

# Aspects of Bush USA campaign

By Dr Iffat Idris

GEORGE Bush has lost his country many friends, and won it many enemies. America is trapped in a war in Iraq that could easily turn into the next Vietnam: it is not trapped in Afghanistan, but it left the job there half-finished.

Domestically, the economy is in tatters — a record surplus has been turned into a record deficit; massive job losses; cuts in social sector spending that have hit ordinary Americans. The country is polarized to an extent not seen in recent years. And the war on terror — the defining mission of the Bush presidency — has categorically failed to achieve its goals: Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda and countless other terror groups flourish. Americans are less safe than they were when Bush became president, or than they were on 9/11 2001.

Judged by any measure, George Bush has failed. He should, logically, be miles behind in the polls. The outcome of November's election should be a foregone conclusion. 'Should be' — but isn't. The polls (taking into account the margin for statistical error) are a dead heat. Some even place Bush ahead of Kerry. Were it not for Kerry's impressive and Bush's unimpressive performance in the television debates, the president would be even further ahead. Why the anomaly? How can a president who has done so badly in his first term be so close to winning a second term in office?

George Bush's famously deep war chest has something to do with it. The president has been phenomenally successful at raising funds for his re-election. The depth of the chest becomes incredibly important when you have to churn out expensive TV ad after expensive TV ad, print posters, hold rallies... It would be no exaggeration to say that victory in the presidential race is as much to do with the ability to keep spending, as it is to do with the strengths and merits of one's arguments. You can be wrong but rich and still win: you can be right but poor — and lose.

Who has filled the president's war chest? Ordinary Americans who support his agenda, yes, but their contribution is small change. The real bucks come from those who have benefited hugely from the first Bush term in office, and who stand to gain even more should he be re-elected. Not ordinary Americans, but the ultra-wealthy corporate elite: those

active and offensive.

In a fully functioning democracy, one would expect at least some of that responsibility — the duty to question and point out lies and falsehoods — to be shouldered by the media. The United States today is not a fully functioning democracy: the media has been silent since the attacks of 9/11. The atmosphere of patriotism and enforced loyalty (with us or against us) fostered by the White House after those attacks did not allow for any criticism or questions. To challenge the administration was tantamount to a challenge to America itself: it was unpatriotic, disloyal, a boost to the terrorists who attacked the US.

Rather than defending its right — indeed, its duty — to speak out and ask quite justifiable questions of the administration, the media readily acquiesced in the Bush agenda. Print and electronic media ran stories supporting the war on terror, supporting the "war president".

Once America went to war — first against Afghanistan and then against Iraq — the media became even more unquestioning and supportive. To do otherwise would be to denigrate the courage and the sacrifices of US soldiers. Even when it became clear that the justification for the Iraq war was totally the opposite — unjustified — the media still stayed silent.

Whether on international foreign policy issues or domestic bread-and-butter issues, the US papers and news channels have failed to tell the American people the truth. Their failure has played directly into the hands of the Republicans.

All this is the "good side" of the Bush campaign: stuff that just about stays within the bounds of legality. There is another far more negative and disturbing side: stuff that moves well into the terrain of illegality.

One example is the appointment by Florida Governor Jeb Bush (the president's brother, and the man who oversaw the subversion of democracy in 2000 that turned victory for Al Gore into defeat) of a staunch Republican as state secretary. Glenda Hood's predecessor Katherine Harris blatantly twisted the 2000 Florida election result in favour of Bush: Hood is already showing signs of doing the same.

Another example is Hood's attempt to deny people the right to vote if they didn't tick a box on their registration forms saying they are US citizens — even though at the bottom of the form they have to sign a statement declaring precisely that. Then, people are being sent absentee ballot

in the defence industry, oil, tobacco and other businesses that would suffer under an administration that prioritized people, values and long-term concerns like protecting the environment. Under the Bush administration, that puts the rich first, throws values out of the window and thinks solely about short-term profit, such businesses flourish.

Bush's massive funds have been used in large part to run a saturation TV ad campaign attacking his opponent. Kerry has been criticized for his voting record in the Senate, for being a liberal for flip-flopping on the Iraq war, and — perhaps most incredible given George Bush's own ignominious war record — for his service in Vietnam.

Negative campaigning has always been part and parcel of the American presidential race, but in this election the Republicans have taken it to new depths. Lynn Cheney, wife of the vice president, was widely quoted comparing Kerry to a pig in one rally — and that's mild compared to some of the other stuff coming out of the Republican camp.

Most of the charges being levelled against John Kerry are false, for instance, the one that he didn't rescue a fellow soldier in Vietnam, for example — made by ex-soldiers who weren't there and refuted by the man in the best position to know: the soldier Kerry rescued. But repeat a lie often enough and for some people, it starts to sound like truth: some come to believe it. It is this art of spin and message manipulation that the Republicans have mastered so well. The Democrats are belatedly struggling to catch up, but their parries remain essentially reactive, defensive rather than pro-

people are being sent absentee ballot papers with John Kerry's name removed, and Republican activists, purporting to be from the Election Office, are calling black voters to 'register them' — thereby allowing them to think they have registered (when they haven't) and ensuring they will not be able to vote on the day.

The attempts to disenfranchise black Americans have been incredible in the scope, degree of organization and planning, and sheer deliberateness with which they have been carried out. One would not be surprised to find such measures being enacted in a 'developing world' democracy like Pakistan but one should be surprised and alarmed to find them in the 'leading democracy of the free world'.

Finally, one should not diminish the strength of Bush's core support base: neo-conservatives and the religious right in America. This base is not only populous but dedicated — almost to the point of extremism. For them getting George Bush back into the White House is much more than a casual political choice: it is a matter of utmost seriousness.

These diehard supporters will vote Republican on November 2: they will turn out, and they will campaign for Bush in the months, weeks and days running up to election day. The passion of Bush's supporters could be considered admirable, were it not for the disinformation and ignorance that (in large measure) fuel it.

In short, should George W. Bush win on November 2, it will be for all the wrong reasons.

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