

BUSH'S ABYSMAL FAILURE ON HOMELAND SECURITY.

The 9/10 President

by Jonathan Chait

It disappeared so quickly that it is easy to forget the bipartisan patriotism and common purpose that existed in Washington immediately after September 11, 2001. Perhaps the most memorable event from that period was the gathering of members of Congress from both parties on the steps of the Capitol to sing "God Bless America." Another such episode—little-noticed, but actually more remarkable—occurred the following month. Shut out of their offices due to anthrax attacks, Democrat David Obey and Republican Bill Young, the ranking members of the House Appropriations Committee, set about investigating the nation's readiness to repel future terrorist attacks. The two met with representatives from every major security agency: FBI, CIA, National Security Agency, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and so on. And what they found frightened them. Even though Congress had speedily approved \$20 billion in homeland security spending in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, prime terrorist targets around the country remained appallingly vulnerable.

Working together, Obey and Young compiled a list of the most immediate security needs neglected in the first round of funding. They decided that only those items agreed upon by both parties would make the list. "We stripped the list down to its bare essentials," Obey recalls. "When that was done, I asked my staff to cut the remaining list in half to make sure there was absolutely no 'soft stuff.'" They came up with a list that was very hard to argue with—computer upgrades for the FBI, improved security for ports and nuclear facilities, new customs agents, and other top homeland security priorities totaling about \$10 billion. On November 6, 2001, Obey and Young, along with their Senate counterparts Robert Byrd and Ted Stevens, were ushered into the White House Cabinet Room to meet with President Bush. "I understand some of you may want to spend more money on homeland security than we have requested," Bush told them, according to members of both parties who attended. "My good friend [Budget Director] Mitch Daniels here assures me that our [\$20 billion funding] request is adequate. . . . I want to make it clear that if Congress appropriates one dollar more than we have requested, I will veto the bill."

Bush declared that he had time to hear four comments, one from each of the four congressmen, before he had to leave. In his allotted comment time, Obey explained to the president that the funding requests had come from the president's own agency appointees and that he and Young would remove any particular items to which Bush objected. He also described specific federal installations he had learned were vulnerable and asked if the president had been informed of them. "If [Bush] had been briefed," Obey recounts, "he gave no evidence of it."

Unable to win agreement from the president, Obey sought a vote in the House to add more money for homeland security. The post-September 11 climate, even among Republicans, remained highly receptive to homeland security spending. Republican Representative Hal Rogers, chairman of the Transportation Subcommittee, said, "There are needs we are unable to meet" with \$20 billion alone. John Duncan, chairman of the Water Resources Subcommittee, told the Scripps-Howard News Service that two GOP House leaders had agreed with him to spend \$1.5 trillion over five years.

From the White House's point of view, this represented a problem. Even before the September 11 attacks, growing deficits were undermining political support for Bush's signature tax cuts, and a spending outburst, however necessary, would increase the pressure even more. So the administration dispatched Vice President Dick Cheney to personally lobby Congress to hold the line against further homeland defense spending. By all

appearances, Cheney appealed to pure party discipline. “Stay in lockstep, stay behind the president,” urged Young, now towing the party line, in a November 14, 2001, floor speech in the House. As *The New York Times* noted two weeks later, when the House voted along party lines to not even permit debate on Obey’s proposal, “No Republicans challenged any items Mr. Obey said were needed. But Representative Ray LaHood of Illinois said, ‘Nobody knows more about this than the commander-in-chief.’”

This episode is not an anomaly. Through passivity or, more often, active opposition, President Bush has repeatedly stifled efforts to strengthen domestic safeguards against further terrorist attacks. As a consequence, homeland security remains perilously deficient. “President Bush vetoed several specific (and relatively cost-effective) measures proposed by Congress that would have addressed critical national vulnerabilities. As a result, the country remains more vulnerable than it should be today,” concluded a report published last month by the Brookings Institution. A December 2002 report sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations concurs: “America remains dangerously unprepared to prevent and respond to a catastrophic terrorist attack on U.S. soil.”

Bush’s record on homeland security ought to be considered a scandal. Yet, not only is it not a scandal, it’s not even a story, having largely failed to register with the public, the media, or even the political elite. One reason is that it’s simply hard to believe that something as essential as protecting Americans from terrorism would be resisted by any serious person in Washington. We have been hearing for a year and a half, after all, that September 11 altered the basic dynamics of American politics, at least as far as security issues go. “Pieties centered on individual rights have yielded to pieties of collective purpose and national security,” observed an essay published in *Time* magazine two months after the attacks. It’s even harder to believe that the resistance would come from Bush. The president has asserted over and over that he has made homeland security his “highest priority.” “What’s important for us, as we work to secure the homeland,” he declared at a campaign stop last fall, “is to remember that the stakes have changed. After September the eleventh the world changed.” The media have repeated Bush’s claim again and again. “THREAT OF TERRORISM IS SHAPING THE FOCUS OF BUSH PRESIDENCY,” asserted a headline in *The New York Times* on September 11, 2002. Bush’s “deeds—especially the \$2 trillion federal budget he’ll submit next week—demonstrate that for him the overriding priority now and for the rest of his term will be waging the war on terrorism and ensuring homeland security,” reported *USA Today* a year ago.

The notion of a once-unsteady Bush transformed by September 11 is also a central theme of the president’s supporters. As former Bush speechwriter David Frum tells it in his White House memoir, *The Right Man*, “There was no more domestic agenda. The domestic agenda was the same as the foreign agenda: Win the war—then we’ll see.” Columnist Charles Krauthammer contrasts the Clinton years—“our holiday from history”—with the steely resolve of Bush: “We now recognize the central problem of the 21st century: the conjunction of terrorism, rogue states and weapons of mass destruction.”

It’s certainly true that September 11 prompted Bush to abandon the soft isolationism he advocated during the campaign. (Remember his obsession with “humility” in foreign affairs?) It’s also true that many liberals have allowed their discomfort with U.S. military power, especially when wielded by a Republican president they despise, to blind them to the potential danger of a nuclear-armed Saddam Hussein. And yet the most striking thing about the Bush administration’s behavior in this new era is the degree to which the president has clung to his pre-September 11 priorities—foremost among them, slashing taxes—even to the detriment of girding the nation against terrorism. The disturbing truth is that Bush’s domestic agenda has not only made the nation less prosperous and less fair, it has also made it less safe.

When Bush signed the Homeland Security Act last November, he announced, “Our government will take every possible measure to safeguard our country and our people.” His use of such pay-any-price, bear-any-burden rhetoric has been near-constant. Following a speech a year ago, *The Washington Post* noted that the president “fram[ed] his [homeland security] proposal in a manner that echoed President John F. Kennedy’s race to place a man on the moon.” But a closer examination of Bush’s actual policies finds them sorely hobbled by his conservative agenda and ideology.

Consider, for instance, the problem of protecting the private sector—power plants, chemical facilities, trucking, office buildings, you name it. Terrorists, of course, have not limited their attacks to government property—the World Trade Center was attacked twice. A Brookings Institution study suggested that some combination of mandatory safety standards and terrorism insurance would give the private sector the needed impetus to impose basic protections. The administration, though, has done nothing—literally nothing—to require this. (And, therefore, as *The Washington Post* reported this week, “Most u.s. businesses are electing not to buy terrorism insurance.”) A forthright explanation for this inaction can be found in the administration’s *National Strategy for Homeland Security*, published last July. The report insists that “sufficient incentives exist in the private market to supply protection.”

At first glance, the administration’s assumption that private industry has sufficiently strong incentives to shore itself up against terrorism appears sensible enough—nobody wants their property to be blown up, after all. This logic works perfectly well when it comes to encouraging private industry to guard against, say, burglary, where the victim bears the entire cost of the crime. But, as Brookings’ Peter Orszag has noted, businesses hit by terrorism would *not* bear the entire cost themselves. First, they have every reason to expect a government bailout, like the airlines received after September 11. Second, some firms have interdependent security, which means their security precautions are worthless unless all their competitors follow suit. (The bomb that destroyed Pan Am Flight 103 over Scotland in 1988 was transferred to Pan Am after being initially checked through another airline.) Terrorist strikes upon a private business impose costs, both psychological and economic, upon the entire country. So, while a business owner may have no interest in spending more money to prevent terrorism than to prevent, say, an electrical fire, the nation’s interest is quite different. For all these reasons, the logic of individual incentive breaks down when it comes to terrorism.

But, because of the administration’s ideological resistance to government action, Brookings concluded in its report last month, “the Federal government made little or no progress in guiding private-sector firms—even ones that handle dangerous materials—toward improving their own security.” The *reductio ad absurdum* of the White House’s neglect is its failure to require tougher standards at chemical plants, which Al Qaeda is known to have studied. The chemical industry is a textbook case of a private interest that would not bear the cost of a terrorist strike alone—an explosion at a chemical facility could harm thousands or even millions in the surrounding area. But Bob Bostock, the assistant Environmental Protection Agency administrator for homeland security, told *The Washington Post* that, even in the absence of federal action, the chemical industry “has a very powerful incentive to do the right thing. It ought to be their worst nightmare that their facility would be the target of a terrorist act because they did not meet their responsibility to their community.” The “incentive,” then, that Bostock believes will cause chemical firms to invest in security is not economic but rather the industry’s own sense of civic duty.

Just in case the consciences of chemical-plant owners proved insufficiently reliable to entrust with public safety, Senator Jon Corzine sponsored a bill toughening security standards at chemical plants. Last summer, the Senate Committee on the Environment and Public Works approved it by a 19-to-zero vote. But, as John B. Judis reported in these pages (see “Poison,” January 27, 2003), the chemical industry lobbied Republicans

to turn against the bill, and the White House stood by while they killed it. As a result, the chemical industry remains a ripe target. Last year, an investigation of 60 chemical plants by the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* found a pattern of lax security, including problems at four plants in Houston and Chicago that could endanger more than one million people each. A July article in the *New York Daily News* revealed that at the Matheson Tri-Gas facility in East Rutherford, New Jersey—where a chemical release could endanger up to 7.3 million people—there was virtually no security at all: Gates were left open, tanks were exposed, and no security personnel were present on site.

More dangerous even than the prospect of a chemical attack is the potential for terrorists to capture, or set off, a nuclear weapon. The risk sufficiently alarmed Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham—a conservative Bush appointee—that he requested \$379.7 million to protect various Energy Department facilities where nuclear weapons are designed, manufactured, and stockpiled. On March 14, 2002, Abraham wrote to Daniels pleading his case. “[W]e are storing vast amounts of materials that remain highly volatile and subject to unthinkable consequences if placed in the wrong hands,” Abraham implored. “[T]he Department now is unable to meet the next round of critical security mission requirements. . . . Failure to support these urgent security requirements is a risk that would be unwise.”

Apparently this warning failed to move the White House, which approved just \$26.4 million for Energy Department security—7 percent of Abraham’s request. The list of improvements Bush declined to fund included more secure barriers and fences, computer improvements to defend against hackers, equipment to detect explosives in packages and vehicles entering department sites, and a reduction in the overall number of sites that store bomb-grade plutonium and uranium. The department’s chief financial officer, also a Bush appointee, wrote to budget officials in March, “We are disconcerted that OMB refused our security supplemental request. I would have much preferred to have heard this from you personally, and been given an opportunity to discuss, not to mention appeal, your decision.” (Georgia Republican Saxby Chambliss defended Bush’s position by arguing, “If we are talking about protecting the entire nuclear world, where does it end? I know we need some measure of security, but is the taxpayer willing to say we gotta have one hundred percent security at every single facility in America?” Chambliss subsequently won a Senate seat by portraying his opponent, triple-amputee, Vietnam veteran Max Cleland, as insufficiently committed to homeland security.)

Nor is the administration’s disregard for safety against nuclear terrorism limited to our own shores. The disintegration of the former Soviet Union left behind a landscape littered with unemployed nuclear scientists and poorly guarded weapons facilities. Because of this, the \$1 billion the United States devotes to locking down unsecured nuclear material and scientists in Russia and elsewhere is perhaps the most cost-effective money in the entire federal budget. But it is still not nearly enough. In order to airlift enriched uranium out of Serbia last summer—a needed safety measure by any reasonable calculation—the administration was forced to rely upon private donations (see “Old Guard,” by Michael Crowley, September 9 & 16, 2002). A bipartisan Energy Department study in January 2001 urged raising the budget for such programs to \$3 billion—still less than 0.15 percent of the federal budget. Bush, by contrast, last year proposed to *cut* overseas nuclear security funding by 5 percent and this year proposes less than \$100 million of additional funds.

Bush’s stinginess extends even to his own signature initiatives. Last December, the White House unveiled plans to vaccinate 500,000 health care workers against smallpox so they could safely treat a terrorist-induced outbreak. The administration set a 30-day deadline to complete the job, but, after a month, only 4,200—less than 1 percent—have taken the vaccine. One reason for the low take-up rate is potential side effects: For every one million people inoculated, an estimated 15 or more will suffer blindness, swelling

of the brain, or other severe reactions. This has made health care workers particularly reluctant because most of them lack proper insurance to cover the risk of disability or lost wages from such side effects. Hospitals, doctors, and unions have asked the administration to create a compensation fund to cover such contingencies—a notion members of Congress in both parties support. But the administration has refused, with the result that few health care workers have been inoculated. This means that, in the event of a terrorist smallpox attack, many may have second thoughts about treating the victims. Imagine you're an uninoculated nurse, and there's a smallpox attack causing hundreds of patients to be rushed to your hospital. Do you care for them—or flee to your home and get out the duct tape?

In his many photo-ops with police officers and firefighters, President Bush has also promised \$3.5 billion in new funding for “first responders.” Everyone who studies homeland security agrees that firefighters and police officers need better training, protective gear, and communications equipment when they rush to the scene of a terrorist attack. (On September 11, 2001, police helicopters saw that the South World Trade Center Tower had collapsed but could not warn the firefighters in the remaining tower because their radio frequencies are not compatible.) But, in fact, Bush only provides \$800 million in new money—he merely shifts the other \$2.7 billion from other, existing grants to police and firefighters. As *Congressional Quarterly* reported last month, “The fact is, according to the administration’s own budget documents, the Bush plan for funding first responders amounts to double-entry bookkeeping: changes in the ledger that would result in no net increase in the amount of federal funding flowing to cities, counties, and states.”

Or consider port security. Ninety-five percent of America’s imports get here via sea. Of the containers that make their way through our ports, though, only one in 50 is ever searched. As Stephen Flynn, a former Coast Guard commander who directed the Council on Foreign Relations’ homeland security report, told a TV interviewer last month, “We have virtually no security there.” The Coast Guard has estimated it would cost \$1 billion immediately and another \$4.5 billion over the next nine years to make domestic ports sufficiently secure. But, since September 11, they’ve received just \$318 million. One program, the Container Security Initiative, which would screen cargo at foreign ports, was specifically endorsed by Bush last June. “The Customs Service,” he told an audience in Port Elizabeth, New Jersey, “is working with overseas ports and shippers to improve its knowledge of container shipments, assessing risk so that we have a better feel of who we ought to look at, what we ought to worry about.” And yet Bush’s budget provides not one new penny of funding for the program.

Indeed, you could tell a story such as the ones above for any of a dozen homeland security improvements shot down or dramatically underfunded by the Bush administration. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), to cite one more example, has just 14 agents to track down 1,200 illegal immigrants from countries where Al Qaeda has been active. “They just have nowhere near enough people,” James Kallstrom, a former assistant director for the FBI and current security adviser to New York Governor George Pataki, told *The New York Times* last May. “They need a geometric increase.” INS requested \$52 million to hire more agents but was turned down by Bush. Obey’s bill—the one Bush lobbied congressional Republicans to kill—would have boosted funding for all these things, along with FBI computer upgrades, grants to airport security, state health departments, more customs agents, vaccine research, and so on.

Since Obey’s meeting with the White House in 2001, Democrats have kept trying to bolster homeland security spending, and Bush has kept stymieing them. Last summer, Congress overwhelmingly approved a \$5.1 billion spending bill, half of which consisted of desperately needed homeland security funding. Bush theatrically declared a pocket veto. “I understand their position. And today, they’re going to learn mine. We’ll spend

none of it,” he announced at his economic forum in Waco, Texas, where the hand-picked crowd burst into applause. Later, in the fall of 2002, the Senate and the House couldn’t agree on how to meet Bush’s spending limits and left town before the elections without appropriating any new funding for homeland security. Denied funds they had been counting on, the Energy Department, Customs Service, and other frontline fighters against terrorism had to freeze planned improvements. The administration actually *celebrated* this development. “There’s a new sheriff in town, and he’s dedicated to fiscal discipline,” crowed White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer last October.

When the GOP subsequently took control of Congress last November, Bush demanded they cut \$10 billion from previously approved spending levels to meet his budget. This not only further delayed the dissemination of homeland spending, it forced Republicans to cut below even Bush’s funding levels for some programs. “If the tardy fiscal 2003 appropriations bills are any indication,” observed *Congressional Quarterly* earlier this month, “the future of homeland security is going to be fights over every penny, whether it is radios that allow New York City police and fire departments to talk to each other or radiation detectors for ocean shipping containers in Long Beach, Calif.”

Yet, even when the mainstream media reports on Bush’s efforts to limit homeland security spending, they still accept his basic assertion that homeland security is his top priority. Take, for instance, this Washington Post story from October 19, 2002:

[T]he White House appears to have put more emphasis on holding the line on overall spending levels than on winning the spending increases it has sought. The president’s high-stakes demand for fiscal discipline in areas he has not emphasized has jeopardized his top priorities. In limbo are billions of proposed dollars to secure the nation’s ports and skies, defend against bioterrorism. . . . Instead of funding those proposals, lawmakers voted this week to keep federal agencies running at current spending levels until Nov. 22, leaving town with the non-military side of government practically operating as if Sept. 11 never happened. Yet White House spokesman Ari Fleischer sought yesterday to paint the impasse as a Bush victory.

Isn’t it just a bit odd that the president would work tirelessly to scuttle his own “top priorities” and then revel in their failure?

What ought to be obvious but has somehow escaped public attention is that Bush’s top priorities are *not* new spending on homeland security but the same conservative aims that animated him before September 11, 2001. The traditional conservative view of government spending celebrates military outlays while disparaging pretty much everything else. And, despite the lip service it pays to homeland security, the Bush administration continues to view spending through that prism. Daniels gave voice to this view during a press briefing earlier this month. “There is not enough money in the galaxy to protect every square inch of America and every American against every conceivable threat that every hateful fanatic in the world might conjure up,” he replied testily to a question about Bush’s commitment to homeland spending. “So the real essence of homeland security is going to be, number one, go after terror where it lives.” Of course, nobody is talking about all the money in the galaxy—Senator Joe Lieberman may be the most extravagant proponent of homeland security spending, demanding an extra \$16 billion per year, or less than 1 percent of the federal budget. And most analysts think homeland security programs are, as Brookings put it, “among the nation’s most cost-effective mechanisms for reducing the risk of terrorism.” But, then, it’s unnatural for the people around Bush to relinquish an ideology that has guided them, in most cases, for their entire adult lives.

And, of course, Bush’s highest priority—above constraining spending or anything else—remains tax cuts. The tax cuts Bush has already passed have been major contrib-

utors to burgeoning federal deficits; those deficits, in turn, have made Republicans in Congress queasy about acceding to further tax cuts. So Bush has tried to rein in those deficits by cutting spending wherever politically feasible, including on homeland security. Indeed, it is in Bush's interest to engineer showdowns with Congress over spending, in order to connect growing deficits in the public's mind with profligate spenders in Congress rather than with tax cutters in the White House. Thus, Bush waited until his economic summit last August, when he had the attention of the national press corps, to dramatically announce his veto of a spending bill that contained vital homeland security improvements. That the bill, at \$5.1 billion, amounted to a tiny fraction of the annual cost of his tax cut hardly mattered—to the folks watching the evening news, anything over \$1 million sounds like a lot of money.

Republican Senator Ted Stevens admitted what many in his party no doubt privately believe when he said last month that he would have supported more spending on homeland security were it not for the endless red ink: "I confess that, if we didn't have the limitations we face, the deficit we face, I would once again support Senator Byrd's funding in each of these items." Bush's priorities are perfectly clear. He cares more about tax cuts than reducing the deficit. He cares more about controlling the deficit than boosting spending on homeland security. Ergo, Bush cares more about cutting taxes than boosting spending on homeland security.

Why has Bush's myopia not become a major political liability for the administration? Perhaps because it simply doesn't fit any existing storyline. The idea that Bush has little regard for the environment, for instance, has been implanted so deeply in the political narrative that every time his administration contemplates even the slightest softening of environmental regulations, it merits a screaming headline in *The New York Times*. But there is no psychological framework in place to absorb Bush's lack of interest in domestic anti-terrorism. The component details have been reported, but the larger story has passed by almost entirely unnoticed.

Grover Norquist, the Republican strategist par excellence, explains that Democrats cannot hurt Bush on homeland security because it sits at the intersection of two issues—crime and national security—where his party enjoys an advantage built up over decades. The public perception is that "Republicans are tough on crime to the point where they'll take away your civil liberties. Republicans are so tough on foreign policy that they'll flatten cities." Democrats, in other words, can't convince voters that Bush is soft on homeland security for the same reason Republicans can't convince voters they care about affordable health care more than about corporate profits. Some Democrats have speculated that Bush's opposition to tougher domestic security will become an issue if there is another major terrorist strike. But, as Norquist argues, "nobody heard the original requests" for more funding by the Democrats. And, if the Democrats do try to say, "I told you so," it will simply confirm the stereotype that, in times of crisis, rather than rally around the commander-in-chief, they blame the United States first.

The White House appears to grasp that Bush's standing on national security issues, especially after September 11, is so unassailable that he does not need to shore it up. Instead, the administration seems to view his wartime popularity as a massive bank of political capital from which they can withdraw and spend on other, unrelated causes. In the short run, this strategy is a political boon for Bush and his party. But, in the long run, it divides and weakens the nation against its external threats.

The most relevant historical example, invoked occasionally since September 11, is America's response to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Franklin Roosevelt decided that, in order to unite the country and to muster the resources to prosecute the war, he would shelve his ambitious domestic agenda. "Dr. New Deal," he later declared, had given way to "Dr. Win the War." The White House has studied this example, but it has gleaned precisely the opposite lesson. The administration's thinking once again finds its

crassest expression in the person of Mitch Daniels. In an op-ed published a year ago, titled “A WARTIME BUDGET,” Daniels cites the fact that, under Roosevelt, “non-war spending was slashed more than 20 percent. Among the early casualties were several of F.D.R.’s own inventions.” From this analogy one might conclude that Bush would shelve his tax cuts, which drain away hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue that the government now desperately needs. But Daniels reasons from F.D.R.’s example not that Bush should curtail his domestic agenda—which, indeed, he has only pursued more aggressively—but rather that the *Democrats* should curtail *theirs*: “[T]he president has directed that all other activities of government must be constrained.” Daniels proceeds to impugn the patriotism of all those who desire to spend more than Bush on domestic programs. “Washington is a capital overrun by vested interests whose livelihoods depend on extracting ever-increasing quantities of taxpayer dollars for their narrow causes,” he writes. “It is not clear that they will subordinate their interests even to the needs of wartime.”

This is indicative of the general Bush strategy of leveraging his status as a popular wartime leader to advance his non-war-related goals. Take the president’s use of the Department of Homeland Security. When Lieberman first proposed creating such a department in October 2001, the administration opposed it. Then, last June, just as FBI whistle-blower Coleen Rowley finished her testimony about the FBI’s mishandling of terror warnings, it announced that it would create such a department after all, even though the White House had only an embarrassingly vague proposal to offer at the time. Bush then seemed to go out of his way to ensure Democratic opposition. He demanded that department employees be stripped of civil servant protections—a surefire way to draw union opposition. Even though Bush himself had categorically opposed the creation of the department just months before, he immediately began telling audiences that any Democrats resisting his version were “not interested in the security of the American people.” In the meantime, he spurned overtures from conservative Democrats, such as John Breaux, seeking a compromise. By opposing the department’s creation at first and then resisting any compromise, Bush created the very delay he bemoaned as injurious to the national defense—but gave himself a political issue with which to club the Democrats.

The tactic of using the patriotic glow that has enveloped Bush since September 11 as a partisan cudgel has succeeded—most notably in winning back control of the Senate for the Republicans. But it has also left the partisan split in the country deeper than it was even before the World Trade Center fell. As liberal columnist E.J. Dionne has written in *The Washington Post*, “By using his popularity on foreign affairs to push for domestic policies that Democrats genuinely despise, [Bush] has made those in the opposition who actually support his objectives abroad look like chumps.”

One manifestation of this split is intensified opposition to the war in Iraq. When you bring up the war with liberals—even those who supported past non-U.N.-sanctioned military actions in the Balkans—they cannot seem to get past their intense distrust and loathing of the president. Last summer, with Democrats buoyed by public concern over the economy and corporate scandals, a reporter asked Democratic campaign strategist Jim Jordan whether he anticipated Iraq overshadowing those concerns. Jordan replied, “You mean, when General Rove calls in the air strikes?” Jordan is far from the only Democrat suspicious of Bush’s motives. Last September, a *Newsweek* poll asked if the White House was “*deliberately* using talk of war with Iraq to distract attention from other issues in this year’s congressional elections.” Thirty-seven percent of all respondents, including 55 percent of Democrats, replied yes. The president does not merit all the blame for this perception, of course: An inability to judge the merits of Bush’s foreign policy, rather than merely the motives of Bush himself, represents a failure of imagination on the part of his critics. But Bush certainly merits some of the blame for the corrosive

cynicism he has engendered. By using his wartime popularity to advance contentious political goals, he has made it inevitable that partisan division would spill into foreign policy.

What makes this all so depressing is that it's easy to imagine the different path Bush could have taken. Rather than use the war on terrorism as a pretext to ram through his preexisting agenda, he could have truly demanded a reordering of national priorities, with security taking precedence. No one should have expected him to transform himself into a New Democrat on September 12, 2001. But he could have scaled back part of his tax cut to make room for the homeland security increase that experts and members of both parties in Congress agreed was needed. He could have adopted Lieberman's homeland security proposal early on, rather than delaying for eight costly months and then wielding it as an election-season club. In short, he could have used his instant popularity to unify the country and safeguard it. President Bush is a clever politician who has astutely taken advantage of the opportunities offered to him by the changed climate of September 11, 2001. But the times don't demand a clever politician. They demand a leader.

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