

The US elections

George W. Bush's drunk driving arrest: revelation from the past spotlights political cynicism of the present

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The revelation that Texas Governor George W. Bush, then a private citizen in the oil business, was arrested for drunk driving in Maine in 1976 should not come as a great shock. The incident does not make Bush a criminal. Nor does it add much to what a politically discerning observer already knows about the man.

It remains to be seen whether this development will significantly affect next Tuesday's vote. Much depends on the way in which it is handled by the media, something the *World Socialist Web Site* will follow with great interest.

Such misadventures befall all sorts of people, in and out of public life. This revelation, however, emerges within a definite political context, and sheds light not only on Bush the politician, but on the Republican Party, the media and the US political system as a whole.

The exposure of Bush's arrest and his attempt to conceal it from the public underscore the boundless hypocrisy of both the Republican campaign and the media establishment that has labored so intently to lend it credibility. The nineteenth century British Tory leader Benjamin Disraeli once called a Conservative Party administration "an organized hypocrisy." This damning sobriquet hardly does justice to the cynicism of the Bush camp, which presents itself to the public as the embodiment of honesty and integrity and casts its Democratic opponent as a congenital liar, morally contaminated by his association with Bill Clinton.

Amid effusions of religious piety, the Republicans claim, with the tacit endorsement of the media, that a Bush presidency would represent the return of ethical values to the White House. The past eight years are painted in the darkest colors, with Clinton portrayed as a moral leper, and Gore his more or less willing accomplice.

Now that an aspect of Bush's own personal failings has come to light—in the home stretch of a very close election campaign—a starkly different standard is applied by the very pontificators who have seized on real or imagined lapses by Democratic leaders to cast the Bush campaign as something akin to a holy crusade.

The Texas governor held a brief press conference Thursday night, after the story of his 1976 arrest had broken, to say he regretted the incident, but that it had no bearing on the current

campaign. He had kept the incident secret, he claimed, in order to shield his daughters. Without any proof, Bush insinuated and his spokeswoman Karen Hughes directly charged that the Gore camp had planted the news item as part of a "dirty tricks" operation.

The pundits on the evening television talk shows lost no time in denouncing the revelation about Bush. Vulgar loudmouths like MSNBC TV's Chris Matthews and the stable of reactionaries on Rupert Murdoch's Fox network, as well as their inevitable guests—David Gergen, Bill Bennett and the like—pronounced it entirely illegitimate to pry into politicians' private lives and bring up past failings. The 1976 incident had nothing to do with Bush's candidacy or his political views, they all agreed. Bush was almost certainly the victim of a conspiracy hatched by Gore, Clinton, or both.

These scoundrels, whose primary function is to pollute public opinion, obviously feel no need to account for the fact that they took precisely the opposite stance in relation to the Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal. Their hypocrisy is not simply repugnant. Within a certain social context it assumes politically criminal proportions.

How many hours of broadcast time were devoted in 1998-99 to the issue of Clinton's "character"? No talk of privacy rights, partisan motives, or seamy and reactionary political forces operating behind the scenes could be tolerated. All such protestations were a diversion from the real, the only issue—Clinton had pursued an extra-marital dalliance, and he had covered it up!

When the self-proclaimed morality czar Bennett and his ilk were told an elected president should not be hounded from office over a private sexual relationship, they momentarily left off spreading salacious gossip to declare that the issue was not sex, but dishonesty. The establishment media provided them an unlimited field of action.

This was the climate in which a cabal of right-wing conspirators—lawyers, judges, prosecutors, reporters, Republican politicians—was able to engineer the first-ever impeachment of an elected president and try him, unsuccessfully, in the Senate. The endless efforts of Clinton and the Democrats to conciliate the witch-hunters, their refusal to expose the forces involved and the

reactionary agenda that motivated them, was a critical factor in enabling the attempted coup to proceed as far as it did.

Now we learn that Bush was picked up for driving under the influence and has lied about it. *Dallas Morning News* reporter Wayne Slater writes that Bush replied “no” when asked in 1998 if, beyond some acknowledged run-ins with the law as a college student in 1968, he had ever been arrested. There is another report that Bush was asked by Texas newsmen in 1996 point blank whether he had ever been arrested for drunk driving, and the governor evaded the question.

The Bush camp denies Slater's claim, but Karen Hughes acknowledges stating in the past that the Texas governor had never been arrested. Hughes insists that “she was respecting his wishes to keep the arrest from his daughters.” The possibility that Clinton misled investigators about his (non-criminal, but embarrassing) liaison with Lewinsky to prevent his family's finding out the unpleasant truth was never even entertained as a legitimate excuse during the massive probe headed by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr.

As for failings of the distant past, the obscure Arkansas development company known as Whitewater was founded in 1978, two decades before Clinton's impeachment and 16 years before the independent counsel's investigation began. That, however, did not prevent the same forces who have sprung to Bush's defense from insisting on the need for a full-scale inquiry into Whitewater, a probe that spanned six years, cost some \$50 million and produced no evidence of criminal wrong-doing by the Clintons.

One can only imagine the field day the Republicans in Congress and the media would have had during the impeachment drive if a story had turned up about Clinton being arrested for drunk driving 20 years earlier and subsequently concealing the incident. New grand juries would have been impaneled, new subpoenas issued, and dozens of additional people would have had their reputations trashed and their savings frittered away on legal costs.

The Bush controversy helps put the Starr witch-hunt into perspective, and underscores the fact that it was about politics and power, not morality.

There is another issue, which speaks to Bush's character not only as an individual, but as a representative of his social class. This is a man with a troubled, unstable past. Reports of alleged drug use have widely circulated. Bush acknowledges having had problems with alcohol. He drifted for a good many years. “I made mistakes in my life,” he told a crowd in Grand Rapids, Michigan on Friday, “but I'm proud to tell you that I've learned from those mistakes.”

The question is: what has he learned?

The most important lesson to be learned from wrestling with the all-too-human failings shared, to one degree or another, by every member of society is the need for compassion. An individual whose personal demons have led him into brushes with the law—all the more so when the individual has prominent family connections and the advantages of wealth and privilege—would hopefully derive from such experiences a deeper empathy and greater sensitivity to the problems of others, especially those who lack his social advantages.

There is no indication, however, that this lesson has been learned by Bush. If anything, his own past mistakes seem to have rendered

him more callous. As Texas governor he presides, and proudly so, over a justice system that, even by American standards, is a symbol of brutality and inhumanity.

Bush has personally confirmed the execution of 145 individuals, the vast majority of them poor, often abused as children and drug or alcohol-addicted, generally tried and sentenced without the benefit of proper counsel. There can be little doubt that some were entirely innocent. Thousands more men and women languish in Texas jails, sentenced to lengthy terms in prison for drug-related and often nonviolent offenses.

How many of the unfortunates in Texas prisons or even on death row began their descent into a living hell with a run-in with the police not much more serious than Bush's? Unlike Bush, they would have lacked a wad of cash to pay a fine and a family name to assure kid-glove treatment by the authorities. The lives of many victims of poverty and the violence that pervades class relations in America have been damaged, if not destroyed, as a result of relatively minor offenses.

Bush, who asks that his missteps be forgiven and forgotten, shows nothing but cruelty to others. Asked in a recent television interview to recall his most courageous action as Texas governor, he cited his decision to approve the execution of Karla Faye Tucker. In this brutality and arrogance one sees not simply a personal trait, but the ugly face of the American ruling class.

The 1976 arrest is, in and of itself, of little significance. However the response of Bush, the media and the Democrats to its exposure is relevant, insofar as it sheds light on the deeply reactionary program of the Bush campaign and the social forces for which it speaks, and the decay and cowardice of the Democrats, who speak essentially for different factions of the same elite.



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