

Republicans Splintering Over Neo-Con Insanity

by Nancy Spannaus

Since at least the beginning of 2004, local Republican Party leaders have been delivering *sotto voce* complaints to leading Bush strategist Karl Rove—and, Republican sources report, in some cases, to the President himself—about the damage that abrasive warmonger Vice-President Dick Cheney has been doing to the party's electoral chances. With the breaking of the Abu Ghraib scandal, this low-level complaining has turned into an open challenge to the Administration's neo-conservatives' mis-managing of the Iraq War, with demands that those who created the debacle be sacked.

The most dramatic indication of the party split is coming in Congress, where the Republicans, who dominate both Houses, have had to make the decisive choices in determining the Congressional reaction to the Abu Ghraib horrors. Senior Republican Senator John Warner (R-VA), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has taken an aggressive role, holding at least four hearings on the scandal with high-level witnesses, including putting Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld under oath. When Vice-President Dick Cheney put out the word that "they should get off Rumsfeld's case," Senator Warner did not listen, but forged right ahead. He was joined by fellow Republican Senators, including Lindsay Graham (R-N.C.) and Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.). Graham, a former Judge Advocate General in the military, directly attacked Cheney's idea of ordering Congress to keep hands off the Defense Secretary while troops were in combat, and has been among the strongest of all Senators of both parties in insisting that the *systemic* nature of the problem be recognized, and rooted out.

Senator Warner's close relations with the U.S. military (He not only served in the Navy in the Korean and Second World Wars, but was Secretary of the Navy in the 1970s), undoubtedly play a role in his determination to get to the bottom of what the Abu Ghraib scandal represents. It is well known that the Senator has not been happy with Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's "military transformation" agenda, which has stomped all over the uniformed services in its pursuit of high-technology weapons and secret special ops.

Demanding Resignations

When Warner complained during his first hearing, on May 7, that he had not been briefed on the investigations underway on mistreatment of prisoners, it was not the first

time. Even prior to the war against Iraq, Republican Party leaker Robert Novak was reporting in his syndicated column that Warner was furious with Rumsfeld for refusing to brief the Senators.

In light of Warner's upfront role, it was not totally surprising that Richard Whalen, publisher of the prominent Republican Party insiders' newsletter *The Big Picture*, reported in that publication's May 24 edition that a delegation of Republican Senators, including Warner, recently went to President Bush, to demand Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's ouster. Whalen wrote: "A broad, powerful bipartisan election-year consensus is forming in Washington, to the effect that Iraq is a loser. Politicians who only recently praised the Iraq invasion and occupation now call it a terrible mistake. Lawmakers find they simply cannot explain U.S. war aims in Iraq or justify U.S. sacrifices to their puzzled, unhappy constituents. How can they explain the shocking POW scandal and pictures? Whatever popularity backing the war once had, that support is now crumbling along with poll approval for 'War President' Bush."

Whalen's report continued, "A half-dozen senior Republican Senators, led by John McCain of Arizona and John Warner of Virginia, reportedly visited Bush at the White House and demanded Rumsfeld's resignation. Bush listened in stony-faced silence, but gave no reply. As we have reported, Rumsfeld is closely allied with Vice President Dick Cheney."

The same newsletter next cited a trip report by Center for Strategi and International Studies analyst and former Marine officer Anthony Cordesman, in which he concluded that "the U.S. can no longer win the insurgency war in Iraq." *The Big Picture*: "That widespread conclusion is a deadly indictment of the Bush Administration, Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld. The Republican Party's internal attitude toward 'Rummy' has turned bitterly critical because of his past arrogance and the ongoing prisoners' abuse scandal."

Going Public

Senator Warner has been joined by other senior Senators in his complaints about the neo-cons.

Senator Chuck Hagel was quoted in the *New York Times* on May 25, saying that President Bush "needs to break out of that cocoon a little bit, and listen to more advice than he gets from his Vice-President and his war cabinet," Hagel, a prominent Vietnam Veteran, had been highly critical of the rush into the Iraq war from the start, as were many of those who learned the lessons of Vietnam in person.

Senior Senator Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, took the occasion of a commencement speech at the Fletcher School of Diplomacy at Tufts University on May 23, to criticize the Administration on Iraq and terrorism. According to the Associated Press report, Lugar said the United States isn't doing enough

to stave off terrorism, and chided President Bush for failing to offer solid plans for Iraq's future. He said that "repairing and rebuilding alliances" is key to avoiding terrorism. Lugar, too, had warned in 2003 that the Administration had not given enough consideration to what would happen in Iraq after the fighting ended.

Not Under Control

Of course, the Senators' behavior still contrasts sharply with that of leading Republicans in the House of Representatives. There, as demonstrated by the opening remarks in the May 7 hearing held by House Armed Services Committee Chairman Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.), many Republicans have taken up Dick Cheney's line that the chicken-hawks and Rumsfeld are doing a terrific job, and should not have to be "diverted" by in-depth investigation into the prison torture scandal. The animosity has gone so far that the May 21 House hearing turned into a Republican attack on the Democrats. Some Republican Representatives have even attacked the Senate Republicans for taking the issue so seriously.

On May 20, party leaders decided to bring in President Bush for a meeting with the party faithful, in hopes of forging party unity again. After what was described as a pep talk, "participants filed past a bank of microphones to announce that they were unified in support of Bush and that there had been no dissent expressed at the meeting," according to the *Washington Post* account. "Bush took no questions," they added.

Despite the President's appearance, Senate Majority Leader Frist abruptly postponed the vote on the budget resolution until June, due to in-fighting among the Republicans. Four Senators are refusing to pass the budget unless it links new tax cuts with spending cuts, or other tax increases. The four hold-outs are Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.), Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins (R-Maine), and Lincoln Chafee (R-R.I.).

Congressional sources report that the Cheney crowd is continuing to put massive pressure on the Republican Senators, in hopes of containing both the investigation of the prisoner torture scandal, and the general revolt against the neo-conservatives' imperial policy. In addition, President Bush has been scheduled by his controllers to give weekly speeches, up until the June 30 deadline for transfer of power to the Iraqis, in order to rally the nation behind his conduct of the war. If his May 24 speech to the Army War College was any indication, this tactic will not do the trick. The President stuck with his standard teleprompter mantra: Staying the course, Iraq for the Iraqis, creating democracy, ending tyranny, *ad nauseam*.

Meanwhile, President Bush's poll numbers continue to drop (They are now below 50%), and gossip columnists are floating options such as Rudy Giuliani to replace Cheney on the ticket. The ball is left in the senior Senators' court, to rebuild the honor of the party, and the nation.