

White House aide Karl Rove witch-hunts Iraq war opponents

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In a heavy-handed effort to intimidate opponents of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, top White House political aide Karl Rove delivered a speech Wednesday in New York City that all but accused critics of these wars of giving aid and comfort to the terrorists. Rove declared that while the Bush administration responded to the 9/11 attacks by waging war, liberals responded by offering “therapy and understanding for our attackers.”

He denounced recent comments by Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois, who compared the methods used at the US detention camp at Guantánamo Bay to those of fascist and Stalinist dictatorships. The previous day, Durbin had made a sniveling recantation on the floor of the Senate.

Noting that Durbin’s original statement had been rebroadcast on Al Jazeera, Rove said it was “certainly putting America’s men and women in uniform in greater danger.” He concluded, “No more needs to be said about the motives of liberals.”

These remarks were a calculated political provocation. Rove delivered them to a convention of the Conservative Party of New York, a rump organization of ultra-rightists that generally lends its line on the statewide ballot to Republican candidates. He spoke in Manhattan, traditionally a stronghold of Democratic Party liberalism, only a few miles from the World Trade Center site where nearly 3,000 people died.

The tone of the speech harkens back to the worst days of McCarthyite witch-hunting in the 1950s, when Republican—and Democratic—red-baiters sought to criminalize every form of left-wing political activity, branding as spies and traitors those who fought for socialist principles or opposed American militarism, racial injustice and corporate domination.

Rove combined allegations of disloyalty and sympathy towards terrorism with militarist demagoguery. September 11 was not a time for “moderation and restraint,” he declared. “It was a moment to summon our national will—and to brandish steel.”

Implying that Democratic Party liberals were little better than traitors, Rove continued, “Conservatives saw what happened to us on 9/11 and said: we will defeat our enemies. Liberals saw what happened to us and said: we must understand our enemies. Conservatives see the United States as a great nation engaged in a noble cause; liberals see the United States and they see ... Nazi concentration camps, Soviet gulags, and the killing fields of Cambodia.”

Behind this reactionary outburst is an intensifying political crisis confronting the Bush administration, the Republican Party, and the

ruling elite as a whole, the driving force of which is the sharp turn in American public opinion against the war in Iraq. Polls have shown a dramatic increase in unease over the war and outright opposition to its continuation, with clear majorities believing that the war was launched on false pretenses and favoring withdrawal of some or all American troops.

Prominent senators in both parties have begun to question the Bush administration’s strategy and tactics in Iraq. Republican Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, a Vietnam veteran, declared last week that “America is losing in Iraq” and that the Bush administration’s claims of steady progress were “completely disconnected from reality about the war.”

Joseph Biden, the senior Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, warned in a speech June 21 that the military position of the United States in Iraq was politically untenable, and that the Iraqi government established by the occupation had little authority outside the Green Zone in Baghdad.

The Bush administration’s optimistic rhetoric was completely at odds with the reality, he said, adding, “This disconnect, I believe, is fueling cynicism that is undermining the single most important weapon we need to give our troops to be able to do their job, and that is the unyielding support of the American people. That support is waning.”

The consternation within ruling circles was on display Thursday at Senate and House committee hearings on the progress of the war, where Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and three top military officers testified. More significant than the highly publicized exchange between Rumsfeld and Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy, who called for Rumsfeld to resign, were the concerns expressed by fervent war hawks on the senate panel.

Democrat Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut warned, “I fear that American public opinion is tipping away from this effort.” Republican Lindsey Graham of South Carolina said, “I’m here to tell you sir, in the most patriotic state that I can imagine, people are beginning to question ... the public views this every day, Mr. Secretary, more and more like Vietnam.”

Another Republican, John Ensign of Nevada, said he believed the US military presence “inspires more insurgents,” and added, “The only way they can win is back here at home, defeating us politically if we lose the support of the American people.”

General John Abizaid, head of the US Central Command, responsible for both Iraq and Afghanistan, told the Senate panel that soldiers in the field were becoming aware of the shift in public

opinion at home, and were asking him “whether or not they’ve got support from the American people.”

He made the obligatory claim that US soldiers were confident of victory, but continued, in an open criticism of Congress and the media, “When I look back here, at what I see is happening in Washington, within the Beltway, I’ve never seen the lack of confidence greater.”

Rumsfeld also blamed his congressional critics for declining public support for the occupation of Iraq. If the American people were turning against the war, he said, “I have a feeling they’re getting pushed.”

It is an article of faith, both in the military brass and in the leading personnel of the Bush administration, that the United States won a military victory in the Vietnam War, but the victory was forfeited because of the activities of the antiwar movement, aided and abetted by sections of the Democratic Party.

This conception recalls the “stab-in-the-back” theory peddled by Hitler and the Nazis, who blamed Germany’s defeat in World War I on the opposition of Jews, Socialists and Communists at home. This served both to cover up the imperialist nature of the war and to provide a suitable domestic scapegoat for the crisis of German capitalism.

The same issue arises in relation to the war in Iraq. Bush, Rove & Co. have drawn the lesson from Vietnam that all opposition to the war must be branded illegitimate, even treasonous. Rove’s speech was a preemptive strike, not so much against the tepid criticism of the Democrats, but against the profound and deep opposition to the war among tens of millions of working people. It is part of a political counteroffensive by the White House leading up to Bush’s scheduled speech on the Iraq, to be delivered on national television June 28.

Rove rehearsed the themes of his New York speech the day before he delivered it, in an interview on MSNBC, where he alternately denied that a majority of the American people had turned against the war and claimed that, if they had, they were giving in to the strategy of the insurgents. “We need to remember,” he said, “that’s part of the goal of the insurgents. Their goal is to weaken our resolve by being so violent and so dangerous and so ugly that they hope that we will turn tail and run.”

In staging such provocations, the Bush administration counts on the spinelessness and impotence of the Democratic Party. Rove’s characterization of the liberals as inwardly sympathetic to terrorism and Al Qaeda is a slander. But his depiction of Democrats as cowardly and mealy-mouthed is apt when it comes to their role as the so-called opposition to the Bush administration.

Senator Durbin’s blubbery apology on the Senate floor—retracting, for the second time, his comparison of Guantánamo to a Nazi or Stalinist concentration camp—was followed by Democratic bluster Thursday in response to Rove’s speech. None of the leading Democrats would call Rove’s speech what it was: an attack on democratic rights and an attempt to deny the legitimacy of political opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, they protested that there were no divisions between liberals and conservatives over the “war on terror.”

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi said Rove “knows full

well, as do all Americans, that our country came together after 9/11.” Defeated 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry called Rove’s statements “an outrageous attempt to divide the nation.”

Senator Jon Corzine of New Jersey said that, after the September 11 attacks, “we weren’t divided. There were no liberals, progressives ... saying that we did not have a need to respond.” He cited the resolution authorizing the Afghanistan war, giving Bush a blank check to use “all necessary and appropriate force,” which passed the Senate 98-0 and the House 420-1.

The subservience of the Democratic Party is rooted in its class position. No less than the Republicans, it is a party of the capitalist ruling elite that defends the interests of American imperialism in the world. Its differences with the Bush administration are purely tactical. They concern the methods being employed, not the goals.

Thus Senator Durbin can denounce torture in Guantánamo, and Senator Kennedy can blast Rumsfeld’s incompetence or Bush’s lies, but not a single leading Democrat will say plainly that the war in Iraq is a predatory war of conquest, aimed at securing oil resources and a decisive strategic advantage for the United States over its imperialist rivals in Europe and Asia.

Both parties support the imperialist aims and goals of the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. But the failure to subdue the insurgencies in both countries has produced differences over how to proceed.

If the Republicans fear that any criticism of their conduct of the war opens the door to a Vietnam-style collapse of political support, the Democrats fear that the arrogance and incompetence of the Republicans are fueling opposition to the war, both within the United States and internationally.

Thus Biden warned in his June 21 speech that “the future, if it results in failure, will be a disaster.” He presented his recommendations for a change of tactics in Iraq, including an appeal for a NATO blocking force to patrol the Iraq-Syria border, as the product of consultations with US military authorities in Iraq. And he claimed that if the American people opposed the war, it was not because of the death toll but because “there is not a plan for success.”

Biden, the chief Democratic spokesman on foreign policy in the Senate, said in his speech: “I want to see the president of the United States succeed in Iraq. It is necessary for the president to succeed in Iraq. His success is America’s success. And his failure is America’s failure. So any good-thinking American would want to see him succeed in Iraq.”



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