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November Surprise?

Tom Engelhardt / The Nation | October 18 2006

The US-backed special tribunal in Baghdad signalled Monday that it will likely delay a verdict in the first trial of Saddam Hussein to November 5. Why hasn't the mainstream media connected the dots between the Saddam's judgment day and the midterm elections?

Here's how the story was reported pretty much everywhere: "An Iraqi court trying Saddam Hussein for the killing of Shi'ite villagers in the 1980s could deliver a verdict on November 5, officials said, a ruling which could send the ousted leader to the gallows..."

A possible death-sentence for Saddam and his top lieutenants on November 5? Now, shouldn't that raise a few eyebrows somewhere? If you happen to have a calendar close at hand, pull it over and take a quick look. That verdict would then come, curiously enough, just two days before the midterm elections. It's the sort of thing that--you would think--that any reporter with knowledge of the US election cycle (no less of how Karl Rove has worked these last years) would at least note in an article. But no, you can search high and low without finding a reference to this in the mainstream media.

I must admit I hadn't thought about this myself until a friend forwarded me "No Comment," the e-mail newsletter that Scott Horton sends out from time to time. ("It's intended as ironic. All I do is comment.") Horton, who likes to identify himself in his newsletter as an "obscure New York lawyer," is actually an adjunct professor at the Columbia University Law School, as well as chairman of the International Law Committee at the New York City Bar Association. He makes frequent trips to Iraq, working as an attorney "representing arrested local-hire reporters of US media."

Once he had pointed out the timing in his newsletter, I couldn't get it out of my head and, since a Google search and a spin through various mainstream articles on the changed verdict date, brought up only a couple of passing mentions online of its relationship to the US elections, I called Horton directly. Here's what he had to say when I asked whether he thought Karl Rove might have anything to do with this:

"For sure. That November 5 date is designed to show some progress in Iraq. This is the last full news-cycle day in the US before the elections. It'll be Monday. And the American public will see Saddam condemned to death and see it as a positive thing.

"When you look at polling figures," Horton said, "there have been three significant spike points. One was the date on which Saddam was captured. The second was the purple fingers election. The third was Zarqawi being killed. Based on those three, it's easy to project that they will get a mild bump out of this.

"After all, almost every newspaper reserves space for Iraq reporting every day. This just assures that they will have a positive news story to feature. I find it amazing not that journalists don't editorialize on this, but that they report the story without even noting that this is right before the midterm elections. That's pretty amazing to me!

"This is not coincidence," he continued. "Nothing in Iraq that's set up this far in advance is coincidental. Look at Michael Gordon's book Cobra II. One of the points he drives home is how everything in the battle for Baghdad was scripted for US media consumption.

"In fact, in my experience, everything that comes out of Baghdad is very carefully prepared for American domestic consumption.

"As for Saddam's trial itself, I've spoken with dozens of lawyers and judges in Iraq and they have a uniformly very negative opinion of this special tribunal. Everybody -- pretty consistently across the board, and despite the fact that there's no love lost for Saddam himself--has a high level of irritation about the tribunal. Judges have said to me, 'I wouldn't serve on that. I wouldn't have anything to do with it. It's a blot on our country.' Their main point of criticism is its lack of

