

REVIEWS

How Bush Rules - Chronicles of a Radical Regime.

Sidney Blumenthal

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JOURNALISM likes to think of itself as the first draft of history - and that is exactly what Sidney Blumenthal's book is: a collection of newspaper and online articles published since the autumn of 2003. Almost all of these pieces are the standard newspaper-column size of a thousand words - one-bite snaps which match the spirit of the google age, but which seldom allow the author to formally enjoy the thematic coherence and cumulative narrative impetus of a unitary thesis.

Still, *How Bush Rules* is a terrifying window into the domestic- and foreign-policy worlds of American planning and execution under the leadership of the world's best-known draft-dodger and best-loved rhetorician (and who got to be president of the republic with the support of just 24% of those entitled to vote for him in his 2004 re-election).

The book highlights the immensely deep ideological cleavages of modern-day American political culture: and it highlights too the often-rotten core of the political system that the stricken giant of the American Empire is pleased to call democracy.

Readers on this side of the Atlantic are already familiar with much of Blumenthal's material (though it is surprising how little of it gets into our newspapers): the rise of the 'religious right', the shameless manipulation of an often supine media, the use of torture

and kidnap as instruments of state policy, the secret GULag and the secret dirty-war through Prestwick and across the globe; and the suborning of the American Constitution (in whose founding mythologies Blumenthal is still a believer) in the cause of the narrow interest of a military-capitalist junta as corrupt at times as any of those which the United States has traditionally maintained in the banana republics to its south.

Blumenthal takes a swipe at Bush's policy on leading-edge sciences: for no other president has been so stupidly, mediocrally hostile to science. Bush is, for instance, against the leading-edge science of stem-cell research - into which the Chinese are pouring resources, for they recognise it as the foundation of a valuable worldwide medical industry within a matter of decades. And while US climate-scientists are silenced and the idiot-dogma of 'creationism' encouraged, 'the words reproductive health and condoms were banned from websites of agencies or organisations that received federal funds'.

Nor does the conduct in recent years of the American news media - which usually likes to think of itself as a robust and essential pillar of the Constitution - escape Blumenthal's critical eye. Central to this has been the image-management of the September 11 2001 attacks on that epicentral symbol of America's imperialist domination of the globe: the World Trade Centre.

Though Blumenthal does not say so, the 9/11 attacks served for Bush the same purpose as the Reichstag Fire and Enabling Act served for Hitler - 'Bush's strategy remains organised around control of the image of 9/11. Maintaining support for Bush's foreign policy demands relentless domestic polarisation - including defining critics as giving aid and comfort to the enemy'.

Thus, in the mid-term 2002 elections, in one Republican TV commercial, 'the face of Senator Max Cleland of Georgia, a Vietnam veteran who had lost three limbs, was morphed into that of Osama Bin Laden. Cleland lost his bid for re-election. The Republicans captured the Senate by one seat'.

Blumenthal does not overlook the United States' self-styled Christian Right - in comparison to which, that same Osama Bin Laden and his objectively anti-imperialist struggle might seem to some as shining citadels of justice, courage and reason.

After all, Elliott Abrams, onetime chief of Middle East affairs at the National Security Council, argued that, 'Tomorrow's lobby for Israel has got to be conservative Christians, because there aren't going to be enough Jews to do it'.

Lieutenant General William Boykin, meanwhile, told a church congregation - complete with Power Point visuals - that the enemy in the so-called 'war on terror' was none other than Satan and that the Bush presidency was divinely ordained.

'They're after us because we're a Christian nation', he claimed. Compared to a Muslim, 'my God is bigger than his. I know that my God is a real God, and his is an idol'. And the uniformed general went on to ask: 'Why is this man in the White House? The majority of Americans did not vote for him. Why is he there? And I tell you this morning that he's in the White House because God put him there for a time such as this'.

Blumenthal is enlightening too - albeit at something of a tangent - on the critical dimension of class in the American economy (although class is not, at least at present, a dimension that clearly reflects itself in the American political system). But however the matter might be presented, it is an ugly one. The tax-cut - and let us

remember that personal and corporate taxation is a deliberate, redistributive instrument of social equity - 'became Bush's chief instrument of social policy'. And again, 'Enron was the biggest financial supporter of Bush's political career'.

And yet again: the central thrust of Bush's domestic policy has been to destroy America's own version of social security. 'He has decided to swing a sledgehammer at the cornerstone of the New Deal and the Democratic Party. The gamble would pay off in closely tying to the Republican Party the Wall Street banks that would finance the transition costs of privatisation [now where have we heard that word before?] and the bond houses and stock firms that would be flush with new investments. But most important, it would unravel the fact and idea of government entitlement programs providing for the needs of the people as a whole'.

Thus the day after Hurricane Katrina blasted New Orleans, 'the Census Bureau released figures showing that the number of poor had increased for the fourth year in a row to 12.7% of the population'. And a week after that hurricane, Condoleezza Rice found herself in Alabama, in a church pulpit, no less; or, rather, a *black* church pulpit (for Christian America doesn't really do faith across the sacred boundaries of colour). 'The Lord Jesus Christ is going to come on time', the Good Doctor assured the assembled multitude, before adding - with a masterly command of historical pace and sensibility - 'if we just wait'.

Blumenthal notes, 'The lobbying expenses from every industry, from financial services to computers, are staggering. Broadcast media firms spent \$38.5 million in 2004 alone on lobbyists in Washington, according to the Centre for Public Integrity. The drug industry during the same period shelled out \$123 million.

In the 2004 election cycle, the drug industry paid out \$87 million in campaign contributions for federal officials, 69% of them flowing to Republicans’.

But Blumenthal is at his strongest with regard to foreign affairs, and especially long-term empire-building ambitions in the Middle East. According to this game-plan, once democratic order had been established in Iraq, the country would become, ‘a base for the projection of US influence throughout the Middle East. Instantly, Iraq would become a beacon of democracy. Awestruck, the Palestinians would forswear terrorist groups like Hamas. From the Iraqi bastion, the United States would topple the regimes of Syria and Iran, by military force if need be. The Iraq example would serve for invasions elsewhere. Saudi Arabia and Egypt would have no choice but to democratize, their rulers yielding to secular figures Like Saddam Hussein’s regime, the entire region was supposedly a house of cards’.

[And where, one is tempted to ask, would the de facto and de jure borders of Israel be at the conclusion of this process: and what would Israel’s population-profile exactly be?]

This strategic ambition had earlier been given theoretical underpinning by the Project for the New American Century (which, inter alia, proposed the imperial militarisation of space). In September 2000 the promoters of the project issued a statement calling for a ‘process of transformation’ in US foreign policy, which would, however, be unlikely without, ‘some catastrophic and catalyzing event - like a new Pearl Harbour’. Exactly one year later, the World Trade Centre collapsed (just like a house of cards): and Bush had his excuse for the long-planned attack, less than two years later, on Iraq - courtesy of this ‘new Pearl Harbour’.

Without question, the full story of 9/11 remains to be told, to put the matter in its mildest form: and while the resultant fiasco in Iraq continues to deepen, the Imperium dreams of taking-out the ancient, and supremely wily, onetime empire of Persia.

But how might it pay for it? And who will fight its battles for it? After all, the American soldier joins-up for the right to a pension rather than the right to fight: and despite the enlistment bonuses of \$40,000, recruitment fell by 40% in 2005. The occupation of Iraq is costing the US £1 billion a week, according to Blumenthal - or maybe double that, in the view of some experts. No less an authority than Zbigniew Brzezinski has said that to 'win' in Iraq would take half a million troops, \$500 billion, a military draft - and even then, ten years of savage asymmetric conflict.

Already, the occupation of Iraq is effectively being financed, at second-hand, by the banking systems of China and East Asia. Strategically, then, the United States' position worsens by the month - and any attack on Iran can only worsen that position.

But there is an American election due in 2008 at the latest. What precisely happens when things - as they certainly will - fall apart in the blood-dimmed Middle East? What happens when the centre of the Imperium can no longer hold, and the Republicans face defeat in 2008? What about a coup - to 'protect' public order, naturally, and to 'defend' the Constitution and the vision of the Founding Fathers?

Or perhaps, of course, by the time this review appears, the Democrats will have seized control of Congress - and US foreign policy might have begun to return to the realms of sanity.

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