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Pass the Duct Tape

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WASHINGTON

Osama bin Laden came to the rescue of George W. Bush yesterday.

The president and his secretary of state had been huffing and puffing to prove a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. George Tenet, who presides over a C.I.A. full of skepticism about the tie, did his best for the boss, playing up the link to the Senate.

Ignoring all the blatant Qaeda hooks to Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen and Pakistan; ignoring the fact that Osama has never had any use for the drinking, smoking, womanizing, secular Saddam; ignoring the fact that Saddam has no proven record of sharing weapons with Al Qaeda, the Bushies have been hellbent on making the 9/11 connection.

The world wasn't entirely buying that rationale for war.

And then who but Osama himself should pop up on an audio tape, calling on Muslims to fight the U.S. if the "infidels" attack "our brothers in Iraq."

Osama's disdain for Saddam still gleamed through. He barely mentioned the Iraqi leader and seemed to be holding his nose when he gave permission to his Qaeda brethren to fight "the Crusaders" alongside Saddam's Baath Party, "even if we believe and declare that the socialists are apostates," and whether Saddam remains in power or not.

Still, the administration pounced on the tape, hoping it would prove to those epicene Old Europeans, with their poufy blue-helmeted U.N. force, that Al Qaeda and Iraq were "bound by a common hatred," as the State Department's Richard Boucher said.

Mr. Powell was so eager to publicize Osama's statements that he broke the news himself at a Senate Budget Committee hearing, hours before Al Jazeera even acknowledged it had the tape.

He said the tape showed that Osama was "in partnership with Iraq," and proved that the U.S. could not count simply on a beefed-up inspection force in Iraq.

In the past, Condi Rice has implored the networks not to broadcast the tapes outright, fearing he might be activating sleeper cells in code.

But this time the administration flacked the tape. And Fox, the official Bush news agency, rushed the entire tape onto the air.

So the Bushies no longer care if Osama sends a coded message to his thugs as long as he stays on message for the White House?

To get Saddam, the Bush administration is even willing to remind the American public that it failed to get bin Laden. Its fixation on Saddam seems to have blinded it to the possibility that Osama might be perversely encouraging America in this war.

The administration and Al Qaeda both have a purpose for invading Iraq, and both want a regime change.

Both talk about "liberating" the Arab people, but Osama's vision is apocalyptic. He wants the Middle East — Israel and the Arab monarchies — to go up in flames. By Zionizing our battle with Iraq and promising an anti-American theocracy, he hopes to radicalize recruits for a jihad against an American occupation of Arab land.

Osama's own fanaticism was forged by foreign occupations — the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and American forces stationed in Saudi Arabia.

The Bush hawks want to go to war in a non-apocalyptic way, to stabilize the Middle East, not to inflame it. They have a grandiose — if risky — plan to transform Iraq into a model kitchen of democracy, a buffer for Israel that the Palestinians and other Arab autocracies would be pressured to emulate.

Senators quizzed Bush officials yesterday, asking whether Gen. Tommy Franks, the future mukhtar of Baghdad, would be choosing new Iraqi leaders. They pressed about the time and cost of an American occupation.

Chris Dodd suggested that there could be unforeseen explosions in the model kitchen, citing an alliance between the Iraqi exiles who might run a post-Saddam government and conservative Iranian clerics who think we're the Great Satan.

"You have to level with the American public," he lectured the Bush officials. "It could be very costly and take a long, long time."

But it is the Bushies' dream of a model kitchen in Iraq, rather than a Saddam-Qaeda link, that makes this war seem noble to them. That's why they were so busy hawking the Osama tape, rather than coming up with ways we can protect ourselves from the coming Osama attacks — other than with plastic and duct tape.