

Imperial President

Opposing Bush becomes unpatriotic.

By William Saletan

The 2004 election is becoming a referendum on your right to hold the president accountable.

That's the upshot of tonight's speeches by Vice President Dick Cheney and Zell Miller, the Republican National Convention's keynote speaker.

The case against President Bush is simple. He sold us his tax cuts as a boon for the economy, but more than three years later, he has driven the economy into the ground. He sold us a war in Iraq as a necessity to protect the United States against weapons of mass destruction, but after spending \$200 billion and nearly 1,000 American lives, and after searching the country for more than a year, we've found no such weapons.

Tonight the Republicans had a chance to explain why they shouldn't be fired for these apparent screw-ups. Here's what Cheney said about the economic situation: "People are returning to work. Mortgage rates are low, and home ownership in this country is at an all-time high. The Bush tax cuts are working." But mortgage rates were low before Bush took office. Home ownership was already at an all-time high. And more than a million more people had jobs than have them today.

"In Iraq, we dealt with a gathering threat," Cheney said. What about the urgent, nukes-any-day threat to the United States that supposedly warranted our expense of so much blood and treasure? Cheney was silent.

"A senator can be wrong for 20 years without consequence to the nation," said Cheney. "But a president always casts the deciding vote." What America needs in this time of peril, he argued, is "a president we can count on to get it right."

You can't make the case against Bush more plainly than that.

If the convention speeches are any guide, Republicans have run out of excuses for blowing the economy, blowing the surplus, and blowing our military resources and moral capital in the wrong country. So they're going after the patriotism of their opponents. Here's what the convention keynoter, Miller, said tonight about Democrats and those who criticize the way President Bush has launched and conducted the Iraq war:

While young Americans are dying in the sands of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan, our nation is being torn apart and made weaker because of the Democrats' manic obsession to bring down our commander in chief.

Motivated more by partisan politics than by national security, today's Democratic leaders see America as an occupier, not a liberator.

In [Democratic leaders'] warped way of thinking, America is the problem, not the solution. They don't believe there is any real danger in the world except that which America brings upon itself.

Kerry would let Paris decide when America needs defending. I want Bush to decide.

Every one of these charges is demonstrably false. When Bush addressed Congress after 9/11, Democrats embraced and applauded him. In the Afghan war, they gave him everything he asked for. Most Democratic senators, including John Kerry and John Edwards, voted to give him the authority to use force in Iraq. During and after the war, they praised Iraq's liberation. Kerry has never said that any other country should decide when the United States is entitled to defend itself.

But the important thing isn't the falsity of the charges, which Republicans continue to repeat despite press reports debunking them. The important thing is that the GOP is

trying to quash criticism of the president simply because it's criticism of the president. The election is becoming a referendum on democracy.

In a democracy, the commander in chief works for you. You hire him when you elect him. You watch him do the job. If he makes good decisions and serves your interests, you rehire him. If he doesn't, you fire him by voting for his opponent in the next election.

Not every country works this way. In some countries, the commander in chief builds a propaganda apparatus that equates him with the military and the nation. If you object that he's making bad decisions and disserving the national interest, you're accused of weakening the nation, undermining its security, sabotaging the commander in chief, and serving a foreign power—the very charges Miller leveled tonight against Bush's critics.

Are you prepared to become one of those countries?

When patriotism is impugned, the facts go out the window. You're not allowed to point out that Bush shifted the rationale for the Iraq war further and further from U.S. national security—from complicity in 9/11 to weapons of mass destruction to building democracy to relieving Iraqis of their dictator—without explaining why American troops and taxpayers should bear the burden. You're not allowed to point out that the longer a liberator stays, the more he looks like an occupier. You're not allowed to propose that the enormous postwar expenses Bush failed to budget for be covered by repealing his tax cuts for the wealthy instead of further indebting every American child.

If you dare to say these things, you're accused—as Kerry now stands accused by Cheney and Miller—of defaming America and refusing “to support American troops in combat.” You're contrasted to a president who “is unashamed of his belief that God is not indifferent to America.” You're derided, in Cheney's words, for trying to show al-Qaida “our softer side.” Your Silver Star, Bronze Star, and three Purple Hearts are no match for the vice president's five draft deferments.

In his remarks, Miller praised Wendell Wilkie, the 1940 Republican presidential nominee who “made it clear that he would rather lose the election than make national security a partisan campaign issue.” But there are three ways to make national security a campaign issue. One is to argue the facts of a particular question, as Kerry has done on Iraq. The second is to sweep aside all factual questions, as Cheney and Miller did tonight, with a categorical charge that the other party is indifferent or hostile to the country's safety. The third is to create a handy political fight, as Republicans did two years ago on the question of labor rights in the Department of Homeland Security, and frame it falsely as a national security issue in order to win an election.

So now you have two reasons to show up at the polls in November. One is to stop Bush from screwing up economic and foreign policy more than he already has. The other is to remind him and his propagandists that even after 9/11, you still have that right.

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