

# Republican double-speak

Dawn USA  
5/19/04 By Martin Kettle

THE books used to talk about how the American Republican party was really two parties. The first of them was very decent and sometimes very grand indeed, and could answer truthfully to the term compassionate conservative.

It was the party of Theodore Roosevelt and Nelson Rockefeller. The second party was decent too, in its way, but it was decidedly not so grand as the first. It was the party of people like Dwight Eisenhower and, stretching a point, Richard Nixon.

Identifiable traces of these two mid-20th century parties, particularly the latter, still live on in George Bush's Republican party of 2004. But they survive there on sufferance, in a transformed party. Even so, you could argue that the Republicans of today are still based on a kind of alliance, though the new one bears no relation to the old. The first arm, which has all of the power and most of the dynamism, is the religious conservative activist party that gathered in Madison Square Garden recently to acclaim Bush, now himself the de facto leader of the religious right. The second, still necessary to the first for purely electoral reasons, consists of people who vote Republican in the belief that the party is as nice as it portrays itself, when in fact it is no such thing.

One needs to beware of applying the political mores of one culture to those of another. Even so, there was no mistaking the sheer aggressiveness of the Republicans. This quality showed above all in the treatment reserved for John Kerry, who was subjected to a four-day stream of orchestrated personal insults that makes British politics appear truly gentlemanly by comparison.

Nothing that happens in a convention hall happens without the party managers' approval. Every placard they wave has been handed out by party officials a few minutes before. So the sudden outbreak of delegates wearing sticking plasters with Purple Hearts on them — implying that Kerry exaggerated his Vietnam wounds in order to win his medals — could hardly have been an unofficial move either, and stands in marked contrast to earlier denials by the Bush campaign that it was promoting the apparently "non-partisan" anti-Kerry moves by rightwing Vietnam veterans.

Of course, it was not an unofficial move at all. What the delegates expressed with their nasty stickers, the party's leaders actually said, just as nastily, from the platform. Speech after speech besmirched Kerry's military record — a record which he had placed at the centre of his own campaign in an explicit bid for electoral credibility both as a man and as a potential president — none

more brutally than the Georgia Democratic senator Zell Miller, who cast Kerry as "wrong, weak and wobbly" and as a man with a "yes-no-maybe" approach to the war on terrorism.

In a truly revealing turn of events, after years in which rightwing America has endlessly celebrated the unquiet Vietnam veterans as a betrayed generation of real male patriots, mainstream Republican demonology has now cast Kerry as a man whose preoccupation with his own exploits in Vietnam make him fundamentally unreliable both as man and potential leader. The fact that rightwing America can so shamelessly taunt Kerry in this way, led by a non-combatant president who refuses to condemn the negative campaign and by a vice-president who fanned the flames in his own speech ("I had other priorities" is how Cheney icily

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The fact that rightwing America, led by a non-combatant president who refuses to condemn the negative campaign and by a vice-president who fanned the flames in his own speech, is a reminder that what is crucially important to Republicans is not, as they like to say, the tradition of armed service but, in reality, their claim to exclusive ownership of the politics of US defence, security and war.

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describes his own Vietnam years) is a reminder that what is crucially important to Republicans is not, as they like to say, the tradition of armed service but, in reality, their claim to exclusive ownership of the politics of US defence, security and war.

Throughout last week, it goes almost without saying, there was not a single critical reference to the American military, not even in relation to Abu Ghraib. Bush himself probably saw no element of irony in his closing encomium of "our military which finds a way, or makes one".

Such self-confidence reminds us how much more vicious American politics since 9/11 would have been if Al Gore had been in the White House when the hijacked planes were flown into the World Trade Centre. Would the Republicans have rallied behind Gore as the Democrats rallied behind Bush that day? Not a chance.

Within days they would have begun to blame Bill Clinton for the attack on America. Some of them, indeed, do so anyway. Browsing through a New York Barnes and Noble bookstore the other day I encountered titles like *Losing Bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror*, *Dereliction of Duty: The Eyewitness Account of How Bill Clinton compromised America's National Security or Intelligence Failure: How Clinton's National Security Policy Set the Stage for 9/11*.

For such people, the mere act of imagining John Kerry as their duly elected "commander-in-chief" is offensive. Miller and others have said as much. Cheney, in the speech of great ruthlessness, went further than most. And again, all this provides a glimpse of the vengeful and vindictive way that a defeated Republican party might be tempted to treat a President Kerry. The Republican party today is not at ease in any settlement other than one whose terms it has dictated. You can already sense the impeachment reflex beginning to take on life.

In some ways it is as though the modern Republican party has become the political expression of the "misplaced power" of the military-industrial complex against which Eisenhower famously warned as he left the White House in 1961. In any other political culture, you would characterize the

Republicans as a militarist party, and in that context it would be perverse not to reflect upon whether this central development in American life did not have far more sinister implications, not least when so many references to the war on terror last week have been accompanied by testosterone-fuelled chants of "U-S-A, U-S-A".

Yet the Republican party which Bush leads should really be seen as the party that tries to unite the military-industrial and religious imperatives in American life. If Bush was careful during the convention not to take the attacks on Kerry too

far, he was much less restrained in his meticulous willingness to tick each of the boxes that matter to the religious party he now leads.

But it was not merely his comments about the unborn child and gay marriage that marked this key role. Time and again, Bush also deployed his well-established "double-coding" technique, dotting his speech with remarks which may not sound to the uninitiated as though they have a Christian conservative meaning, but which initiates will easily read differently.

"We must win this culture war," the Republican senator Sam Brownback told a private Family, Faith and Freedom rally in New York last week. For many in Bush's party, this is now the central task of a second term. "We ask that you continue to provide strength to President Bush and the first family," intoned the blessing with which the final convention evening began. "Guide, protect, and grant wisdom to him as he leads America and the world against the forces of evil ... And father, we pray your will is accomplished in this convention and throughout this great country."

Much of what was said in Madison Square Garden this week was a masterpiece of Orwellian double-speak. A few things, on the other hand, meant exactly what they said. —Dawn/The Guardian News Service