

George W. Bush and the end of conservatism

I REMEMBER when the Soviet Union collapsed. The American media went into a celebratory frenzy. With the intellectual depth of a squid, pundit after pundit lined up to pen “Socialism’s” eulogy. The “evil empire” was disemboweled. The former Soviet satellites were sinking into chaotic fratricide as the triumph of free-market capitalism loomed just over the horizon.

But I didn’t see it that way, writing at the time that the collapse of the Soviet Union would ultimately lead to the death, not of socialism, but of capitalism. My argument was simple. The “New Right” crowd in Washington was now able to pursue a radical free market agenda in the former Soviet Satellites – an agenda that liberal Americans would never allow back home. And that agenda of disassembling generations worth of public health, education, retirement, housing and cultural programs, I argued, would prove so disastrous as to expose the free market for the barbarous medieval throwback that it is.

I’m the first to admit that my theory was “out there.” But time seems to be proving it correct. Former Soviet satellites have either rebounded back from the market, reinstating socialist reforms and reconstructing a social safety net within a democratic framework, or they’ve sunken into quagmires of totalitarian kleptocracy. Neither direction models the success the Reaganites dreamed of.

Meanwhile, European Union countries continued moving left for 15 years, with the E.U. emerging as a democratic socialist alternative to the social despair of unbridled market greed.

Back here in America, however, we continued electing corporate-friendly conservatives such as Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton, who continued to shift the tax burden downward while gutting public education, public transportation, culture and arts funding, healthcare etc.

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Then George Junior seized the White House. And Paul Wellstone's death flipped the Senate to Republican control just as right wing media giants like Clear Channel, Sinclair, Fox and Liberty Media were consolidating their hegemony over the American media. One would think the current political moment would be a conservative wet dream. Frat boys rule! Suddenly everything is within reach – the complete wacko agenda – privatizing social security, eliminating income tax, privatizing public education, eliminating environmental regulation, outlawing abortion and pushing gay Americans back into the closet. Anything is possible. A century's worth of social progress is vulnerable as the Bush team leads us not into the 21st Century, but back into the 19th Century.

Many conservatives, however, aren't donning their party hats or twirling their noisemakers. No. To the contrary – many thinking conservatives see this as threatening the end of their movement. As with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Democratic Party, replete with Republican control of the Congress, Senate, White House, Military, CIA and Federal judiciary, offers the Grand Old Party a historically unprecedented opportunity to fuck up.

This is why Scott McConnell, writing for The American Conservative magazine, endorsed John Kerry for president. It's not that he liked Kerry – he clearly didn't support the man or his policies. But, he wrote, Bush's policies, by driving the country into ruination, "will discredit any sort of conservatism for generations."

Bush, he added, "has become the Left's perfect foil – its dream candidate." McConnell went on to describe Bush as behaving "like a caricature of what a right-wing president is supposed to be..."

Kerry, by comparison, McConnell wrote, would be a powerless president. "If he were to win, his dearth of charisma would likely ensure him a single term. He would face challenges from within his own party and a thwarting of his most expensive initiatives by a Republican Congress." McConnell added that Kerry would be bogged down mopping up after Bush. "Much of his presidency would be absorbed by trying to clean up the mess left to him in Iraq. He would be constrained by the swollen deficits and a ripe target for the next [more centrist] Republican nominee."

McConnell urged conservatives to vote for Kerry – in essence buying time for Republicans to get their act together and maintain their rightward momentum into the 2008 elections. Kerry, while powerless in stopping this momentum, would perform the painful and unpopular task of paying off the bill for the Bush White House's deficit spending – while dealing with the quagmire in Iraq. This politically toxic combination of belt tightening and body bags would effectively guarantee Kerry a legacy as a one-term president. The conservative media would label him a "liberal," and hence, his failed

presidency would be the failure of liberalism. Another prominent conservative, Paul Craig Roberts, a former Wall Street Journal editor and Ronald Reagan's Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, blames Bush for discrediting American conservatism in the eyes of the world. He argues that "the crude propagandistic Republican campaign against John Kerry is shocking to Europeans. The childishness of American conservatives scares them." According to Roberts, "America's allies are amazed at the ignorance manifested by the Bush administration." And, he adds, "The entire world is stunned by the Bush administration's abandonment of a half century of U.S. diplomacy in favor of misguided, unilateralist, 'preemptive' naked aggression on totally false pretenses against Iraq," ultimately "giving Osama bin Laden the war he wanted."

Bush's war, according to Roberts, "is the least justifiable military action since Hitler invaded Poland." The frightening reality that Bush revived the Nazi "preemptive war" doctrine caused Roberts to warn that "America's European allies cannot differentiate the immaturity of American conservatives from the ignorance of the National Socialists [Nazis]."

For traditional conservatives such as Roberts, the Iraq war is more than an ugly distraction from the conservative agenda – it will discredit the Bush administration and ultimately discredit the conservative agenda associated with the Bush junta.

Scott McConnell made many of the same points as Roberts, arguing that "it is as if the Bush administration sought to resurrect every false 1960s era left-wing cliché about predatory imperialism and turn it into administration policy." He argues they have done this by "launching an invasion against a country that posed no threat to the U.S." and by the "doling out of war profits and concessions to politically favored corporations." While McConnell argues that this is not conservatism, it is what the world now equates with conservatism. And it's also a policy that is destined to fail, pulling the whole conservative movement down with it while strengthening the credibility of global anti-imperialist movements. Perhaps this is why the Bush administration suffered five high level cabinet resignations (and one eviction) since last week's election. Either the ship is going down and the rats are jumping off, or Bush is assembling a doomsday cabinet.

This is the Bush as Marx scenario. Indian novelist and political columnist Arundhati Roy credited Bush with laying the mechanics of empire bare for all the world to see. Marxist economists have tried to do this for generations, but were too crippled by their own class privilege to communicate effectively to the masses. They were bogged down by the very jargon that the New England born and bred Bush so effectively discarded in favor of an ersatz populist lingo. Ultimately it took the Republican Bush to make imperialism and class struggle as clear as the sun in the sky. It's no wonder conservatives are fretting.