

The hijacking of 9/11

By Bill Berkowitz

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I first heard the phrase “I am a September 11th person” during a 2003 interview on the Fox News Channel. At the time, actor Ron Silver told Neil Cavuto, host of the daily afternoon program *Your World with Cavuto*, that “There are two kinds of people. There are September 10th people and September 11th people, and I am a September 11th person.”

Silver, who likely still considers himself a liberal Democrat, admitted that his politics changed forever on 9/11 and that he supported President Bush’s prosecution of the war on terror (he has since said that he’s always been a hawk on national security issues). At the Republican Party’s national convention Silver reiterated his support for President Bush: “I think there are September 10 people and there are September 11 people. I’m one of the latter. Everything changed for me. Since then I see everything through the prism of what happened that day,” he said.

“For me this election is about one issue and that is the response to 9/11,” he went on. “I think the president is doing exactly the right thing.” And, according to most recent polls, that is what the majority of Americans appear to believe.

In addition to telling Cavuto how 9/11 had reformulated his core beliefs and changed his political allegiances, Silver implied something a bit more insidious: In order to be a “9/11 person,” you had to get behind President Bush’s prosecution of the war on terror.

Vice President Dick Cheney took that notion one step further recently when, during a campaign stop in Des Moines, Iowa, he placed the administration’s claim on 9/11 in the starkest of terms. At a town hall meeting attended by 350 of the party faithful, the vice president eerily evoked memories of Lyndon Johnson’s infamous mushroom cloud television advertisement during the 1964 presidential campaign against Republican Barry Goldwater. “It’s absolutely essential,” the vice president said, “that eight weeks from today, on Nov. 2, we make the right choice, because if we make the wrong choice then the danger is that we’ll get hit again and we’ll be hit in a way that will be devastating from the standpoint of the United States.”

The reality behind Cheney’s remarks, wrote the *New York Times*’ Maureen Dowd, is that while “Cheney implies that John Kerry couldn’t protect us from an attack like 9/11, [he] blithely ignore[s] the fact that he and President Bush didn’t protect us from the real 9/11.

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Think of what brass-knuckled Republicans could have made of a 9/11 tape of an uncertain Democratic president giving a shaky statement that looked like a hostage tape and flying randomly from air base to air base, as the veep ordered that planes be shot down.”

For all Americans, life itself changed on 9/11. For those who lost loved ones, that day will never fade into memory. But, as any good spinmeister understands, perception can easily become reality. While everything was changing for all Americans, Republicans saw an opening and seized it. They tried to make 9/11 their own.

For all opportunistic intents and political purposes, the Bush Administration appropriated 9/11. Remember that one of Bush's first campaign advertisements — which ultimately proved to be so controversial that it was used sparingly — invoked the memory of 9/11. By continually playing on 9/11 the administration intends to stir up fear, followed by its claims that it can save the American people from another attack on the homeland.

Since 9/11, the country has been consumed by an administration involved in a symbiotic relationship that encompasses fighting terrorism abroad while securing the homeland, and winning elections at any cost. To win elections administration spokespersons will say and do anything. And their strategy appears to be bearing fruit: In most recent polling, safeguarding the nation from a terrorist attack is the public's number one priority.

The terrible irony is that while the administration may continue to win elections, it is losing the war against terrorism. And, at the same time, it has diverted precious resources away from homeland security.

According to a new report published by Foreign Policy in Focus entitled A Secure America in a Secure World, “The Bush administration's ‘war on terrorism’ reflects a major failure of leadership and makes Americans more vulnerable rather than more secure. The administration has chosen a path to combat terrorism that has weakened multilateral institutions and squandered international goodwill.”

The administration's efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq have made the United States “more vulnerable and have opened a new front and a recruiting tool for terrorists while diverting resources from essential homeland security efforts,” the report contends.

Nevertheless, if Team Bush convinces the American people that John Kerry's election will result in a devastating terrorist attack in the homeland — as vice president Cheney suggested — President Bush will win the election. If Americans vote their fears over the failing economy, if they vote fear over the disaster that is Iraq, if they vote fear over civil liberties, the protection of the environment, greater educational opportunities, and the protection of Medicare and Social Security, Republicans will emerge victorious on November 2.

Before there was a Bush Administration and before there was a 9/11, a coterie of

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neoconservative ideologues had regime change in Iraq on their agenda. This agenda was never secret: It was spelled out in numerous documents and articles, and put forward in a series of speeches delivered in Beltway think tanks throughout the 1990s.

After 9/11, the first target was Afghanistan. The goals: Quickly remove the Taliban, disperse al Qaeda's network of terrorists and "smoke out" and capture or kill Osama bin Laden, the number one "evildoer," and claim victory. Yet, as has been amply documented, the number one target for the neoconservatives has always been the removal of Saddam Hussein from Iraq. Despite the fact that Hussein had nothing to do with the events of 9/11, never mind that he had no connections to al Qaeda, toppling his regime was all about the neoconservatives' vision for twenty-first century American hegemony in the region.

If the occupation of Iraq was going well, if there weren't so many US dead — 1007 at press time — and wounded, if there wasn't a growing insurgency, we would be hearing more about how the "successful" invasion transformed the country into a democracy.

If the economy was in better shape, if the massive debt was being reduced, if the poverty rate was falling, or if more jobs were being created, the Bush campaign would be talking about these issues and accomplishments.

With so few successes, however, it ultimately all flows back to Bush's hole card — the war against terrorism. And that flows back to the administration's hammer-lock on 9/11. For the past three years, the Bush Administration has marketed, managed, massaged and manipulated the tragedy of 9/11. Karl Rove's strategy for victory in November revolves around 9/11. Do Republicans own 9/11? Does the Bush Administration have a special claim to the grief of the victims' families? Considering the inept, panicked and clumsy response of the president and vice president to events on September 11, 2001, these men have no right to claim they can protect America from another attack. (For a thorough and precise chronicling of the first few hours after the terrorist attacks see September 33rd — <http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?emx=x&pid=1814> <http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?emx=x&pid=1814> — by Tom Engelhardt.) 9/11 isn't the property of the Bush Administration and it can never be allowed to be viewed that way.

A statement - http://www.truthout.org/docs_04/091204Z.shtml - issued by September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows on 9/11 reads in part: "Today, as we commemorate September 11, 2004, we find that our worst fears have been realized. The terrorism of September 11th has been neither neutralized, nor ended, by the terrorism of war."

Being a 9/11 person means that you don't buy into the fear stirred up at every turn by this administration. Being a 9/11 person means that you don't slavishly support preemptive strikes and phony wars. Being a 9/11 person means that while you commemorate the day and honor the dead, you continue to fight for a more peaceful world.