

States of war

Appeasing the armed forces has become a political necessity for the American president

The relationship between governments and those who seek favours from them has changed. Not long ago, lobbyists would visit politicians and bribe or threaten them until they got what they wanted. Today, ministers lobby the lobbyists.

Whenever a big business pressure group holds its annual conference or dinner, Tony Blair or Gordon Brown or another senior minister will come and beg it not to persecute the government. George Bush flies around the United States, flattering the companies that might support his re-election, offering tax breaks and subsidies even before the companies ask for them.

But while we are slowly becoming aware of the corporate capture of our governments, we seem to have overlooked the growing power of another recipient of this back-to-front lobbying. In the United States, a sort of reverse military coup appears to be taking place.

Both the president and the opposition seem to be offering the armed forces, though they do not appear to have requested it, an ever greater share of the business of government.

Every week, the state department makes a list of Mr Bush's most important speeches and visits, to distribute to US embassies around the world. The embassy in London has a public archive dating from June last year. During this period, Bush has made 41 major speeches to live audiences. Of these, 14 - just over a third - were delivered to military personnel or veterans.

Now Bush, of course, is commander-in-chief as well as president, and he has every right to address the troops. But this commander-in-chief goes far beyond the patriotic blandishments of previous leaders. He sometimes dresses up in the uniform of the troops he is meeting.

He quotes their mottoes and songs, retells their internal jokes, mimics their slang. He informs the “dog-faced soldiers” that they are “the rock of Marne”, or asks naval cadets whether they gave “the left-handed salute to Tecumseh, the God of 2.0”. The television audience is mystified, but the men love him for it. He is, or so his speeches suggest, one of them.

He starts by leading them in chants of “Hoo-ah! Hoo-ah!”, then plasters them with praise and reminds them that their pay, healthcare and housing (unlike those of any other workers in America) are being upgraded. After this, they will cheer everything he says. So he uses these occasions to attack his opponents and announce new and often controversial policies.

The marines were the first to be told about his interstate electricity grid; he instructed the American Legion about the reform of the Medicare programme; last week he explained his plans for the taxation of small businesses to the national guard. The troops may not have the faintest idea what he’s talking about, but they cheer him to the rafters anyway. After that, implementing these policies looks like a patriotic duty.

This strikes me as an abuse of his position as commander-in-chief, rather like the use of Air Force One (the presidential aeroplane) for political fundraising tours. The war against terror is a feeble excuse. Indeed, all this began long before September 2001; between February and August that year he gave eight major speeches to the military, some of which were stuffed with policy announcements.

But there is a lot more at stake than merely casting the cloak of patriotism over his corporate welfare programmes. Appeasing the armed forces has become, for President Bush, a political necessity. He cannot win the next election without them. Unless he can destroy the resistance in Iraq, the resistance will destroy his political career. But crushing it requires the continuous presence of a vast professional army and tens of thousands of reservists.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the troops do not want to be there, and that at least some of their generals regard the invasion as poorly planned. At the moment, Bush is using Donald Rumsfeld, the defence secretary, as his lightning conductor, just as Blair is using Geoff Hoon. But if he is to continue to deflect the anger of the troops, the president must give them everything they might want, whether or not they have asked for it.

This is one of the reasons for a military budget that is now entirely detached from any possible strategic reality. As the World Socialist website has pointed out, when you add together the \$368bn for routine spending, the \$19bn assigned to the department of energy for new nuclear weapons, the \$79bn already passed by Congress to fund the war in Iraq and the \$87bn that Bush has just requested to sustain it, you find that the US federal government is now spending as much on war as it is on education, public health, housing, employment, pensions, food aid and welfare put together.

You would expect this sort of allocation from a third world military dictatorship. But all this has come from a civilian leadership. It is not just Bush. Such is the success of his re-ordering of national priorities, not a single Democrat on the congressional appropriations panel dared to challenge the government's latest request.

Bush's other big problem, which has quietly tracked him ever since he declared his candidacy, is that he is a draft-dodger who failed even to discharge his duties as a national guardsman, while some of his most prominent political opponents are war heroes and generals. To win the Republican nomination, he had to beat John McCain, the fighter pilot and prisoner of war who won the silver star, bronze star, purple heart, legion of merit and distinguished flying cross for his bravery in Vietnam. To go to war with Iraq, Bush had to overcome the resistance of his secretary of state Colin Powell, the general who was formerly the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff.

To win the next election, he may have to beat Wesley Clark, who was the commander of Nato forces during the war in Yugoslavia and is currently the Democrats' favoured candidate. Bush's reverse coup has meant that the Democrats must suck up to the armed forces as well, in order to be seen as a patriotic party. Wesley Clark's campaigning slogan is "a new American patriotism".

The last general to have been appointed president, though as belligerent as any other, understood that there was a potential conflict between his two public roles. As a result, Dwight Eisenhower never wore a uniform while in office, or engaged in the hooting and chest-thumping with which George Bush greets his troops. His warning about the dangers of failing to contain "the military-industrial complex" has been forgotten.

Tony Blair has also played the tin soldier, but with less success. He was the first western leader to arrive in Iraq after George Bush prematurely announced victory there. But when he addressed the troops, they remained silent. I am told by a good source that the generals are furious with him for sending them to war on false pretences. But in America, the armed forces, whether they want it or not, are being dragged into the heart of political life. A mature democracy is in danger of turning itself into a military state. #