

Behind the Foley scandal: A bitter struggle within the US ruling elite

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The furor over Republican Congressman Mark Foley is another instance of a well-established tradition in American politics: the use of media-driven scandals as a means of fighting out policy differences and settling scores within the ruling elite, while manipulating public opinion and concealing from the people the real issues in dispute.

There is now a nearly 35-year record of such scandals, ranging from the sexual peccadilloes of congressmen like Wilbur Mills and Wayne Hays, to the Abscam investigation and “Koreagate,” to the myriad probes of the Clinton administration—Whitewater, Travelgate, and a half dozen others—which culminated in the Lewinsky affair and Clinton’s impeachment.

There is, of course, a powerful element of irony in the current spectacle in Congress. Republican congressional leaders who claimed that Clinton should be removed from office for trying to conceal a sexual affair are now accused of a systematic cover-up to protect a sexual predator. Those who stoked up their political base through appeals to anti-gay bigotry and moralizing condemnation of sexual promiscuity now find themselves hoisted on their own petard.

Perhaps the rankest hypocrisy comes from congressional leaders who complain that the timing of the Foley exposure proves that it is an attempt by the media and the Democratic Party to manipulate the November election. This from the party that has perfected the art of using political provocations to influence election results!

Much of the bitterness in the comments of Bush aides and leading congressional Republicans stems from the feeling that they have been outdone in their own special field. In the current campaign, the Bush administration hoped to use a phony terrorism scare—kicked off with the August allegations of a vast new terrorist plot against US-bound airliners, followed by Bush’s speeches around the anniversary of 9/11—to stampede the electorate.

That being said, it is inarguable that the Foley affair has been seized on by sections of the political establishment—Republican as well as Democrat—to put pressure on the Bush administration and force it to carry out certain changes in policy, particularly in relation to Iraq and the larger Middle East.

The explosion of media attention on the Foley case followed several weeks of attacks on the Bush administration’s conduct of the war in Iraq, first with the leaking of a CIA National Intelligence Estimate that concluded that the war had increased rather than decreased the terrorist threat to the United States.

Then came the publication of *State of Denial*, a book by journalist Bob Woodward, which is an exposure of the incompetence and internal disarray within the Bush administration, all the more damaging because Woodward had written two previous books on Bush’s war policies, in 2002 and 2004, which were largely flattering to the White House.

The combined effects of these attacks could well be a shift in control of one or both houses of Congress to the Democratic Party, a result that now appears increasingly likely. The Democrats are expected to win at least

five Republican-held Senate seats, which would split the upper house 50-50, with Vice President Dick Cheney as the tiebreaking vote. Any further gains by the Democrats would give them control of the Senate.

As for the House of Representatives, a leading Republican congressman, Thomas S. Davis, chairman of the House Committee on Government Reform, told the *Washington Post* this week that the Republicans could lose anywhere from 7 to 30 seats (a loss of 15 would put the Democrats in control). This may well be a deliberate underestimate, with media analysts projecting that as many as 70 Republican seats could be in jeopardy, as opposed to fewer than 20 of the current Democratic seats at risk.

The major issue in dispute within the US ruling elite is the war in Iraq, and more broadly, the course of US policy in the Middle East and Central Asia. It is widely agreed that the results of Bush’s invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have been disastrous for the world position of American imperialism.

The bulk of the deployable ground troops in the US military are bogged down in those two countries, suffering losses, both human and material, that are seriously degrading the long-term effectiveness of the army and Marines, and reducing the credibility of the US threat of force against potential targets like North Korea, Iran, Syria and Venezuela.

Equally important is the political damage both at home and abroad. There is virtually no prospect of public support among the American people for the new military adventures required to expand and extend US control of the oil-rich Middle East and Caspian Basin regions. And all over the world, popular hostility to the United States and to the commercial and strategic interests of American imperialism is at an all-time high.

A consensus has begun to emerge within the financial oligarchy that constitutes the real ruling power in America. It is not for withdrawal from Iraq, which is opposed by every section of the ruling class. It is rather for a change of course, from direct US occupation to a more arms-length relationship, with US troops redeployed to other areas, ranging from Iraq’s neighbors, Syria and Iran, to the Far East or even the Caribbean.

This consensus is expressed in the work of the Baker/Hamilton commission, a panel of high-level ruling class strategists chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker, a longtime Bush family *consigliere*. The co-chairman, the former Democratic chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Lee Hamilton, served in a similar capacity on the 9/11 Commission.

Other members of this panel include Democrats William J. Perry, a former Clinton defense secretary, former senator Charles Robb, and Vernon Jordan, a Clinton crony and former head of the Urban League. The Republicans include former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani and retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor.

For months after the appointment of the commission, it seemed a dead letter. But after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon—backed to the hilt by the Bush administration—produced a military and political debacle, the commission became a vehicle for the demands from within the political

establishment for a rethinking of US strategy in the Middle East.

The Baker/Hamilton commission will not deliver any formal recommendations until after the election, but Baker appeared on ABC television's "This Week" program last Sunday and gave an advance look, saying that the commission "believes that there are alternatives between the stated alternatives, the ones that are out there in the political debate, of 'stay the course' and 'cut and run.'"

Baker openly criticized the Bush administration's refusal to negotiate with Syria, Iran, North Korea and other countries with hostile governments. "I believe in talking to your enemies," he said, recalling his 15 trips to Syria while he was secretary of state in the administration of Bush's father.

After returning from a week-long visit to Iraq, in which they never left the Green Zone, Baker and Hamilton held a press conference to declare that the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had only a few months left to establish its authority and improve security conditions—no later than the end of this year.

In his ABC interview, Baker declared his agreement with Senator John Warner of Virginia, the Republican chairman of the Armed Services Committee, who returned from a visit to Iraq last week warning that the country was "drifting sideways" and calling for a "change of course" if the Maliki government could not stabilize Baghdad and other major cities in two-to-three months.

At his press conference Wednesday—hastily called by the White House in an effort to stem the media avalanche over the Foley scandal and use the North Korean nuclear test to refocus attention on its "war on terror"—Bush seemed for the first time to suggest a willingness to modify his tactics in Iraq. "My attitude is, don't do what you're doing if it's not working—change," he said. But he added, "Stay the course also means, don't leave before the job is done. We're going to get the job done in Iraq."

A change in the tactics being pursued by the Bush administration in Iraq in the wake of the US elections—whether the Republicans or Democrats end up in control of Congress—now seems inevitable. This would not represent a concession to anti-war opinion within the United States and worldwide. On the contrary, it would represent an effort by the American ruling elite to continue an unpopular war in a new and potentially even more bloody form.

The fact is that under the American two-party system, in which both parties are controlled by the financial elite and defend the wealth and power of big business, the vast majority of the American people are effectively disenfranchised.

Millions of working people will vote for Democratic candidates on November 7, and may well elect a Democratic majority in the House and Senate. But while their votes may express their discontent and hatred of the Bush administration, the result will be the election of a party whose leaders are fully committed to essentially the same right-wing policies as the Bush administration, above all on the necessity for US imperialism to maintain its grip on the oil-rich Middle East.

The Democrats continue to voice their desire for "success" and "victory" in Iraq, not an end to a war of aggression. The first action of a House Speaker Nancy Pelosi or Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid will be to call for a bipartisan approach to achieving the goals of American imperialism in Iraq. Pelosi has already scotched all talk of impeaching Bush—a step that would be amply justified given his role as the architect of a war of aggression, a war crime under international law, a defender of torture, and a violator of US laws and civil liberties guaranteed in the US Constitution.

The election serves two interrelated purposes for the American ruling class. It channels in a safe direction the mass sentiment against the war. Some 66 percent of the people believe the war is not worth fighting and a staggering 83 percent believe Bush is lying when he speaks about the war.

But these sentiments will, for the most part, be translated in the voting booth into votes for a party which supports the war and is jointly responsible for the lies.

At the same time, the election provides the opportunity to take the Bush administration down a peg and compel it to make certain changes in policy, particularly related to shifting US military assets to other, equally critical, parts of the world.

There is, certainly, a growing awareness among masses of Americans that the Democratic Party offers no serious alternative to the Republicans. Bush's poll numbers have plummeted without any corresponding rise in popular support for his ostensible "opposition." But discontent with the two existing parties is not enough.

What is required is the development of a consciously anti-capitalist political movement among working people, directed not only against the Democrats and Republicans, but against the entire corporate structure that they defend and represent.

The Socialist Equality Party is running candidates in the 2006 election to advance the struggle to build such a mass political movement of the working class. Our candidates—in New York, Maine, Michigan, Illinois, Oregon and California—are raising the real issues in the election, the issues which the two big business parties refuse to discuss.

We demand an end to the illegal, criminal war in Iraq, and the withdrawal of all US and other foreign troops from Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East and Central Asia. We call for the payment of massive compensation to the people of those countries invaded and laid waste by US arms, and the trial and punishment of Bush, Cheney and all their confederates as war criminals.

We demand an end to the attacks on democratic rights being waged under the banner of the "war on terror." We call for repeal of the Patriot Act, which legalizes police-state spying, and the Military Commissions Act, which sanctions torture and drumhead courts. We call for a serious investigation into September 11, 2001, directed at uncovering the role of US government agencies in permitting and even facilitating the terrorist attacks.

We put forward a socialist program to defend the interests of working people: jobs, decent living standards, the restoration and expansion of public services like education, the establishment of a right to healthcare for all, based on a state-paid medical system. Society must be freed from its subordination to the profit interests of the few—the one percent of millionaires and multi-millionaires—and economic life reorganized based on public ownership and democratic control.

We urge all those opposed to the war in Iraq and the right-wing program of the Bush administration to join the fight of the Socialist Equality Party to build a new political party of the working class.



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