

their country should be. Again and again Bush and his confederates have used the cover of national security to push through an uncompromising rightwing agenda. Ignoring the broad leeway already provided the federal government to fight terrorists and conduct domestic surveillance, the administration has gone out of its way to claim vast new powers to detain, spy on, and imprison its own citizens, and to abduct and even torture foreigners — a subject we shall return to. It has used the cover of the war to push through enormous tax cuts, the attempt to dismantle the Social Security system, and alter the very social covenant of the nation. Incidents from the Terri Schiavo case to the teaching of "intelligent design" are periodically exploited to start new cultural battles.

Given this state of permanent culture war, it is not surprising that the Bush White House trotted out the stab-in-the-back myth when its Iraq project began to run out of steam early last summer. It was first given a spin, as usual, by the right's media shock troops, and directed at both Democratic and renegade Republican lawmakers who had dared to criticize the strategic conduct of the war or our treatment of detainees. The *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page opined, "Where the terrorists are gaining ground is in Washington, D.C." and noted that General John Abizaid, of the U.S. Central Command, had said "When my soldiers say to me and ask me the question whether they've got support from the American people or not, that worries me. And they're starting to do that."

Again, the link was made. Soldiers of the most powerful army in the history of the world would be actively endangered if they even wondered whether the folks at home were questioning their deployment. The right was looking for a target, and it got one when Senator Dick Durbin, Democrat from Illinois, appalled by an FBI report on the prisons for suspected terrorists at Guantánamo Bay, compared them to those run by "Nazis, Soviets in their gulags, or some mad regime — Pol Pot or others — that had no concern for human beings..."

The right's response was predictably swift and savage. "The Power Line" blogger Paul Mirengoff commented that the Senator "slanders his own country. Normally that kind of slander is uttered only by revolutionaries seeking the violent overthrow of the government." Rush Limbaugh harrumphed that "Dick Durbin has just identified who the Democrats are in the year 2005, particularly when it comes to American national security and when it comes to the U.S. military. These are the same people that say they support the troops. This is how they do it, huh? They give aid and comfort to the enemy."

Yet for once, Rush was undone. John Carlson, host of a Seattle talk show and Washington State's unsuccessful Republican candidate for governor in 2000, said of Durbin, "This man is simply a piece of excrement, a piece of waste that needs to be scraped off the sidewalk and eliminated." Bill O'Reilly of Fox News launched a preemptive attack on his few liberal counterparts, urging that the staff of Air America be jailed: "Dissent, fine; undermining, you're a traitor. Got it? So all you clowns over at the liberal radio network, we could incarcerate them immediately. Will you have that done, please? Send them over to the FBI and just put them in chains, because they, you know, they're undermining everything."

Once the Republican media had secured the ground and set the terms of debate, the Party's representatives in Washington jumped into the fray. When Democratic House Leader Nancy Pelosi called the war "a grotesque mistake" that was "not making America safer," the as-yet-unindicted Tom DeLay reported that Pelosi "owes our military and their families an apology for her reckless comments," and House Majority Whip Roy Blunt claimed that Pelosi's words had "emboldened" the enemy.

All of the crucial elements of the stab-in-the-back charge were now in place. Critics of the war were not simply questioning its strategy or its necessity, or upholding the best of American traditions by raising concerns over how enemy prisoners were being treated. Instead, they were aiding the enemy, and actively endangering our fighting men and women. They were traitors and "revolutionaries," individuals who were "conducting guerrilla warfare on American troops," and "excrement" who could now be safely incarcerated "immediately" or even "eliminated."

It remained only for the chief Republican strategist, Karl Rove, to appear before a conservative party fundraiser in Manhattan on June 22 and tie up a campaign that bore all the usual earmarks.

"Conservatives saw the savagery of 9/11 in the attacks and prepared for war; liberals saw the savagery of the 9/11 attacks and wanted to prepare indictments and offer therapy and understanding for our attackers," Rove began, riffing on a proven theme from the 2004 Presidential election, which sought to link Democrats not only with the terrorist attack on 9/11 but also with a generation of Republican assertions that liberals are "soft" on domestic crime. Rove then honed in on poor Dick Durbin's remarks: "Has there ever been a more revealing moment this year? Let me just put this fairly simple terms: *Al Jazeera now broadcasts the words of Senator Durbin to the Mideast, certainly putting our troops in greater danger. No more needs to be said about the motives of liberals.*" (My italics.)

The conspiracy had expanded yet again. Not just Nancy Pelosi or Dick Durbin but *all* Democrats and *all* liberals were now firmly established as traitors, and it was not possible that they had made some honest gaffes; instead, their very *motives* were sinister.

When Rove's thunderous media offensive had finally subsided, however, a strange silence ensued. The popularity of his master, George W. Bush, continued to plunge in the opinion polls. Support for the war continued to plummet as well, and by July, Rove himself was thoroughly enmeshed in the Valerie Plame scandal, with all of the attendant implications about its manipulation of pre-war intelligence. By November, Rove was forced to send out Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney them-



MILAN TRENC

selves on a new "Strategy for Victory" campaign. Speaking on Veterans Day to an all-military audience at an army depot in Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania, Bush attacked Democrats who were saying they had been duped by the fraudulent intelligence the administration had used to secure their votes for war.

"These baseless attacks send the wrong signal to our troops and to an enemy that is questioning American will," Bush told the soldiers assembled for his photo-op. "As our troops fight a ruthless enemy determined to destroy our way of life, they deserve to know that their elected leaders who voted to send them to war continue to stand behind them."

WARTIME DISSENT

Quite often heard lately is the admonition that dissent should be restrained and even prohibited during time of war — that it might be acceptable prior to the start of a war but equivalent to treason once a war has started.

Dissent during wartime is harshly criticized as "aiding and abetting" an enemy. Yet now, when even friends and neighbors disparage dissent, is the essential moment to resist, to question with intelligence and vigorous skepticism the claims of a war's necessity and righteousness, and to protest the curbing of civil liberties that seem corollary to every war.

The primary purpose for dissent in wartime is to discontinue wars inimical to the principles and liberties bedrock to this nation; and to critically scrutinize every stage of a war's conduct.

If there were no dissent the government would not feel compelled to publicly explain or justify its warring nor recognize the civil rights of combatants and citizenry, but instead issue repressive edicts disguised as necessities for the war effort. And even with dissent, government generally stonewalls in reaction to public disquiet which imputations of treachery are unable to fully squelch.

Dissent is especially important when it is realized the reasons for war are misleading or hypocritical, which begs the question: is it truly unpatriotic to condemn lies that are as surely murdering Americans as any proclaimed enemy?

It makes little sense to justify the dead of a war by sending more to also die; not is it reasonable to curb dissent to war with the rationale it would prolong a war rather than pressure its end.

Dissent in wartime is a necessary antithesis to the magnification of militarism war generates. The public is governed more by military doctrines and less by civic principles — militant dominance of government and society erodes democracy to such a point that obedience rapidly supplants freedom of thought and expression as permissible patriotism. Wartime is not a time to be submissive or silent — dissent is not a right but an obligation for resolutely demanding veracity and integrity from self-styled war leaders, and scrupulous adherence to constitutional values.

And it might be argued that dissent refutes the claim that an entire society is manifestly responsible for the advent or conduct of a war and policies that lead to it. In a reframing of the concept that all members of a nation are guilty of whatever that nation does on the world scene, the liberties and freedoms within a society such as the USA dispute the contention of universal liability for "total war." In that sense alone, dissent in wartime is our finest beacon.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER
(NCTE, July/August 2004)

Once again, criticism of the war in Iraq has been adroitly linked to criticism of the administration, and then to treason — something that would, somehow, magically empower the enemy and demoralize our troops. Once again, unnatural enemies were striking at the heroic, Siegfried figures at the top of the administration, who struggled to get out the great truth that intelligence had not been manipulated and the Democrats were engaged in "revisionism."

Yet still, somehow, Bush's numbers continued to plunge. What went wrong? How could such an infallible Republican strategy, conducted with all the rightwing's vast media resources at his command, have failed so utterly? How was it that the story of the stab in the back had lost its power to hold us spellbound?

What has really robbed the conspiracy theories of their effectiveness is how the war in Iraq has been conducted. Bush and his advisers have sought to use the war not only to punish their enemies but also to reward their supporters, a bit of political juggling that led them to demand nothing from the American public as a whole. Those of us who are not actively fighting in Iraq, or who do not have close friends and family members who are doing so, have not been asked to sacrifice in any way. The richest among us have even been showered with tax cuts.

Yet in demanding so little, Bush has finally uncoupled the state from its heroic status. It is not a coincidence that modern nationalism dates from the advent of mass democracy — and mass citizen armies — that the American and French revolutions ushered in at the end of the 18th century. Bush's refusal to mobilize the nation for the war in Iraq has severed that immediate identification with our army's fortunes. Nor did it begin with the Bush administration. The wartime tax cuts and the all-volunteer, wartime army are simply the latest manifestations of a trend that is now decades old and that has been promulgated through peace as well as war, by Democrats as well as Republicans. It cannot truly be a surprise that a society that has steadily dismantled or diminished the most basic access to healthcare, relief for the poor and the aged, and decent education; a society that has allowed the gap between its richest and poorest citizens to grow to unprecedented size; a society that has paid obeisance to the ideology of globalization to the point of giving away both its jobs and its debt to foreign nations, and which has just allowed one of its poorer cities to quietly drown, should choose to largely opt out of its own defense.

Anyone who doubts that this is exactly what we have done need only look at how little the war really engages most of us. It rarely draws more than a few seconds of coverage on the local television news, if that, and then only well into the broadcast, after a story on a murder, or a fire, or the latest weather predictions. Even the largest and angriest demonstrations against our occupation of Iraq have not approached the mobilizations against the war in Vietnam, but a close observer will notice that we also have yet to see any of the massive counter-demonstrations that were held in *support* of that war — or "in support of the troops." Such engagement on either side seems almost quaint now.

Who could possibly believe in a plot to lose this war? No one cares that much about it. We have, instead, reached a crossroads where the overwhelming rightwing desire to dissolve much of the old social compact that held together the modern nation-state is irreconcilably at odds with any attempt to conduct such a grand, heroic experiment as implanting democracy in the Middle East. Without mass participation, Iraq cannot be passed off as an heroic endeavor, no matter how much Mr. Bush's rhetoric tries to make it one, and without a hero there can be no great betrayer, no skulking villain.

And yet, a convincing national narrative, though it may be the sheerest, most vicious fiction, can have incredible staying power — can perhaps outlast even the nation that it was meant to serve. It is ironic that, even as support for his war was starting to unravel in May of 2005, George W. Bush was in the Latvian capital of Riga, describing the Yalta agreement as "one of the greatest wrongs of history." The President placed it in the "unjust tradition" of the 1938 Munich Pact and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which together paved the way for the start of World War 2 in 1939. Bush's words echoed his statements of three previous trips to Eastern Europe, dating back to 2001, during which he had pledged, "no more Munichs, no more Yaltas," and called Yalta an "attempt to sacrifice freedom for the sake of stability," a "bitter legacy," and a "constant source of injustice and fear" that had "divided a living civilization."

The ultimate irony of Bush's perpetuating this ageless rightwing shibboleth is that for once it wasn't intended for home consumption. The Yalta myth has finally lost its old magic, here in historically illiterate, contemporary America. Nor did Bush make any special attempt to let his countrymen know he was apportioning them equal blame with Stalin and Hitler for the greatest calamities of the 20th century.

Bush's pandering was directed instead to the nations he was visiting, in a region that still batters on any number of conspiracy theories. Why he should have so denigrated his own country to a few small Eastern European nations might seem a mystery, until one considers that this is the "new Europe" that Bush has solicited for troops for his Iraqi adventure... and where he appears to have found either destinations or conduits for victims of "extraordinary rendition," en route to where they could be safely tortured in secrecy.

An American President, wandering the halls of Eastern European palaces, denounces his own nation in order to appease his hosts into torturing secret prisoners. Our heroic age surely has come to an end.

Kevin Baker wrote this article for *Harper's* magazine, from which it has been reprinted. He is the author of *Striver's Row*, which is the final installment in his *City of Fire* trilogy of novels about New York City.

CREATE A DECLARATION OF EQUALITY

**FOUNDATION FOR
EQUAL RULE**

ASTORIA, OREGON 97103 • (503) 325-6555



GODFATHER'S BOOKS AND ESPRESSO BAR

Audio Book Sales & Rentals * Cards * Pastries
Incense * Occult & Metaphysical * Lattes & Literature

1108 Commercial • Astoria, OR 97103
Phone: (503) 325-8143