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Core Values

By Chris Floyd

02/24/05 "Moscow Times" -- Day in and day out, patriotic American dissidents on both the left and the right keep shovelling through the bloody muck of the Bush Imperium. The filth is endless, Augean; Salon.com recently catalogued 34 ongoing major scandals, equalling or surpassing the depravity of Watergate. Yet still the patriots bend to the task, tossing up steaming piles of ugly truth before the public.

And with every loud splattering of fresh Bushflop, there's a flurry of hope that this time, the dirt will stick; this time, the stench of corruption will be so overwhelming that the nation's long-somnolent conscience will be aroused. Yet each time, the rancid slurry just disappears down the drain: The Bushists tell their butt-covering lies, the "watchdogs" of the media wag their tails and all is well again in the land that Gore Vidal so aptly dubbed the United States of Amnesia. No scandal, no matter how outrageous, ever gains any traction.

But there is a simple reason why patriots on both the right and the left are stymied: because the center is rotten to its well-wadded, self-righteous, wilfully ignorant core. We speak here of the nation's "great and good," pillars of the community and stalwarts of the established order, the "captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters, the generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers, distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees, industrial lords and petty contractors," in T.S. Eliot's words -- to which we might add, as a modern gloss, the highly credentialed academics, extremely well-remunerated corporate journalists, politically wired churchmen and the innumerable massagers of public opinion and commercial desire.

It is this center -- which prides itself on being sensible, moderate, decent and respectable -- that has become morally corrupted beyond measure, perhaps beyond remedy. Here, where there should be thunderous denunciations of the Bush regime's rape of American honor -- a litany of sins that includes aggressive war, the decimation of cities, vile acts of torture, kidnappings, "renditions," imprisonment without charges, indefinite detention, assassinations, war profiteering and the exaltation of presidential power above the reach of law -- there has been only silent acquiescence, or the rare, decorous, timorous murmur, or, increasingly, enthusiastic support.

An obscure news story from last week, buried in the back pages -- if noted at all -- provides a vivid glimpse of the center rot. It was an ordinary wire piece from Knight-Ridder, standard Washington wonkery about a bureaucratic turf battle. It dealt with one of the recommendations of the "9-11 Commission" -- that assemblage of the great and good whose "independent" investigation of the 2001 terrorist attacks on America unearthed a vast tangle of criminal negligence and fatal incompetence for which, miraculously, not a single member of the great and good bore the least responsibility.

The commission issued a slew of recommendations for upgrading national security, including the much-ballyhooed creation of a new "Director of National Intelligence" to oversee the ever-spreading octopus of U.S. "security organs" -- 15 separate spy agencies at last count (that we know about). The wisdom of this advice was borne out by George W. Bush's choice for the post: John Negroponte, the death-squad enabler and atrocity manager best known for burying evidence of CIA-sponsored murders, massacres and torture in Central America during the Reagan-Bush I years. Fresh from not-dissimilar duties in Baghdad, this distinguished civil servant is now

bringing his dark arts to the Homeland -- to general approval from the stalwarts.

But the sages had another, lesser-known recommendation: consolidating "all secret U.S. paramilitary operations, whether clandestine or covert" within the Pentagon. This would make such operations "more robust," the worthies said. But the CIA objected to having its own secret armies taken away. After months of negotiation, it was decided last week that the Pentagon and CIA would keep their separate paramilitary capabilities.

What exactly are these "paramilitary operations" which the commission, the U.S. Congress and all our stalwarts think we should have more of? As Knight-Ridder notes, they are actions "conducted by armed units that do not belong to conventional military formations" -- in other words, terrorist groups, according to the Bush regime's own definition. Those designated as terrorists by Bush should not be covered by the Geneva Conventions, we are told, because they are not part of a "conventional military formation." They're outlaws, Bush says, fit to be killed or locked up without charges. Yet of course he commands the largest collection of such "outlaws" in the world.

And "outlaw" is no metaphorical term here. As Knight-Ridder explains, specifically "covert" operations are those "in which the U.S. government wants to be able to deny any involvement" because they "at times violate international law or the laws of war."

Here we come to the crux of the rot. Not a single Establishment stalwart involved in the matter -- not Congress, nor the Commission, nor the President, nor the press -- objected in the least to this horrifying reality: that the U.S. government routinely violates "international law and the laws of war" in secret terrorist actions by "unconventional" forces, including CIA operatives, local proxies and hired killers. It's simply accepted, across the board, as standard practice. In fact, the only concern about these admittedly criminal actions -- directed by unrestricted presidential fiat, with their true ends (Counterterrorism? Personal enrichment? Political power games? Ideological zealotry?) forever hidden from public scrutiny -- is how to make them more "robust," more efficient and more deadly.

The great societal bulwarks that should mitigate the abuse of power have instead embraced the barbaric ethos of brute force in order to maintain their own comfort, privilege and self-regard. For them, law has become a pretty sham and honor is a fiction, while respectability and decency are fairy tales for fools and children. Truth will never hold where the center is so murderously corrupted.

Annotations

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