

Are The Wheels Coming Off The Republican Bangwagon

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It sure looks that way. In recent months, the Republican administration of George W. Bush and the Republican Party in general have taken a series of heavy blows. The former majority leader of the US House of Representatives, Tom DeLay, has been indicted for violating the campaign financing laws of Texas by illegally diverting funds to ensure the victory of Republican candidates in that state. His fate seems settled by the guilty plea of sleazeball lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who is cooperating with prosecutors. The Abramoff investigation has already implicated other Republicans (as well as Democrats), and may well ensnare more. Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, Gordon "Scooter" Libby, has been indicted for obstruction of justice in the investigation of the "outing" of covert CIA agent Valerie Plame, believed to have been part of a vendetta against her husband, former diplomat John Wilson. Wilson publicly challenged the administration's justification for the invasion of Iraq, specifically, that Hussein had purchased "yellowcake," a form of semi-processed uranium ore, from Niger. In a sign of tension in the political coalition behind the administration, Bush's nomination of Harriet Miers was torpedoed by the right wing of the Republican Party. More broadly, Republican governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger got creamed in the special election he called for, when all the initiatives he sponsored or backed went down to defeat, while Republican gubernatorial candidates were beaten by Democrats in Virginia and New Jersey. Virtually on a daily basis there are new revelations that Bush manipulated evidence or just plain lied in his effort to build support for and justify the invasion of Iraq.

Almost as frequent are the revelations that the CIA has been torturing detainees in prisons overseas, while Shiite militias formally allied to the US-backed government in Iraq have infiltrated the Iraqi security forces, from which position they have been abusing and killing their political/religious opponents. Not least, amidst increasing opposition to the war on Iraq among the people of the United States, John P. Murtha, the conservative and very pro-military Democratic representative (and decorated war hero) from western Pennsylvania, has called for the early withdrawal of US troops. Revelations that Bush violated the law in ordering the spying on US citizens without getting a warrant from a special tribunal, as required, have further damaged his credibility. Bush's Medicare drug program has turned out to be a disaster, while his foreign policy has been reduced almost to a shambles by two recent developments: Hamas's vic-

tory in the recent Palestinian elections and the virtual eclipse of the secular parties backed by the administration in the parliamentary elections in Iraq (not to mention what looks like imminent civil war in that beleaguered country). Much less important in its own terms, but truly emblematic of the entire administration, Vice President Dick Cheney shot his hunting partner in the face during a hunting outing, then delayed reporting the incident. Most recently, the administration's approval of the proposed takeover of major US port operations by the Persian Gulf emirate of Dubai has brought on a roar of opposition from across the political spectrum. To top everything off, Bush has been getting low grades in the opinion polls concerning his handling of the economy. It almost seems as if every time they turn around, Bush and the Republican Party are being walloped with some bad news. These developments, however suddenly they appear to be changing the Republican fortunes, have in fact been developing over the past year. Among the Republicans' problems has been Bush's declining stature as a leader. However absurd it may seem, Bush managed to convince a significant portion of the US population that he was strong and decisive, a down-to-earth guy who was willing and able to protect America and its people. Beyond the actual issues involved in 2004's contest between him and John Kerry (Iraq, gay marriage, etc.), it was this, I believe, that was ultimately decisive in his victory. But Bush's leadership credentials began to look tattered not long after his reelection.

Probably most important, his campaign to reform (actually, to destroy) Social Security by allowing people to withdraw their money from the system and set up private retirement accounts went nowhere. This not only lowered his standing as a political leader, it also revealed that the population as a whole is nowhere nearly as conservative as his and the Republicans' electoral victories had suggested. Even worse, Bush's response (or lack thereof) to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina wounded, perhaps fatally, his reputation as a decisive individual concerned about the well-being of the people of the United States. In a couple of days, the emperor was shown to be naked, revealed for what he is, an incompetent, provincial and self-centered boob, motivated more by ideology and class and racial prejudice than by any serious concern for the American people. So politically feeble has Bush become that in the last election Republican candidates and other figures tried to distance themselves from him rather than seek his support. In the run-up to California's special election, Schwarzenegger refused to attend one of Bush's fundraisers, essentially accusing Bush of stealing his funds.

It was this weakness among his own supporters—religious conservatives and the right wing of the Republican Party generally—that was revealed in his defeat on the Harriet Miers nomination. Among other things, it showed that leaders of his own political base no longer trust him. What I think Bush tried to do was to select someone with no public record and virtually no experience, but who he knew from personal experience would vote the “right way” in Supreme Court decisions (particularly on abortion), in the hopes of disarming the Democratic opposition to her nomination. But conservative leaders, already angered by what they saw as betrayals in Bush's No Child Left Behind education bill and his Medicare prescription plan, both of which expanded rather than diminished the federal government's role in promoting social welfare, his record budget deficits and his guest worker immigration plan, weren't prepared to take him at his word.

They wanted an outright, prominent right-wing jurist as the nominee, and went public with their opposition. What once appeared to be a disciplined Republican machine, kept in line by the administration and its stooges, which voted as directed—either from ideological commitment or

from fear of offending the administration—quickly cracked apart, revealing the fractious nature of the coalition behind the president.

But the biggest factor in the Republicans' travails has been the situation in Iraq. In politics as in much else, nothing succeeds like success. Very little of what is now plaguing the administration would have much impact if the United States' imperial mission were going well. So what if he lied to the country, so what if he's surrounded by corruption, and he and his allies rigged elections, revealed the identity of a covert agent, failed to respond to the humanitarian crisis in New Orleans and the surrounding area, etc., etc.? If the war were obviously being won, if the new Iraqi government were functioning well, the Iraqi army and police proving capable of taking on and defeating the insurgency, and the US able to begin withdrawing troops, Bush and the Republican Party would be standing tall.

But the war is clearly not being won. Despite months of counterinsurgency operations, the resistance operates with apparent impunity, attacking almost whenever and wherever it wants.

There are virtually no areas except inside heavily barricaded buildings that are immune from the insurgents' bombs. Every day, more and more people, US troops and other personnel, members of the Iraqi government, or just plain Iraqis perceived by the insurgents as supporters of the US puppet government, are dying or being seriously wounded. Each day, there seem to be more revelations of abuses perpetrated either by the US government or its allies. And with the recent bombing of a Shiite mosque just north of Baghdad, and the sectarian violence and political tension within the Iraqi government itself that ensued, the situation truly seems to be spinning out of control. As long as the Iraqi government reveals itself to be incapable of defeating the insurgency, maintaining civil peace and improving the daily lives of the Iraqi people, and particularly as long as US troops—for the most part, young, naive kids, tricked into believing that this is a war to defend the vital interests of the country and to promote democracy—are dying or being maimed, the support for this war among the US population will decline. The only arguments left for staying that have any authority at all are two: (1) that since so many people have died and been wounded already, to leave now would only make their sacrifices worthless; (2) that if the US were to pull out now, the country would inevitably be engulfed in a civil war, destabilizing the entire region. And this last argument's efficacy is fading fast: the presence of US troops is clearly no guarantee of stability. On the contrary, all the armed political entities, both the Sunni-based insurgents and the Shiites' armed militias, increasingly view the United States with hostility.

These recent developments suggest several things.

1. The Bush administration is (finally!) paying a price for its failure to win a truly popular consensus behind the war. It's not just that lying, manipulating evidence, and scaring the hell out of people is morally bad. It's often not politically effective. In the current case, what it created was support for the war that was very shallow—built, as the saying goes, on sand—based on fear, blind patriotism, and ignorance, rather than any real understanding of the situation. Now the sand is eroding. People are beginning to scream about US casualties that are above 2,200. Of course, as far as wars go, that's nothing. There were nearly 60,000 casualties in Vietnam. More in the Korean War. How many hundreds of thousands of US troops died in World Wars I and II (leaving aside the millions from other nations)? As these other conflicts have shown, the people of the United States have often been prepared to make considerable sacrifices for causes they have been convinced or manipulated into

believing are just and worthwhile. But clearly, that convincing and/or manipulation was not substantial enough in the case of Iraq.

2. The war and its recent developments also reveal just how gullible, provincial, and infected with imperialist prejudices the majority of Americans are. Was it that hard to see how uneducated, inexperienced, narrow-minded, shallow, and dishonest George W. Bush really is? Was it that difficult to figure out that he was going to invade Iraq sooner or later, regardless of whether Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, was engaged in international terrorism, or actually represented a serious threat to the people of the United States and the rest of the world? Was it so impossible to understand that a country that was an artificial creation of European (particularly British) imperialism, that incorporated long-standing ethnic and religious rivalries, and that has been held together as long as it has only by monarchies and dictatorships, would not be easy to reconstruct on the basis of bourgeois democracy? Did it require great sophistication to recognize that the US army and its puppets would not necessarily be seen by the Iraqis as liberators with their interest at heart? I guess so. Because, speaking frankly, the vast majority of the US population know nothing of the world and its people outside the borders of the United States (and not too much of what goes on inside its borders). They know nothing of the role of the US bank and corporations and the international financial institutions under US control in plundering the world's resources and maiming or killing the people who get in their way. They are ignorant of the role of the US military in the hundreds of countries hosting US military bases, the rapes and other violence perpetrated on the occupied people, the turning of entire communities and provinces into brothels serving for the most part racist, arrogant, and sex-starved troops. Most people in the United States don't even know that Saddam Hussein was put in power by a CIA-backed (and probably engineered) coup, that he was supported and armed for years by the United States, and that the man who negotiated the aid/arms agreements with him was none other than the current Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, a fact that has been carefully kept out of the media throughout the entire sad story of the Iraqi invasion. One of the things that is striking about the mentality of so many people in the United States, including those who oppose the war, is that they never question the country's right to go anywhere and do virtually anything it wants, to invade sovereign nations, to kill, injure, or otherwise harm the people of other lands. We're the good guys, honest, big-hearted and generous. We believe in democracy, freedom, and common decency, and anything we do is right, just because it's we who are doing it. And if someone opposes such great people, s/he must be crazy and/or a religious fanatic—this is how most people in this country think, or so it seems to me. Who in the United States knows or cares that over a hundred thousand Iraqis died during the first Iraq war? Who knows or cares that a million and a half Iraqis, mostly old people and children, are estimated to have died during the years of the US-sponsored embargo against Iraq? Or that between 5,000 and 10,000 Panamanians died when the US invaded Panama to overthrow Manuel Noriega, a man trained and put into power by the United States? But let a few thousand Americans die in the attack on the World Trade Center and in Iraq and then people start wringing their hands.

3. As imbued with imperialist arrogance and assumptions as so many people in the country may be, they've also become very spoiled. They desire and expect easy victories, with minimal financial costs and casualties. The war was right and good as long as it didn't cost too much, in money or American lives. This is the other side of the declining popularity of the war. The American people want and expect empire on the cheap.
4. But ignorance, provinciality, gullibility, and moral corruption are not just characteristic of the US population at large. It's hard to imagine a political opposition as stupid and cowardly as the Democratic Party. Whatever doubts the Democrats had when the invasion was being planned and promoted were suppressed by the fear of looking weak on national security and of opposing a president who seemed popular. Now, even as public sentiment is turning against the war, they look as bad as Bush. After all, they supported the invasion and most of them still do. All they've done is to carp and criticize Bush's handling of the conflict and his lack of a plan for winning it. But where's their plan and what alternatives have they proposed? Having supported the war, however snivelingly, they look as confused and as dishonest as Bush and the Republicans. They were manipulated, they were lied to, they didn't know, so they claim. But how does this make them look, and what kind of leadership can anyone expect from them? Small wonder that as Bush's standing in the public opinion polls has hit record lows, the Democrats' ratings are not going up. Unfortunately, what the Democrats' insipidity and cowardice have tended to obscure is that the real reason for their poor performance around the whole Iraqi debacle is that they share the same basic political assumptions as the Republicans, particularly when it comes to foreign affairs. They, too, are firm supporters of US imperialism and want to see it defended and extended just as much as the Republicans. They support the right of the oil companies and other US corporations and banks to exploit the world, plunder its resources, and oppress its people. They, too, defend the US right to have military bases, and all the garbage that accompanies them, around the globe. Indeed, during the presidential election campaign, John Kerry opposed the Republican plan to close military bases in Western Europe and elsewhere that are no longer deemed necessary, and to withdraw 40,000 troops. Instead, he proposed sending even more troops abroad. The chief difference between the Republicans and Democrats on foreign policy is that the Democrats prefer to hide US imperialist interests behind the facade of international institutions and coalitions and to attempt to use diplomatic arm-twisting before resorting to brute force. This is tactics, not principle.
5. The Iraqi affair also reveals that US imperialism suffers from an acute crisis of leadership. Not only are the power and position of the country declining in the world, but the US economy is in sad shape, whatever the most recent statistics and short-term predictions of the economists may be. Enormous budget deficits, a staggering deficit in the balance of trade, a disintegrating industrial base, and a decaying infrastructure—schools, hospitals, transportation system, police and fire departments, levees and aqueducts, Social Security etc., etc.—plague the nation. But does anyone have a serious plan to deal with any of this? It sure doesn't look like it. The political and economic leaders of the country seem to be as confused and as demoralized as the rest of the population. In the past, the economic wealth of the country allowed it to weather serious political blunders (such as the war in Vietnam). With the economic underpinnings weakening, the country's vulnerability to inept leaders

is increasing. In my younger days, I used to believe that the political and economic leaders of our country were self-interested, arrogant, cynical, dishonest, and evil men (they were mostly men back then) who seemed to be fully aware of what they were doing. How could I have been so naive?! I never realized they were also ignorant and stupid.

6. It is this reality of a country adrift—at sea and without leadership in a world that most people know nothing about— that may be, at least in part, behind many people’s rush to embrace right-wing, fundamentalist versions of Christianity and so-called “traditional values,” to close the country’s borders against “illegal aliens,” and to reject evolution and natural selection in favor of creationism and its pseudo-scientific alter ego, “intelligent design.” In a world that’s changing, and not necessarily in favor of American imperialism, and one in which Americans feel increasingly vulnerable, the proclaimed inerrancy of the Bible and the certainty of absolute truth seem to many to be the only source of comfort.

It is a sign of the sickness of the US population that so many of the people who are reacting this way are supporting the Republican Party and the current Republican administration in the belief that these political figures support the “traditional values” they hold so dear. But the administration and the Republican Party as a whole are corrupt and dishonest to the core and backed by the most rapacious, least socially conscious sectors of the capitalist class. Bush and his allies and backers aren’t good Christians; they’re liars, thieves, and killers who are attacking and plundering everybody else, including their own rank and file base. Yet, these supporters don’t see this. Meanwhile, most of those who oppose the Republican cabal see little alternative but to support the vile Democrats, another bunch of cynical crooks, thus revealing, once again, the brilliance of the US political system (at least from the point of view of our rulers): its role in emasculating radical opposition and corralling it toward the center.

I’d like to believe that, sooner or later, enough people in the country will wake up and see the situation for what it is. I’d like to think that it is possible, when they do so, for them to create a mass movement against the Iraq war and against the administration that sponsored it. And I’d like to imagine that such a movement might grow, politically and in size, into one committed to winning economic security and political rights for all people, including (and especially) homosexuals and undocumented immigrants; to fighting for the radical democratization of US society, including the devolution of political power and wealth; to opposing all dictatorships and authoritarian regimes around the world; and to fighting against US imperialism and the corporations, banks, political and cultural institutions, and the political and economic elite (Republicans and Democrats alike) that runs the country. Are enough people in the United States capable of building such a movement, of committing themselves to living cooperatively with each other and with other people in the world, rather than plundering and exploiting them? I’d like to believe that the answer is yes. But I sure can’t say that I’m optimistic.

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