Cynicism and political reaction in the Bush White House: the case of Karl Rove

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It is a rare occasion in modern American politics when a government official makes a public statement that exposes, baldly and without artifice, the appalling cynicism and ignorance which characterize official Washington and the ruling circles as a whole.

Such is the case with the comments of White House political aide Karl Rove, quoted in an article published in the *New York Times* last Sunday. The article was a saccharine piece of puffery, devoted to praising the alleged transformation of President George W. Bush into a serious and even imposing political leader in the period since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The responsibilities of wartime have had an impact, Rove said, adding, "It's a little more somber when you're dealing with life-and-death issues instead of the patients' bill of rights."

Before simply dismissing this statement as a case of monumental stupidity, it is worth considering who made it. Rove is not a rank-and-file White House minion, but the chief political adviser to Bush both as candidate and president. It was Rove who peddled to the media a lying explanation of Bush's embarrassing failure to return to Washington promptly on September 11. He claimed, without any factual basis, that Bush was acting on the advice of the Secret Service, which had received a serious terrorist threat to Air Force One. No such threat was ever recorded.

The patients' bill of rights, let us recall, is political shorthand for legislation which would restrict to some extent the power of HMOs and insurance companies to deny people needed medical care because of financial considerations. If that is not a life-and-death issue, what is? Far more people are killed every year by such profit-driven medical decisions than by all the terrorists in the world.

Rove's dismissal of the significance of the health care issue demonstrates the base cynicism of Bush's posture of "compassionate conservatism," which he adopted for electoral purposes but largely scrapped once installed in the White House by a 5-4 decision of the Supreme Court.

In the course of 2000, Bush repeatedly claimed to support a patients' bill of rights. He made such a statement during his nationally televised debates with his Democratic opponent. This was part of an effort, spearheaded by Rove, to distance Bush from the unpopular Republican congressional leadership and its politics of grim and heartless reaction.

Once in office, of course, Bush quickly discarded "compassionate conservatism" in favor an all-out campaign to provide corporate America and the wealthy the biggest tax cut in US history. The administration declined to introduce a patients' bill of rights in Congress, relying on the Republican leadership to prevent one from emerging.

Then the Senate unexpectedly reverted to Democratic control and passed a version of the patients' bill of rights. At the instructions of Bush and Rove, the Republican-controlled House went to work, passing its own version, diametrically opposed to the Senate plan, on key points, for the sole purpose of sparing Bush the necessity to veto the legislation.

The Senate bill did nothing to address the more fundamental social issues in the US health care crisis, above all the complete lack of health insurance and guaranteed access to health care for more than 40 million Americans. But that is not why the Bush administration opposed the bill—they objected to any measure, no matter how timid, which might affect the profits of the privately owned hospitals, HMOs and health insurers.

That is where matters stood on September 11, when

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the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon effectively buried the issue of health care reform, as far as the American ruling elite is concerned.

For Bush, Rove & Co., September 11 was a heaven-sent opportunity to drop their pretense of concern and sympathy for the plight of the economically beleaguered—a posture both awkward and unconvincing—and proceed without any further constraint to act in the interests of the most rapacious and selfish sections of the American ruling class.

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