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Bush stands by secret CIA prisons

By **Jamie Coomarasamy**
BBC News, Washington

There have been no balloon-filled convention halls, no prime-time standing ovations for chosen candidates.

Unlike a presidential campaign, the start of the US mid-term election season has been decidedly lacking in razzmatazz.

What it has begun with, though, is a rather punishing schedule of speeches by President George Bush on the most persistent (and most consistently vote-winning) theme of his presidency - the war on terror.

The White House, of course, insists that the speeches are not political, but at this point in the election cycle, everything is.

And after two broader addresses, which dwelled on historical parallels between Osama Bin Laden and Hitler and Lenin (or should that have been Stalin?), the president used his third war on terror speech - in less than a week - to make some striking announcements about previously secret CIA prisons - and the transfer of 14 top terrorist suspects from those prisons to the Guantanamo Bay detention centre.

So, by admitting the prisons' existence, was the president admitting that their existence was wrong, as many of his worldwide critics contend?

Not in the slightest.

In fact, Mr Bush issued a robust defence of those secret prisons: necessary and effective tools - as he sees them - in the struggle to get information from the most dangerous, best-informed terrorist suspects, such as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, alleged mastermind of the 11 September attacks.

To emphasise his point, the president went into some detail



Bush's speech marks the start of the US mid-term poll season

KEY SUSPECTS



Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (above left): Alleged mastermind of 9/11; believed to be the Number 3 al-Qaeda leader before he was captured in Pakistan in 2003

Abu Zubaydah: Alleged link between Osama Bin Laden and many al-Qaeda cells before his capture in Pakistan in 2002

Ramzi Binalshibh (above right): One of the alleged masterminds of 9/11

Hambali (Riduan Isamuddin): Alleged senior leader in

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about several potential terrorist plots, both at home and abroad, which, according to him, were foiled, thanks to intelligence gathered through "tough", but legal questioning by CIA interrogators.

Jemaah Islamiah (JI); wanted by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines in connection with blasts

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And on the sensitive issue of Guantanamo Bay, this speech was a classic example of the White House deftly attempting to turn an apparent weakness (in this case, a defeat in the Supreme Court) into a counter-attack (in this case, against those who question the legality of their methods of fighting the war on terror).

By revealing that some of America's most dangerous foreign terrorist suspects - including those with direct links to 9/11 - have been moved to the controversial prison camp, Mr Bush has made it harder for his congressional opponents to vote against a bill that would authorise military tribunals, or commissions, at Guantanamo Bay.

That congressional approval is required since the US Supreme Court ruled, earlier this summer, that the executive branch had overstepped its powers, by unilaterally authorising the tribunals.

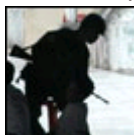
There is, of course, no guarantee that this new, rhetorical approach will help the Republican Party regain control of Congress in the 7 November vote, but if these series of national security speeches are becoming very familiar to Americans, so, too, is the bump - albeit a temporary one - they give to the president's approval ratings.

Yet, with such widespread public concern about the president's handling of Iraq - the "central front " in his war on terror - Republicans will be hoping that, this time around, the opinion poll bounce will be a high one.

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