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Terrorism and the election

Tom Ridge, the federal official in charge of defending the United States against terrorism, was on message when he told a July 14 news conference: "We don't do politics at Homeland Security." Such high-level claims of patriotic purity have been routine since 9/11. But in this election year, they're more ludicrous than ever. Days earlier, alongside a photo of Ridge, a headline on USA Today's front page had declared: "Election Terror Threat Intensifies." There was unintended irony in the headline.

While a real threat of terrorism exists in the United States, we should also acknowledge that an intensifying "election terror threat" is coming from the Bush administration. With scarcely 100 days to go until Election Day, the White House is desperate to wring every ounce of advantage from the American Flag, patriotism, apple pie – and the subject of "terrorism."

Newsweek reported a week after July Fourth that Ridge's agency "asked the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel to analyze what legal steps would be needed to permit the postponement of the election were an attack to take place." The media response was mostly negative, and the Bush administration proceeded with its intended dual message of portraying a postponement as far-fetched – yet not quite unthinkable.

Even while the bulk of commentators panned the postponement scenario, the Bush political team had succeeded in getting it on the media table without causing a massive sustained uproar. That's dangerous.

The leading White House strategist, Karl Rove, has a record of shoving the envelope in order to win. Forget ethics or honesty. Some of the documentation about Rove is downright chilling in the book "Bush's Brain: How Karl Rove Made George W. Bush Presidential," co-authored by TV news correspondent James Moore and Dallas Morning News reporter Wayne Slater.

If a terrorist attack occurs between now and Nov. 2, the administration would be much more likely to postpone the election if the Republican ticket is behind in the

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polls. That kind of unprecedented manipulation of the U.S. presidential election system should be strictly off-limits.

Several days after Newsweek broke the story, a Washington Post editorial – ostensibly shooting at the trial balloon – commented that “powerful emotional and even political arguments exist for holding a presidential election on the day it was meant to be held, regardless of what happens and who is unable to vote, just as it was held during the Civil War and just as it would be held in case of a hurricane, flood, fire or other natural catastrophe.”

Yet the Post editorial's conclusion portrayed the postponement scenario in somewhat less than unequivocal terms: “Congress should think through the consequences of a disrupted election, but it should remain extremely wary of any scheme to hold a presidential election at any time other than the first Tuesday of November.” That kind of language falls short of a clarion call to block Machiavellian postponement of the national Election Day.

Meanwhile, rhetorical manipulations about terrorism and the election are already upon us. Pro-Bush spinners have put out the fatuous idea that a pre-election terrorist attack on the USA would amount to an effort to oust the incumbent from the White House. Yet President Bush's approval ratings skyrocketed across the country immediately after Sept. 11, 2001.

If anyone stands to gain politically from a terrorist attack in the United States before Election Day, in my opinion, it's George W. Bush. But many journalists have bought into the opposite line, which sets the stage for Republicans to claim that a Bush-Cheney victory is necessary to show terrorists that America refuses to be intimidated.

The GOP's Sen. Richard Shelby said as much on MSNBC's prime-time “Hardball” show July 8: “It won't work in America. I'll tell you, I believe if they try that in America and think it's going to influence the election, it will do the opposite. The American people traditionally have rallied behind the government, the flag, and we would do it in this case. We're not going to let outsiders, terrorists or other foreign powers, influence our elections, tell us what to do.”

While questioning Democratic Sen. John Breaux, the “Hardball” host Chris Matthews energetically blew smoke: “What happens, Sen. Breaux, if it looks like that al-Qaeda is playing cards here, playing a game of trying to get people to vote Democrat for president, to basically make their case worldwide? Doesn't it put your party in a terrible position of having al-Qaeda rooting for you?”

The question, based on a faulty premise, pretended to know something that isn't known. Given that the 9/11 terrorist attacks became an overnight political boon for

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President Bush, it would be more rational to ask how much the Bush-Cheney ticket is likely to gain from a terrorist attack on U.S. soil before voters pass judgment on Election Day.

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