

Bush says Kerry 'emboldened enemy'

By Bill Berkowitz

workingforchange.com | September 30, 2004

With President Bush and Senator Kerry preparing to square off in their first debate – covering foreign affairs – widespread insurgent attacks and US casualties continue to mount. Have the Bush Administration and its surrogates crossed the line by charging the Kerry campaign with undermining the war effort? Dusting off the “watch what you say, watch what you do” mantra from its post-9/11 playbook, Team Bush appears confident it can level these charges without suffering any significant damage.

With Iraq’s un-elected transitional Prime Minister Ayad Allawi at his side during a White House Rose Garden press conference on September 23, President Bush claimed that critics of his policy in Iraq were encouraging the enemy: “I understand... what mixed messages do. You can embolden an enemy by sending a mixed message. You can dispirit the Iraqi people by sending mixed messages. That’s why I will continue to lead with clarity and in a resolute way.”

At a campaign appearance in Wisconsin the day after his press conference, the president escalated his attack on Kerry’s judgment, taking issue with comments Kerry made about Allawi: “My opponent chose to criticize the Prime Minister of Iraq... questioning the prime minister’s credibility.”

“John Kerry is trying to tear down all the good that has been accomplished, and his words are destructive to our effort in Iraq and in the global war on terror,” vice president Dick Cheney told a GOP rally in St. Joseph, Missouri. “As Prime Minister Allawi said in his speech, and I quote, ‘When political leaders sound the siren of defeatism in the face of terrorism, it only encourages more violence.’ End quote.”

Allawi, who came to the US to trumpet the “successes” of the occupation, made a bit of a splash in what the Washington Post characterized as a “carefully orchestrated series of meetings.” Elisabeth Bumiller wrote in the New York Times: “By the end of the day, it was clear that Dr. Allawi’s visit to Washington, his first as Iraq’s interim prime minister, was not

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simply a trip by a head of government but a politically charged moment in the presidential campaign.”

Parroting Team Bush’s assessment of the situation in Iraq right down to its fine points, Allawi acknowledged that although not everything was going perfectly, nevertheless the January elections will take place as planned.

Senator Kerry wasn’t the only one questioning Allawi’s credibility. According to secret government documents seen by the London Telegraph, more than two years ago British officials warned that Allawi was viewed as “a western stooge” who “lacked domestic credibility.” The newspaper reported that “The Cabinet Office told ministers a year before the war in Iraq that the external opposition, made up of Allawi’s Iraqi National Accord and Ahmad Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress, was ‘weak, divided and lacks domestic credibility.’”

Attacks on Kerry beyond the pale?

Team Bush’s charges against Senator Kerry are “a line of attack that tests the conventional bounds of political rhetoric,” the Washington Post’s Dana Milbank reported. Milbank pointed out a number of other instances where Republicans were playing the “ETE” (emboldening the enemy) card:

* Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), chairman of the Judiciary Committee, said terrorists “are going to throw everything they can between now and the election to try and elect Kerry.” On Fox News, Hatch said Democrats are “consistently saying things that I think undermine our young men and women who are serving over there.”

* GOP Senate candidate John Thune of South Dakota said of his opponent, Senate Minority Leader Thomas A. Daschle: “His words embolden the enemy.” Thune, on NBC’s Meet the Press, declined to disavow a statement by the Republican Party chairman in his state saying Daschle had brought “comfort to America’s enemies.”

* House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (Ill.) said at a GOP fundraiser: “I don’t have data or intelligence to tell me one thing or another, [but] I would think they would be more apt to go [for] somebody who would file a lawsuit with the World Court or something rather than respond with troops.” Asked whether he believed al Qaeda would be more successful under a Kerry presidency, Hastert said: “That’s my opinion, yes.”

Responding to Hastert, and a previous remark by vice president Dick Cheney intimating that a Kerry victory would assure a terrorist attack on the homeland, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) said: “These despicable comments cross the line from partisan politics to shameless fear tactics. . . . Republicans should remember that the reason Osama bin Laden is still able to threaten the United States three years after the September 11th attack is the utter failure of the Bush administration to catch him and destroy al Qaeda.”

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Appearing on FOX News Channel’s FOX & Friends on September 28, David Horowitz, the head of the Los Angeles-based Center for the Study of Popular Culture, and a well-practiced provocative GOP hit-man, claimed that Senator John Kerry’s election would “vastly encourage the terrorist forces” and that civil rights organizations are “in bed with the terrorists,” Media Matters for America reported.

In matters of free speech and dissent we have now come full circle from 9/11. Soon after the terrorist attacks, Americans were hesitant to criticize the president’s war against terrorism, with good reason: When critics unloaded, the administration’s attack dogs were quick to smack them down.

A month after 9/11 White House Press Secretary, Ari Fleischer, responding to comments by comedian Bill Maher – then the host of ABC’s Politically Incorrect and now presiding over HBO’s Real Time – warned Americans that they would “have to watch what they say and watch what they do.”

In November 2001, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), an organization co-founded by Lynne Cheney, the wife of the vice president, and Sen. Joseph Lieberman, issued a report entitled “Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It,” which branded university professors as the weak link in the fight against terrorism.

A month later, while testifying at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, Attorney General John D. Ashcroft said that tactics used by critics of the USA Patriot Act “only aid terrorists” and “give ammunition to America’s enemies.”

In March 2002, William Bennett, formerly the country’s self-appointed guru of morality and now a radio talk show host, founded Americans for Victory Over Terrorism, an organization that promised to call out individuals who had the temerity to question the president’s “war on terrorism.”

In its \$128,000 kick-off announcement that appeared in the New York Times “Week in Review” section, AVOT warned that “While support for U.S. policies is at present very high, we believe that unless public opinion is reinforced, our national resolve will weaken over time.” And this “resolve” is mainly threatened by internal critics, “who are attempting to use this opportunity to promulgate their agenda of ‘blame America first.’”

Do not think that the latest attacks on Senator Kerry’s patriotism and judgment are signs of desperation on the part of the Bush campaign. They are aimed at again setting the Kerry campaign back on its heels. If Team Bush’s surrogates could successfully turn Swift Boat Veterans for Truth’s attack on Senator Kerry’s military record in Vietnam into a summer’s worth of media attention, the president’s advisors are confident that they can level just about any attack and get away with it. Will the Kerry camp confirm that belief?