

Does John Kerry have a chance?

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton, New Jersey

YES, John Kerry does have a chance to win the US Presidency this November, but the Republican juggernaut will pull out all the stops to deny him. In what promises to be a fiercely fought slugfest, the winner and last man standing will be badly bruised!

The writer cannot recall an America so divided. The Republicans seem to be on a mission, almost a holy mission, to reelect an incumbent president who they believe has a divine right to rule. The Democrats believe that Bush had not been elected at all in 2000. That the Republican-dominated Supreme Court "stole" the presidency from their candidate, Al Gore, by stopping the Florida recount, and handed it over to George W. Bush, who had received half a million less votes than Gore. The Democrats are appalled that George Bush has broken his campaign promise to be a "uniter not a divider," and has become a divider. And that instead of being a "compassionate conservative," as the candidate Bush had promised during the 2000 campaign, President Bush has thrown compassion to the winds and has become the most rightwing president in recent history, and has loaded the judicial and the executive branches of the government with rightwing appointees!

The Democrats are aghast that spurred by pro-Israeli neoconservatives such as Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Feith, Libby, Bolton, Kristol, Pipes and Krauthammer, who have taken over the US government, the Bush presidency has been systematically dismantling international treaties, defying the United Nations, and has adopted the neocon mantra of pre-emptive strikes against other, potentially hostile nations. As is well known, the neocon plans to aid Israel by attacking Iraq first, and Syria and Iran next, were drawn up well before the terrorist attack on America on September 11. Indeed, most experts agree that the tragic events of 9/11 were used by the neocons to execute their previously formulated policies.

After being blindsided by the Republican use of the war on terror to discredit the Democrats as soft on national security during the mid-term elections of 2002, the Democrats regrouped. Led by the former presidential candidate and Governor of Vermont Howard Dean, they began attacking President George W. Bush's policies and record. Because of the persistent Democratic attacks on the president during the Democratic primaries earlier this year, Mr. Bush's approval rating percentages plummeted from the stratospheric eighties to the current anaemic forties. Highflying Howard Dean, long the leader among the Democratic primary presidential candidates, committed a fatal blunder before January's Iowa caucus. Perhaps ill advised by a group that backed him named Muslim Americans for Dean, Dean committed the cardinal sin of American politics: he said that America should be evenhanded in the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis! When historians research the spectacular fall of Howard Dean in the Democratic primaries of 2004, they will point to his desire to be fair in the dispute between the Palestinians and

the Israelis as the root cause for his doom! All other candidates, including John Kerry, got the message. Since then John Kerry has been just as blatant in support of Israel as President Bush.

With the Republican right wingers like Rush Limbaugh, Bob Grant, Sean Hannity, and Michael Savage dominating the radio talk shows and Fox News Channel acting as 24-hour political commercial channel for George W. Bush, the Democrats felt they need to do something in

ganda came from Michael Moore in his books and in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, an anti-Bush documentary which has struck a chord with the American public, as well as finding colossal success world wide.

The adage, "America votes its pocketbook" will be less true this year than in the past. Although improving recently, the American economy remains weak. The stock market is treading water. The unemployment rate, while not excessively high, is still high, close to 6 percent. The crude oil

more depressing for the Democrats, after what everyone regarded as an excellent Democratic Convention in Boston last week, Kerry failed to receive the expected bounce in the opinion polls.

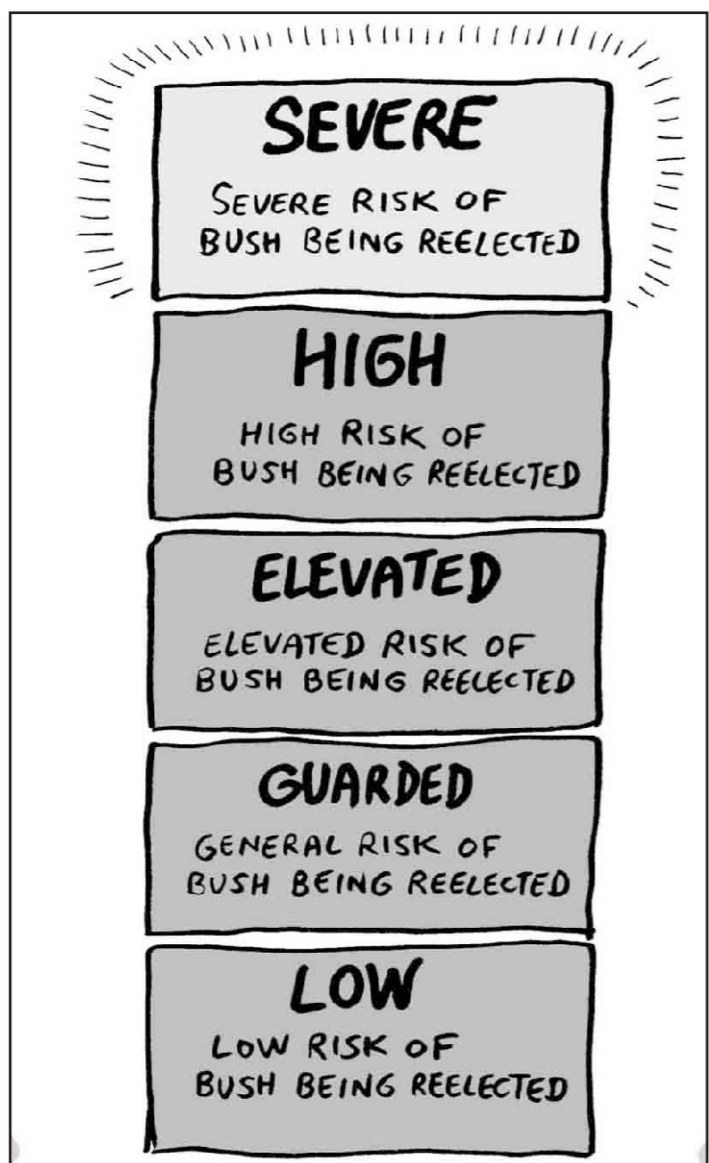
The reason for all this is that the Americans feel insecure at home. And President Bush has convinced them that they will be safer under him than under a Kerry administration. Facts do not matter here; perception does. The fact is that even in the face of a specific intelligence warning that Osama Bin Laden was determined to carry out terrorist attacks inside America, for the first nine months of his administration, President Bush remained heedless. After 9/11, as the nation naturally rallied behind the commander-in-chief, the commander-in-chief cast himself as the only one capable of protecting them. Even after all the evidence to the contrary -- Bush's previously planned attack on Iraq on fictitious grounds, the death of close to one thousand American soldiers in Iraq and the prohibitive cost, one billion dollars per week, of occupying Iraq, America earning the world's enmity for its preemptive attack on Iraq -- President Bush has successfully convinced the Americans that he is the man to save and protect them from harm. As Howard Dean was commenting the other day, every time the Democrats are in the limelight and are seen gaining on Bush, the Attorney General John Ashcroft raises the threat level, as if to remind the Americans of the ongoing "war on terrorism," and most importantly, who is supposed to be better at it.

Because of all of the above, approximately 40 percent of the Americans, the so-called Republican base, will vote for Bush in November come hell or high water. An equal number of newly energised Democrats will ignore Kerry's so-called waffling and lack of charisma and will vote for him. The election will be decided by the approximately 20 percent undecided and swing voters. The bad news for Kerry is that the independent candidate Ralph Nader has entered the race. It is generally agreed that Nader cost Al Gore the presidency in 2000 by siphoning away 200,000 votes in Florida, most of which would have gone to Gore in Nader's absence. As is well known, Bush won Florida by 537 votes and with the US Supreme Court stopping a Florida State Supreme Court-mandated recount, Bush won enough electoral votes to win the presidency. Five percent of the die-hard Democrats are so anti-Iraqi war that they will vote for Nader, who has promised to pull out of Iraq, if elected, within six months. To win, Kerry will have to overcome this 5 percent, which would have gone to him in Nader's absence.

The danger for President Bush is the 1980 Jimmy Carter scenario. Then too the economy was in a recession, far worse than the present. Interest rates were sky high. And with American diplomats held hostage for over a year in Iran, Americans were concerned. Still, in all the opinion polls leading up to the election the incumbent President Jimmy Carter was either tied with, or ahead of the Republican challenger Ronald Reagan. A week before the election, the American voters focused on the two candidates, and realised that President Carter had got the nation into a royal mess. Ronald Reagan won in a landslide!

LETTER FROM AMERICA

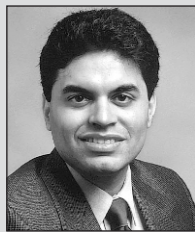
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response. Saturday Night Live (SNL) comedy show alumnus Al Franken wrote a scathing book blasting Fox Channel's top-rated Bill O'Reilly's pretensions to be "fair and balanced." Franken also purchased time on certain major city radio stations to propagate "liberal" views. Of course, the most successful antidote to the Republican media propa-

prices have hit record highs of \$45 dollars a barrel and the gasoline prices are over two dollars a gallon nation wide. The historically high gasoline price alone should have been enough to derail President Bush's reelection chances. Yet, in most public opinion polls for presidential preference Bush is either tied or only slightly behind Kerry. And

Warlords, drugs and votes



FAREED ZAKARIA writes from Washington

POLITICAL junkies are betting these days as to how certain events would affect the election, like a terror attack or a major crisis in Iraq. To these I would add one that is almost certain to take place: the October election in Afghanistan. How that vote takes place with chaos and violence or order and celebration will have a significant effect on President Bush's electoral fortunes. Here, as in Iraq, he must now wish he had listened to wiser voices sooner.

After the United States won its spectacular victory against the Taliban in December 2001, it assured the world that it was committed to intensive efforts to rebuild Afghanistan. But policy on the ground was largely controlled by the Defense Department, whose civilian leaders rejected nation-building. They saw the mission in Afghanistan as narrowly

military fighting the Taliban and perhaps wanted to move troops out of Afghanistan to prepare for an invasion of Iraq. During 2002 the United States would not extend the reach of the international security force outside Kabul, was wary of asking NATO to get involved, provided little funding for reconstruction and, most crucially, refused to help in the demobilization of the Afghan militias.

The second, related effect of America's tunnel vision was that the drug trade began booming. Afghanistan now supplies 75 percent of the world's opium. The warlords saw a ready source of revenue, outside the reach of Kabul, and encouraged the trade. Drugs are now the dominant feature of Afghanistan's economy, half as big as the legal economy. Worse, the trade is now moving from opium to

cal stability and economic development. Even then, when Karzai presented Donald Rumsfeld with a plan to take on certain key warlords in May 2003, Rumsfeld declined to offer American support. (Yes, all this eerily echoes what later happened in Iraq.)

About a year ago, policy began shifting, partly pushed by the new American Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, a former Pentagon official who is trusted by Rumsfeld. The United States asked NATO to get involved, began gingerly accepting the idea of expanding the reach of the international force, promised increased resources and, crucially, began supporting demobilization.

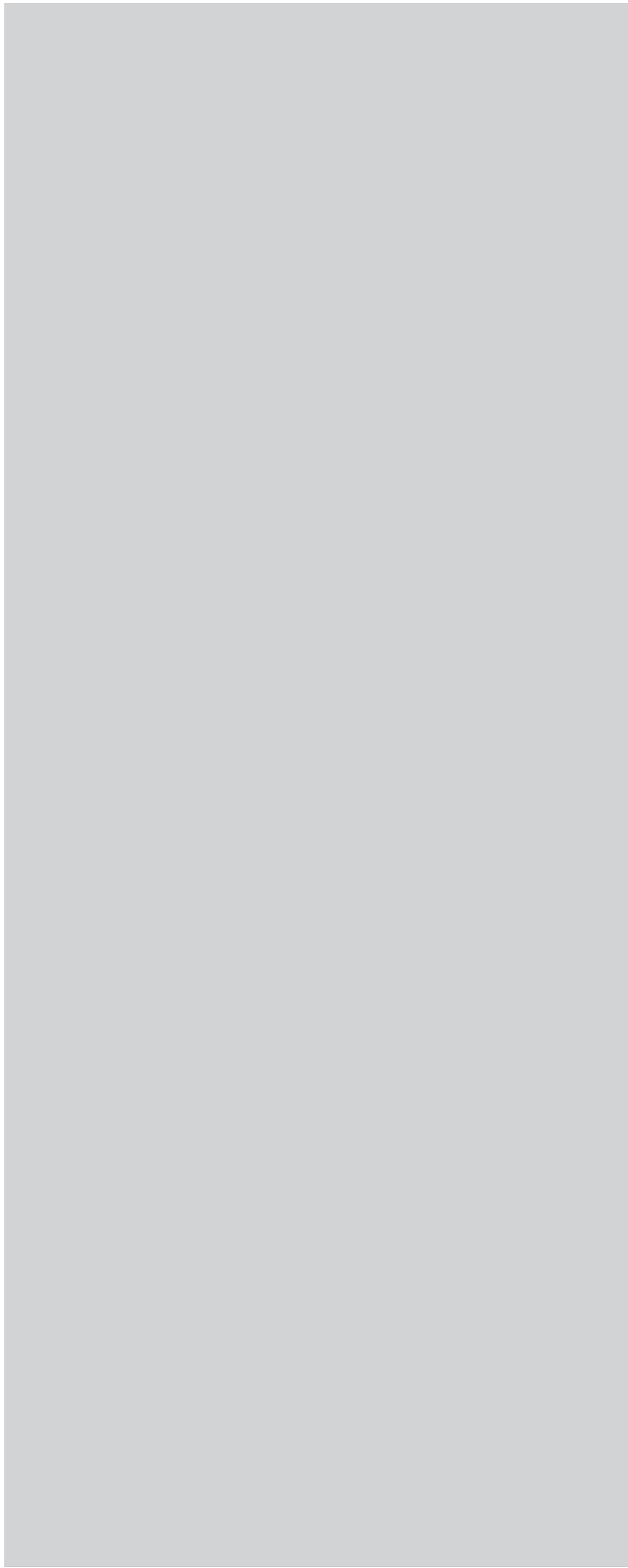
Disbanding the warlords' forces is the key challenge facing Afghanistan. The political scientist Max Weber once defined a state as that entity that has a monopoly of the legitimate use of force in the country. In Afghanistan, the state has no such monopoly. Winding down militias is the only path to that goal. The Pentagon had made it so clear that the U.S. would have nothing to do with this that Lakhdar Brahimi, the U.N.'s special envoy, used to jokingly call it "the American fatwa" on demobilisation. By the end of 2003, the fatwa was revoked. Now finally the United States is actively assisting in the process, urging warlords to disband their militias and incorporate into the new Afghan Army.

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These decisions had two effects: the first was to embolden Afghanistan's warlords and tighten their grip on power. In the aftermath of the war, their powers could have been defined so as to allow a central government to develop basic elements of national life, such as the rule of law, a national economy and a set of political institutions. Instead, the United States had a laissez-faire policy. The warlords were the only ones other than the United States with military power on the ground. They noticed the development of a political vacuum, expanded their powers and broadened their reach.

heroin, which means that it's connected with international cartels, crime and big money. The amounts of cash involved dwarf government revenues, and corruption has infected every aspect of Afghan political life.

The Defense Department's aversion to any political role in Afghanistan was criticised by President Karzai and his allies (quietly), the State Department, U.S. senators such as Joseph Biden and John Edwards, U.N. officials and nongovernmental organizations. Then the military on the ground began making the case that it could not achieve its goals without politi-



There are other positive trends in the country. Afghans have approached the national elections with huge enthusiasm, exceeding all predictions of voter registration. Polls show that they are highly supportive of Karzai, the United States and the international efforts at reconstruction. The problem in Afghanistan has

not been with the Afghans but with the U.S. government.

U.S. policy toward Afghanistan is now on the right track. America and its allies are extending security outside Kabul, helping to build up the Afghan Army and police, weakening the warlords, strengthening the

central government, funding reconstruction projects, offering farmers alternatives to opium. But it might be too late. Instability is rampant, the drug trade is flourishing and the warlords are entrenched. As in Iraq, the administration seems to have learned from its mistakes, but the education of George Bush has been

mighty costly.

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