

While we were distracted

A FEW weeks ago I rode my bike past the mayor of Buffalo's house on my way to work as I do most days. This day was memorable, however, since city workers assigned to the "Mayor's Impact Team" were outside his house doing a few gardening chores. The mayor's house abuts city-owned property, and the Impact Team was busily clearing away brush and installing a shrub on a parcel contiguous to the mayor's front garden.

Two blocks away, the sidewalk on a highway overpass was still encrusted with ice from a previous storm. High school students on their way to school were precariously trying not to slip off the icy sidewalk and into rush hour traffic. The Impact Team usually clears the sidewalk on the overpass. On this day, the students would just have to struggle on and hope for the best. The impact team was otherwise occupied. The mayor's shrubs had obviously arrived.

I just shook my head, and rode on. This is the kind of thing journalists are usually elated to stumble upon. But not me. The war in Iraq was raging, and I had neither time nor editorial space to deal with the minutia of Buffalo's day to day corruption. People were dying en masse. Journalists were being killed. The rule of international law was going to hell. The story of the misappropriation of city resources at a time when Buffalo could hardly provide essential services would just have to go unreported.

Of course the mayor's inappropriate gardening is not the only story to slip by unnoticed in the fog of war. The Bush team has been at least as busy on the domestic front as they've been in Iraq, but the horrors of a bunch of frat boys threatening to hijack the US

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military on a joyride across the Middle East has been rather distracting – and rightfully so. It has also all but monopolized the domestic press corps in a way that is usually reserved for a presidential blowjob or a celebrity murder trial has.

Meanwhile in Afghanistan

So let's look at some of the other under-reported stories. The war in Afghanistan is raging once again, with Taliban forces regrouping and asserting control over increasing parts of that country. It's been 18 months since the US invaded Afghanistan, but all we've seen so far is a puppet government that controls little outside of Kabul, and a host of oil pipeline contracts for associates of the Bush/Cheney administration. Pro-war hawks are raucously invoking Afghanistan as a model for the rebuilding of Iraq – no doubt banking on the public's ignorance regarding that country and our ongoing war there.

The war in Columbia is also heating up, with US military personnel getting deeper and deeper into that conflict, much as the US slowly became involved in the Vietnam war in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In addition to Columbia, Afghanistan and Iraq, US forces are currently deployed in 141 other countries – with each place posing unique challenges or threats.

The scariest stories, however, are coming from the home front. That's where the Bush administration, without much attention from the media, is undertaking a radical and multifaceted attack against American political traditions and values. They're also waging class war against the poor and an ecocidal war of pillage against the environment.

Deficit culture

The current regimen of tax cuts for the rich promises to produce enormous gashes in America's social fabric, cutting funding for public education, benefits for veterans (including those future veterans putting their lives on the line today in the Bush wars), health care for senior citizens, environmental law enforcement and so on. At the same time, these cuts will create the largest American federal deficit in history – driving up interest rates, hence cutting the supply of capital to businesses. The new deficit culture will mandate an otherwise politically untenable redefinition of government – undoing a century's worth of progress by eliminating the social safety net.

On the line in this new America are public education and health programs that are the hallmark of industrial democracies the world over. The Bush tax cuts will essentially bankrupt the US government – forcing a Guatemalanization of the US economy. The new America, like Guatemala, the "model democracy" where I was living when the elder Bush was elected president, will be populated by a small rich elite and a massive population of

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poor people who toil longer and longer hours for less and less money, unable to pay for the basic needs of their families. The Bush tax cuts, coupled with his administration's propensity to give public monies to corporate benefactors, also means that working Americans will be nickel-and-dimed by a plethora of new little taxes and fees. Hence, as federal funding to municipalities dries up, and federal spending for education evaporates, we'll see ever increasing college tuition bills, new municipal user fees and a host of other regressive taxes. The economic restructuring of America which began during the Reagan/Bush administration, is accelerating to supersonic levels – all obscured by the fog of war.

What war on terrorism?

Also on the chopping block are anti-terrorism and homeland security programs. New York City, which ironically is the nation's prime terrorist target even though it's ground zero for anti-Bush political power, has already been forced to cut 4,000 police positions since 2001. Hurt by the Bush recession and starved for the federal funds promised after the 9/11 attacks, New York is also planning to close 40 fire companies and eliminate as many as 1,500 fire fighters. Among the firehouses slated to be closed are many who sent fire fighters to the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. New York's four billion dollar deficit is exacerbated by one billion dollars' worth of annual mandated counter-terrorism costs, partially as a result of the heightened terrorist threat accompanying the Iraq war and the ensuing anti-American hatred it is inspiring.

Every homeland security agency from the Coast Guard and Customs Service to the Atomic Energy Commission is starved for the funds needed to safeguard domestic targets from potential attacks. One nuclear plant in East Rutherford, New Jersey recently visited by journalists, for example, could cause the deaths of seven million people – yet it doesn't have funding for a security staff. Bush's Energy Secretary Spencer Abrams went public more than a year ago, detailing the security threat posed by nuclear power plants such as the one at Indian Point New York, which the 9/11 hijackers chose to fly over instead of diving into. Abrams give a preliminary bare bones budget needed to start to secure such plants. The Bush administration funded only seven percent of Abrams' request. The list goes on and on. What is clear is that the Bush administration does not view the supposed terrorist threat as real – which is another unreported story in and of itself.

Whether or not the terrorist threat is real, the threat posed by anti-terrorist legislation is indeed real. While we were watching the carnage in Iraq, the Bush administration has been quietly pushing their new, more threatening, oxymoronically named Patriot Act II. The new proposal would give the federal government the power to strip American citizenship away from citizen's deemed "enemy combatants" by the Justice Department.

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Once stripped of citizenship, they can be held indefinitely without charges, trial or conviction. The bill will also further increase the big brotheresque surveillance powers of the emerging police state while allowing it to detain or even punish people simply suspected of "terrorist" crimes.

See you in jail

The very notion of the world "terrorism" is also up for review, with an Oregon bill providing a warning of legislation to come. Oregon's Senate Bill # 742 redefines a terrorist as anyone who "plans or participates in an act that is intended, by at least one of its participants, to disrupt" business, transportation or government. The minimum sentence is 25 years to life. While this bill is destined to be voted down in committee, it is telling of the bold and shameless political culture that is festering under the tutelage of the Bush regime. Bill # 742, if applied in New York, would have put at least 200,000 of New York's February 15th anti-war protestors in prison for a minimum of 25 years, tripling the state prison population at a cost of about \$8 billion per year. Such nonsense would be laughable in its absurdity if it weren't real – but it is not atypical in Bush's America. Perhaps this is why traditional right wing groups such as The Eagle Forum and the American Conservative Union have joined with groups like the American Civil Liberties Union and the Electronic Frontier Foundation to oppose the new expanded Patriot Act.

There are also larger issues being left unreported as we focus on the daily saga of American troops in Iraq. Foremost is the fact that each one of the United States' military victories during the last 15 years seems to have left us less, not more, secure. The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 left the world's second largest arsenal of Weapons of Mass Destruction dispersed among a slew of impoverished chaotic little countries, as well as a crime-ridden Russia. When we speak of terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction, we're usually referring to these former Soviet weapons, left in the charge of bankrupt agencies and hungry corrupt guards.

Nukes for everyone

The first Gulf War showed the world the US had no compunctions about slaughtering Arab peoples, and hence fueled a generation of suicide bombers – including probably, the 9/11 terrorists. The current Iraq war was supposedly about Weapons of Mass Destruction – which by all accounts were destroyed by the Iraqis in accordance with UN mandates. If the Bush regime's claims that these weapons weren't destroyed are true, then where the hell are they? If we are to take the Bush folks at their word – that this war wasn't about oil, but about weapons of mass destruction – then this war certainly hasn't made us any

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safer, since Saddam Hussein and the weapons are both missing. Saddam now has nothing to lose, and there is no country to blame if he turns these weapons over to his former enemies in al Qaida, who are also floating around the missing in action underworld. So what is it? Are the Bush folks liars? Or are we fucked?

Nuclear weapons proliferation will now be a bigger problem than ever before in history thanks to the Iraq war. The message there was clear. If you do not have nuclear weapons you are vulnerable to one of the United States' new "preemptive" wars. If you really have weapons of mass destruction, on the other hand, you have an effective deterrent, not just against a US attack, but against any attack. The race is on. Oh yeah, the South Korean (they're our friends, in case you were confused) newspaper, the Korea Times, reports that an unarmed North Korean test missile recently landed in Alaska.

Rebuilding Republican war chests

The story of the rebuilding of Iraq is another story that seems to be about the Iraq war, but if reported differently, is actually a domestic issue. Take for instance Bechtel and Halliburton, where Dick Cheney was CEO prior to his Vice Presidency. Both corporations just received down payments on what promises to be multibillion dollar contracts to rebuild Iraq. Both corporations have very close ties to the Bush administration and the Republican party. Both have already seen tremendous paybacks on their comparatively minor investments in the Republican party. Now, with millions pouring into their corporate coffers, they will no doubt exercise their largesse in the next election cycle. Dozens of corporations are in similar situations – with a new federal money train funneling tax dollars into corporate coffers and ultimately into the Bush re-election campaign. This is especially frightening considering that in the last federal election cycle, the congressional candidates who spent the most money won in 95% of the races. The multibillion dollar campaign to rebuild Iraq threatens to further poison the remnants of our democratic culture as the kickbacks start pouring in. And please, do not doubt that political regimes doling out no-bid billion dollar deals are rewarded for such favors.

Even so, the 2004 election is still a crap shoot. Call me romantic, but I don't think the American electorate is brain dead. Anesthetized maybe – but not quite dead.

Michael Moore offers one of the best rays of hope. His book, *Stupid White Men*, which is primarily about the Bush administration, spent 50 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list – with eight weeks in the top slot. His film, *Bowling for Columbine*, about America's culture of violence and racism, with a strong anti-Bush message, just broke all records for the most money grossed by a documentary film – by a factor of three. Preorders for the VHS version are running higher than those for *Chicago*, which won the

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Oscar for Best Picture. Bowling for Columbine is also the longest running commercial release in America today, with 28 weeks as a first run film and still going strong. Moore's website now gets up to 20 million hits per day – besting the White House on some days. The point is – you can stand up to these people. You just have to stay out of small planes.

The Dixie Chicks are in a similar position. After their lead singer spoke out against the Bush administration's war plans, corporate-owned radio stations began boycotting their songs. Record stores cancelled orders. And the media generally reported that sales of their music was way down. But this isn't true. To the contrary, Michael Moore points out that their CD stayed at #1 on the Billboard country charts and rose from #6 to #4 on Entertainment Weekly's pop music charts. And Ani DiFranco, threatened with a last minute cancellation of a New Jersey show because she wanted to invite guests to speak out against the war, went ahead and invited those guests up on stage anyway. The show wasn't cancelled and Ani remains unstoppable. The point is – the anti-war momentum never waned. It only became lost in the fog of war. Lost as we became obsessed with an army of embedded reporters.

According to The Nation, more people watched Comedy Central's The Daily Show (4 million) at the height of the war, than watched Rupert Murdoch's Fox News (3.3 million). And why not – Comedy Central actually had better war coverage. Though, ironically, Fox's coverage was funnier.

Hang in there. ●