



Uday, Qusay's Deaths May Quiet Criticism

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By Liza Porteus

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WASHINGTON — With the war effort in Iraq bearing fresh fruit, some campaign experts say Democrats may want to do themselves a favor and tone down the harsh criticism of President Bush.

"I think [the news of Uday's and Qusay's deaths] helps. I think it's moving in the right direction," said Fox News political analyst **Al D'Amato** ([search](#)). "I think that it dispels the rumors that we are doing nothing in Iraq, and [indicates] that we will eventually capture or kill Saddam."

Before word came that Saddam Hussein's notorious sons, **Uday and Qusay** ([search](#)), were killed in a firefight with U.S. soldiers in **Mosul** ([search](#)) on Tuesday, and another top regime member was captured, the nine Democratic presidential candidates were targeting Bush for intelligence failures and a misguided strategy in Iraq.

"I think [Democrats] are making a colossal mistake, frankly," said Erik Potholm, a partner with Republican media consulting firm Stevens Reed Curcio and Potholm. "I think they're playing a very dangerous game that's going to boomerang on them. It shows how desperate and pathetic their attacks have become."

But Democratic strategists say the criticisms about the way the administration has dealt with postwar Iraq are valid.

"This issue doesn't exist because of Democratic candidates, it exists because of the real issues on the ground," said Mark Mellman, CEO of The Mellman Group, a Democratic consulting firm. "Killing Uday and Qusay is not a plan to win the peace."

Mellman said one large question that still needs to be answered, and which candidates will likely use against the president, is the location of Iraq's weapons.

"Uday and Qusay may have been weapons of mass destruction in their own way but they're not the weapons of mass destruction the administration talked about and still hasn't found. That question remains open," he said.

Paul Herrnson, director of the Center for American Politics and Citizenship and a politics professor at the University of Maryland, said Democrats will start asking more questions of Bush as time goes on.

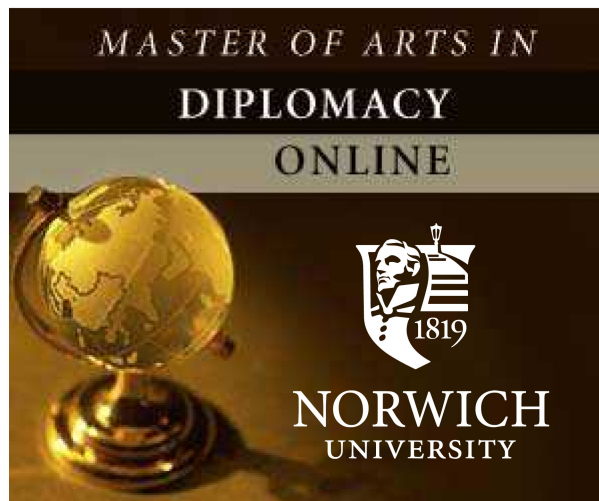
"They will continue to pound away at the president for failing to actively look into the issues and try to make reality of the world that fits his rhetoric," Herrnson said, adding that Democrats will try to show that Bush looks for facts that support his campaign rhetoric, no matter how substantive they are.

"They'll probably try to draw a wedge between Bush and the voters that way," Herrnson said.

Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean has openly questioned the president's truthfulness in his case for war. The front page of Missouri Rep. Dick Gephardt's campaign Web site says: "Bush has left us less safe."

Sen. John Kerry has said that Bush circumvented the congressional resolution authorizing war against Iraq by failing to exhaust all diplomatic options first and said the sons' deaths don't change much.

"Now is not the time for victory laps," Kerry said in a statement this week after the U.S. military announced Qusay and



Uday's deaths. "The fighting continues in Iraq and President Bush needs to be straight with the American people about how we are going to win the peace."

Kerry campaign spokeswoman Kelley Benander defended that message, saying: "[Kerry] certainly will not stop reiterating that message ... people want President Bush to be honest with them as to when our troops are coming home and what the plan is."

Democrats have coalesced on their criticism in order to diminish Bush's high ratings, say analysts.

"They're trying to figure out how to carve out a little piece of the pie that's trying to get them the nomination," said Candice Nelson, academic director for the Campaign Management Institute at American University. "I think this is sort of an uptick for Bush but where we are a year from now, I think that's really the question."

Even if the criticism is toned down, long-term questions are bound to emerge on the campaign trail, including Saddam's whereabouts, the location of Iraq's weapons and the degree of progress being made in the global war on terror, Nelson said.

A Harris Interactive Poll released Thursday shows that before the news of Saddam's sons' deaths, public perceptions of Bush's handling of Iraq had eroded sharply, as U.S. troops were increasingly seen more as occupiers of Iraq rather than liberators, and as U.S. casualties continued to mount.

"I think the questions that are on the minds of people are whether we did this the right way or whether in fact we are safer for it," said Democratic strategist Doug Hattaway.

But with this week's big successes in Iraq, some question whether the American public wants to hear constant negatives.

"[Democrats] are in this constant attack mode and I think, in general, that's a mistake," Potholm said. "Simply attacking the president 24 hours a day is not an effective strategy in terms of getting votes ... Not one of them is articulating why they want to be president and what their agenda is."

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