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War and the Bankruptcy of the Bush Administration **by Richard M. Ebeling**

The war on terrorism and the war on Iraq have become the defining characteristics of the Bush administration and the Republican Party in general. Indeed, without the current war hysteria, President Bush and the Republicans have nothing to stand for and run on in next year's congressional and presidential elections.

Think back to August 2001, just a few weeks before the tragic events of September 11. Ten months after the presidential election of November 2000, public-opinion polls suggested that a large number of Americans still did not consider George W. Bush a legitimate president because of the disputes surrounding the vote count in Florida.

After running a campaign in which he promised greater parental choice in education, he renounced his tepid support for school vouchers. Instead, he called for greater federal control over education through national testing standards and more federal money.

After suggesting that individuals should have more control over their retirement plans through a partial privatization of Social Security heavily regulated by the government, he stopped pushing the idea when both Democrats and some Republicans resisted the proposal. In addition, his tax-cut proposals were considered the palest reflection of those instituted in the Reagan years of the early 1980s.

And on the television news programs, the burning issue that consumed hour after hour of airtime in July and August 2001 was the suspected wrongdoing of Congressman Gary Condit of California in relation to the missing intern Chandra Levy.

In a nutshell, the Bush administration was floundering in the water, with neither agenda nor direction.

Disarray of the Republican Party

In fact, this merely reflected the disarray of the Republican Party in general during the entire decade of the 1990s following the fall of the Soviet Union and the election of Bill Clinton as president in 1992. The Cold War had served as an Archimedean point for the Republicans around which to rally support and try to win elections.

But with the demise of the Evil Empire, there was no longer a terrible foreign foe against whom to run by arguing that Democrats were “weak” on the communist threat to America. In the post-Soviet era, many Republicans didn’t know whether to be for or against continuing U.S. foreign interventionism, other than to mostly react against it whenever Bill Clinton was for it and engaged in it.

On the domestic scene, the Republicans lost whatever positive vision they had tried to project in their 1994 “Contract with America” when Clinton stared them down over the partial freeze on federal government activities. They were more frightened of the bad media fallout when the Washington Monument was closed to tourists than of any loss of political meaning and purpose for their party. It was far easier and less ideologically controversial to try to impeach Bill Clinton for lying about extramarital wrongdoing than to articulate a policy agenda that would in any way challenge the premises and rationale for the interventionist welfare state.

The Republican Party, in other words, has become increasingly bankrupt in terms of both policy and ideology. For decades it has been becoming merely a more “conservative” variation on the Democratic Party conception of the redistributive-regulatory state. What now separates Republicans and Democrats is which special-interest groups have access to the governmental trough.

Whereas the Democrats have traditionally wished to regulate the market, the Republicans have wanted to regulate private and social life. But even that difference has been narrowed as Republicans have increasingly given up on any desire or ideological commitment to even reducing the interventionist welfare state, let alone dismantling any part of it. That was shown with the attempted buying of votes in the 2002 congressional election through the imposition of steel tariffs and increases in farm subsidies. And it has been reinforced with the dramatic increases in domestic federal spending pushed by the White House and approved by the Republican-controlled Congress for the new fiscal year.

Bush's godsend: September 11

However impolitic it may seem to say, the events of September 11, 2001, were a godsend for the Bush administration. Suddenly, the president of the United States stepped forward to make himself the symbol and voice for all Americans shocked and frightened by the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C.

Here was the legitimizing role for George W. Bush. He could stand with the workers looking for the remains of the victims where the Trade Towers had stood and offer his sympathy and condolences to the families of the deceased. He was able to take on the mantle of commander in chief, promising before a joint session of Congress to be the avenging angel who would bring the perpetrators to justice. George W. Bush was now "presidential" and every American's president.

But if a terrorist attack made Bush "the president" in the eyes of the American people, the war on terrorism and the war on Iraq have become the essential ingredients to maintain that status and image. What else defines the Bush administration? In fact, practically nothing other than its self-proclaimed role as the enemy of international terrorism.

The Department of Homeland Security, the invasion of Afghanistan, and now the "liberation" of Iraq are all threads in the emerging tapestry of the Bush agenda for reelection in 2004. Here, at the same time, is the new rationale for voting Republican instead of Democratic. The Republicans are now the party representing America as a global policeman in the name of national security and making the world safe for democracy and peace.

A misguided war on terrorism

But this war on international terrorism is as misguided and counterproductive as earlier wars fought by the federal government, e.g., its wars on poverty, illiteracy, racism, and drugs. It is misguided because practically all the terrorist groups and activities in various countries around the world have their origin in domestic controversies that have had absolutely nothing to do with the United States. They have initially emerged out of political controversies and conflicts within those countries. The decades-old terror campaigns by the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland and a number of Basque independence groups in northern Spain, for example, grew out of disputes over political rights and desires for national self-determination.

However harmful and indefensible acts of terrorism committed by these and similar groups may be to innocent life, they have not historically started by being directed at or concerned with America. What has made them “America’s problem” has been U.S. political and military intervention in numerous parts of the world. And these American interventions have merely embroiled the United States in the domestic disputes of those parts of the world.

Repressing terrorist violence — under the assumption that American military or “special forces” intervention could actually succeed in doing so — has not and cannot eliminate the underlying causes that created the situation existing in those countries in the first place.

Furthermore, American intervention may act only to harden an established political regime’s resistance to reform or change, confident that U.S. power will save it from having to make compromises or concessions. And if the United States attempts to pressure the existing political authority to cut a deal to end the underlying causes generating the conflict, then even America’s client government in that country may begin to see the United States as more of an enemy than a friend.

In addition, this war on terrorism will be counterproductive because it will only continue to arouse the anger and hatred of even more potential terrorists around the world, as such groups now see the United States entering the fray on the side of those with whom they are in conflict. And under the old notion that the friend of my enemy is my enemy, the American government will have made the United States and its citizens new targets for a growing number of terrorist organizations around the world.

The war on Iraq has added an additional dimension to the Bush administration’s agenda — the “liberation” of oppressed peoples in the name of extending democracy and eliminating threatening foreign despots in the cause of world peace. Unconcerned with furthering freedom in the United States, George W. Bush and the Republicans are undertaking the task of bringing freedom to others around the world.

War on terrorism as the new form of social engineering

Another way of conceiving this is that the Bush administration is now determined to extend the “social-welfare function” of the U.S. government to the rest of globe. The United States will remake governments, redesign social institutions, and reeducate entire populations, and mostly at the American taxpayer’s expense.

But what else could be expected from a president and an administration that believe in designing educational standards for every child in America, that hope to remold human character through government-subsidized “faith-based” initiatives and organizations, and that consider it legitimate to play an increasingly large role of “Big Brother,” intruding and prying into ordinary people’s lives in the name of fighting terrorist threats?

Just as other social-engineering visionaries in the last hundred years have arrogantly presumed to possess the knowledge, wisdom, and ability to make over man and society, the U.S. government and the American people will find, over time, that people usually do not want others, especially “foreign outsiders,” to tell them how to live and what to believe. The U.S. government and the American people will be reminded of the law of unintended consequences.

And most especially, the U.S. government and the American people will be reminded of the law of unintended consequences: Rarely do things turn out as planned and they often come with side effects opposite from what was desired or expected. The world, after all, is far more complex than it appears to those who draft blueprints for social reconstruction.

It seems that the American people will have to relearn from sad experience the danger posed by the social engineer, whom Adam Smith called “the man of system,” who he said “is apt to be very wise in his own conceit, and who is often so enamored with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it.” And who “seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon the chessboard.”

Smith also pointed out that the “statesman” who would attempt to tell people how to go about their affairs of life “would not only load himself with a most unnecessary attention, but assume an authority which could be safely trusted, not only to no single person, but to no council or senate whatever, and which would nowhere be so dangerous as in the hands of a man who had folly and presumption enough to fancy himself fit to exercise it.”

It can only be hoped that a war that was more difficult and more costly than the political and military planners had originally anticipated and a postwar occupation that turns out more burdensome and complicated than they had expected and promised will rein in the arrogance of Washington’s “men of system” who want to rearrange nations and peoples on the chessboard of the world.

What can demonstrate the bankruptcy of the Bush administration and the Republican Party in general more clearly than the fact that its agenda and promised legacy is the failed 20th-century

ideology of “planning”? What can highlight more clearly the lack of any “vision thing” on the part of the president and those around him than the pursuit of another “war” for the social good?

But whereas Bush’s Democratic and Republican predecessors in the White House pursued their wars on poverty, illiteracy, and racism mostly with regulations, controls, and taxes, Bush’s wars are real wars. His wars, of course, drain the wealth of Americans through taxes and result in new, oppressive, and intrusive regulations and controls at home. But Bush’s wars, in addition, involve the dropping of bombs and the killing of innocents, the invasion and occupation of foreign countries, and military and political guardianship of faraway places halfway around the world.

The danger from this bankruptcy of the Bush administration is that it may result in the corruption of the last vestiges of limited constitutional government in the United States and foretell the demise of the great American experiment in freedom and the free society.

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