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Covering September 11 and Its Consequences: A Comparative Study of the Press in America, India and Pakistan

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COVERING SEPTEMBER 11 AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE PRESS IN AMERICA, INDIA AND PAKISTAN

By Ramindar Singh, Shorenstein Fellow, Fall 2001

The September 11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York , confronted the Press with a supreme challenge, in America where the earth-shaking event happened and in South Asia which continued to experience violent aftershocks months later.

September 11 affected Americans in a most fundamental way; it forced them to re-assess their role in the world and question why they become a target for disaffected groups in faraway lands. Similar reassessments were underway on the other side of the globe, with the press in India and Pakistan asking a different set of questions about how this event would affect and alter the lives of people in the South Asia region.

This paper is an attempt to analyse how the press in America responded to the need to understand and report what happened on September 11, analyse why it happened and to present this information and analysis in a professional manner untainted by emotion, sentiment or jingoism. Simultaneously it examines how the press in India and Pakistan handled a similar challenge in their region.

It would be tempting, while analyzing the performance of the press in these three countries, to cover a wide spectrum of newspapers and television stations. But to make this exercise manageable, I have limited the scope of these enquiries to one leading newspaper from each country though my general observations about the press in each country are based on an overview of local press there. I have specifically examined the New York Times as representative of the American press, The Times of India of the Indian press, and from Pakistan I have studied *Dawn*, the authoritative Karachi paper which in my view, represents the best of Pakistani journalism. This limited sample opens

this analysis to the danger of over-generalisation, but I hope these findings broadly reflect journalism trends in these countries.

One trend that emerged clearly is that location affects perspective, and perception: What you see depends on where you stand. The picture of the world that you see from the vantage point of New York or Washington is radically different from the view one gets in New Delhi or Islamabad. Geography not only colours the picture but often transforms it. For example, let us look at how the Press in the US, India and Pakistan has portrayed three major players in this drama: George Bush, Pakistan's leader General Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. How these leaders appear to their home audiences is radically different from the image you get from afar and distance distorts the image as you move away from home turf.

America's view of itself and its president, as reflected by the American press is quite different from the view one sees from South Asia. Its not only a different perspective, but a totally different picture. Within South Asia too, the view from Islamabad as filtered through the eyes of the Pakistani press is quite different from what is projected by the Indian press .And there are subtle but interesting shifts in the way in which India and Pakistan, traditionally hostile neighbours, see their respective leaders in the light of their altered relationships with the US.

Before September 11, George W Bush was regarded by large numbers of his countrymen as a wimp, an intellectual pygmy. I remember the poster that greeted me when I walked into one office at Harvard university at the start of the Fall term in September 2000: it portrayed George Bush as Alfred E Neuman, the moronic mascot of MAD magazine. The nation-wide call to arms after September 11 changed all that, particularly after Bush's stirring address to Congress on Sept.21. That speech transformed Bush from a lack-lustre, tentative leader into Mr President. Several months later , in January 2002, 83 percent of Americans still viewed him as a wartime president who led his country effectively up until the ouster of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Even though his presidency was rescued from ordinariness by momentous events, he retained tremendous popular support at home and at one point his approval rating had soared to 92 percent.

It was inevitable that the press in America, increasingly sensitive in recent years to market sentiments, would let its treatment of the president and their judgment of his actions be affected by these approval ratings. Like members of Congress, journalists allowed themselves to be swept along in the countrywide upsurge of nationalistic sentiment. For nearly three months after the fall of the World Trade Center, they raised no questions about the mis-steps and omissions of the Bush administration: The president was allowed to get away with policies for which his predecessors would have been flayed.

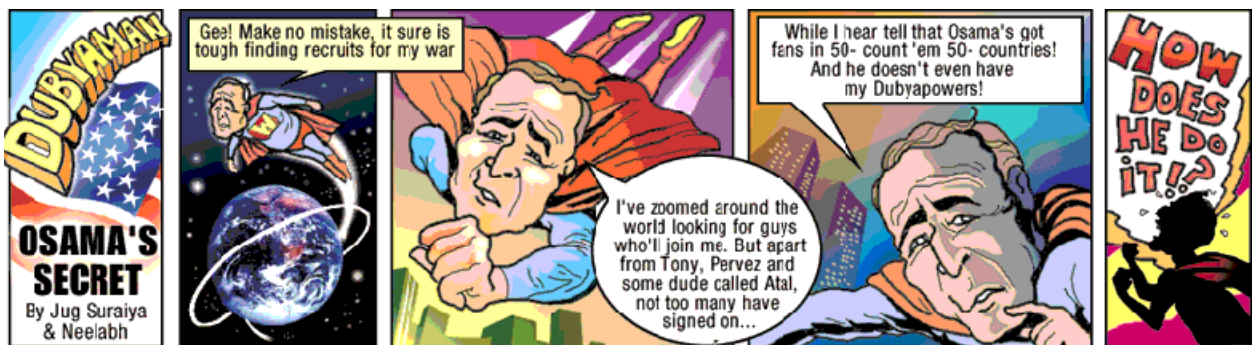
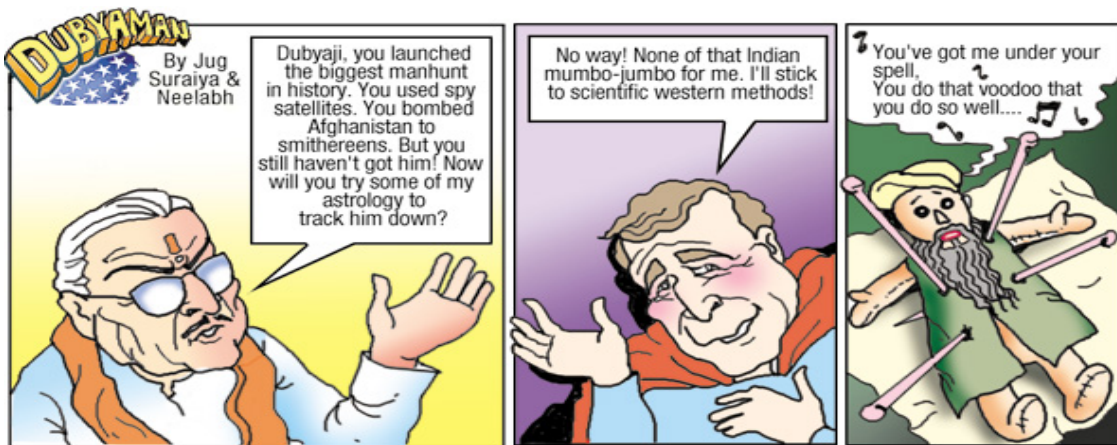
It's not that the President was consciously portrayed as a heroic figure to cover up his lack of charisma or other infirmities. But by consciously withholding criticism and unquestioningly applauding his actions and speeches, and splashing his photographs all over the news columns, the press in the US contributed to turning him into a virtual hero. Move away from the US and the view changes, and also the tone of reporting. The American press had begun to see Bush in a new light but this personality transformation is not reflected in India's leading English language newspaper the Times of India, a pro-American paper which proclaims its empathy with American values and beliefs. The Times of India remains cynical about George W and the policies of the American government. And in the view of the Times of India editorial writers, Mr Bush had yet to transcend his failings: they still see him as a bumbling dyslexic, a "Saturday night Live" caricature co-authored by Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien.

In the American press Bush had gained stature; to the Times of India he was Rodney Dangerfield playing John Wayne.

Nowhere is this illustrated better than in a comic strip *Dubyaman*, that the Times of India has run every day since September, initially on the front page and later on the International page. In this spoof of Superman, a weepy Dubyaman goes around trying to save the world but has to be saved from embarrassment by his sturdy sidekicks Colin Powell and Dick Cheney who read to him every night to improve his English and geography.

This cynical Indian view of the American leadership and its lofty sounding objectives in the war against terrorism, is due in part to the avowedly anti-war policy of the Times of India. In both cases it appears to be a case of the wish fathering the thought. American

opinion, its confidence badly to shaken, **wanted** see him as a wartime leader in the hour of crisis and and therefore **invested** him with these qualities. India's snobbish intellectuals saw him as a lightweight and no demonstration of firepower in Afghanistan could convince them to see him as anything else. The overblown caricature painted by the Times of India is as much of an exaggeration as the heroic dimensions attributed to Bush by the American press. But by continuing to satirise him as Dubyaman, the Times of India made the mistake of persisting with a stereotype whose relevance had ended with September 11. Some commentators on the TOI staff who had earlier been trenchant critics of the US, changed their tune and started seeing benefits for India in the American intervention in Afghanistan, but the lasting impression that the TOI left on the minds of its readers is of Bush as Dubyaman. The medium (comic strip) had become the message.





THE VIEW FROM ISLAMBAD

The Pakistani press was more practical: it virtually ignored the personality of Bush and concentrated instead on the US president's tremendous power, exercised through political and military actions, to alter the lives and futures of the people of Pakistan and its neighbours. Unlike their Indian counterparts, leading Pakistani commentators were reluctant to parody Bush: it's difficult to see someone as a joker when that joker is holding a gun to your head. So the columnists of *Dawn* vented their vitriol on their own leader General Pervez Musharraf, and his military predecessors, whose Taliban policies lead to Pakistan's humiliation and whose involvement in Kashmir terrorism lead to a brink-of-war military standoff with India.

It wasn't always so. In the summer of 2001 Musharraf was a hero to scribes at home. He had returned triumphant after a summit meeting at Agra with the Indian Prime minister: he was generally seen in Pakistan and India as having staged a media coup by going on Indian TV and defending the jihad in Kashmir as a freedom struggle. And even though the summit had collapsed because of his outspokenness he was, by and large, lionized by the Pakistan press as a tough-talking patriot who had told the Indians where they got off. But in American eyes he was regarded as something of a villain, a usurper. Before September 11 the US government and media painted of Musharraf in negative terms. Most stories in the American press about Musharraf began with a judgemental description of Musharraf as "Pakistan's military ruler who captured power in a coup two years ago....." He was virtually shunned by the international community, and treated as an outcast by the United States, Britain and the countries of the Commonwealth. Time, terrorism, and the Taliban changed all that.

Sept 11 provided Gen Musharraf an opportunity to dramatically end Pakistan's isolation as well as his own. The moment Pakistan joined America's War on Terrorism, Pakistan's status changed from that of a virtual pariah to a friend. Overnight Musharraf became America's most-quoted ally, second only to Tony Blair. This turnaround was captured by Celia Dugger of the New York Times who wrote (on November 30, 2001) that "Pervez Musharraf, the military ruler who has been transformed from a dictator scorned by the West, to the darling of the American-led anti-terror coalition".

In the month before September 11, the New York Times had mentioned him in only ten stories, mostly in negative terms. In the month after September 11, he figured in New York Times stories 70 times, almost always with sympathetic references to the difficulties he was facing because of his decision to join the alliance against terrorism.

Reviled in the West but lauded at home before he jettisoned the Taliban, Musharraf now found himself being applauded abroad but pilloried at home. The same Islamists and right wing radicals who had lionized Musharraf for his support to their Jihad against India in Kashmir, saw his abandonment of Osama bin Laden, the big-daddy of all jihadis, as a stab in the back. Now he was a quisling, a puppet of the Americans, not only by people

in the streets but also by independent columnists. Ayaz Amir has repeatedly argued in *Dawn* that Musharraf sold Pakistan short by his eagerness to jump on to the American bandwagon.

“It is a moot point what crumbled faster” he wrote. “the twin towers of the World Trade Centre or the imposing ramparts of Pakistani pride? Just a few threatening statements from President Bush and General Powell and Pakistan’s military government, usually so tough at home, conceded everything the Americans were asking for”.

USA Today reported with barely concealed glee that the General’s opponents inside Pakistan had taken to calling him Busharraf.

But to be fair to the General, his change of heart had come at the point of a gun. Patrick Tyler of the New York Times narrates (Nov13) the dramatic circumstances of the general’s conversion: “Within 48 hours of September’s terrorist strikes, Secretary of state Colin Powell telephoned General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan and said, “General you have got to make a choice”. After several conversations with Powell, NYT columnist Bill Keller narrates (Nov25) how Powell’s “most trusted deputy Richard Armitage had already called in the Pakistani intelligence chief ... (and) delivered a seven-point, with-us-or-against-us ultimatum calling on the Pakistanis to close their border with Afghanistan, open their intelligence files and provide access for American forces”. In the memorable words of the Godfather, the general had been made an offer he could not refuse.

Writing on Sept 14, *Dawn’s* Ayaz Amir confirmed that Armitage had threatened “it was for Pakistan to decide whether it wanted to live in the 21st century or the Stone Age”.

What precisely was Pakistan afraid of, he asks? “That the US in blind anger would make an example of us, flatten our airfields, destroying our installations taking out our nuclear strategic assets? We are being told to be wise. Wisdom does not lie in acting cravenly... there is no reason for us to sully national honour by behaving in too supine a manner... a measure of self-serving calculation is involved in the decision General Musharraf has taken on behalf of the nation...”

In subsequent columns Amir has applauded the leaders of Iran and Lebanon for showing more guts in the face of American bullying. In his Nov 23 column “Who’s held a gun to the nation’s head?” Amir challenged Musharraf’s contention that “a tiny minority of

unenlightened, obscurantist and backward-looking religious extremists” was holding the majority of Pakistanis hostage.

“...after the change of political climate in Pakistan it is near-treason to suggest that prior to September 11 General Musharraf subscribed to the same philosophy he now so stoutly berates. His own words on numerous occasions testify to the fact that on Afghanistan, Kashmir and the great strategic space provided to Pakistan by its nuclear capability his views were no different from that of the Beards (mullahs). Both sides, the army and the Beards, swore by the same strategic orthodoxy .

It goes to General Musharraf’s credit that he changed his mind quickly when circumstances changed... Even so, he could try putting Pakistan’s peculiar brand of obscurantism in perspective. When the very bastions of national security are infected by the spirit of holy war, does obscurantism reside in the madrassas or in the bastions standing guard against the enemy?

...Who held whom hostage? It was not the madrassas which forced any government to support the Taliban. This was a decision taken by the national security establishment in pursuit of ‘strategic depth’ and similar notions which have characterised our Afghan policy. The madrassas had it not in their power to hold the nation hostage. It was the army and the intelligence services which brooked no assault on the “obscurantist elements” because they were seen as serving the ‘national interest’—a bogey in whose name every last lunacy can be justified.”

What is clear to Ayaz Amir is clear also to the Bush administration: that the general was grandstanding, making a virtue out of necessity. So while paying fulsome tributes to the general in public, Powell and Defence Secretary Rumsfeld did not allow Musharraf’s objections to change the way in which the way in Afghanistan was being prosecuted . Musharraf first declared that no American troops would be based on Pakistani soil: a few days later he opened his airports for use by American helicopters and other aircraft. In December 2001 and January 2002 he even permitted American troops to extend their hot pursuit of the Taliban into Pakistani territory. By January 2002, he had also permitted the American/allied forces a permanent base in Karachi.

He made it clear in October 2001, he would like the bombing of Afghanistan to last no more than a few days . It went on till January 2002. He had asked the US to suspend bombing during the holy month of Ramadan. The bombing continued.

When he visited the US in November 2001, he pleaded with President Bush and Colin Powell to release the 60 F16 planes whose shipment had been banned after sanctions were imposed on Pakistan. His request was rejected by Powell. He warned there would be chaos unless the Northern Alliance was stopped from entering Kabul, but when he returned home a few days later it was in time to see Northern Alliance troops pouring into Kabul.

This prompted to note that Pakistan's red carpet was fraying at the edges. On November 16, Amir wrote :

“with the Northern alliance entering Kabul.....the mood in Islamabad is anything but celebratory.Overestimating our importance , we had convinced ourselves that our frontline status gave us a virtual veto over the shape of things to come in Afghanistan. If not that, then at least our objections regarding the Northern Alliance would be respected. We forgot that the Americans were working to a different deadline.....Pakistan is reduced to delivering dire warnings of further strife in Afghanistan. Let us express our fears by all means. But with no leverage to back up our warnings we only underline our impotence ...At the root of our distress lies our strange obsession with Afghanistan. Why don't we leave Afghanistan alone...”

So as the war went well for America the outlook for Pervez Musharraf kept getting bleaker at home. Reporting from Islamabad on Nov. 24, John Burns, in the NYT encapsulated the general's predicament.:“ the sense that the United States has failed to keep its side of the deal is rife.....General Musharraf has bitten his tongue....He does so knowing that his own standing in Pakistan would be seriously undermined if he were to say that the United States had broken a promise to him”.

The Times of India construed these rebuffs as deliberate punishment. It's Washington correspondent Chidananda Rajghatta argued, on Nov 28, that some of the rebuffs were intended and that in all but name, the US was at war with Pakistan.:

“Despite all the protestations about military ruler Gen. Pervez Musharraf's 'bold and

courageous stand' and Islamabad's status as a frontline ally, there is a growing sense in Washington that Pakistan has worked against US interests in Afghanistan. There is also anger in sections of the administration over what is seen as Pakistani perfidy over issues ranging from deployment of its troops, agents and private militia in Afghanistan to its dangerous game of nuclear weapons proliferation.

As a result, the Bush administration has begun to quietly punish Pakistan even while publicly upholding a facade of goodwill, just as Islamabad is also maintaining a pretense of cooperation in the fight against terrorism while pursuing its own agenda. Several incidents bear this out, including the latest episode involving two prominent Pakistani nuclear scientists, who have now been detained again at Washington's insistence over suspicion that they were involved in planning an "Anthrax Bomb."

The US has also allowed the Northern Alliance to decimate those euphemistically known as "foreign fighters" – who it now turns out are mostly Pakistani irregulars and jihadists with some serving army personnel and agents directing them.

Western journalists in the region have now exposed the smokescreen that referred to these fighters as "Arab, Chechen and Pakistani," by reporting that they are almost exclusively Pakistani. In some cases, Washington itself has joined in by using air power to bomb the Pakistani fighters.

While publicly continuing to endorse and applaud the military regime of Gen. Musharraf – to the extent of ignoring his announcement that he will continue to be Pakistan's president even after the proposed October 2002 elections – Washington has begun to ignore a growing list of Pakistani gripes...

In each case, the US has gone ahead and done pretty much what suits its war aims, forcing Musharraf to fall in line and handle the domestic fall-out.

...In one instance at least, accounts by Northern Alliance fighters that they executed scores of Pakistani fighters "before the eyes of US military personnel," after they refused to surrender, have enraged Islamabad. ...

The strange dissonance between the official positions of the two sides and the private differences is the subject of much discussion in Washington... "It's like a bad marriage. Or like two colleagues who mistrust each other but are forced to work together," a Congressional aide who works on regional issues said.

THE VIEW FROM NEW DELHI

The third player in this drama, Indian prime minister Vajpayee was for the first few months pushed to the sidelines primarily because India was seen as a marginal player, not directly involved with the great events unfolding in Afghanistan. After initially sulking over America's coddling of Pakistan, Vajpayee later felt it was inevitable that US' alliance of convenience with Pakistan would come in for re-examination. And after that happened, Vajpayee turned the heat up on Pakistan, to bring international attention back to the fact that instead of being viewed as part of the solution to the problem of terrorism, Pakistan was part of the terrorism problem in South Asia.

After joining the alliance against terrorism Musharraf immediately brought Kashmir into the equation saying he had aligned with the US to protect Pakistan's interests regarding Kashmir and its nuclear assets. And India had reacted with a show of pique when foreign minister Jaswant Singh cancelled a meeting with Senate foreign relations committee chairman Joe Biden on a visit to Washington. South Asia expert at the Brookings Institute Stephen Cohen thinks India was seething. In an interview published on December 2 he said: *"Many Indians resent the manner in which Pakistan has been transformed from being part of the problem to its new status as an essential element in the solution. I think the Indians seethed with anger as they saw US rebuilding a relationship with the one country, Pakistan, that they identified fully with international terrorism, and seeing the US trying to accommodate their other strategic rival, China, which is, incidentally, the real winner in this whole affair."*

Seething is too strong a word but it serves to illustrate India's initial disappointment with the west's willingness to forget Pakistan's role in supporting terrorism in Kashmir. But India pinned its hopes on the American president fulfilling his commitment "to go after terrorism in all its forms all over the world...to destroy it without geographic constraints and without time limits". Colin Powell reiterated president Bush's pledge adding that this included "terrorism which affects India..The war against terrorism can leave no room for exceptions...There are no good terrorists and bad terrorists." Powell had told

Bill Keller (NY Times magazine, November 25) that one of his main objectives in the future was to defuse the explosive border dispute in Kashmir.

The Indian prime minister kept away from the spotlight hoping that American leaders would be true to their words. India also received with great happiness the news that the US was playing a significant role in securing Pakistan's nuclear weapons following the arrest and interrogation of half a dozen retired Pakistan nuclear scientists who had been traveling to Afghanistan and meeting with Osama bin Laden.

What's more, after the embarrassing collapse of its Afghanistan policy, sensible voices in Pakistan have begun to raise the question whether its Kashmir policy needs to be reassessed. One such voice is Amir who feels that Pakistan "must recognize that after Afghanistan the freedom struggle in Kashmir is bound to come under greater American scrutiny. In the new global climate now forming there will be less patience for such extra-territorial organizations as Lashkar-i-Taiba and Jaish-i-Muhammad.

So how best to support the Kashmir cause? By letting the Kashmiris carry on their own struggle or by raising the flag of militancy within Pakistan? Sooner rather than later we will have to answer this question."

The answer to that question was provided by the US which banned these organizations after the December 13 attack on the Indian Parliament, by militants suspected to belong to these organizations.

So, with Bush and Powell echoing India's sentiments and Pakistani commentators calling for a reassessment of Pakistan's Kashmir policy, Vajpayee was content to wait on the sidelines. It is little wonder therefore that between September 11 and November 21, when both of them visited New York and met with Bush and other world leaders attending the United Nations General assembly session Musharraf made it to the pages of the NYT 173 times versus only 32 times for Vajpayee. But Vajpayee realized that after America's immediate objectives were achieved in Afghanistan, the US ardour for Musharraf would cool.

THE NUCLEAR QUESTION

And cool it did, primarily because of US worries about unsecured Pakistani nuclear materials passing into the hands of the Al Qaeda. The US appears to have acted intervened directly to ensure the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

Battalions of reporters and analysts who had been scouring the tinderbox region of South and Central Asia since the start of the bombing of Taliban and Al Qaeda hideouts in Afghanistan began on October 7, missed the significance of this and other big stories unfolding right under their noses in Pakistan.

Consumed with immediate concerns, the bombing of Afghanistan and the pursuit of Al Qaeda, few reporters looked ahead to what these actions could mean in the near future, when Al Qaeda jihadis on the run from Kabul, Kunduz and Kandahar, would sneak into Pakistan and ultimately into Kashmir to continue their jihad there. Apart from a couple a articles, the NYT too did not see the implications for South Asia as a result of the rout of the Al Qaeda. The likelihood of the flight of the Taliban leading to increased India-Pakistan tensions was foreseen at the Shorenstein Center's Theodore White seminar and again at the New Directions for News seminar organized by the Nieman Foundation around the ends of October and early November.

Given the prevailing circumstances there was only one place for the Taliban to run to, Pakistan, and given the existing connection between Al Qaeda training camps and the Kashmiri insurgency, it was almost pre-ordained that Pakistan would allow/encourage the fleeing Taliban to wend their way to Kashmir to continue the proxy war/jihad against India.

Any student of sub-continental history could have predicted this possibility, but few among the Pakistan-based journalists covering the War against Terrorism strayed from their pre-determined beat. Its only after the worlds biggest concentration of military forces actually happened on the India Pakistan border in mid December that these journalists took notice.

Similarly, the nuclear development relating to America's direct intervention to prevent Pakistan's nuclear weapon from passing into the hands of terrorists. This story too had been there all along in the shape of small, unconnected bits of information floating around in the newspapers of Pakistan and the United States. All it needed was for someone to piece this information together from tell-tale items which appeared regularly

in the columns of Dawn. But American and Indian reporters either didn't see the story or deliberately avoided writing it as disclosure would hurt the interests of America, Pakistan and India. It was a development which raised the chilling spectre of political instability in Pakistan since every Pakistani regime till date has projected the possession of nuclear weapons as a matter of national pride and as a security against India.

Understandably, neither Pakistani nor US officials have so far officially admitted that this has happened but the first hint of this development came from none other than the Pakistan foreign Minister Abdul Sattar himself.

Addressing a Press conference in Islamabad on November 1 Sattar disclosed that Pakistan had accepted an offer made by the US Secretary of State Colin Powell for training Pakistani experts "for security and protection of nuclear assets". His choice of words in the next sentence is very telling. He said "Pakistani experts would be apprised of the **security measures being applied by the United States.**"

If Sattar is to be believed, even before Pakistani personnel had been informed or trained, the US was **applying security measures** with regard to Pakistan's nuclear assets.

Three factors appear to have forced Sattar to make this admission.

One was a spate of stories in the American press suggesting that a coup by fundamentalist generals sympathetic to the Taliban and Al Qaeda may unseat Musharraf and hand over nuclear material to Osama bin Laden.

Musharraf quickly scotched any talk of a coup in an interview to USA today which carried alongside its Musharraf interview a report of a Gallup poll in Pakistan which suggested that the majority of the Pakistanis supported his actions. (The parent Gallup organization in the US quickly denounced the Pakistan poll as unreliable)

The second was an unexpected, tongue-in-cheek endorsement by the Indian Defence minister George Fernandes on October 30, that Pakistan's nuclear assets were in safe hands. "Those concerned with Pakistan's nuclear weapons are responsible people", Fernandes said.

Surprisingly, Fernandes' certificate raised no eyebrows. Sattar however appears to have got the message that the Indian Defence Minister may spill the beans, so, according to a report in Karachi's newspaper, Sattar "surprised" local and foreign correspondents by

walking down to the Foreign office briefing hall to read out a statement, which said, among other things that “Pakistan’s strategic assets are under foolproof custodial controls”, without specifying whose custody it was. After paying tribute to the professionalism of the Pakistani armed forces, he said any apprehension that these assets “might fall into the hands of extremists was entirely imaginary”.

He then proceeded to mention the offer made by Colin Powell to train Pakistani experts. He explained that the Pakistani experts would be apprised of the security measures being applied by the United States.

The third reason why Sattar made this admission was to deny a story in the New Yorker in which Seymour Hersh suggested that US special operations troops were training with Israeli commandos for a possible mission into Pakistan to “take out” Pakistan’s nuclear warheads to prevent them from being transferred to the Al Qaeda.

Now, Sattar is seasoned diplomat who has spent several decades in the Pakistan Foreign Service and has held the most prestigious postings that the service had to offer. He chooses his words with extreme care and precision as I discovered when I interviewed him when he was Pakistan’s ambassador to India in the early 1990s. He is very particular when speaking on the record to journalists and has an uncanny knack of conveying the precise sense of what he wants to communicate.

His choice of words is telling and significant. He talks of “custodial control” of the nuclear assets leaving open the interpretation that the custodial control was being exercised by someone else. He said “dedicated formations of specially equipped forces have been deployed for ensuring the security of Pakistan nuclear installations and assets” without specifying whether these specially equipped forces were all Pakistani or were there elements of outside forces that had come in to guard these nuclear assets. Interestingly, the words used by George Fernandes two days earlier are telling: they reveal as much as they conceal. “I would like to give them credit. Those concerned with Pakistan’s nuclear weapons are responsible people”, he said.

On the same day as Sattar made the statement in Islamabad US deputy secretary for disarmament John Bolton quoted George Fernandes to quell doubts about the safety of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons.

It is intriguing how all of a sudden, the US and India which had been leaking like

crazy to the press about their misgivings about the safety of Pakistan's nukes and the likelihood of their being transferred to the Al Qaeda, started reassuring all and sundry that they were in safe hands. Were they acting in tandem?

Just as Abdul Sattar has a reputation for precision in his choice words, Fernandes too has a reputation for speaking out of turn and revealing things that cause embarrassment to his government and other governments.

Some years ago he let slip in an interview the government's assessment that India's main strategic threat came from China rather than Pakistan. Though the Indian Government was forced to say that these were Fernandes' personal views and the Chinese government objected.

Three years ago after Indian and Pakistan military clashed at Kargil, Fernandes let it be known that this military misadventure was the handiwork of the Army chief Musharraf and the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was not in the know of it. That too was confirmed by later events.

It could well be that on October 30, too he was trying to embarrass Musharraf and this is why Sattar took the unusual step on Nov 1 of coming down to the foreign office briefing in Islamabad and disclosing that the Americans were applying security measures to Pakistan's nuclear assets.

Powell's offer of help in securing these assets was disclosed after the US secretary of state visited Islamabad and Delhi on October 15 but it probably was an undisclosed part of the seven point ultimatum that the US had issued to Pakistan in the first few days after Sept 11. Bob Woodward's behind-the-scenes revelations in the *Washington Post* in end January 2002, confirm that the no-choice-but-to-comply ultimatum was sanctioned by Bush himself.

Did the ultimatum mention nuclear weapons security?

Dawn's columnist, Ayaz Amir, respected equally in Pakistan and India, appears to think that it did. He made this connection in a piece published on September 14: He said Armitage had threatened "it was for Pakistan to decide whether it wanted to live in the 21st century or the Stone Age. What precisely was Pakistan afraid of? That the US in blind anger would make an example of us, flatten our airfields, destroying our installations taking out our nuclear strategic assets?"

By the time the bombing of Afghanistan began on October 7, Musharraf had, according to a report in the Washington Post, ordered an “emergency redeployment” of the nuclear arsenal to at least six new locations. He also began relocating critical nuclear components. The threat to his prized weapons was patently manifest. He used this opportunity to also reshuffle his top generals and create a strategic Planning division within the nuclear program.

The Sunday Times of London went so far as to suggest that he had even thought of moving his nuclear warheads for safekeeping to a friendly neighbor China, which had clandestinely aided Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and missile development programs. Further confirmation of this was provided by the arrival in Islamabad on December 2, of two Italian Arms Control scientists, to “prepare a report on the status of nuclear security in Pakistan” as blandly reported by *Dawn*:

“ Sources said the visiting scientists, Prof Paolo Cotta-Ramusino and Prof Maurizio Martellini, would be looking at certain key questions relating to safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, the percentage of nuclear weapons that are assembled, effects of the Sept 11 attacks and the Afghan crisis on the nuclear posture of Pakistan, Pakistan's reaction to possible Indian attack and the public perception of the nuclear weapons. The report would later be submitted to the Italian government, they said.

The scientists, visiting under the auspices of the foreign ministry of Italy, have held deliberations with foreign ministry officials and think-tanks to assess the safety of nuclear weapons and the risks of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to terrorists and rogue states, the sources said..”

The newspaper quoted from a report prepared by the two scientists which said:

“The situation has raised serious concerns about the possibility that terrorist groups have acquired weapons of mass destruction or may be striving to acquire such weapons....”

then went on to comment that some of the questions being asked by the two *“have raised concern in the security establishment.”*

Here then was Pakistan’s leading English language newspaper reporting that two European scientists were going around the country questioning Pakistani scientists about the extent to which the country’s nuclear assets were weaponized and whether some of these weapons could have been passed on to Al Qaeda terrorists.

The Pakistan Government did not deny this report or its contents just as there had been no denial of the Sattar statement that the United States was applying security measures to Pakistan's nuclear assets.

The United States has apparently gone about the task of verifying the status and number of Pakistan's nuclear weapons in a roundabout but clever manner calculated to save Musharraf from embarrassment at a time when America still needs his help to sort out the mess in Afghanistan. Just as the Bush administration had used the good offices of British Prime Minister Tony Blair to convince the international alliance about the evidence against Osama bin Laden, and used a representative of the United Nations Secretary General to cobble together an alternative government for Afghanistan, in the same way it appears to have drafted two of Europe's best known and energetic disarmament experts to help verify the status and disposition of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. More remarkable is the fact that a Pakistani newspaper was allowed to report this by the military government in Islamabad.

The two scientists on the team are known campaigners for disarmament. Maurizio Martellini is the Secretary general of the Landau Network-Centro Volta, based in Como near Milan, which, according to the Centro's website, collaborates with UNESCO and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in promoting "research programs in science and international security, including proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, disarmament..... and use and misuse of biotechnologies."

The other scientist Paolo Cotta Ramusino was the Secretary General of the Italian Union of Scientists for Disarmament (USPID). Centro Volta and USPID work closely with the Non Proliferation Project of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington. Both Martellini and Ramusino know Abdul Sattar who attended one of their disarmament-related seminars in Como in May 1999.

The scope of their enquiries in Pakistan left nothing to the imagination. One need only quote a few paragraphs from the report published on December 6:

"..in terms of nuclear proliferation risks the scientists are exploring the possible links of Pakistani nuclear scientists with the Afghan Taliban and the Arab Afghans in the past and present scenarios, effectiveness of control over Pakistani fissile material storage and production facilities, possible transfer of illicit nuclear material through Pakistan and

Afghanistan and the effectiveness of control of Pakistan's radioactive sources and their potential illicit traffic.

They said that in terms of chemical and biological weapons the scientists have questions about effective control of materials of concern for chemical and biological weapons transfer and diffusion, Pakistan Afghan border in recent history and transfer of illicit biological, chemical agents and dual use equipment through the border.

Some of the questions being asked relate to transfer of nuclear scientists and experts to Afghanistan or any other country and the impact of recent events on the scientific community, particularly on the community of scientists involved in military and defence activities. The sources said the scientists would also report the impact of Pakistan's nuclear programme on the role of Islamic countries in the international arena and whether Pakistan's nuclearization has contributed to any change in the role of the Islamic countries.”

Are these then the “security measures being applied by the United States”, which Sattar had spoken of on November 1? It sounds suspiciously so, and the Landau Network-Centro Volta team was sent in to confirm that the measures were still in place.

It is therefore not surprising that the Indian defence minister should express happiness that “those concerned with Pakistan’s nuclear weapons are responsible people”: he probably knows that these “concerned, responsible people” are not Pakistanis.

Subsequent developments on the India Pakistan border since mid-December, leading to the biggest and most dangerous military faceoff on the subcontinent in the last 30 years, confirm this hypothesis. India’s aggressive rhetoric and military drumbeating, which is totally out of character with its mild conduct towards its neighbours in the past few decades, would appear to suggest that India realizes that it can fight and win a conventional war with Pakistan now that the nuclear factor has possibly been neutralized. Hence the massive military mobilization on the border and also the January 25 test-firing of its Agni ballistic missile at a time when the world community was counselling restraint.

Just a few years ago, in 1998, when the two armies clashed at Kargil, India resisted the temptation to expand the Kargil confrontation into a general war partly because of the danger of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. Now, hardly a day goes by without a statement by

the prime minister, or the home minister, or defence minister or foreign minister saying that India is prepared to go to war. Apart from putting pressure on the United States to pull India's chestnuts out of the fire lit by terrorists from across the Kashmir border, these statements also indicate a genuine readiness on the part of India's political leadership to fight a conventional war with Pakistan because the nuclear risk has now been either eliminated or minimized.

There are a large number of people in India who think that this aggressive posture is justified after the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament by militants strongly suspected to be linked to Pakistan-based agencies. The popular support for this political belligerence is what scares world leaders like US secretary of State Colin Powell and brings them rushing to the sub continent when such threats as India's are aired. After September 11, the definition of self defence used by the US to bomb the Taliban in Afghanistan has changed the rules of international behaviour. It is easier for countries like India, itself threatened by terrorism, to say if the US could bomb Afghanistan which provided sanctuary to Al Qaeda, how can India be blamed for wanting to take out the staging posts in Pakistan which are sending terrorists into its territory.

It is equally possible that having neutralized Pakistan's nuclear option, Powell feels it is incumbent upon the US to protect Pakistan from a military defeat at the hands of India. This brings me to the question of why all this has gone virtually unreported. Is it because the US press believes the country is at war and has therefore unquestioningly accepted "war-time" restraints on reporting sought by the Bush administration?

Since the early days after Sept 11, much of the American press had convinced it self that since the nation was at war, it became the patriotic duty of the press not to dilute that war effort. For the bulk of the press this meant not criticizing the administration for what it was doing and, luckily for the administration, accepting unquestioningly all that the administration was putting out. Immediately after Sept 11 it appeared as if the American press, caught up in the nation's grief over the loss of several thousand lives in the WTC bombing, had suspended disbelief and the kind of skeptical questioning which is one of the basic functions of a free press.

There were several results of this suspension of disbelief. Having allowed itself to co-opted into the administration's war on terrorism it did not feel compelled to go beyond

the surface events that were unfolding. Any criticism of the Press' refusal or hesitation to question the administration brought forth an angry retort from journalists: "You don't understand we are at war", or "this is war we are talking about", suggesting as it were that in a war like situation the American press takes on a patriotic duty which overrides and supercedes its professional duties.

Few people would admit this, but in effect this is what was happening.

In the first weeks after 911, very few reporters and writers in the newspapers questioned how this undeclared war against a non-state entity could be used by the administration to curtail civil liberties, justify the use of military tribunals to try suspected terrorists, and request the press not to telecast videos of bin Laden.

From September through December there was hardly a question asked about the failure of the intelligence agencies in preventing 911 attack. In a populist paroxysm of patriotism, the US Congress suspended judgment of the administration and so did the Press. It might make sense for the President, in his desire to maintain cohesiveness in his administration not to sack the intelligence agency heads while a "war" is being waged, but should that absolve the Pres of the responsibility of asking for accountability.

The first detailed news report speaking of the possibility of an investigation into the intelligence failure appeared in the New York Times on November 23, nearly two and a half months after Sept. 11. After that token offering, the issue went into hibernation again for several months.

Popular support for the President, which at one point touched 92 percent, seems to have colored the judgment of Congress but should it also have swayed the American Press. Marvin Kalb explains this by saying that journalist who were hired during the cold war felt they owed a responsibility to the news, and news organisations to the public. The public was later replaced by the market and market share.

This dilemma of patriotic duties versus professionalism at a time of crisis was voiced in a stark way at the seminar following the Theodore White lecture at the Kennedy School on November 1. Judy Wodruff who delivered an excellent lecture on how the electronic media had covered 911, was asked why the press was not asking the obvious questions about the failings of the administration. She replied that among other things American journalists had to be conscious of their duties as citizens.

In that remark Ms Woodruff, a thoughtful journalist, paraphrased the American journalists essential dilemma in the aftermath of Sept 11: Should their duties as citizens of a country which had been attacked and their consequent feelings of nationalism and patriotism change the parameters and rules of professionalism by which journalism is practiced. If so then what about truth? Does truth become optional in times of national crisis? Is that press then *free*?

There has I think been insufficient or no debate in the American media on this question of the journalist's fundamental duties and responsibilities. If nationalistic feelings are allowed to color press coverage then one can hardly expect balance and detachment from journalists in countries which are perpetually in crisis.

At the root of this dilemma is the question of what defines national interest, and whether at a time of crisis or national emergency, national interest means supporting what the government of the day is doing. If that is so, then a journalist who criticizes the actions and policies of the government because he genuinely believes these policies are hurting the nation, would be open to the charge that he is anti-national. Behind this is the larger question: Is the government the only body which has the power and the ability to define what is in the national interest. And should the press complicitly allow the government's judgment to supercede its own?

All these questions could legitimately be posed to the American press in the aftermath of September 11. It would appear that even news organisations which had fought all the way to the Supreme Court to defend their right to determine what is in the public interest to publish were only too willing to put that right into storage for some months after September 11, and to let public interest be determined by a government which was intent on curtailing civil liberties and setting up military tribunals for trial of terrorists.

Whatever little questioning of the administration's actions did take place was on the oped pages of the major newspapers and oped writers like Thomas Friedman, Anthony Lewis, Maureen Dowd and Paul Krugman (in NYT) and James Carrol of the Boston Globe among a handful of others others, who saved the day for the American Press. Outside the columns of the newspapers it was left to media pundits like Marvin Kalb to argue that patriotism and concerns of citizen's duties do not change the basic rules of journalistic functioning. "Patriotism," he said at a seminar in the Shorenstein Center in October, "is

wonderful for the citizen but not for the journalist. “Patriotism inhibits skepticism and a good journalist has to subject all statements and claims by the government to skeptical enquiry” . But for the initial months after September 11, in the lull between the catastrophe and its consequences, the voices of people like Kalb were merely cries in the wilderness.

The roots of this acquiescence probably go back to the Gulf War in which the US Press allowed itself to be shackled by Pentagon-enforced limits on access to the war zone and combatants. The US Press had then had to depend on official releases and briefing for much of their information on how the war was going. This enabled the creating of myths about the accuracy of smart bombs and the success of Patriot missiles. Says Kalb “80 percent of the smart bombs missed their target but the Press was told they were 100 percent accurate”.

Probably stricter controls were in effect in Afghanistan which the Press accepted without demur. As in the Gulf war, so also in Afghanistan civilian casualties were allowed to be garbed as collateral damage, an inoffensive description which camouflages the maiming and mutilation that war heaps on non-combatants.

Lacking credible first hand action-reports from the war zone the NYT and the Boston Globe often took recourse to full page descriptions of the zap-em fry-em abilities of the munitions and weapons that US was using in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan was turned into a show window for the technological wizardry of America’s munitions industry: Bombs’r Us for the grown man! Or How the Daisy Cutters Tamed Afghanistan’s Poppy Growers.

This list of omissions should not obscure the fact that in most other areas the New York Times and other newspapers did a superb job of reporting the tragedy and its aftermath. The New York Time and other papers like the Boston Globe provided compelling reading in the months after September 11 and they will no doubt be rewarded by a clutch of Pulitzer prizes and other journalism awards. Since the purpose of this paper was to critically evaluate the functioning of the these papers, it has of necessity focused on the shortfalls. The examples of professional excellence in the reporting of 911, are so numerous and so obvious that they do not need recounting.