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November 8, 2004 issue

Unfortunately, this election does not offer traditional conservatives an easy or natural choice and has left our editors as split as our readership. In an effort to deepen our readers' and our own understanding of the options before us, we've asked several of our editors and contributors to make "the conservative case" for their favored candidate. Their pieces, plus Taki's column closing out this issue, constitute *TAC's* endorsement. —*The Editors*

Coming Home

Kerry's the One

Old Right Nader

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Libertarian Resistance

The Right to Remain Silent

The Real Deal

Kerry's the One

By Scott McConnell

There is little in John Kerry's persona or platform that appeals to conservatives. The flip-flopper charge—the centerpiece of the Republican campaign against Kerry—seems overdone, as Kerry's contrasting votes are the sort of baggage any senator of long service is likely to pick up. (Bob Dole could tell you all about it.) But Kerry is plainly a conventional liberal and no candidate for a future edition of *Profiles in Courage*. In my view, he will always deserve censure for his vote in favor of the Iraq War in 2002.

But this election is not about John Kerry. 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. 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 Republican nominee.

It is, instead, an election about the presidency of George W. Bush. To the surprise of virtually everyone, Bush has turned into an important president, and in many ways the most radical America has had since the 19th century. Because he is the leader of America's conservative party, he has become the Left's perfect foil—its dream candidate. The libertarian writer Lew Rockwell has mischievously noted parallels between Bush and Russia's last tsar, Nicholas II: both gained office as a result of family connections, both initiated an unnecessary war that shattered their countries' budgets. Lenin needed the calamitous reign of Nicholas II to create an opening for the Bolsheviks.

Bush has behaved like a caricature of what a right-wing president is supposed to be, and his continuation in office will discredit any sort of conservatism for generations. The launching of an invasion against a country that posed no threat to the U.S., the doling out of war profits and concessions to politically favored corporations, the financing of the war by ballooning the deficit to be passed on to the nation's children, the ceaseless drive to cut taxes for those outside the middle class and working poor: it is as if Bush sought to resurrect every false 1960s-era left-wing cliché about predatory imperialism and turn it into administration policy. Add to this his nation-breaking immigration proposal—Bush has laid out a mad scheme to import immigrants to fill any job where the wage is so low that an American can't be found to do it—and you have a presidency that combines imperialist Right and open-borders Left in a uniquely noxious cocktail.

During the campaign, few have paid attention to how much the Bush presidency has degraded the image of the United States in the world. Of course there has always been "anti-Americanism." After the Second World War many European intellectuals argued for a "Third Way" between American-style capitalism and Soviet communism, and a generation later Europe's radicals embraced every ragged "anti-imperialist" cause that came along. In South America, defiance of "the Yanqui" always draws a crowd. But Bush has somehow managed to take all these sentiments and turbo-charge them. In Europe and indeed all over the world, he has made the United States despised by people who used to be its friends, by businessmen and the middle classes, by moderate and sensible liberals. Never before have democratic foreign governments needed to demonstrate disdain for Washington to their own electorates in order to survive in office. The poll numbers are shocking. In countries like Norway, Germany, France, and Spain, Bush is liked by about seven percent of the populace. In Egypt, recipient of huge piles of American aid in the past two decades, some 98 percent have an unfavorable view of the United States. It's the same throughout the Middle East.

Bush has accomplished this by giving the U.S. a novel foreign-policy

doctrine under which it arrogates to itself the right to invade any country it wants if it feels threatened. It is an American version of the Brezhnev Doctrine, but the latter was at least confined to Eastern Europe. If the analogy seems extreme, what is an appropriate comparison when a country manufactures falsehoods about a foreign government, disseminates them widely, and invades the country on the basis of those falsehoods? It is not an action that any American president has ever taken before. It is not something that “good” countries do. It is the main reason that people all over the world who used to consider the United States a reliable and necessary bulwark of world stability now see us as a menace to their own peace and security.

These sentiments mean that as long as Bush is president, we have no real allies in the world, no friends to help us dig out from the Iraq quagmire. More tragically, they mean that if terrorists succeed in striking at the United States in another 9/11-type attack, many in the world will not only think of the American victims but also of the thousands and thousands of Iraqi civilians killed and maimed by American armed forces. The hatred Bush has generated has helped immeasurably those trying to recruit anti-American terrorists—indeed his policies are the gift to terrorism that keeps on giving, as the sons and brothers of slain Iraqis think how they may eventually take their own revenge. Only the seriously deluded could fail to see that a policy so central to America’s survival as a free country as getting hold of loose nuclear materials and controlling nuclear proliferation requires the willingness of foreign countries to provide full, 100 percent co-operation. Making yourself into the world’s most hated country is not an obvious way to secure that help.

I’ve heard people who have known George W. Bush for decades and served prominently in his father’s administration say that he could not possibly have conceived of the doctrine of pre-emptive war by himself, that he was essentially taken for a ride by people with a pre-existing agenda to overturn Saddam Hussein. Bush’s public performances plainly show him to be a man who has never read or thought much about foreign policy. So the inevitable questions are: who makes the key foreign-policy decisions in the Bush presidency, who controls the information flow to the president, how are various options are presented?

The record, from published administration memoirs and in-depth reporting, is one of an administration with a very small group of six or eight real decision-makers, who were set on war from the beginning and who took great pains to shut out arguments from professionals in the CIA and State Department and the U.S. armed forces that contradicted their rosy scenarios about easy victory. Much has been written about the neoconservative hand guiding the Bush presidency—and it is peculiar that one who was fired from the National Security Council in the Reagan administration for suspicion of passing classified material to the Israeli embassy and another who has written position papers for an Israeli Likud Party leader have become key players in the making of American foreign policy.

But neoconservatism now encompasses much more than Israel-obsessed

intellectuals and policy insiders. The Bush foreign policy also surfs on deep currents within the Christian Right, some of which see unqualified support of Israel as part of a godly plan to bring about Armageddon and the future kingdom of Christ. These two strands of Jewish and Christian extremism build on one another in the Bush presidency—and President Bush has given not the slightest indication he would restrain either in a second term. With Colin Powell's departure from the State Department looming, Bush is more than ever the "neoconian candidate." The only way Americans will have a presidency in which neoconservatives and the Christian Armageddon set are not holding the reins of power is if Kerry is elected.

If Kerry wins, this magazine will be in opposition from Inauguration Day forward. But the most important battles will take place within the Republican Party and the conservative movement. A Bush defeat will ignite a huge soul-searching within the rank-and-file of Republicanism: a quest to find out how and where the Bush presidency went wrong. And it is then that more traditional conservatives will have an audience to argue for a conservatism informed by the lessons of history, based in prudence and a sense of continuity with the American past—and to make that case without a powerful White House pulling in the opposite direction.

George W. Bush has come to embody a politics that is antithetical to almost any kind of thoughtful conservatism. His international policies have been based on the hopelessly naïve belief that foreign peoples are eager to be liberated by American armies—a notion more grounded in Leon Trotsky's concept of global revolution than any sort of conservative statecraft. His immigration policies—temporarily put on hold while he runs for re-election—are just as extreme. A re-elected President Bush would be committed to bringing in millions of low-wage immigrants to do jobs Americans "won't do." This election is all about George W. Bush, and those issues are enough to render him unworthy of any conservative support. ■

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