.

Within a few days, Ahmedzay, Zazi and the third individual met with an al-Qaeda facilitator in Peshawar and agreed to travel for training in Waziristan. Upon arriving, they met with two al-Qaeda leaders, but did not learn their

true identities. As the government represented during today's guilty plea, the leaders were Saleh al-Somali, the head of international operations for al-Qaeda, and Rashid Rauf, a key al-Qaeda operative. The three Americans said that they wanted to fight in Afghanistan, but the al-Qaeda leaders explained that they would be more useful to al-Qaeda and the *jihād* if they returned to New York and conducted attacks there. [my emphasis]

Now, that's interesting for several reasons. Rauf, as you might recall, had a key role in planning the foiled 2006 attempt to use liquid explosives to blow up airliners (potentially using the same TATP Zazi was going to use in his plot). The British were busy conducting a solid law enforcement investigation of the plot and were working with Pakistan to extradite Rauf. But partly in an effort to shore up Bush's crappy poll numbers, Cheney and the guy who ordered the destruction of the torture tapes, Jose Rodriguez, asked the Pakistanis to pick up Rauf before the Brits could finish their investigation. Here's how Ron Suskind described what happened.

NPR: I want to talk just a little about this fascinating episode you describe in the summer of 2006, when President Bush is very anxious about some intelligence briefings that he is getting from the British. What are they telling him?

SUSKIND: In late July of 2006, the British are moving forward on a mission they've been—an investigation they've been at for a year at that point, where they've got a group of "plotters," so-called, in the London area that they've been tracking...Bush gets this briefing at the end of July of 2006, and he's very agitated. When Blair comes at the end of the month, they talk about it and he says, "Look, I want this thing, this trap snapped shut immediately." Blair's

like, "Well, look, be patient here. What we do in Britain"—Blair describes, and this is something well known to Bush—"is we try to be more patient so they move a bit forward. These guys are not going to breathe without us knowing it. We've got them all mapped out so that we can get actual hard evidence, and then prosecute them in public courts of law and get real prosecutions and long prison terms"...

Well, Bush doesn't get the answer he wants, which is "snap the trap shut." And the reason he wants that is because he's getting all sorts of pressure from Republicans in Congress that his ratings are down. These are the worst ratings for a sitting president at this point in his second term, and they're just wild-eyed about the coming midterm elections. Well, Bush expresses his dissatisfaction to Cheney as to the Blair meeting, and Cheney moves forward.

NPR: So you got the British saying, "Let's carefully build our case. Let's get more intelligence." Bush wants an arrest and a political win. What does he do?

SUSKIND: Absolutely. What happens is that then, oh, a few days later, the CIA operations chief—which is really a senior guy. He's up there in the one, two, three spots at CIA, guy named Jose Rodriguez ends up slipping quietly into Islamabad, Pakistan, and he meets secretly with the ISI, which is the Pakistani intelligence service. And suddenly a guy in Pakistan named Rashid Rauf, who's kind of the contact of the British plotters in Pakistan, gets arrested. This, of course, as anyone could expect, triggers a reaction in London, a lot of scurrying. And the Brits have to run through the night

wild-eyed and basically round up 25 or 30 people. It's quite a frenzy. The British are livid about this. They talk to the Americans. The Americans kind of shrug, "Who knows? You know, ISI picked up Rashid Rauf."

DAVIES: So the British did not even get a heads-up from the United States that this arrest was going to happen?

SUSKIND: Did not get a heads-up. In fact, the whole point was to mislead the British...The British did not know about it, frankly, until I reported it in the book... [my emphasis]

And that, in turn, had two effects. First, it screwed up the British investigation, making it much harder for them to convict the plotters remaining in the UK. In addition, it put Rauf in Pakistani, not British, custody. In 2007, he was allowed to escape, when Pakistani authorities let his uncle, rather than the police, escort him back to prison after a court appearance. And that's why Rauf was free to plan further plots in the UK and, apparently, Zazi's planned attack on the NY Subway.

American authorities claim to have killed Rauf (and Saleh al-Somali) with two separate drone strikes in late 2008. But it remains unclear whether Rauf actually died in that 2008 strike.

So he may still be out there, because Dick Cheney wanted to boost Bush's poll ratings rather than let the Brits develop their case and extradite Rauf into secure custody in 2006.

I've been wondering since Zazi was arrested why the right-wingers don't want to talk about him at all, ignoring the Zazi case to instead squawk about the underwear bomber. I'm beginning to wonder if this is the reason: Dick Cheney's refusal to let law enforcement work four years ago exposed us to at least three more years of Rauf's plotting.

A bunch of NY subway riders may have almost gotten killed last September 11 because Dick Cheney wanted to boost poll numbers in 2006 rather than let law enforcement work.