

The Uncivil War

By Paul Krugman

“One of the problems with media coverage of this administration,” wrote Eric Alterman in *The Nation*, “is that it requires bad manners.”

He’s right. There’s no nice way to explain how the administration uses cooked numbers to sell its tax cuts, or how its arrogance and gullibility led to the current mess in Iraq.

So it was predictable that the administration and its allies, no longer very successful at claiming that questioning the president is unpatriotic, would use appeals to good manners as a way to silence critics. Not, mind you, that *Emily Post* has taken over the Republican Party: the same people who denounce liberal incivility continue to impugn the motives of their opponents.

Smart conservatives admit that their own side was a bit rude during the Clinton years. But now, they say, they’ve learned better, and it’s those angry liberals who have a problem. The reality, however, is that they can only convince themselves that liberals have an anger problem by applying a double standard.

When Ann Coulter expresses regret that Timothy McVeigh didn’t blow up *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* laughs it off as “tongue-in-cheek agitprop.” But when Al Franken writes about lies and lying liars in a funny, but carefully researched book, he’s degrading the discourse.

More important, the Bush administration—which likes to portray itself as the inheritor of Reagan-like optimism—actually has a Nixonian habit of demonizing its opponents.

For example, here’s President Bush on critics of his economic policies: “Some say, well, maybe the recession should have been deeper. It bothers me when people say that.” Because he used the word “some,” he didn’t literally lie—no doubt a careful search will find someone, somewhere, who says the recession should have been deeper. But he clearly intended to suggest that those who disagree with his policies don’t care about helping the economy.

And that’s nothing compared with the tactics now being used on foreign policy.

The campaign against “political hate speech” originates with the Republican National Committee. But last week the committee unveiled its first ad for the 2004 campaign, and it’s as hateful as they come. “Some are now attacking the president for attacking the terrorists,” it declares.

Again, there’s that weasel word “some.” No doubt someone doesn’t believe that we should attack terrorists. But the serious criticism of the president, as the committee knows very well, is the reverse: that after an initial victory in Afghanistan he shifted his attention—and crucial resources—from fighting terrorism to other projects.

What the critics say is that this loss of focus seriously damaged the campaign against terrorism. Strategic assets in limited supply, like Special Forces soldiers and Predator drone aircraft, were shifted from Afghanistan to Iraq, while intelligence resources, including translators, were shifted from the pursuit of Al Qaeda to the coming invasion. This probably allowed Qaeda members, including Osama bin Laden, to get away, and definitely helped the Taliban stage its ominous comeback. And the Iraq war has, by all accounts, done wonders for Qaeda recruiting. Is saying all this attacking the president for attacking the terrorists?

The ad was clearly intended to insinuate once again—without saying anything falsifiable—that there was a link between Iraq and 9/11. (Now that the Iraq venture

has turned sour, this claim is suddenly making the rounds again, even though no significant new evidence has surfaced.) But it was also designed to imply that critics are soft on terror.

All this fuss about civility, then, is an attempt to bully critics into unilaterally disarming—into being demure and respectful of the president, even while his campaign chairman declares that the 2004 election will be a choice “between victory in Iraq and insecurity in America.”

And even aside from the double standard, how important is civility? I’m all for good manners, but this isn’t a dinner party. The opposing sides in our national debate are far apart on fundamental issues, from fiscal and environmental policies to national security and civil liberties. It’s the duty of pundits and politicians to make those differences clear, not to play them down for fear that someone will be offended.