



Our Friend Pakistan and Other Mental Pretzels



By Marty Kaplan

On the same day that Americans are test-driving the idea that Osama bin Laden lived on the outskirts of Pakistan's West Point, undetected, for six years, Orly Taitz goes to the 9th Circuit Appeals Court to prove that President Obama's long-form birth certificate is a forgery.

As they say in conspiracy-land, there are no coincidences.

If you believe that Pakistan is our ally in the war on al Qaeda, then you have to square that belief with what we now know about bin Laden's last years. Maybe building a luxury compound in Abbottabad illustrates the brilliance of hiding in plain sight; surely no one in the Pakistani intelligence services could have been expected to look for him there. Or maybe they knew all along that someone who looked a lot like bin Laden lived in there, but it took half-a-dozen years to be certain he wasn't a fiendishly clever decoy. Or maybe they knew it was bin Laden, but the ISI, the IB and MI — the three Pakistani intelligence agencies — are like a country of their own, not to be conflated with the nation we call our ally.

Birthers, too, need to be mental contortionists to hold fast to their belief that the president is not a natural-born American. Not only do they have to include the White House and the state of Hawaii in the plot to issue counterfeit documents; they are also required to maintain that the Honolulu newspapers were co-conspirators nearly 50 years ago.

The world is rich with things hard to believe, but which nevertheless have passionate adherents. Creationists have to twist their minds into pretzels in order to dispatch geological evidence that our planet is billions, rather than thousands, of years old. If the Mayan calendar convinces you that the apocalypse will arrive in 2012, you will still be perfectly capable of rationalizing the arrival of an ordinary New Year's Day in 2013. If you believe that Paul Ryan's budget truly preserves and strengthens Medicare, then no appeal to the facts about health insurance companies and health care inflation will make a difference. If you think that cutting taxes for the wealthy spurs economic expansion, creates jobs and increases revenues, then you will be armed with an endless supply of exceptions to account for the actual economic record of the last 30 years.

Diplomacy, of course, is artful doubletalk. Everyone knows that “candid discussions” is a euphemism for trading accusations. Negotiators say one thing for domestic political consumption, but agree to the opposite under cover of secrecy. We tap one another’s phones, but butter wouldn’t melt in our diplomats’ mouths.

We need Pakistan. We need them even if they complain about our drones in their airspace, even if they arrest our CIA operatives, even if they support the Afghan Taliban, even if they freed and lionize A. Q. Khan, who sold nuclear weapon designs to terrorist states. We also need China, even if their antagonism to human rights is appalling. We need Saudi Arabia, no matter what they do in Bahrain. Pursuing our interests is messy and contradictory; some of our interests turn out to be more important than others. That’s what Realpolitik means.

If we had shared intelligence with Pakistan about our impending SEALS attack on bin Laden, the chances that it would not have leaked and been foiled are about zero. Pakistan knows that, just as it knows that the palaver about friendship and sovereignty is meant to conceal as much as it reveals. We’re all in on the wink.

But I don’t think that Orly Taitz is winking. Nor are religious fundamentalists. Where it gets hazy for me is the political fray. Do Michele Bachmann and Donald Trump actually believe the things they say, or are they just cynical manipulators who know how to get attention? When Newt Gingrich exonerates his extra-marital infidelity as a byproduct of his patriotism, is this Realpolitik at work, or does he actually think he’s telling the truth? The Ryan budget, passed by House Republicans and now likely to be brought up for a vote in the Senate by Harry Reid, relies on unemployment falling below 3 percent, something that the United States has never achieved except briefly during the Korean War. When Paul Krugman points this out, do supporters of the Republican budget somehow rewire their neurons to prevent this information from reaching the part of their brain where facts are supposed to penetrate, or is evidence simply irrelevant, and everyone actually understands that “cutting the deficit” is just wink-wink code for punishing the unworthy poor?

The coming days will no doubt include many accounts of bin Laden’s end. The administration’s version will include some elegant evasiveness about the double game that Pakistan has been playing, but that doesn’t bother me; Hillary Clinton is no Orly Taitz. I wish I could say that with certainty about the other doubletalkers in our midst.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.

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