

MAY 31

Impeachment fever and media politics

If you think President Bush should be impeached, it's time to get serious. We're facing huge obstacles – and they have nothing to do with legal standards for impeachment. This is all about media and politics.

Five months into 2005, the movement to impeach Bush is very small. And three enormous factors weigh against it: 1) Republicans control Congress. 2) Most congressional Democrats are routinely gutless. 3) Big media outlets shun the idea that the president might really be a war criminal.

For now, we can't end the GOP's majority. But we could proceed to light a fire under congressional Democrats. And during the next several weeks, it's possible to have major impacts on news media by launching a massive educational and "agitational" campaign – spotlighting the newly leaked Downing Street Memo and explaining why its significance must be pursued as a grave constitutional issue.

The leak of the memo weeks ago, providing minutes from a high-level meeting that Prime Minister Tony Blair held with aides in July 2002, may be the strongest evidence yet that Bush is guilty of an impeachable offense. As Rep. John Conyers, the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, wrote in late May:

* "First, the memo appears to directly contradict the administration's assertions to Congress and the American people that it would exhaust all options before going to war. According to the minutes, in July 2002, the administration had already decided to go to war against Iraq."

* "Second, a debate has raged in the United States over the last year and one half about whether the obviously flawed intelligence that falsely stated that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction was a mere 'failure' or the result of intentional manipulation to reach foreordained conclusions supporting the case for war. The memo appears to close the case on that issue stating that in the United States the intelligence and facts were being 'fixed' around the decision to go to war."

The May 26 launch of www.AfterDowningStreet.org comes from a coalition of solid progressive groups opting to take on this issue with a step-by-step approach that rec-

ognizes the need to build a case in the arena of media and politics. The coalition is calling for a Resolution of Inquiry in the House of Representatives that would require a formal investigation by the Judiciary Committee.

"The recent release of the Downing Street Memo provides new and compelling evidence that the President of the United States has been actively engaged in a conspiracy to deceive and mislead the United States Congress and the American people about the basis for going to war against Iraq," attorney John C. Bonifaz recently wrote to Conyers. "If true, such conduct constitutes a High Crime under Article II, Section 4 of the United States Constitution: 'The President, Vice President, and all civil officers of the United States shall be removed from office on impeachment for, and conviction of, treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors.'"

Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution gives Congress the sole power to declare war – and the argument can be made that White House deception in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq amounted to a criminal assault on that constitutional provision. But "high crimes and misdemeanors" is a very general term. And history tells us that in Washington's pivotal matrix of media and politics, crimes of war have rarely even registered on the impeachment scale.

In 1974, President Nixon avoided impeachment only by resigning soon after the Judiciary Committee, by a 27-11 vote, approved a recommendation that the full House impeach him for obstruction of justice in the Watergate scandal. Only 12 members of the committee voted to include Nixon's illegal bombing of Cambodia – and his lies about that bombing – among the articles of impeachment.

Another war-related impeachment effort came in response to the Iran-Contra scandal. You wouldn't have known it from media coverage or congressional debate, but the Reagan administration's Iran-Contra maneuvers were part of a Washington-driven war that enabled the U.S.-backed Contra guerrillas to terrorize Nicaraguan civilians, killing thousands in the process. When Rep. Henry Gonzalez, a Democrat from Texas, pushed for impeachment of President Reagan (and, for good measure, Vice President George H. W. Bush) in 1987, he stood virtually alone on Capitol Hill.

Gonzalez was back on high moral ground the day before the first President Bush launched the Gulf War. On Jan. 16, 1991, the maverick Democrat stood on the House floor and announced he was introducing a resolution with five impeachment charges against Bush. The National Journal reported: "Among the constitutional violations Bush committed, according to Gonzalez, were commanding a volunteer military whose 'soldiers in the Middle East are overwhelmingly poor white, black and Mexican-American or Hispanic-American,' in violation of the equal protection clause, and 'bribing,

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intimidating and threatening' members of the United Nations Security Council 'to support belligerent acts against Iraq,' in violation of the U.N. charter."

In the past, attempts to impeach presidents for war crimes have sunk like a stone in the Potomac. If this time is going to be different, we need to get to work – organizing around the country – making the case for a thorough public inquiry and creating a groundswell that emerges as a powerful force from the grassroots. Only a massive movement will be strong enough to push over the media obstacles and drag politicians into a real debate about presidential war crimes and the appropriate constitutional punishment.

Norman Solomon's new book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," comes off the press in June. For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com