

PAKISTAN AND THE SERIOUS PEOPLE, ONE

I'm going to do a series on Pakistan—and how the blindness of the "serious people" got us into big trouble there. I'm going to use Matt Bai's inaccurate slam on me as a foil to show how the serious people allowed themselves to get distracted from a brewing crisis that carries real consequences. I'll start, then, by showing you the slam, and explaining what Matt got wrong. MissLaura (who wrote an insightful review of this exchange) sent along this excerpt from Matt's book; I haven't read the book, so if you have, let me know if there's more to this.

[**Update:** This exchange happened at a post-keynote bloggers chat with former VA Governor and likely future VA Senator Mark Warner.]

Marcy Wheeler, who blogged as "emptywheel" on Daily Kos, jumped in first. **Why, she wanted to know, had Warner pointed to Iran as such a big threat to national security? Wasn't Pakistan a bigger problem? After all, they already had nukes.**

Warner had been spending hours in private tutoring sessions on foreign policy, and he talked confidently about Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and his "whole approach toward regional hegemony." **This made him dangerous, Warner said.**

"On what grounds?" Marcy demanded. She had short hair and glasses and a serious demeanor. She reminded me, strangely, of Marcy from Peanuts. I wondered if she got that a lot.

Warner mentioned Ahmadinejad's explicit threat to Israel.

"I've heard Pakistan described as Iran in 1978, except it's Iran with a nuclear bomb," Marcy retorted, as if she'd just

stepped off a plane from the region. There were nods and murmured assents all around. "Maybe I'm crazy."

"I hope you're crazy," Warner said testily. This had caught him completely off guard. He had just given the most confrontational, partisan speech he knew how to give, and he had expected the bloggers to appreciate it. Instead, he was getting hammered on Iran. Why were they seizing on this one line? What he didn't understand was that this was the one place in his speech where he had agreed with Bush on something, and thus it had to be probed. To the bloggers, if Bush said the sky was blue, then it was green. If he said the world was round, it had to be flat. And if Bush thought Iran was the most serious threat out there, then no Democratic candidate could think that too. Warner was clearly buying into the right-wing spin. [my emphasis]

Now, compare Bai's description with my own description.

I asked the first question, which went something like:

I'm going to ask the Iran question, but I'm going to get at it sideways. You said that Iran is the biggest WMD threat out there. But Pakistan is a tremendously unstable country right now. And if Musharraf fell, Al Qaeda could get the bomb within 6 weeks. And al-Baradei has just said that Iran does not now have the bomb. So why is Iran the biggest threat?

Hethen listed several reasons why Iran

was a threat: Ahmadienijad's snuttiness, a "regional strategy," support for terrorism. I pointed out that none of those things were WMDs.

Do you see what Matt left out? Warner had called Iran the **biggest WMD threat**—not the biggest **threat**, as Matt inaccurately reported it. And I'm not sure (I'm still looking for a video), but I believe I effectively agreed with Warner's assessment of why Iran was a threat—Ahmadinejad's threats, Iran's hegemonic pretensions, and Iran's support for Hezbollah. My point was not that Iran wasn't (and isn't) a threat. My point was that Warner was claiming it was a WMD threat, even while the three things he pointed to to support that argument had nothing to do with WMD.

Matt rewrote the story to transform my challenge to Warner from a serious critique of his logic into a frivolous objection to his agreement with Bush. While Matt's move is clearly shitty reporting (though it served his narrative well), I believe it captures the blindness of the serious people quite well.

Oh, and for the record, Matt? No, I never get comparisons with Marcie from Peanuts.