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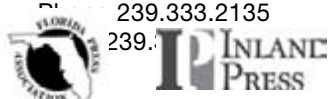
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EDITORIAL

When an assassin succeeds

BY RICH LOWRY

The roll call of U.S. allies in the Middle East and its neighborhood has always read like a target list: Maliki, Karzai, Sistani, Musharraf. One bullet or one suicide blast could wipe out all our work and rip apart a strategically important country.

Assassinations have steadily picked off pro-Western politicians in Lebanon, and one of our key tribal allies in Western Iraq, Sheik Satter, was murdered shortly after meeting with President Bush. But since Sept. 11, we have been lucky. There have been no assassinations of true geo-strategic significance, except perhaps that of anti-Syria former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, whose killing prompted a popular backlash that ended the Syrian occupation of his country.

Until now. Until Benazir Bhutto was killed in a shooting and suicide bombing at the end of a political rally in the city of Rawalpindi. Until her return to Pakistan from exile a few months ago, met immediately with threats to kill her from Islamic extremists, ended in a tragedy that is still shocking even if it seemed inevitable.

It's always been the assassin's conceit that he can move history with a single blow. Sometimes, as most infamously with Gavrilo Princip's shot that precipitated World War I, he succeeds. But it is much harder to do in stable, institutionally mature democracies where established parties can be as important as a single man or woman. Pakistan, alternately ruled by civilian kleptocrats and generals, is not such a country. Bhutto will be hard to replace.

In keeping with the clannishness of Pakistani politics, her Pakistan Peoples Party was entirely dependent on her (authoritarian-style) leadership. Her civilian rival, Nawaz Sharif, who also recently returned from exile, is soft on Islamic militants and has even been accused of having taken bribes from Osama bin Laden. That leaves President Pervez Musharraf, increasingly isolated politically, without a decent civilian ally with whom to try to broaden his support as his country totters from this latest blow.

If Bhutto's murder were to create a spiral of violence in nuclear-armed Pakistan that Musharraf couldn't control, it would be the most successful post-Sept. 11 terrorist act

since the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Iraq, which stoked a civil war that nearly brought us to our knees there. Chaos is militancy's friend, and it is much easier to bring about than lawfully constituted order.

For the terrorists, murder rather than persuasion is the very stuff of politics. Where it has no majority support and no democratic inspirational leaders of its own, al-Qaida can always kill and hope to gain in the resulting whirlwind.

As Iraq during the past year shows, chaos needn't prevail. As our Iraq policy spiraled downward in 2006, it benefited from the sort of thorough rethinking that we now need to bring to bear to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Because what we always feared has happened -- an assassin has killed a strategically significant target. Bhutto's martyrdom will understandably obscure her misrule the first two times she was prime minister. But on her return, she was a frank voice against Islamism, and no one can deny her this: She was very brave. ■

— Rich Lowry is editor of the *National Review*.

GUEST OPINION

Worse than a bad movie

BY ROGER E. HERNANDEZ

What can you say about a guy who tries to free hostages, a guy who brings affordable heating oil to poor people?

What can you say? What you can say about Hugo Chavez is that you are on to him.

A few weeks ago, the Venezuelan president mounted a media circus in neighboring Colombia, where he bragged that he was going to convince his left-wing comrades in the terrorist Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces -- known by its Spanish acronym FARC -- to release three hostages (including a 3-year-old child) that they have held for years.

Along for the ride were former Argentinean President (and current first husband) Nestor Kirchner, a Brazilian official with close ties to president Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva, the French and Cuban ambassadors in Caracas, and a pretty ugly American named Oliver Stone.

Yes, him. He was hoping, of course, to humbly be of help in Chavez's humanitarian gesture.

Besides, "I have no illusions about the

FARC," he told reporters, "but it looks like they are a peasant army fighting for a decent living."

No illusions, mind you. Just a heroic army of the Little People fighting for what's right. Even if they kill, maim and kidnap a few thousand innocents. Sort of like al-Qaida, right? Didn't Oliver compare al-Qaida to the Minutemen of 1776? No? Oops, no, that was Michael Moore. Sorry, I sometimes confuse which Hollywood director who admires Fidel Castro said what about whom.

One thing is for sure, the celebs are not missing a beat as Fidel slowly makes his transition from this world to the other -- they are learning to heap praises on his disciple, Hugo.

A "great man," Stone called Chavez. "One of the Earth's wisest people," he once said of Castro.

Here in the United States, Chavez's greatness is being sung by Joe Kennedy, son of Bobby, who is appearing in television and radio commercials thanking CITGO, the government-owned Venezuelan oil company, for providing millions of barrels of discounted heating oil to impoverished Americans.

It's how Chavez sets himself up: the liberator of hostages, the provider of warmth. Freedom and security. What more could anybody want?

Maybe, "socialism or death."

That's the slogan in Chavez's Venezuela, as well as in Castro's Cuba. And they do not mean Euro-socialism, either. They mean hard-line Marxism-Leninism. They are saying, in essence, that Cubans and Venezuelans either accept a one-party state without freedom of speech, or they die. It's an ideology Castro tried to spread through force of arms in the 1960s and 1970s, funding and training guerrilla movements to make the Andes into another Vietnam, in the words of Che Guevara.

FARC and another Colombian group, the ELN, are just about the last holdouts from that violent era.

Now Chavez is trying a different tactic: soft power. The discounted oil. The effort to free hostages.

Regional leaders of democracies like Kirchner and Lula are as blind to the danger as Oliver Stone. The difference is that the main harm Stone can do is make a bad movie. ■

— Roger Hernandez is a syndicated columnist and writer-in-residence at New Jersey Institute of Technology.

MOMENTS IN TIME

- On Jan. 17, 1950, a team of 11 thieves steals more than \$2 million from the Brink's Armored Car depot in Boston. The Great Brink's Robbery was the almost perfect crime. Just days before the six-year statute of limitations was set to expire, the culprits were finally caught.

- On Jan. 18, 1882, A.A. Milne, creator of Winnie-the-Pooh, is born. When Milne's son Christopher Robin was about a year old, he received a stuffed bear as a present, which inspired Milne to begin writing a series of whimsical stories.

- On Jan. 19, 1940, the Three Stooges film "You Natzy Spy" is released. The Three Stooges made a total of 190 short subjects with Columbia, at least 20 feature-length

films, and hundreds of cartoons.

- On Jan. 20, 1961, 87-year-old Robert Frost recites his poem "The Gift Outright" at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy. Although Frost had written a new poem for the occasion, titled "Dedication," faint ink in his typewriter made the words difficult to read, so he recited "The Gift Outright" from memory.

- On Jan. 21, 1959, Carl Dean Switzer, the actor who as a child played "Alfalfa" in the Our Gang comedy film series, dies at age 31 in a fight, allegedly about money. Alfalfa, the freckle-faced boy with a warbling singing voice and a cowlick protruding from the top of his head, was Switzer's best-known role.

- On Jan. 22, 1973, the Supreme Court decriminalizes abortion by handing down its decision in the case of *Roe v. Wade*. For most of the country's first 100 years, abortion was not a criminal offense. Abortion only became a criminal offense in the period between 1860 and 1880 when the American Medical Association decided that abortion practitioners were unwanted competition.

- On Jan. 23, 1968, the U.S. intelligence-gathering ship *Pueblo* is seized by North Korean naval vessels and charged with spying and violating North Korean territorial waters. Negotiations to free the 83-man crew of the U.S. ship dragged on for nearly a year. ■