

JULY 9

The media's class war

The morning after John Kerry announced that John Edwards will be his running mate, powerful newspapers fired warning shots across the bow of the Kerry-Edwards campaign.

"It is likely that Mr. Edwards will be dispatched to critical industrial states like Ohio to talk about jobs, as he did with such force in the primary," the liberal New York Times editorialized. "We hope that he'll refrain from falling into protectionist rhetoric in the process."

Over at The Washington Post, an editorial that voiced less overall enthusiasm for Edwards underscored the same basic concern: "Mr. Edwards improved as a candidate during the primaries, but he also demonstrated, especially toward the end, an unfortunate tendency to cater to popular but irresponsible positions. Mr. Edwards was powerful, even moving, when he spoke about how the country was divided into two Americas, with one tax system, one school system, one health care system for the rich, and an inferior version for everyone else. Yet his lurch toward protectionism on trade was disappointing for a candidate who we thought knew better."

On the Times op-ed page, two columnists had their say. Conservative William Safire pooh-poohed the new V.P. candidate, calling him "the happy class warrior, the smoothest divisive force in politics today."

Meanwhile, liberal columnist Nicholas Kristof had a lot of favorable things to say about Edwards. But there was a problem. Edwards "may continue to wave a protectionist cudgel at trade issues – and that was worrisome. After all, Kristof warned, "trade populism would mark a retreat from President Clinton's embrace of globalization. Mr. Kerry and Mr. Edwards should remember that Mr. Clinton won the electorate without turning demagogic on trade."

Is there an echo in here?

Whether praising Edwards, bashing him or somewhere in between, the mainstream spectrum of media punditry is on the same page about "globalization" (the misleading buzzword for corporate globalization). Media coverage often equates promoting the

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trade agendas of huge corporations with providing responsible leadership.

And, in the simple algebra of corporate media, "protectionism" equals "demagogic." So, in the media worldview, economic populism is like a dog that must be housebroken and kept on a leash. Sometimes, to maintain discipline, it needs to be whacked on the nose with a newspaper.

The specter of bottom-up "class warfare" that worries most corporate-employed pundits is the same sort that riles the top-down class warriors at places like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Just hours before Kerry announced his choice of Edwards, a Wall Street Journal story – headlined "Business Elite Vows to Take On Kerry If He Taps Edwards" – reported that the Chamber's president, Tom Donohue, was vowing to "get the best people and the greatest assets we can rally" against the Democratic ticket if it became a Kerry-Edwards duo.

Said Donohue: "It is about something so fundamental to what we do here at the chamber that we can't walk away from it."

"What we do here" at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is to help lead the incessant political war against proposed measures to protect the health and well-being of working people – whether in the form of a raise in the nation's paltry minimum wage, or more compensation for injuries on the job, or corporate liability for dangerously defective consumer products.

As an unrepentant trial lawyer, John Edwards represents some willingness to side with victims of corporate abuses. Edwards may not be much of an anti-business candidate, but big business is overwhelmingly anti-Edwards.

Groups like the National Federation of Independent Business and the National Association of Manufacturers have now pulled the knives out. "A lot of people just don't understand that Enemy No. 1 for large and small business is not China, it's not terrorism," says NAM's president, Jerry Jasinowski. "It's the extreme trial lawyers." Better for workers and consumers to be even more vulnerable to the tender mercies of corporations and their squads of attorneys.

Former House Majority Leader Dick Armey quickly went on the attack after Kerry named Edwards, accusing the vice presidential candidate of representing "the well-connected swarm of trial lawyers who twist our legal system to pillage the productive sector for personal gain." Armey is a right-wing Republican who now chairs the business-funded Citizens for a Sound Economy, a pro-Bush organization that has begun to assist efforts to get presidential candidate Ralph Nader on the ballot in swing states.

The Philadelphia Inquirer reported on July 4: "Citizens for a Sound Economy

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spokesman Chris Kinnan says the group will aid Nader's signature-gathering efforts in Florida and Wisconsin." According to the newspaper, Kinnan also commented: "We're watching Pennsylvania. We will likely activate our state network (10,000 members) as Nader gets closer to the ballot deadline." The organization's president, Matt Kibbe, said on CNN that "we're looking at Washington state where Nader's trying to qualify for the ballot" and added that "we're looking at all the swing states."

The direct and indirect efforts by big business groups to help defeat the Kerry-Edwards ticket are largely fueled by worries that ousting Bush from the White House would be detrimental to mega-profits, outsized corporate power and deregulation measures. Such concerns are shared in the executive suites of quite a few media conglomerates, which employ large numbers of editorial writers and pundits who denounce "protectionism."

For more than a decade, studies by the media watch group FAIR (where I'm an associate) have repeatedly documented major imbalances in news coverage and editorial positions on "free trade" issues by media outlets. For instance, a search of the Nexis database for the month of April 2001, when the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas pact was prominent in the news, "found 34 editorials in U.S. papers supporting the FTAA – and none opposing it."

That's the kind of buzzsaw that John Edwards' mild "protectionism" is encountering in the nation's mainstream press.

Norman Solomon's latest book, "Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You", co-authored with foreign correspondent Reese Erlich, is now available as a free download at www.coldtype.net.