

The new face of fascism at the GOP Convention

LATELY, when reporting on the Bush Junta, I've found myself overusing a few select words such as "surreal." Surreal, however, seems to be the best word for describing last week's Republican Convention. Bizarre surreal theater. It was surreal to see a political convention where the party's politics were kept from public view like soiled bed sheets.

While the Republicans adopted the most draconian reactionary political platform in modern history, they used their prime-time stage mostly to pimp the more liberal views of moderate Republicans such as Rudolf Giuliani, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Michael Bloomberg – views that the party is often diametrically opposed to. We got to see the Bush twins, now 22 years old, snicker like Beavis and Butthead while reading a fuzzy comedy script about their family life. But we didn't get to hear them talk about the gay wedding they were rumored to be planning to attend on September 11 – a wedding that would be outlawed under the Republican platform championed by their adoring father.

It was surreal to see Schwarzenegger tell a cheering convention of the nation's leaders that Democrats were "girly men." It was surreal to watch former Buffalo Bills quarterback Jim Kelly hooting "Youuu Esssss Ayyyyy" as Dick Cheney railed on about a brave new world. And it was surreal to watch thousands of Republican delegates flailing about waving beach slippers and chanting "flip flop" as if they were cheese heads at a Green Bay Packers game – not delegates about to nominate George W. Bush for the presidency.

GOP regulars were introduced on stage with a trademark Saturday Night Live style video, calling out their names as if they were comedians lining up to appear on weapons manufacturer General Electric's NBC late night comedy show. But there's nothing comical

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about this year's Republican agenda. Their hush hush platform calls for privatizing (ending) Social Security, outlawing reproductive choice, and making it illegal for states to recognize current legal rights of gay partners.

Disrespecting New York's tragedy

From the podium we got a lot of song and dance acts, as if the circus came back to Madison Square Gardens – but there was little political substance in this choreographed performance. There were wild utopian promises of a new day, but absolutely no plans or details. It was a political convention designed, like an ad for a powerful gas guzzling SUV, to appeal to emotion – not logic. The convention took viewers on a schizophrenic roller coaster ride, with every major speaker referencing the tragedy of 9/11 (the GOP platform makes 20 references to 9/11), only to have the ensuing somber moments of grief punctuated by bizarre cheesy MTV style comedy routines or delegates dancing to Soul Man.

Many of the images, especially those on the GOP's own Fox News network, bore an uncanny and frightening resemblance to Leni Riefenstahl's classic Nazi propaganda film, "Triumph of the Will," which was a documentary about the 1934 Nazi party convention. This is no accident. The 1934 Nazis spoke about the same things the GOP is speaking about – strength, pride and power. Like the GOP convention, it was theater devoid of politics. It was a performance unmarred by the putrid stench of their reactionary agenda. This cleansing of the political theater to remove political substance from partisan performance is the essence of fascism.

Fascism also reared its ugly head at a convention-related gathering of the Young Republicans. When a group of peaceful AIDS activists unfurled protest signs at the event, they were immediately and violently set upon, Brown Shirt style, by the Young Republicans. The Secret Service and the police rescued them by arresting them. ABC TV focused on reporting in detail about the Republicans beating of a young woman activist.

NPR praises Lincoln

Surreal is also the best word to describe National Public Radio's reporting of the Republican convention. As New York came alive with massive anti-Republican anti-war anti-fascism protests at the opening of the convention, NPR took to reporting on GOP conventions from the late 1800s. Hence, the reactionary 2004 platform took a back seat to the GOP's progressive anti-slavery stances of the 1860s.

Politically, NPR's history of the Republican Party focused more on the age of dinosaurs and Neanderthals than on the history of civilization. While celebrating Abraham Lincoln's

legacy, they glossed over the religious fundamentalist takeover of today's Republican Party, its corporate controlled economic agenda, its subtle and not so subtle racism and the neo-fascism of John Ashcroft. Lincoln must be stirring in his grave.

I guess "fascism" is another word that I'll be overusing for at least the next few months. It's a term I've always avoided when describing American politics. Like the words "genocide" or "ethnocide," it's a word that should be deployed judiciously so that it is not stripped of its power like an over prescribed antibiotic. And we should never cry "fire" in a crowded nation. The rapidly changing political climate in this country, the nationwide repression of free speech and the harassment of anti-Bush patriots mandate that we identify ideologies by their proper name. It's time to yell fire.

Targeting the Press - again

The fascism of the Bush administration is rearing its ugly head in various ways. This week they went after the New York Independent Media Center (IMC) which publishes the New York Independent newspaper (recent circ. 200,000) and runs New York's Indy Media website (nyc.indymedia.org). New York's cooperatively run IMC has emerged as the largest news agency covering the GOP convention, offering the most comprehensive coverage of the protests, counter-conventions, art installations, political theater, marches, teach-ins etc. associated with the Republican convention.

Last week John Ashcroft's Justice Department (I guess "Orwellian" is another of those words that keeps coming to mind) subpoenaed the records of the IMC's Internet service provider, launching an investigation of the IMC. The IMC's crime, according to the Justice Department, was to list the names of the delegates to the Republican convention. There's nothing illegal about this, however. The delegates are officials of the Republican Party and are players in the public political arena. The GOP convention is not a secret cabal and the Republican Party is not a secret society. They don't wear white hoods. They have faces, names and political ideologies. They are the political players who are nominating George W. Bush and they are not above reproach.

The IMC's problem is that they are part of the unembedded media. While approximately 10,000 journalists have shacked up with the Republicans in the James A. Farley Building, hosted by a public relations firm (GCI Inc.) retained by the Republican Party, IMC reporters have stayed steadfast on the streets of New York. The Washington Post reports that services provided to the mainstream press by the Republicans included "very soothing and relaxing" facials, manicures, massages and a plethora of gourmet treats. The IMC reporters, by contrast, spend their time dodging pepper spray.

Despite the harassment, the IMC has been prolific in posting moment-by-moment stories and videos from diverse anti-Bush events all across New York as well as from reporters infiltrating the conventions as volunteers.

The official charge against the IMC is "voter intimidation," as if questioning a public official's politics is criminally intimidating. Ironically, the Justice Department hasn't launched a voter intimidation investigation looking into Jeb Bush's Florida state government. They are currently launching baseless harassing investigations against black voter registration activists as well as having investigators visit and intimidate elderly black voters who use absentee ballots.

Guantanamo on the Hudson

The Justice Department also isn't investigating the conditions under which jailed protestors and bystanders, many caught in giant nets made from orange plastic snow fencing, are being held. New York City authorities held hundreds of people in an abandoned bus garage on Pier 57, dubbed by New Yorkers as "Guantanamo on the Hudson."

Pier 57 was last used as a city bus garage, which suffered from a fire in 1994 and has been empty for years leading up to last week's convention. The concrete floors are spotted with thick oily stains. The walls have chemical danger warning signs, some of which advised the use masks and goggles in the lockup area. Detainees, which included not only demonstrators, but an array of tourists, shoppers and other bystanders "netted" in police sweeps of blocks surrounding "illegal" marches, had to sleep on the oil stained concrete floor without bedding or blankets. While being warned not to let their skin touch the oily floor, lest they break out with rashes. The New York Civil Liberties Union reports that some former detainees appear to have incurred chemical burns and are suffering from respiratory problems. New York's Republican mayor Michael Bloomberg responded, "It's not supposed to be Club Med."

At last count approximately 1,800 people were arrested, which constituted, according the Associated Press, one of the largest mass arrests in U.S. history. Many detainees were held without charges for over 48 hours, causing a New York judge to order the city to release at least 500 of the detainees held in Pier 57. The city refused, causing the judge to declare police officials to be in contempt of court. New York authorities have also overcharged many of the other arrestees not covered by this order. They charged a woman who hung an anti-Bush banner from the roof of the Plaza Hotel, for example, with a class D felony. She's currently facing over 20 years in jail on felony assault charges since a police officer cut his foot while responding to the scene of the banner drop.

Civil liberties attorneys are also concerned since a 1994 fire at Pier 57 left that facility with an asbestos contamination problem. Asbestos contamination of lower Manhattan was one of the major environmental impacts of the 9/11 attacks, exposing tens of thousands of New Yorkers to this airborne poison. If the allegations about Pier 57 prove true, then New Yorkers will have once e again been exposed to asbestos against their will, this time by their own government.

Bush vs. New York

This irony touches on the essence of the anti-Republican protests in New York. New Yorkers collectively feel like they are being victimized a second time. Many hold the Bush administration at least partially responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Information exposed during subsequent investigations confirmed their belief that at the very least, the attacks could have and should have been prevented. They are also upset about the Bush administration's "Bring em on" policy of thumbing its nose at the world and daring terrorists to attack the US – an attack that many New Yorkers feel would target their city. And they're upset that New York State now ranks 49th in the per-capita receipt of homeland security funds. And they're upset about cuts to education and health care that have disproportionately hurt New Yorkers and added to that city's post-9/11 financial woes.

But most of all, they are incensed that the very politicians that most New Yorkers despise, have come to the city they have so hurt, to use it as a cheap prop in their election campaign. They're incensed that Republicans scheduled their convention for the first time in 150 years, in New York City – and that they pushed the date into September so as to coincide with the start of the 9/11 memorials, all in an effort to exploit New York's tragedy.

And they're incensed by comments such as one made by a Republican official, claiming that the Republicans are "brave to be in New York," as if setting foot on New York soil for one week constituted a heroic event. And they're incensed by comments such as one uttered by another Republican official who explained that there is a time and a place for free speech, and New York is not the place, and now is not the time.

Making protest invisible

Hence it should come as no surprise that feisty as they are, over a half million New Yorkers and their supporters marched against the Republicans on Sunday August 29th, cheered on by tens of thousands of residents on the sidelines. This historic event

constituted the largest protest ever at a U.S. political convention, spanning the full expanse of 40 avenue blocks and lasting for six hours.

Iraq War veterans marched in full uniform side by side with peace and social justice activists. The New York Times and the New York City Police Department both reported a crowd of 500,000 people, yet most of the U.S. corporate media more or less ignored, distorted or downplayed this and the hundreds of other protests that took place during the convention. The Buffalo News, for example, described the Sunday march as encompassing "over 100,000" demonstrators. While this is technically accurate, 500,000 is in fact "over 100,000," it is still a misleading statement. National Public Radio reported the crowd as being "perhaps as many as 200,000." Or perhaps there were 500,000.

Hundreds of other demonstrations were virtually ignored by the national media. These included a miles long symbolic unemployment line, a "shut-up-a-thon" at Fox News headquarters, a "Man in Black Block" protest defending Johnny Cash's legacy from a Republican hijacking, a Ground Zero vigil and so on. With the Bloomberg administration showing blatant contempt for the Constitution and unilaterally declaring most protests illegal, demonstrators were often arrested as soon as they unfurled banners or began to march. Despite this provocation, demonstrators responded nonviolently to the arrests. Their nonviolence, like their messages, were invisible in the media.

Lies and the lying liars...

The national media also neglected to point out that almost every speaker at the Republican convention laced their diatribes with litanies of lies, attacking John Kerry for policies he never championed and statements he never made, or for crediting George Bush for accomplishments that didn't exist. The "big lie" is one of the simplest tools of propaganda. A lie repeated enough will be perceived as the truth. Hence, the Republicans embarked on a rhetorical crusade to challenge their own weaknesses head on by painting a picture of a successful fantasy presidency that deserves four more years.

Speaker after speaker congratulated the Bush administration for creating jobs, when in fact the labor force, along with real wages, shrunk under Bush's watch. Nine million Americans lost their health care coverage during this administration, yet the convention speakers congratulated Bush for making health care more affordable. On the day after the convention ended, the Bush administration announced the largest Medicare premium increase in history – 17%. Likewise, they credited him with making prescription drugs more accessible at the very moment when Bush's Food and Drug administration is outlawing the import of more affordable drugs from Canada and press reports document

record numbers of seniors going without medication. And they credited him with making the world safer from terrorism when U.S. intelligence officials warn that the opposite is true. They still claim Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and supported al Qaida, when again, U.S. intelligence agencies said this was in fact false. And they claimed the U.S. "liberated" Iraq on the same day American forces conducted heavy aerial bombing of the city of Falluja.

A good political pundit can fill a book solely with the lies broadcast last week from the podium of the Republican convention. This litany of lies debases our political culture and poisons our national debate while undermining every aspect of our society. We cannot build a future on a foundation of fantasies. We cannot maintain a democracy without a debate grounded in reality. And we can't maintain any aspect of a cohesive society if lying is both accepted and celebrated.

The American corporate media, for the most part, broadcast these lies unchallenged. By doing so, they failed in their responsibility as stewards of the public airwaves. After a week of back-to-back liars, the big lie has become the truth. And the truth seems hopelessly lost in a fog of jingoistic fantasy. In the end, it may not be the historic protests, which were mostly invisible to the American people, which will give this convention its place in history, but the triumph of the lie. Let's hope that doesn't happen.