

Carl Boggs

Bush, Kerry and the Politics of Empire

by
Carl Boggs

It is hard to imagine a worse, more reactionary and destructive, Presidency than that of George W. Bush, whose nearly four years in office has been marred by one failure after another. The Iraq debacle, costing (as of mid-September 2004) more than 1000 American and up to 30,000 Iraqi lives and proving more bloody by the day, is alone enough to destroy Bush's legitimate claim to govern. Justified by the most brazen lies and myths, the invasion and occupation must be regarded as one of most reckless uses of political power in U.S. history, bringing misery and chaos to Iraq and the Middle East, draining taxpayers of more than 200 billion dollars and counting, giving rise to weekly reports of atrocities and scandals, and carried out with the most arrogant disrespect for the United Nations, international law, and the voices of other nations.

Shamefully playing on the horrors of 9/11, this administration conducts its "war on terrorism" while also doing everything possible to aggravate the sources of terror and diverting vital resources *away* from the needs of homeland security. The White House is occupied by a ruthless, scheming elite that presides over increasing global disorder, a record federal budget deficit, corporate scandals, spreading poverty, a stagnant economy, Medicare "reform" that augments the already outrageous windfall profits to giant pharmaceutical companies, and erosion of civil liberties. All this from a candidate who ran in 2000 as a "compassionate" conservative, pretending humility in foreign affairs, and who again is covering himself with a phony veneer of political moderation, now coupled with the toughness of a warrior leader.

Even the Nixon and Reagan years now appear relatively benign in the wake of Bush junior's frightening record. No doubt a Bush reelection would bring further disasters—most likely new military ventures in world politics combined with emboldened rightwing assaults on social programs in the domestic arena. Bush is surely no Hitler, as some on the left have

charged, but his capacity to do unfathomable harm to American society, the environment, and the global system should not be underestimated. There would be much cause for rejoicing should the President be sent unceremoniously back to his Texas ranch. The danger is heightened by the fact that Bush comes from a well-entrenched labyrinth of interests defined by corporate privilege, oil, weapons production and arms trade, and intelligence networks—part of a dynasty going back several decades.

From Senator Prescott Bush through George Bush the elder and his son, the family has been deeply involved in the military-industrial complex, active in more than 20 securities firms, banks, brokerage houses, investment companies, arms-trading businesses, pharmaceutical corporations, and Middle East oil ventures. It has enjoyed a cozy relationship with the scandal-ridden Enron corporation and some of its subsidiaries—a relationship that, as in the oil business, extends to Vice-President Richard Cheney and others in the administration. Michael Moore's skillful treatment of this legacy in *Fahrenheit 9/11* actually comes across as something of an *understatement*. In any event, the disastrous policies that Bush and the neocon crowd have unleashed on the world do not amount to a radical or shocking departure when viewed against this larger backdrop; legitimated in part by the terrorist attacks, they did not come out of an historical vacuum. If scary talk about Bush's Christian fundamentalism explains little in this context, references to his supposed moronic intelligence are even less helpful.

As the 2004 Presidential election approaches, we confront a paradox: how could someone regarded by many as the worst-ever occupant of the White House stand even a remote chance of being reelected, much less enter the home stretch of the campaign with a comfortable lead in the polls? Despite everything, the smirk on Bush's face remains in full view. As of early September, both *Time* and *Newsweek* showed the incumbent ahead of John Kerry by an astonishing eleven percentage points. Contrary to all logic, it was the Democrats and not the failed President who were reeling, forced onto the defensive, strategically confused, looking as if their campaign were on life-support systems. How can we make sense of such a seemingly inexplicable turn of events?

Carl Boggs

ONE PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATION LIES IN THE HEGEMONIC and still broadening power of the corporate media which, as David Brock shows in *The Republican Noise Machine*, is the locus of a well-orchestrated right wing ideological shift over the past two decades or so. There is little doubt that political discourse has moved dramatically rightward—visible in the TV networks, talk radio, the print media, even the Internet—to the point where “liberalism” has become something of a terrible stigma avoided by all but the most bold-spirited of politicians. It is easy enough to see that the media have cravenly accommodated the Bush clique in its lies, ineptness, and warmongering, cheerfully presenting the Iraq war as a crusade for the “liberation” of an oppressed people, another episode in U.S. global benevolence. All the bogus claims used to market an illegal and immoral war—imminent military threat, doomsday weapons, terrorist links, overthrowing a tyrant—went unchallenged while the actual reasons, openly and repeatedly spelled out by neocons and others in the administration, were economic and geopolitical.

The media has also been quick to repeat the familiar litany of myths, including the fiction that Republicans stand for small government and a free market. The reality is just the opposite: astronomical levels of federal spending for the military, the Iraq operation, law enforcement, intelligence and surveillance, and a growing prison system, made even more lopsided by Bush’s massive tax cuts for the rich and the corporations. The result is unsurpassed growth in the *coercive* side of big government. Small government and reduced bureaucracy? This Republican administration cherishes huge federal programs, so long as they fit priorities established by the Pentagon and the rest of the military-industrial complex. Free market? Everything about this system, extending to the corporate boondoggles in Iraq and elsewhere, is channeled through institutions marked by highly-concentrated economic, military, and political power. Bush’s love affair with old-crony capitalism, moreover, has nothing to do with free market values, any more than does the modus operandi of military contractors, big drug companies, financial interests, and usual complex of transnational corporations that escape the reaches of democratic governance. Since the popular media repeats these myths and deceits on a daily basis, and since the American public gets most of its “news” and information from these very sources, the paradox of Bush’s surprising advantage in the polls becomes a little less mystifying.

But there is more to the story. The Democrats, above all the Kerry campaign, must share responsibility for their own predicament. In fact most of Bush's harmful policies, including the Iraq crusade, have enjoyed "bipartisan" support from leading Democrats as well as the media. With few exceptions, the Democrats have responded in silence to just about every Bush fiasco. Handed one major issue after another, Kerry strategists have backtracked, seemingly frightened of being attacked as too liberal, too unpatriotic, too soft on terrorism, too unsettling to the legions of undecided voters. The Kerry campaign has echoed many of the Bush refrains, endorsing the Iraq war as a noble cause, promising deployment of tens of thousands *more* troops, hoping to "stay the course," while pressing to internationalize (that is, further legitimate) the occupation that has already become a Vietnam-sized failure. In September 2003 Kerry endorsed Order 39 for Iraq, intended to open the doors to U.S. and other Western corporate investment—a fundamental restructuring of the Iraqi economy that violates international law. If one can identify such a thing as a "Bush Doctrine," Kerry's thinking seems confined to its discursive limits. Should he somehow manage to win the November election, the American public will likely remain clueless as to how he might set about reversing the course of events.

The Republicans gained some momentum after their New York convention, but the Kerry trajectory remained flat after the comparatively lifeless Democratic National Convention in Boston, where the familiar DNC-style "centrism" was rigidly enforced: nothing beyond the mildest criticism of the Iraq occupation or the war against terrorism, general platitudes on the economy, jobs, and healthcare. No Bush-bashing was permitted. Fearful of alienating middle-of-the-road voters, the Democrats organized one of the most boring national conventions in memory: nearly four years of a reactionary Bush presidency went almost forgotten, as if calling attention to them would backfire, even though polls indicated a broad discontent with Bush's policies among the electorate. Thus, on the question of terrorism, with Bush's "war" having accomplished little, the Democratic platform reads: "Victory in the war on terrorism requires a combination of American determination and international cooperation on all fronts." Kerry and Edwards could easily have blasted the Bush administration for its failed counterterrorism strategy, beginning with Iraq, but they politely desisted. As Richard Clarke, Bush's former leading terrorist expert, observed: "I find it outrageous that the President is

running for reelection on the grounds he's done such great things about terrorism. He ignored it." Bush not only ignored it, his actions in the Middle East have surely helped spread it. Taking a page from Clarke's book and using it to frame their own anti-terror strategy, the Democrats might well have gotten a boost after Boston, but they chose silence. Meanwhile, Kerry moved at the DNC was to set himself up as the preferred warrior candidate, a Vietnam combat hero, patriot, and leader best able to rise to the challenges of Empire, that is, to carry out effective military action—a stratagem likely to backfire given Kerry's history of anti-Vietnam war activism not to mention the Democrats' own otherwise tepid campaign.

More than three decades after his famous antiwar testimony, Senator Kerry has emerged as something of a military hawk, insisting that the U.S. must occupy Iraq until "the job is done," calling for more troops there, opposing Bush's plan to demobilize American forces in Europe and Korea, championing "humanitarian intervention", calling for elevated Pentagon spending. Anyone following Kerry's career since the early 1980s will not be astonished by any of this, whatever his supposed liberal reputation. His views on foreign and military policy are concisely laid out in his 2003 "vision" book, *A Call to Service*, where he argues for a more vigilant and aggressive U.S. global military power. Relatively progressive as a young senator, he has since worked patiently and effectively to make himself politically safe, "electable" to the White House—his overriding goal for the past two decades. He supported every conservative domestic initiative during the Clinton years, was a lead cheerleader for the bombing of Yugoslavia, and beginning in 2001 has endorsed Bush's actions full-tilt, going out of his way to blister politicians in his own party who questioned the fraudulent pretexts for war. Why liberals and progressives might expect any bold departure within the Kerry camp, now or later, would be difficult to explain on the basis of past actions or statements.

Of course Kerry was indeed a combat hero during Vietnam—a war he came to denounce as barbaric and immoral during the 1971 Winter Soldier hearings. He served four months as a Navy lieutenant aboard a patrol boat, being awarded the Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts. Knowing as he did at the time, and presumably has not forgotten today, that the Vietnam war was a prolonged, bloody nightmare—and seeing a disastrous replay of that same nightmare in Iraq—Kerry's decision to dress up his candidacy in

military heroism linked to the Vietnam era only makes sense as an opportunistic move to outflank Bush as a hard-line military leader. He has wound up trapped not only in the logic of militarism but in his own incapacity to mount a challenge to Bush's neocon strategy rooted in superpatriotism and U.S. exceptionalism. Like the neocons, he fails to see that this kind of militarism—recognizing few limits to U.S. power—can only be self-defeating, that efforts to occupy Iraq *for any purpose* cannot possibly gain legitimacy. Much like Robert McNamara in *The Fog of War*, Kerry says that both he and the U.S. have learned from the Vietnam catastrophe, that is it time to “get beyond” that horrible memory, but from all indications he seems to have learned absolutely nothing—indeed probably less than McNamara. Further, in establishing himself as bearer of warrior politics, and drawing on his own (conflicted) Vietnam experience, he places himself at great disadvantage when running against a sitting (at war) president with his mantle “commander-in-chief,” even if that mantle is quite tainted. This tells us a good deal about why Kerry has been thrown on the defensive at a time when he has every opportunity to mount a strong offensive campaign.

This recycling of the Vietnam era in the 2004 Presidential contest, fully 30 years after that war ended, furnishes yet another sad commentary on the state of American political culture. On the one side Kerry is commonly known to have protested the war—joining with millions of citizens in and out of the military—but he had also been amply decorated and now apparently wants to be embraced as a war hero straight out of the Hollywood combat genre. How this starkly dual involvement in an extremely unpopular war bolsters his Presidential cache is anyone's guess; it doesn't seem to have worked with the electorate, and it has made him a rather easy target for the Republicans. On the other side we have Bush, recipient of preferential treatment owing to family connections who was safely confined to Air National Guard duty instead of being sent to Vietnam, now going on the attack through a well-financed Republican group, the Swift Boat Veterans, who charge Kerry with lying about his wartime service and his medals. These charges are doubly scurrilous—bogus according to the evidence, but also scarcely germane to the tasks of Presidential governance at hand. As the Republican campaign descends into a crude marketing effort based on sleazy personal attacks, more lies, and fear-mongering, the infamous Vietnam Syndrome in yet another one of its bizarre incarnations lives on to haunt American politics. That it

should hover over the landscape at the very moment another “Vietnam” is unfolding before a cynical American public simply feeds into the political bankruptcy.

In the midst of such absurdity the entire Presidential campaign ends up sidestepping all that really matters: how to exit the Iraq morass as quickly and viably as possible, how to forge efficacious strategies (domestic and global) to fight terrorism, how to solve the healthcare crisis, how to stabilize the economy, how to do *anything* to reverse global warming, and so forth. In the lead-up to arguably one of the most critical elections in U.S. history, a political haze has settled over everything. Aside from the usual posturing and name-calling, neither Bush nor Kerry have had much to say about the most pressing challenges, a situation reflective of ongoing trends toward ideological convergence of the two major parties and its corollary, growing corporate colonization of American politics. For Bush, the 2004 campaign seems to be about honing an image of moderation, a return to compassionate conservatism, while for Kerry it is an equally fanciful “centrism” that rarely goes beyond refinements in the Republican program. Here we have yet another rendering of the term “bipartisanship,” operative in foreign policy since the end of World War II but now increasingly visible on the *domestic* front.

If the Presidential contest has deteriorated into pointless squabbles about what Lt. Kerry did in the Mekong Delta in 1969, then—even leaving aside the scandalous favoritism granted Bush and his Vice-President Cheney at that very time—where does this leave a restless public in facing what should be a leading priority of any U.S. President—checking terrorism and getting the country returned to a sound condition of national security? The Democratic platform is so filled with vague generalities as to be useless. If Bush has won a few victories, such as routing (temporarily) Taliban and Al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan, his overall record has been dismal, with worldwide terrorist actions on the increase since 9/11. Neither candidate is about to rethink those aspects of U.S. foreign policy (massive troop deployments in the Middle East, occupation of Iraq, support for Israel) that only help worsen the problem. Kerry says that American troops should remain in Iraq for *at least* another four years, a recipe for even more chaos, violence, and blowback against the superpower and its “coalition partners.” Since Kerry has already voted for Bush’s policies and is ideologically locked into the same geopolitical objectives, his capacity

to provide fresh alternatives is severely undermined. We know that Bush initially dismissed the problem of terrorism out of hand, then refused to follow up intelligence reports in summer 2001 warning of imminent major Al Qaeda operations, then moved against Iraq on the false pretext that the Hussein regime was linked to terrorism—all of which reveals a failed Presidency and more. Most egregiously, the Bush administration has steadily deflected resources away from homeland security—for example, leaving airport, seaport, and nuclear protection woefully inadequate—largely because of the Iraq obsession.

Once in the White House, Bush and his reactionary clique had three main international priorities: Iraq, Star Wars, and Pentagon restructuring. These priorities have remained fully in place, although 9/11 meant they would have to be reframed. Contrary to myth, Bush's hapless record in the war on terrorism has nothing to do with "intelligence failures" and everything to do with politics; it was willful negligence born of irrational ideological agendas. We now know that reports from the CIA, NSA, FBI, and other agencies were routinely ignored or downplayed. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at one point dismissed the terrorism threat as a normal "law-enforcement problem." In the case of Iraq, on the other hand, intelligence "data" was actually created or exaggerated to support phony claims about WMD, military threats, and terrorist connections, so that Bush could maintain that the invasion and occupation of Iraq is an ongoing, integral part of the war on terrorism.

Unfortunately, the report of the independent *National Commission on 9/11*, while detailing the many political, intelligence, and law-enforcement calamities leading up to the terrorist attacks, refuses to hold anyone responsible, stating "our aim was not to assign individual blame." The report seems to conclude that because the whole system was so terribly flawed, with so many institutions and agencies implicated, no particular leader or official is culpable. Yet as supreme office holder Bush *must* be held accountable, just as he now tries to take credit for all the supposed achievements in the war on terrorism. In fact Bush can be viewed as *triple* culpable: he ignored the first warnings, failed after 9/11 to invest sufficient resources in homeland security, and then aggravated the conditions of blowback by invading Iraq. Further, Bush's personal ineptitude and painfully slow response in learning of the terrorist attacks is tellingly depicted in Moore's documentary. At the RNP, conveniently staged in

New York, the Bush-Cheney campaign shamelessly used the 9/11 events to market the war in Iraq as a great blow against Al Qaeda and the forces of darkness, when of course the war has given rise to just the opposite. Leading Republicans like Rudy Giuliani and John McCain came to the podium to trumpet this message while exploiting popular fears of future terrorist attacks. The Kerry-Edwards campaign has done little to call attention to the complete mendacity of these discourses.

Still, the Republicans appear to have the political upper hand and the electoral momentum, utilizing every advantage of incumbency, a culture of imperial hubris, and a fully-compliant corporate media. Another, perhaps deeper conundrum is that Kerry, like most every leading Democrat going back to Carter, is essentially running as a moderate Republican, another connotation of “centrism” in the electoral parlance. All too often they have managed little more than a me-too campaigns on both domestic and international policy, differences surfacing mostly over methods, style, personality, and social issues like the death penalty. Carter was able to win in the aftermath of Watergate and Vietnam, but Mondale and Dukakis went down to humiliating defeat. Clinton’s DLC-inspired conservatism, meant to defeat the Republicans on their own turf, never would have prevailed in 1992 without Ross Perot winning 19 percent of the vote, and Clinton eventually governed the way he campaigned. Al Gore’s failure to carve out positions to the left of Bush in 2000 are too well known to require elaboration here. It might be argued that Kerry has moved even to the right of his Democratic predecessors. By mid-September, his election prospects languishing, he started moving forcefully on domestic issues, lashing out at Bush’s record on civil rights, poverty, and healthcare—easy enough targets—hoping to narrow the gap, which he did judging by a minor surge in the polls. In foreign policy, however, and especially on Iraq, Kerry’s positions remained guarded and muted.

The predicament here is not Kerry’s alone, but has deeper historical origins stemming in part from the postwar legacy of “bipartisanship” in U.S. foreign policy with Democrats and Republicans equally wedded to a strategy of American global power. Both have supported the Pentagon system and its labyrinthine network of corporate, governmental, and military interests, first during the phase of Cold War liberalism and then in the current period of unchallenged U.S. superpower hegemony and the

war on terrorism. Before the Bush interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, it was mostly Democratic presidents who resorted to military power: Truman in Korea, Kennedy and Johnson in Vietnam, Carter in Central America, Clinton in Yugoslavia. The “global liberalism” first laid out by Woodrow Wilson and later championed by JFK as the basis of U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in the Third World remains today a crucial rationale for advancing American economic and geopolitical interests. Moreover, during the 2000 Presidential election Al Gore pressed for a more aggressive foreign policy than did Bush, calling for augmented Pentagon spending, increased deployment of military forces, and a vigilant policy of “humanitarian intervention”. Having stressed “humility” in foreign affairs, Bush’s did not make his pronounced neocon turn until after the traumas of 9/11. Viewed thusly, one cannot be too surprised to find Bush justifying his militarism with reference to the early postwar Truman Doctrine, in which America was “called on to lead the cause of freedom and democracy around the world.” The strategy of “preemptive war” actually has its origins in Truman, who with the onset of the Cold War defended the U.S. right of military intervention anywhere national interests were deemed threatened.

In terms of both history and logic, therefore, we have little reason to believe that Kerry’s larger view of revived Pax Americana will differ markedly from Bush’s, whatever the possible variations in style and tactics. No doubt a Kerry Presidency would dispense with the ideological rigidity, imperial arrogance, and self-defeating exceptionalism typical of the neocons. On the other hand a Bush victory would surely further embolden the neocons, ever anxious to press forward on other fronts such as Iran, but the costly and bloody Iraq catastrophe promises to negate such initiatives, at least for the near future. Whatever the outcome in November, at the start of the twenty-first century any U.S. leader will be obligated to work within the imperatives of Empire: global military presence, an expanded Pentagon system, anti-terrorist initiatives, security state, the militarization of space, ongoing resource wars. Such imperatives, undoubtedly stronger today than ever, will inevitably enter into the decision-making of Democrats and Republicans alike. Kerry’s inability to carve out an alternative to the Bush disaster must be understood in this historical and geopolitical context. Such a momentous eclipse of political discourse, fateful not only to American society but to the rest of the world,

Carl Boggs

is ultimately located within a more crucial, underlying problem—the decay of American politics in the midst of widening Empire.

Carl Boggs is the author of numerous books in the fields of contemporary social and political theory, European politics, and popular movements and is Professor of Social Sciences at National University in Los Angeles. His next book is Imperial Delusions: American Militarism and Endless War (Rowman and Littlefield). He is on the editorial board of several journals, including Theory and Society (where he is book-review editor), New Political Science, and Democracy and Nature.