

## The Jaycee Dugard kidnapping

### A tragedy of errors

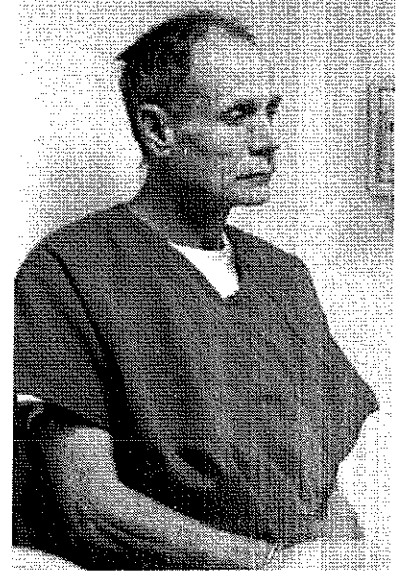
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#### A horrible case shows the need for competent policing

WHEN Barack Obama was running for the Senate, an adviser showed him a file of damaging facts that Republicans had dug up about him. One was that he had voted against a bill "to protect our children from sex offenders". "Wait a minute," said Mr Obama. "I accidentally pressed the wrong button on that bill. I meant to vote aye, and had it immediately corrected in the official record." His adviser smiled: "Somehow I don't think that portion of the official record will make it into a Republican ad."

Few issues are more politically toxic than child rape. Which is why the tragedy of Jaycee Dugard may have political consequences. Miss Dugard disappeared in 1991, when she was 11. Her stepfather saw her being bundled into a car. A well-publicised hunt turned up no clues. The trail went cold. But at the end of August she was found living in a warren of tents and sheds in a convicted rapist's overgrown back yard in Antioch, California. She has two daughters. Prosecutors say her alleged abductor, Phillip Garrido, is the father. He and his wife, Nancy Garrido, face 29 charges, including rape and kidnapping.

Mr Garrido is no stranger to the law. In 1977 he earned a 50-year sentence for kidnapping and raping a woman in Nevada. Yet he was released after only 11 years. He moved to California, where he was put on a registry of sex offenders. Parole officers visited him regularly, but none noticed that he was keeping prisoners in his back yard. In 2006 a neighbour called the police to complain that he was "psychotic and had a sexual addiction" and that there were children living in his rubbish-piled, ramshackle garden. A policeman came to his house, but did not look behind it. Last year, a task force that checks up on sex offenders paid Mr Garrido a surprise visit and searched every room of his house. But they, too, omitted to look outside.



Reuters

**No one looked in Garrido's back yard**

Why did it take so long to find Miss Dugard? The main reason appears to be simple human error. That said, it perhaps did not help that California registers so many people as sex offenders—63,000, including many convicted of relatively minor offences—that it is hard to keep track of the most dangerous predators. A local sheriff told the *Los Angeles Times* that his station was responsible for about 350 sex offenders, "349 more than the number of detectives I have dedicated to monitoring these people."

But the conclusion many voters will draw is that the system is too soft on crime. The furore may have prompted California's lawmakers to scale back a plan to save money and ease the chronic overcrowding in the state's prisons by releasing some non-violent prisoners early. A bill passed on August 31st would release fewer prisoners than the 27,000 originally planned, but was still derided by Republicans as a "state-sanctioned jailbreak".