

JUNE 17

Presidential campaigns and media charades

Political myth-making goes into overdrive every four years. With presidential campaigns fixated mostly on media, an array of nonstop spin takes its toll while illogic often takes hold: When heroes are absent, they're invented. When convenient claims are untrue, they're defended.

Many supporters come to function as enablers – staying silent or mimicking their candidate's contorted explanations to try to finesse the gaping contradiction. Fast talk substitutes for straight talk. A kind of "covering fire" across media battlefields makes it easier for the candidate to just keep on dissembling.

There are true believers, of course – people who believe every word that comes out of their own mouths when, for instance, they stand at the podium of the Republican or Democratic convention. Whatever the extent of their sincerity, only superlatives will do as speakers unequivocally praise George W. Bush or John Kerry.

The fact that Bush keeps saying things that aren't true should matter. His repeated statements about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, or supposed links between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein (again explicitly refuted on June 16 by the official 9/11 commission), have been mendacious exercises in deadly propaganda. But the president's avid supporters can't possibly be honest about those lies while speaking to journalists or appearing on radio and television. Instead, we get a whole lot more hooey.

Meanwhile, the man in line to become the Democratic presidential nominee is supporting the current war in Iraq following an invasion based on distortions that he helped to propagate before the war began. In a speech on Oct. 9, 2002, for instance, John Kerry let fly with this rhetorical question: "Why is Saddam Hussein attempting to develop nuclear weapons when most nations don't even try?" Kerry also sought to justify his decision to vote for the congressional pro-war resolution with the statement that "according to intelligence, Iraq has chemical and biological weapons." Yet you can bet that countless Democrats who oppose the current war and never bought the WMD "evidence" will keep pretending – in public, anyway – that there's nothing much wrong

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with Kerry's Iraq stance and general hawkishness.

Partisans are frightened off from engaging in candor – especially within media earshot – because they're afraid of being accused of simply settling for the lesser of two evils. Yet foggy evasions degrade political discourse. We'd be better off bypassing the media's black-and-white political color schemes. In the case of the 2004 presidential race, all military hawks are not alike. The Progressive Unity Voter Fund aptly quotes comedian Dan Kaufman: "The only thing worse than the lesser of two evils ... is the greater of two evils."

The gang in control of George W. Bush's presidency is beyond even the sort of militarism implemented during the 1980s by the administrations of Ronald Reagan and Bush the First. In a new documentary film, "Hijacking Catastrophe," Noam Chomsky comments: "They happen to be an extremely arrogant, dangerous group of reactionary statist. They're not conservatives."

Usually the media game is to choose your presidential candidate and then sing that candidate's praises. But for progressive advocates, the most telling – and honest – way to support Kerry would be to openly acknowledge his pro-corporate and militaristic positions while pointing out that, overall, Bush is significantly worse.

The crying need to defeat the incumbent president is so clear that presidential candidate Ralph Nader says his campaign this year will aid in ousting him. Nader keeps making that claim, which he phrased this way in late March: "I'm going to take more votes away from Bush than from Kerry."

But the Progressive Unity Voter Fund's "Don't Vote Ralph" site provides a chart and backup data from available independent polls (a total of 37) gauging Nader's impact. Titled "How Much Nader Is Helping Bush," the chart is posted at www.dontvoteralph.net/pollwatch.htm – and it demolishes Nader's assertion, while graphically showing why "Bush's brain" Karl Rove must be thrilled that Nader is in the race. Rove's gratitude is especially plausible because Nader is trying to get on the ballot in every state – a big gift to the Bush-Cheney ticket in more than a dozen swing states.

Supporters of Bush, Kerry and Nader differ on many issues. But all too often they're similar in this unfortunate respect: They are willing to go along with absurd pretenses rather than publicly acknowledge that their candidate is blowing smoke.

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