

Senators Battle White House on Issues of War, Torture, Vets

by Nancy Spannaus

“Mr. Bush now has to decide how to respond in a way that shows he’s not a lame duck,” wrote the pro-Administration *Wall Street Journal* in its June 22 editorial, reviewing the implications of the failure of the Administration to ram through the nomination of John Bolton as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. In fact, it’s already too late. Faced with intractable opposition to his agenda on multiple fronts—Bolton, the Iraq war, Social Security, the torture scandal, and the military base closings, to mention just the most prominent—President Bush is losing his already tenuous grasp on reality, and the Administration is being held together increasingly by the sheer thuggery of Vice President Dick Cheney.

Even the public record shows that Cheney is working overtime to try to ensure that the agenda of his synarchist banker bosses goes through. It is Cheney who has demanded that the Senate Republicans keep fighting to get Bolton, who was Cheney’s personal pick, confirmed. It is Cheney who has gone on television to try to counter the overwhelming evidence of U.S. failure in Iraq, by asserting that the insurgency “is in its last throes.” And it is Cheney—whose legal counsel, David Addington, authored one of the crucial memos legitimizing torture by U.S. troops at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib—who has most adamantly refused to respond to the increasingly gruesome revelations about conditions at the U.S. prison camp in Cuba.

In fact, as Lyndon LaRouche said at his June 16 webcast, the Senate has to politically destroy Cheney *first*, as the Bush Administration falls apart. That is the only way that the Senate can effectively take up the urgent economic agenda which is needed to save the nation from impending disaster.

Beyond the Bolton Impasse

While the most dramatic confrontation between the Senate and the White House continues to be on the issue of

John Bolton, the points of contention, on a bipartisan basis, are expanding daily. Minimal estimates are that at least a dozen leading Senate Republicans have “crossed” the Cheney-Rove team, by challenging Administration policy on various issues.

One of the major arenas of acrimonious debate is the Iraq war. As the insurgency against the U.S. occupation expands in bloodier and bloodier fashion, the war is becoming increasingly unpopular, and it’s becoming a political issue.

In a May 30 interview on CNN’s Larry King show, Dick Cheney decided to take the point on the matter by announcing that the United States was winning in Iraq. “I think the level of activity that we see today, from a military standpoint, I think will clearly decline,” said Cheney. “I think they’re in the last throes, if you will, of the insurgency.”

By June 16, after 47 American soldiers were killed in Iraq in the first 15 days of June—five more than were killed in the entire month of June 2004—and hundreds of Iraqis were also killed by the insurgency, Cheney’s remarks began to meet a backlash.

On June 16, Rep. Walter Jones, Republican of North Carolina, broke ranks with the White House, and introduced a bipartisan group of four members of the House of Representatives, including himself, to announce that they were sponsoring a binding resolution to begin the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Jones, who voted for the war in October 2002, and who is credited with inventing the gimmick of “Freedom Fries” instead of “French Fries,” when the French opposed the Iraq war, introduced the other three sponsors, Ron Paul (R-Tex.), Dennis Kucinich (D-Oh.), and Neil Abercrombie (D-Hi.), as “a conservative, a libertarian, a liberal, and a moderate, who agree that our forces have done all they can do in Iraq.”

The bill mandates that Bush begin withdrawing troops



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Sen. Chuck Hagel
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on or before Oct. 1, 2006. It was modelled after the Mansfield Amendment of 1971, which had a similar message to President Nixon about bringing the troops home from Vietnam. Kucinich said: “Today is the beginning of the end of the war in Iraq. It is time to thank our troops and say, ‘Come home.’ ”

On June 17, in a hearing room of the U.S. Senate, at a forum of the Middle East Policy Council, the most competent, independent thinktank in Washington that deals with Southwest Asia, speaker Ivan Eland stated, “We lost, and we don’t know it yet.” The forum, which featured four speakers, was a grim but welcome dose of the truth. The Administration’s refusal to admit mistakes in the Iraq policy reflects “political autism,” said Policy Council president Chas Freeman, who was U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia under Bush 41. Freeman’s observation was prophetic—Cheney’s drivel was defended three times between June 18 and June 22 by the Administration—by the State Department, by the White House, and by Bush’s handler, Karl Rove.

In effect, all the Policy Council speakers concurred that the insurgency has not been crushed, that the United States has no clear objectives or exit strategy, and that Iraq is coming unglued. Colonel Patrick Lang (USA-ret.), former Defense Intelligence Officer for the Mideast, not only warned that Iraq’s insurgency is going through a phase of consolidation similar to the rebels in Vietnam against the French in the early Vietnam war, but said that Iraq has been turned into a school for terrorists by the Bush policy.

Then, on June 19, came a kind of *coup de grâce*, when *U.S. News and World Report* released its latest issue with an article called, “Hit With Friendly Fire,” quoting Republican Senator Chuck Hagel, a Vietnam War veteran and very senior member of the GOP. The article begins: “Nebraska Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel is angry. He’s upset about the more than 1,700 U.S. soldiers killed and nearly 13,000 wounded in Iraq. He’s also aggravated by the continued string of sunny



Sen. Arlen Specter
(R-Penn.) held Senate
Judiciary Committee
hearings on Guantanamo
detainees.

assessments from the Bush Administration, such as Vice President Dick Cheney’s recent remark that the insurgency is in its ‘last throes.’ ‘Things aren’t getting better; they’re getting worse. The White House is completely disconnected from reality,’ Hagel tells *U.S. News*. ‘It’s like they’re just making it up as they go along. The reality is that we’re losing in Iraq.’ ”

Abu Ghraib Is Hurting Us

Republicans are also threatening to revolt against the White House when it comes to the related issue of the torture scandals. There has been growing pressure from outside the Congress to establish an Independent Commission to investigate prisoner “detainee abuses,” because neither the House nor the Senate carried out a full investigation. The effect of this pressure was reflected in the fact that Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Penn.) held hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee on June 15, where the abuses at Guantanamo were extensively reviewed. Until this point, the Republican leadership had generally blocked this kind of disclosure.

The hearing was called by Specter, as he said at the outset, to consider the procedures used by the Defense Department for determining if detainees are to be held indefinitely, or tried before a military commission; the hearing was not for the purpose of considering the torture and mistreatment of prisoners, which Specter suggested could be the subject of future hearings.

The ludicrous efforts by Pentagon spokesmen and Administration defenders, such as former Attorney General William Barr, to portray the procedures used at Guantanamo as complying with traditional U.S. military practice, and with the Supreme Court’s requirements of due process, was blown out of the water by the two defense lawyers. (Sen. Jeffrey Sessions, an Alabama Republican, went so far as to assert that the setting for Guantanamo “would make a magnificent resort.”)

The first to testify was Joseph Margulies, who represents Mamdouh Habib, an Australian citizen who was picked up in Pakistan, taken to Egypt where he was held and brutally tortured for six months, and then taken to Guantanamo. Under



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Rep. Walter Jones (R-N.C.), sponsor of a binding resolution to begin withdrawing troops from Iraq.

torture, Habib had “confessed” to all kinds of allegations, and then the Combat Status Review Tribunal at Guantanamo had relied on these “confessions”—and nothing else—to determine that Habib should be held as an “enemy combatant.” But five days after an account of Habib’s rendition and torture appeared in the *Washington Post*, the Pentagon released him without any charges and sent him back to Australia.

The second lawyer to testify was Navy Lt. Commander Charles Swift. The stage for his testimony had been set during the first panel, by Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.), who questioned Gen. Thomas Hemingway, a top official in the Pentagon’s Office of Military Commissions, about statements in Swift’s prepared testimony, that he had only been assigned to represent detainee Salim Ahmed Hamdan for the purpose of inducing Hamdan to plead guilty. Hemenway denied under oath that this was the case.

But when Swift testified, he made it clear that “the purpose in detailing me was to negotiate a guilty plea,” and that his access to Hamdan was contingent upon Hamdan making a guilty plea. What Swift did, instead, was to file a writ of *habeas corpus* on Hamdan’s behalf; a federal judge ruled last year in his case that the Pentagon’s procedures for military commissions were unconstitutional, and stopped the trials then under way.

Swift testified June 24 that the commissions are not “an independent and fair process,” and that “It’s not befitting of America.” At the end of the hearing, Swift firmly told the committee that “when you hold a trial . . . it says as much about the society that holds the trial, as it does about the individual before it. Our trials in the United States reflect who we are; they’re the models of the world.”

Throughout the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, defenders of the Bush Administration’s practices at Guantanamo—both witnesses and some Republican Senators—repeatedly referred to the detainees at Guantanamo as “the worst of the worst,” and as posing a threat to the U.S. which is unprecedented in American history, such that the Geneva Conventions and the laws of war cannot possibly apply.

But when Sen. Patrick Leahy (Vt.), the ranking Democrat

on the committee, asked Lt. Cmdr. Charles Swift what advantages there would be to applying the Geneva Conventions, Swift responded by pointing to the experience of World War II — noting that the Japanese were certainly considered “fanatical, willing to die rather than surrender,” and that they had kamikaze pilots, the equivalent of today’s suicide bombers. Swift pointed out that the most effective interrogations of the Japanese were those conducted in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, in which the prisoners were treated kindly and humanely. Once the Japanese prisoners realized that the Americans were not simply out to annihilate the Japanese, they cooperated in their interrogations.

According to the *New York Times* June 22, Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.) a former Air Force lawyer and member of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, has now endorsed the idea of an independent commission to review accusations of abuse. The United States needs “to prove to the world that we are a rule-of-law nation,” Graham was quoted as saying. Similar statements have been made in recent weeks by Senator Hagel.

Social Security Plus

No review of Bush’s lame-duck status would be complete without reference to his Social Security privatization drive. This was the flight-forward which Lyndon LaRouche said in late 2004 would sink the President, and it most assuredly has led the way in destroying his aura of power.

Republican plans for introducing Social Security legislation in both houses of Congress can only be described as foundering in face of unanimous Democratic Party opposition. At present, some Republicans are even claiming that the President will drop his “private accounts” scheme, in favor of a “mere solvency” bill, but this has been exposed by Democrats, like Sen. Max Baucus (Mt.) as a “transparent bait-and-switch” operation, which means it also is headed for oblivion.

Nor is it only Social Security on which Republicans are revolting against Bush. On June 23, Republican Senator Larry Craig (Id.), chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Oversight Subcommittee, joined with other Republicans and leading Democrats to protest the fact that Bush’s Veterans Administration has come up more than \$1.2 billion short for 2006 veterans’ health care. The VA had repeatedly assured the Senators that it had enough funds to deliver the needed services, and now that it is clear that the funds are not available to handle all the problems of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, the Senators were angry. Craig said he planned Senate hearings soon, and declared, “We’re going to pound them like hell ’til we get them. Then we’ll make some judgments.”

Leading Republicans are also “up in arms” against the Administration’s proposed base closings. Speaking out against the Administration are Republicans Sen. John Thune (S.D.), Sen. Susan Collins (Me.), and Sen. Olympia Snowe (Me.).