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## American Betrayal

By David Michael Green

**02/17/07 "ICH" ---** - Some people are hopelessly foolish. Some can't help it entirely (though a little less TV time would certainly go a long way), because they have been purposely trained to be so. They may be excused.

But too many others know better. That makes them cowardly and self-serving, and there is no excuse for that. Not when people are dying by the tens of thousands there. Not when the republic is being savaged here.

History will record this as America's most shameful – most inexcusable – moment, and probably the beginning of the end of any further such significant American moments whatsoever, as the empire begins its slow descent. Generations of responsible statesmen and women handed over a largely healthy, sometimes pacific, broadly admired republic to the present administration, which has taken quantum leaps toward unraveling those centuries of painstaking work.

It would be easy to cast the blame for our present predicament on a single ideological movement, or even a single generation, and it would not be wholly inaccurate to do so. The contemporary regressive right is without question a vicious cancer that has invaded the body politic to devastating consequences. Its predations were immensely facilitated by the self-reverential concerns of the Baby Boomers, who not for nothing were once called the Me Generation (that's capital M, capital G, if you don't mind). Rest assured, there are no statesmen today because to be one requires consciousness of others, sacrifice of self, moral sensitivity and historical sagacity, all qualities notably absent from this generation.

It is not only the Boomers to blame, however, but their parents as well. Ironically, the so-called "Greatest Generation" – which was indeed great in many ways – was also responsible for at least two crucial mistakes that deeply haunt us today. One was to raise a bunch of self-serving, self-interested children, well-trained for the pursuit of happiness, but woefully unprepared for comprehending or sacrificing

what is necessary to sustain and advance the greater good of the commonweal.

The other was the failure of their political class to stand up one last time, at the end of their days, for the values they knew to be crucial, at a time during which those values have been so deeply imperiled. And why didn't they? For what did they exchange their silence? In the end, the saddest truth is that both generations traded away everything for nothing. In the end, those who had the most only wound up dissipating their honor and their reputations in a failed attempt to cosset their self-serving pusillanimity.

There have always been scandals and offenses against the republic and its values. But in the past, the worst of these were called out by name, regardless of partisan affiliation. It may have taken a while, but ultimately it was Barry Goldwater and fellow Republicans who put an end to Richard Nixon. And not only because he was destroying them politically, but also because they were offended by his offenses against the nation.

But as the radical right and its scorched earth practices have come to power over the last quarter-century, fewer such patriots seemed to appear, just when they were needed most. In 1996, I wondered who amongst the members of the American political pantheon would ask "Where's the outrage?" when Bob Dole was asking "Where's the outrage?" concerning a Bill Clinton who was virtually untouched by scandal at that time. And when he was subsequently impeached for lying about having oral sex, not nearly enough of those who could have made a difference stood up and called this attempt at political assassination what it was.

But the new millennium brought a whole other level of abdication to the fore, and in late 2000 the most shameful political exercise of my lifetime (until then) was unraveling before our eyes. I couldn't help thinking at the time, "Where is the great stentorian voice of reason, honor and fairness from our elder statesmen and women, booming across the land, as the most fundamental principle of the republic was being undermined?" When Antonin Scalia took it upon himself to actually stop the counting of votes on that dark December day, where were those who'd spent a lifetime earning a reputation for probity amongst the American public, and who'd also enjoyed the same lifetime reaping the benefits of living in a free, secure and prosperous society?

Certain of these people perhaps could not stand up because their prior political affiliations would have been used as cudgels against them by the radical right. (But then again, so what? That happens regardless.) Jimmy Carter, who has for decades been far more a humanist, statesman and small-d democrat than he ever was a big-D Democrat, nevertheless probably falls well within this category. I think we now know without question that the Karl Rove machine would have unleashed its savage dogs of defamation against Carter, and branded him a sore loser partisan, or

worse, had he stood up then.

Which was why it was even more crucial that the voice of reason should have come from the other side of the aisle. What I really wanted to know back then was, where was Jerry Ford? Where was Bob Dole? Jack Kemp? Howard Baker? (It is truly telling, as an aside, that the list of 'reasonable voices' from the GOP leadership of the last several decades ends here, and is perhaps already one or two names too long. Nevertheless, the question remains.) Where were the patriots who understood that principle must come before party, and therefore that if you're gonna call it a democracy, you damn well need to count the votes?

Of course, it only got worse from there. An eerily similar silence greeted George Bush's radical agenda when he did come to office the following January. Even before 9/11, these neocon-artists were hurriedly dismantling two generations worth of painstaking diplomacy that had created a host of successful international regimes and multilateral institutions. The Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which had kept a peaceful balance in a nuclear-armed world, had to go. The International Criminal Court? Had to go. The Geneva Conventions? Quaint and obsolete. The Kyoto Protocol? A balanced Middle East policy? All these and more were unceremoniously chucked out the window by a president whose utter lack of foreign policy wisdom is only now becoming apparent to many Americans. But where were those who did know better, and why did they stand by and allow their life's work and the country they loved to be ruined by the political equivalent of drunken adolescents operating heavy machinery?

And then it got still worse yet. Few events in American history were more shameful than the run-up to the Iraq invasion in 2002 and 2003. Few individuals could have had more impact on preventing that tragedy than Jerry Ford or Colin Powell. (George H. W. Bush, who also knew better, may be excused from both these episodes for obvious reasons. Anyhow, he's got plenty to atone for elsewhere, not least including his progeny.) As to Mr. Ford, many of us assumed that he supported the president and the war all along, only to find out that the opposite was true, but that he would allow that information to be released only upon his death. What was to be gained by that? Neither the GOP nor Bush would have been any better off if this revelation was made a day earlier, let alone several years earlier. The only benefactor was Jerry Ford, who could make his accusations from the safety of his grave, without being subject to the costs sure to be inflicted even on him by the take-no-prisoners mutant monster his party had become. Without wishing to speak ill of the recently departed, this was an act of sheer political cravenness, with enormous consequences for the lives (and deaths) of others.

But surely the hottest place in Hell is being reserved for Colin Powell, who not only violated all his experience, principles, honor and reputation by failing to speak

out against the war, but in fact sold that war to a then-skeptical American public by means of his United Nations exhibition in political pornography. No one was better placed in the firmament of American political celebrity to prevent this tragedy than Powell, and no one, therefore, was also better able to sell the war, just as he did. Imagine if Powell had resigned as secretary of state – even silently, even “to spend more time with my family”, let alone with a true explanation for his actions – imagine how different the world might look today. I’d say it is an open question whether Bush could have brought along Congress and the public and gone to war in the face of Powell’s oppositional voice of sanity. And even if the Texas Global Law Massacrer could have still launched the epic battle production he so badly craved, the whole war plan and bogus WMD rationale was always dependent on a cakewalk-blowout-smashing-victory, which would wipe away any empirical, imperial or ethical concerns in a bacchanalia of triumphant chauvinist celebration. When that failed to materialize, Powell’s prior warning would have gone a long way toward undermining Bush’s chances for winning in 2004. His support would have eroded far faster and far earlier with a Powell ‘told-you-so’ as backdrop, probably enough to prevent him from even stealing that election.

I’ve always thought that Colin Powell was way overrated. Like Hillary and Obama today, these political figures strike me as more famous for being famous than for any particular accomplishments. They are the Anna Nicole Smiths of politics. Without the boobs (mostly). And without the psychodrama (ditto). But famous and popular Powell nevertheless was, to the point where he could probably have won the presidency in 1996 had he been willing to run. Along with this fame, Powell also had the wisdom accrued from being just about the only Bush administration official to have actually served in Vietnam, and from subsequent tours of duty as National Security Advisor and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. From all of this experience he had distilled certain principles about how America should go to war, if necessary, including the required use of overwhelming military force, the support of the American public, strong international cooperation, and the existence of a clear exit strategy.

It is hard to imagine a war more antithetical to the Powell Doctrine than Bush’s Iraq adventure. And yet, even though Powell once reportedly referred to his neocon colleagues as “fucking crazies”, he nevertheless made the war happen – every bit as much as did Bush, in many ways – throwing away in one fell swoop his principles, his fame, his reputation, his honor and his place in history. And – if there’s a shred of intellectual honesty left in the man – his conscience as well. As a former grunt who once served in some politician’s bullshit war, it is unimaginable to me how he sleeps at night knowing that he’s condemned another generation to precisely the same fate.

And for what? Can you possibly sell enough books to buy back your integrity once you’ve done that? Can you possibly be asked for your autograph enough times to

regain your sleep? Or was it something else altogether? What is it about George W. Bush that causes grown men like Powell, Ford and the rest to mortgage a lifetime's achievement for the benefit of this little Caligula, this meritocratic caveat, this dynastic disaster?

I cannot answer that question, but if there is any consolation for these sorry sell-outs (traitor may be too strong a word, but only barely: remember that we are talking about someone who not only allowed "crazies" to kill en masse, but provided the crucial cover that facilitated them doing so), it is that they are not alone.

Every member of Congress from the Vietnam generation should have understood completely and intuitively what was up with the Iraq war resolution, especially since Rove made sure that it was introduced right before the election of 2002. And, of course, they did. But far too many of them opted for the advancement of their own political careers over the literal lives of hundreds of thousands of people. You can talk 'til you're blue in the face, but you'll never convince me that Hillary Clinton, John Kerry and John Edwards didn't vote for this abomination thinking that they had to in order to have a chance at becoming president. And so I ask, is there a greater shame imaginable? Especially for John Kerry, who, along with Powell, lived this nightmare himself once upon a time. And who originally made his name by truthfully denouncing that former episode. (Only to denounce his own denunciations thirty years later, when running for president. Evidently he was actually for the Vietnam War before he was against it, before he was for it again.) Are there no limits to the opportunism of which these people are capable?

The correct response to that question may be found in the person of one John McCain (although the short answer, for those of you who like to read the last page of a novel first, is "No"). To be sure, there are certainly some other folks very high up on the hit parade of culpability. Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Anthony Kennedy – the 'moderates' who allowed Scalia to crown Bush president – are definite leading lights in the pantheon of dishonor. So are the Florida election officials who caved to the 'Brooks Brothers Riot', and stopped counting votes. And so for that matter is Robert Gates, December's supposed voice of realpolitik reasonableness and prudence, who has instead gone completely native in the short weeks since he joined the Pimpster-In-Chief's Washington stable.

But, without question, McCain gets the Oscar for best performance by a prostitute acting in the role of a statesman. It is beginning to appear that there are indeed no limits to the depths he is capable of sinking to in his (probably quite futile, again) attempt to capture the White House.

Here's a guy who paid the price of Lyndon's lies and Dick's deceptions (the first deceptive Dick, that is) more than perhaps anybody this side of those 58,000 poor

souls unlucky enough to have their names inscribed on the big black wall. And yet he not only supports Bush's hopeless war and its escalation, he is calling for an even bigger expansion.

Here's a guy who blasted Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson for their intolerance in 2000, but is now kissing the rings on their pudgy, greasy fingers in the run-up to 2008.

Here's a guy who made a name for himself as a reformer trying to end the influence of money in politics. (After, that is, he got caught going to bat for Charles Keating in the S&L scandal of the 1980s.) But now he is appointing to his national finance committee some of the same people he was only a year and a half ago accusing in court of trying to "evade and violate" campaign laws. (Apparently McCain was for political corruption before he was against it, before he was for it again.)

Here's a guy who knows first-hand how scummy a politician George Bush is, and yet gave a disgusting endorsement speech of him at the 2004 Republican convention. A speech which simultaneously referred to Dick Cheney as a "steady, experienced, public spirited man", and to Michael Moore as "a disingenuous film maker", even though McCain had never even seen the film in question. With this speech, McCain did for Bush's election what Powell had done for Bush's war.

And here's a guy who was savagely maligned by the Rove attack machine in 2000, only to be gearing up to do the same himself. After McCain won in Iowa and New Hampshire that year, the Bush campaign pulled out all the stops, directing its surrogates to accuse McCain – in South Carolina no less – of having an illegitimate child who was the product of an extramarital affair with a black woman, when in fact the girl is his adopted daughter from Bangladesh. Could you imagine, after that, McCain now hiring some of the same people for his own campaign whom he had previously accused of distorting his record, of running "dishonest and dishonorable" ads swift-boating John Kerry, and of using slimy race-baiting ads to defeat Harold Ford in Tennessee only months ago?

Guess what? He has. "This is about winning at the end of the day," said McCain's senior strategist, John Weaver. Yeah, no kidding, bro. We hardly noticed.

And isn't it always about winning with these people? Isn't that why this country finds itself in the abysmal state it's in today? Where's the presidential candidate who'd rather lose the office than his or her principles?

There will always be the Cheneys, Roves and Bushes of this world. The great wisdom of the Founders was to recognize this fact and to develop institutional bulwarks arrayed in opposition to those who would seek power at any cost.

What we've learned these last years is that institutions will only take you so far. The difference between the United States Congress (Version 1.0, that is – prior to 2001) and the Chinese National People's Congress has a lot less to do with what is written in the two countries' respective constitutions than with their political cultures and the courage of the people who inhabit those bodies. In the last six years, we've sure as heck seen the American parliament move far closer toward the rubber-stamp model of the Chinese than the other way around.

And that has been a symptom of a more general malaise which has infected the American body politic, including even our elder statesmen who presumably have almost nothing left to lose by speaking up at that late juncture of their lives. Along came a little would-be Mao figure, with his Stalin- and Goebbels-like sidekicks, and instead of using the institutional powers bequeathed to us by the Founders, virtually everyone in our political solar system ran and hid, when they weren't instead actually aiding and abetting the depredations of these last, sad years.

What is perhaps even more remarkable is how little the costs would have been, especially for those whose day in power had passed. Perhaps it is only a reflection of my hopeless naiveté, but I still cannot fathom how a person could condemn hundreds of thousands of people to their deaths as a price they're willing to pay for guarding their personal reputations and power (while ironically doing just the opposite, anyhow).

A strategically placed voice of reason from a trusted figure here or there could have stopped this madness a lot earlier, or at least lessened the magnitude of its severity. That didn't happen, though, and I can't think of a time in American history so deserving of shame. If future generations don't think of us in the worst of terms, it will only be because of our sheer dumb luck.

But, given that we've gluttonously consumed several generations' worth of luck already, that doesn't seem likely. Expect your children and grandchildren to be very, very angry at you. Expect them to ask why they should be going broke paying their share of taxes, plus your share, plus interest on yours, and getting only a disastrous war and a massively enriched American plutocracy in exchange. Expect them to ask why the planet we live on is screaming in pain and we knowingly let that happen back when it could have been stopped. Expect them to ask why we stood by and allowed an arrogant, stupid and lethal foreign policy make the whole world come to hate them, when it wasn't actually coming to kill them.

With so little courage on display these last years, perhaps we did in fact get the government we deserved.

But they didn't.

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