

Downside UP

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Elections 2006: The Wedge Issues

This month's Downside Up highlights eight major issues shaping the future of this country as the 2006 elections approach. Three of these are likely "wedge" issues; that is, issues which have the capacity to cause a significant movement of voters from one political party to the other and thereby shaping the elections themselves.¹

Four of the eight issues were named by The Washington Post two months ago as part of its "Bellwether" project defining the factors which would most likely determine the outcome of the 2006 elections: (1) the economy, (2) corruption, (3) immigration, and (4) the Iraq War.² To these four I would add four more: (5) terrorism and the supposed war on it, (6) the Republican's long-standing "core" or "values" agenda on issues like abortion, state-supported religious activity, patriotism, hostility to gay marriage, tax cuts, small government, and financial responsibility, (7) civil liberties, and (8) the environment. Of these eight, three -- the economy, the Iraq war, and terrorism/national security -- appear to be wedge issues -- those most likely to affect the outcome of the election

In the end, most voters most of the time vote the way they have been voting, no matter what the issues. That's the reality of American politics -- and the world's politics. Even when their party is behaving contrary to what they believe, people tend to unconsciously rationalize their party's behavior to their own beliefs. Just 5 to 15% of voters will swing the 2006 U.S. election.

It would appear that the Democrats have a chance of making significant gains in the House and Senate because many of these swing voters perceive the economy as not doing well, worry about the Iraq war as it has degenerated into civil war, and no longer believe that Republicans will do the best job defending the country against terrorism. Indeed, national security/terrorism and Iraq have combined to make a large percentage of Americans anxious about their economic future. In a sense, the three wedge issues have become one issue.

¹ I use the plural, "elections," because, in the United States, there are not only many elections at many levels of government but they are dispersed by state and congressional districts, each with its own set of rules. In non-presidential years especially, there is much less sense of a single national election than in many other countries.

² Also included were four strategic factors: George Bush as a political albatross to his own party, Democrats competing in the (upper) South, Republicans competing in the Northeast, and how local ballot issues will affect voter turnout. The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, July 31 – August 6, 2006, pp. 6-9. For on-line updates, see "Eight Issues That Will Shape the 2006 Elections," www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/bellwether/index.htm

Evaluating the Issues

(1) The Environment

The environment is vitally important to the future of this country but it doesn't cut the mustard as a partisan issue in American politics. Ironically, it doesn't cut the mustard in part because it is so much a non-partisan issue. All polls show that the vast majority of Americans care deeply about protecting the environment and most politicians, Republican as well as Democratic, claim this value as their own. Just the other day an article in our local newspaper gave credit to the Bush as well as the Clinton government for the significant reduction in air pollution across the Northeast. What got lost in the ignorance of the reporter was the fact that the Bush regulations, instituted immediately after his coming into office, dramatically watered down the proposed Clinton standards as part of what has been, no question, the most anti-environment presidency in American history.

Beyond general principles, the details of environmental protection are just too complicated for many voters to grasp. When a West Virginia mountain top is removed and pristine streams run black with coal slurry, people get it. Oil spills are no brainers. But when our county's St. Johns River or Florida beaches suffer from "red tide" algae explosions, it is harder to get the connection between these and excessive use of fertilizer on local farms. It takes complex evidence and "blue state" suits to connect power plant emissions to asthma. It has taken decades to connect increased levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to unnatural global warming. One large industrial development today seems so much more economically important than the long-term loss of thousands of small shrimp farmers and the ecological system which sustains them. And all the time, big corporate money is fighting environmental legislation, funding phony environmental organizations, and claiming to be staunchly environmentalist.

Polls show that most Americans clearly understand that Democrats are more protective of the environment, but the distinction between Republicans and Democrats is fuzzy enough, and the issues complex and often remote enough (Alaska, West Virginia), to prevent the environment from being a wedge issue which changes a person's vote.

(2) Civil Liberties

Civil liberties may, in the long run, be the most important issue shaping what this country will become, but it too has little traction as a wedge issue. Bush practices and proposals on wire tapping without subpoenas; search and seizure of financial, telephone, and other once-private citizens' records without subpoenas; torture; and holding of prisoners without trial, without the right to see the evidence against them, and without the right to confront their accusers: all violate the most fundamental constitutional principles contained in the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Eighth Amendments to the Constitution. Under the guise of war, the current government of the United States has brushed aside and ignored the very foundation of the Republic even as it has laid exclusive claim to patriotism and a "strict interpretation" of the Constitution.

Yet, it is so easy to accept blindly the constant repetition of the idea that the only people affected are, after all, terrorists – other people. This despite the fact that thousands of people, including American citizens, have been held for months and years without any chance to prove their innocence much less, as our legal system requires, the government to prove their guilt. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

has lately joined the president in creating false analogies between World War II and the war in Iraq. First it was the liberation of Paris. Now Iraq is a war against fascism and opposition to the war is like British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's capitulation to Hitler on Czechoslovakia.

I would suggest a better analogy to Hitler would be the use and repetition of lies to justify attacking another country and the violation of civil liberties expanding from a small minority to larger and larger segments of the population. Special rules under the so-called Patriot Act have already been used against not only foreigners suspected of terrorism but also U.S. citizens suspected of ordinary crimes. The FBI is photographing and gathering files on student protesters. The IV Amendment to the Constitution states that "no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized." When the government gathers financial, internet, and telephone records on tens of millions of us without such warrants, we are all made terrorist suspects. With computers combing our files for matches, it would not be paranoid of any of us, Republican or Democrat, to imagine ourselves also in the not-too-distant future trying to prove our innocence of unspecified charges based on unverified data.

Yet, for most citizens, Democrat as well as Republican, the risk all seems so technical, vague, and distant.

(3) Corruption

Corruption should get a broad cross-section of the citizenry up in arms and certainly this time around, the corruption is far more Republican than Democratic. Corporations are paying out hundreds of millions of dollars in campaign contributions in expectation of support for their donors' objectives, Lobbyists are in some cases actually writing the legislation affecting their clients. Corporations are flying Senators, Congresspeople, and their whole families on corporate jets to exotic places from Scotland to Thailand for "educational programs." This kind of stuff would seem to have potential as a strong swing issue, especially with independents. Every commentator I have read on the subject agrees that the scale of corruption is unprecedented in American history. It is one of the Post's four issues.

Yet, there is a hard-to-grasp quality to this issue too. The Post article agrees that certain Congresspeople closely tied to Jack Abramoff but not indicted, like Ohio's Senator Mike DeWine and Congressman Robert Ney (who has now pleaded guilty to false statements), are being affected. However, "for the corruption issue to have national impact, politicians would [have to] be dislodged who are only in the vicinity of ethics controversies, rather than being central characters."

Part of the reason corruption has no traction is the notion that "all politicians are corrupt." This is patently untrue on the individual level. It is also untrue in the sense that most corruption today is not the old-fashioned 19th century variety where politicians were paid personally for delivering a specific contract or piece of legislation. Yet, the Democrats have been the focus of corruption scandals when they have been in power, and the system as a whole is, I am sad and reluctant to admit, profoundly corrupted by the overwhelming influence of huge amounts of money. Almost everybody takes huge campaign contributions because few can get

elected, at least for the first time, without hundreds of thousands, indeed, millions of dollars.³

(4) The Republicans' Values Agenda

The Republicans' corruption scandals have had a dampening effect on the power of the values agenda at a time when the issue was already in decline as a motivator of the party's hard core of religious fundamentalists. Not that the Republican leadership did not put on a good show. They supported constitutional bans on gay marriage and flag-burning, and in support of school prayer. They gained approval from the Senate for two hard core conservative Supreme Court appointees who have already voted to restrict federal authority over the environment, enhance police and presidential powers, and enable the federal government to contravene state law on certain moral issues anathema to the Right.

It might seem that these efforts would be rewarded once again with heavy voting from the party's core constituency. But Bush has not been very successful in passing additional tax reductions and, to the chagrin of more traditional conservatives with whom the religious right are allied, he has driven the federal budget deficit into the stratosphere. It would not be out of place for many on the Religious Right to conclude that the Bush people care a lot more about their corporate supporters than their religious ones.

On the Democratic side, I don't know why they have not pressed the Republicans on the Terry Schiavo case but there is no question that the Republican leadership's efforts to intervene there alienated almost all "moderate" Republicans. To a man, even my Republican tennis cohort – well-off, a-religious, and individualistic – thinks that was wrong. That could hurt the Republicans among swing voters in suburbia.

(5) Immigration

If values issues no longer strongly move the hard core of the Republicans' constituency, immigration seems to be the one issue which, according to the Post, still "excites the conservative base." Many Republicans are vowing to block the border and any program which smacks of "amnesty" or "guest worker" legitimacy for illegal immigrants. The issue plays well with Republicans not only in states like Arizona and Colorado near the Mexican border but also in places like Iowa and Georgia. I hear it a lot in Florida where Central Americans and people from the Caribbean join Mexicans to pour our concrete, put on our roofs, and mow our lawns.⁴ Building a 700 mile fence along the U.S.-Mexican border was one of the last bills rammed through Congress by Republicans on September 29/30 before going on break to campaign in the November elections.

³ Some political commentators on the right like to emphasize that money comes from a wide variety of "special interests" and love to point to labor unions and environmentalists. But both have always depended more on people than dollars. Labor union contributions never compared to corporation contributions, and labor unions are today, in both numbers and dollars, a much diminished force in American politics. It is corporate money that pervades the process and, despite the rapid growth of small donations from Fundamentalist Republicans on the religious right and internet-savvy Democrats on the left, Democrats just as much as Republicans depend upon it. New York Senator Charles Schumer often sounds like a raging leftist ideologue when talking about oil companies and corporate polluters but don't look for any crusades against the financial community by the "Senator from Wall Street."

⁴ Many of these people are contract workers legally in this country and who return to their home country until their next contract.

Yet the issue plays in both directions. George Bush and some in the Republican leadership are haunted by what happened in California after Governor Pete Wilson successfully pushed a 1994 referendum restricting public services for illegal immigrants. California turned overwhelmingly Democratic, a secure "blue" state. It may be in fact that the Republicans were already running down in California as a result of vast increases in the Hispanic population. Yet, those increases are continuing in California as well as in other states, and there seems little doubt that Hispanics, legal as well as illegal, take anti-immigrant rhetoric, and especially that rhetoric associated with Mexican border controls, as fundamentally anti-Hispanic. Hispanics are the largest group of legal and illegal immigrants to the country and have just become our largest minority.⁵

Five of the seven states with the fastest growing Hispanic populations are in the thoroughly red-state South, a sixth was red state for Bush in 2004, and the seventh squeaked through for Kerry in 2004.⁶ In the short run, anti-immigrant tirades may draw more of the core Republican Right to the polls in 2006, but in the long run, playing this card may be a losing – and dangerous – proposition for Republicans.

The Wedge Issues

Although the environment, civil liberties, corruption, values, and immigration are all important issues for the country in 2006 and could marginally affect the elections, they do not appear to be true wedge issues. They are not decisive enough to sway a large part of the 5 to 15% of voters who are swing voters. In that sense, these issues don't count; they don't have political traction. The wedge issues are (1) national security and the war on terrorism, (2) the Iraq War, and (3) the economy as it affects people's pocketbooks now and looking to the future.

(6) Terrorism

With an opening salvo before the American Legion at its national convention in Salt Lake City on August 31, President Bush began a series of speeches equating dissent on the Iraq war with defeatism, aiding terrorism, and, implicitly, lack of patriotism. Even before that, he, Vice President Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld suggested (1) that critics (mostly meaning Democrats) would "[if elected] block additional money" for the war (and, of course, "the troops"), (2) that these critics now "claim retreat from Iraq would satisfy the appetite of terrorists and get them to leave us alone," and (3) that the critics would, if elected appease terrorists much as British Prime Minister Chamberlain appeased Hitler and Nazi Germany. On September 5, in a speech to the Military Officers Association of America – again and as always talking only to pre-screened audiences chosen in advance because they already support him -- Bush followed up with the stupendous claim that the country was "safer five years after 9/11."⁷

Why The Post did not single out terrorism among its key issues affecting the election is baffling. Not only did the Republicans use terrorism and national security to

⁵ www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2003/cb03-100.html

⁶ The states are Arkansas, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Nevada, and New Hampshire. <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/08/15/diversity.ap/index.html>, www-personal.umich.edu/~mejn/election/

⁷ Peter Baker and Jim VandeHei, "On the Offensive," The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, p. 13. Bush was quick to deny that his speeches had anything to do with the 2006 election: "They're not political speeches," he said, "They're speeches about the future of this country...I seriously hope people wouldn't politicize these issues that I'm going to talk about."; David Jackson, "Bush: America safer 5 years after 9/11," USA Today, September 6, 2006, p. 10A.

crushing effect in 2002 and 2004, Karl Rove, as he has before, telegraphed the Republicans' intent in a speech as far back as last January 20th.⁸ Although the effectiveness of this strategy in 2006 was already in doubt, Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld were well on their way to carrying it out when The New York Times, on September 24th, revealed the existence of the official but classified National Intelligence Estimate. Entitled ""Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States," it represented a consensus of the 16 disparate U.S. spy agencies and cites the Iraq war as a key "indicator" of a worsening threat of terrorism.⁹

So important was the "safer than before 9/11" strategy that the White House forced changes in the original National Intelligence Estimate. This caused its completion to be delayed until April, at which point the White House released laundered reports along with a not-quite-so-sanitized September 20 report from the Republican-controlled House Intelligence Committee. The initial White House documents barely mentioned the effect of the Iraq war on the jihadist movement and referred only to how the "ongoing fight for freedom in Iraq has been twisted by terrorist propaganda as a rallying cry." But the National Intelligence Estimate concludes that the war has led to the "spread of the Global Jihadist Movement."¹⁰

In case any reader has forgotten, the original excuse for invading Iraq was weapons of mass destruction. Then it was building democracy in the Middle East – the "nation-building" that the Bush team rejected because Clinton did it. Only now that Iraq has fallen into terrorist civil war and become the inspiration and source of training for terrorists, has the very same Republican leadership that created the Iraq-terrorist threat begun to link criticism of the war to being soft on terrorism!

Rove's fear-mongering strategy of 2002 and 2004 worked especially well with women. In 2004, one woman professor and former colleague at the State University of New York, Potsdam, asked me to discontinue sending her Downside Up. She emailed me that she was most concerned about security, convinced that George Bush was going to deal with it better than John Kerry, and didn't want to hear anything to the contrary from me. But the strategy may not work this time. The "security moms" of closely contested suburban districts at the core of Bush's swing voters in 2002 and 2004 are "taking flight" to the Democrats. A Pew Research Center poll for The Washington Post found that married women with children support Democrats for Congress by a 12-point margin, 50% to 38%, and that is "nearly a mirror-image reversal from a similar period in 2002 when this group backed Republicans 53% to 36%."¹¹

The idea that Democrats would be "soft on terrorism" has always been as bogus – and immoral – an issue as the Republicans' smearing of Gore, Kerry, Vietnam War triple amputee Georgia Senator Max Cleland, and other Democratic war heroes. It is just that only now Democrats have fought back. On the broad shoulders of Pennsylvania Congressman John Murtha, emblazoned with military awards for valor,

⁸ E. J. Dionne Jr., "Rove's Early Warning," The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, January 30-February 5, 2006, p. 26.

⁹ Mark Mazzetti, p. 1.

¹⁰ Mazzetti again.

¹¹ Jim VandeHei, "Don't Count on Them This Time," The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, August 28-September 3, 2006, p. 14.

Democrats have gained some breathing room to link mismanagement of the war with making the United States less safe from terrorists.

The American people need to hear and remember all the facts about 9/11, terrorism, and the real origins of the threat to national security. It happened, after all, on Bush's watch, not Bill Clinton's. It happened **after Richard Clarke, Bush's Coordinator of Counter-Terrorism, had, from the day Bush took office, warned him repeatedly of a looming Al Qaeda attack on the United States, and Bush ignored him.**¹² The new laws limiting our civil liberties are not even necessary. The 9/11 attack itself would have been stopped if only the CIA and the FBI had been sharing what they knew rather than fighting with each other.¹³ We are still pathetically ill-equipped at home to prevent terrorists attacks on nuclear and chemical facilities and our intelligence effort is still disorganized and overwhelmed by chaos.¹⁴ Even the President, whom the FBI and the CIA told before the invasion of Iraq that Saddam had nothing to do with 9/11, publicly admitted three years ago that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11.¹⁵

Underlying the White House claim that we are safer today than before 9/11 is the monstrous lie, leaked out edgily but continually, that 9/11, and somehow everything that has happened since, was the fault of the Bush crowd's arch-enemy, Bill Clinton. The CBS TV drama, "NCIS," ended last season with Mark Harmon, the star of this naval investigation show, growling about Clinton calling off a U.S. Navy Cruise missile attack on bin Laden when they could have gotten him. Ann Coulter and other liars of the fanatical Right have called him a coward. All these allegations stoke Republican propaganda portraying Democrats in general and Clinton in particular as wimps on terrorism and national security.

The fact is that Clinton was the first U.S. president to seriously address terrorism as a national priority. It was Clinton who elevated the position of Coordinator of Counter-Terrorism to the cabinet level, having its incumbent, Clarke, meet with the cabinet even though it was not an official cabinet office. ABC's "docudrama" of September 10 and 11, claims that the CIA and the Northern Alliance had bin Laden surrounded and was only asking for permission to capture him, but that the Clinton White House, Sandy Berger in particular, refused to allow it. ABC claims Clarke as its counter-terrorism adviser, but the scene is totally fictional. **It is Clarke who has criticized the Bush White House for downgrading his position – and him – out of cabinet meetings, and abandoning both the Clinton focus on terrorism and the effort to take bin Laden out.** This was, again, not doing whatever Clinton was doing for the sole reason that Clinton was doing it.¹⁶ Talk about analogies to World War II, Neville Chamberlain, and appeasement of fascism!

¹² See Downside Up, "Invasion of Iraq," April 2006.

¹³ A New Yorker article, "The Agent," by Lawrence Wright, describes in terrifying detail how the CIA knew that two of the terrorists wanted for the October 12, 2000, attack on the USS Cole in Yemen were part of a pre-9/11 meeting of Al Qaeda terrorists in Malaysia, they had entered the United States in July of 2001, and they were living in San Diego. Even when the FBI asked about those same people it suspected, the CIA would not tell them. (July 10 & 17, 2006, pp. 62-73.)

¹⁴ See Karen DeYoung, "A Chaotic Work in Progress," The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, August 21-17, 2006, p. 6-.

¹⁵ Scott Shepard, "Bush: No Iraq link to 9/11 found," Seattle Post Intelligencer, September 18, 2003, seattlepi.nwsourc.com. Downside Up, "Invasion of Iraq," April, 2006.

¹⁶ According to Clarke and contrary to the ABC portrayal, the CIA was not at the house where bin Laden was alleged to be, nor was the leader of the Northern Alliance, and the CIA Director, George Tenet, said he could

In fact, it is the Bush policies of ignoring allies, going it alone, preemptive war, lack of planning, bad planning, favoring Israel over Palestinians, failing to "stay the course" in Afghanistan, and refusing to provide adequate troops in Iraq, which have made most of the world mad at us and led to the surge in terrorism since 2003. Iraq has distracted our attention from what really needs to be done to fight terrorism.

Thanks to Bush's policies, we are far less safe now than before 9/11. And more and more Americans are beginning to realize it.

(7) The Iraq War

The Iraq war has not only increased the threat of terrorism, it is a distraction from the effort to limit terrorism. For many Americans, it also takes away money and focus from more important domestic issues. Although I have not yet heard Cheney admit it, Rumsfeld, as well as Bush, has reluctantly admitted that there were no weapons of mass destruction and that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11. In 2001, from Day One, the recently installed Bush II presidential regime was planning to invade Iraq and finish what many of them criticized Bush I for not doing: overthrowing Saddam Hussein. It was an unprovoked war of aggression. Weapons of mass destruction were merely the most convenient excuse for getting it started.¹⁷

Even after starting the war, the Bush regime flaunted its ignorance and arrogance. A recent article in The Washington Post detailed the same kind of attitude so evident in the Bush regime's response to Hurricane Katrina.¹⁸ They knew what could happen – massive levee failure, looting of national treasures – but they ignored what they knew. In Iraq, addressing the needs of a country stretched to the breaking point was made secondary to rewarding political supporters with jobs and contracts. All appointments to the Coalition Provisional Authority were screened by Republican loyalists to favor Republican supporters. At the highest level, appointments were screened directly by the White House and top Pentagon political appointees.

In one case, extreme but far from unique, a social worker who headed a "faith-based" so-called "Christian" anti-abortion international relief organization was put in charge of rehabilitating the Iraqi health care system. He replaced a physician with a master's degree in public health, experience in Kosovo, Somalia, and northern Iraq, and deputy assistant administrator at the U.S. Agency for International Development which sent him to Baghdad immediately after the war. The corruption and abuse were intentional and unparalleled.¹⁹

Meanwhile, as Rumsfeld refused our military leadership's request for additional troops to finish off Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, he refused to meet their request for enough troops to prevent first chaos and now civil war in Iraq. The Clinton-led military action in the former Yugoslavia was a model for damping down conflict in a

not recommend a strike because the information was single-sourced and there was no way to know if bin Laden was in the area. According to the 9/11 Commission Report, Tenet had the authority from Clinton to kill bin Laden. www.thinkprogress.org/2006/09/05. See also Downside Up, "Invasion of Iraq," April, 2006.

¹⁷ Speaking of Hitleresque analogies! See Downside Up, "Invasion of Iraq," again, for more on this event.

¹⁸ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Ties Trump Experience," The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, September 25 – October 1, 2006, p. 6.

¹⁹ Yes, contracts and appointment were totally politicized in the 19th century United States but that was why civil service reforms were passed at the end of that century.

fractious country rent with religious and ethnic hostilities. Once again, however, precisely because it was done one way there by Clinton, the Bush team was determined not to do it that way in Iraq. Not nation-building for them. Ignore the fact that not a single U.S. soldier died in combat there under the Clinton-Powell plan.²⁰ The belated realization that if they were not engaged in nation-building, they were engaged in nation-destroying, was too late. The fact that, without more troops, there was inevitably more violence, has never been admitted.

Now it's a total mess. Democrats know that and are enraged. Most swing voters and some less hard core Republicans have joined them to make up a majority of Americans who think the war was a mistake, and perhaps worse, made terrorism a greater risk to our country. Iraq is now in civil war. Even most Iraqis now want us out.²¹ The emperor has no clothes: everyone with eyes to see knows the truth but the dangers of admitting it are too great for those in power.²²

The problem for Republicans is that if they admit Iraq is now in civil war, there remains no justification for the U.S. presence. There can no longer be any pretense that we are protecting anyone from someone else when everyone is fighting. And the only resolution is partition. Oops, I have spoken the unspeakable words. Like Yugoslavia, created by the Great Powers after World War I, Iraq was an artificial amalgamation of diverse peoples, ethnicities, and religious persuasions living in three regions – Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. Occupied for centuries by the Ottoman Turks, it was re-formed by the British after World War I out of the same regions and held together by force. The real surprise may not be that Iraq is falling apart but that it has held together for so long. The Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld vision for a new Iraq may never have been possible but that only compounds the ignorance and arrogance behind their starting the war.

The response by the Bush regime is by now well-worn: lies and denials. For the truth would reveal the full dimensions of the disaster. As Harold Meyerson has opined in The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, "It's not true that they don't have a plan for Iraq. Their plan is to avoid having such a resolution [partition and withdrawal] occur on their watch, to delay the disintegration of Iraq, for which they more than anyone else are responsible, until Bush is out of office and they can lay the blame for this catastrophe on his successor."²³ In the meantime, they motivate their base by contrasting "'the president's commitment to defeat the terrorists in Iraq' with the Democrats' supposed lack of commitment to that goal." There is no civil war. Because they have a "unity government," there can be no civil war. "Another problem solved in the neat little world of George Bush."

At long last, a majority of the American people may not buy this charade.

(8) The Economy

To the degree that Republicans can energize their base around national security and the so-called "war on terrorism," and thereby neutralize the effects of the Iraq

²⁰ The "Powell Doctrine" holds that you enter a conflict – or start one – only with overwhelming force, so overwhelming that there is never a question of serious resistance.

²¹ "Polls find most Iraqis want immediate U.S. withdrawal," The St. Augustine Record, 9/27/06, p. 8A.

²² E.J. Dionne Jr., "Slowly Sidling to Iraq's Exit," The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, September 4 – 10, 2006, p. 27.

²³ "So What's our Role in Iraq's Civil War," same issue as above, p. 26.

disaster, they still have a chance to hold onto the House and, even more likely, the Senate. Whether success with these issues will be enough may depend a lot on people's perceptions of the economy and its effect on their pocketbooks.

In 2006, Republicans appear to be facing some of the same frustrations Democrats experienced in 2004 trying to convince voters that the Bush tax cuts were not good for most people and people should vote their pocketbooks. This year, Republicans are trumpeting a 2005 increase of 1.1% in real median household income, low unemployment, record homeownership, and rising gross domestic product. But potential voters don't seem to be paying proper attention.²⁴ The situation is similar to 2004 in that voters are worried in 2006 about non-economic issues like Iraq as voters were worried about terrorism in 2004. But there is also a difference in the fact that longer term data and larger economic issues weigh heavily on many Americans.

The gain in real median household income is the first since 1999 and more than five years after George Bush took office. A rising gross domestic product says nothing about its distribution – which is increasingly unequal to the benefit of the already rich. Strong employment says nothing about the quality and pay of those jobs. The high costs of energy, health care, and debt weigh heavily on consumers' minds. The ratio of financial obligations – primarily mortgage and consumer debt payments – to disposable income recently set a modern record of 18.7%.

In particular, the housing market is troubling to many. Mortgage debt alone has more than doubled to nearly \$9 trillion since 2000 as homeowners have taken advantage of low interest rates in a rising housing market. Now, interest rates are going up, housing values are softening, and new homeowners are being hit with the consequences of adjustable rate mortgages used to buy homes in the boom of the last six years. There will be more than \$400 billion in readjusted mortgages in 2006 and \$1 trillion more – about 11% of all outstanding mortgage debt – in 2007.

Most telling of all is the impact of the Iraq War. Both Business Week and The Washington Post National Weekly Edition²⁵ talk about the unusual variable of a war gone bad. Voters feel they are living in "risky times" says one pollster. A former campaign adviser to both Bush and Senator John McCain "says that the war in Iraq has clouded traditional economic models used to predict voter behavior. 'There is an unusually high correlation between how we're doing in the Middle East and [perceptions of] the economy...People keep on spending, but they say they don't feel good about the economy.'"

Me either.

Predicting the 2006 Election Results

While all the polls point to substantial Democratic gains in the 2006 elections, including recapture of the House and possibly even the Senate, the variables leave the details too close to call. On the evidence, it would seem the Republicans don't have a chance. The war founded on lies is a disaster and the current Republican

²⁴ Data for this section comes from Richard S. Dunham, "That Sinking Feeling," Business Week, August 21/28, 2006, p. 34; "The Business Week," in Business Week, September 11, 2006, p. 28; Jeffrey H. Birnbaum and Chris Cillizza, "Just Can't Get Ahead," The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, September 11, 2006, pp. 18 – 19.

²⁵ See previous footnote.

leadership in control of the Presidency and both houses of Congress is entirely responsible. The so-called war on terrorism is mismanaged and counterproductive. The Bush team is preparing for the last attack rather than the next, more interested in limiting civil liberties than protecting U.S. sites at risk, and still planning to spend more money on a missile defense system than the broad range of likely threats to American national security. The economy has not recovered and certainly not gained for most Americans. Heck, the stock market only now is around its 2000 peak. It is hard to see how even wealthy Americans would be happy with the George Bush regime.

In the end, anxieties created by the Iraq War, terrorism, and the economy are all wrapped up together. In a sense, one issue. It is absurd to claim that the country is safer today than before 9/11. The Iraq war has already grown into a regional civil war. Iranian Shiites support Iraqi Shiites. Turkey threatens to intervene if the Kurds become independent and by that incite Kurds in Turkey. Iran is emboldened to develop nuclear weapons and supports Hezbollah in attacking Israel. The United States gives Israel the go-ahead to attack Hezbollah so that the United States will be freer to unilaterally attack Iran.

All the while, the United States refuses to negotiate with those like Iran and Syria it claims are terrorists but whitewashes Israel of every abuse. After endlessly claiming that its goal for the Middle East is to establish democracy and a new Palestinian government is democratically elected, the United States says nothing when Israel withholds all the tax revenue it has collected for that government. This throws the new government into chaos and gives Hezbollah an excuse for attacking Israel. Tell me why Muslims wouldn't hate us!

We are NOT safer for having hundreds of millions of people around the world, not only in Muslim countries but among our allies in Europe, for very good reason, thinking much less of, if not actually hating, us. As Israel may at last have found out from Hezbollah that not even a wall can keep it safe, we have found out -- again -- that not even two oceans can keep us safe. This country appeared to have learned this from World War II. George Bush has made us learn it again. "No man is an island" and we have to work with people even when it is messy.

For very good reason, the mess George Bush and his cohort have created makes Americans anxious about the economy and their future. We cannot imagine how we are going to pay down the stupendous debt which has accumulated. We know we should be paying for the war not hiding its costs in special resolutions outside the regular budget. We know that tax cuts have made it all worse. Some of us know that even the deficits the Bush Government admits to are deceptively low because they use the surplus in the current account for Social Security to balance out part of the real deficit. In these circumstances it would seem impossible that the Republicans could retain their hold on Congress in the 2006 elections.

Yet, there is one factor no one in the mainstream media is talking about: the honesty and legitimacy of the 2006 elections. Are the failures of the American electoral system now so evident that no election, no matter how honestly carried out, can be considered democratic and legitimate? Even disregarding the 2000 and 2002 elections, is the evidence which has now accumulated about the manipulation and fraud in the 2004 elections enough to place in question the honesty of the 2006 elections? This is the subject of next month's Downside Up.

Web Site: Downside Up has had a web site, and may have one again, but I haven't figured out to create one without tying myself down with blog management. If you need a back issue, email me at downsideup2@bellsouth.net.

Expanding the Readership: If you like what you see in Downside Up, feel free to forward this on to others. If you have received this by forwarding from someone else and you would like to be on the direct email list, email your email address to downsideup2@bellsouth.net. If you want to be taken off the email list, email to the same address.

Downside Up is published to educate the public about political, economic, and social issues from personal finance to international relations. In order to maintain flexibility in administration and allow for donations to political organizations, Downside Up is not set up as a charity and contributions are not tax-deductible. Email correspondence may be sent to downsideup2@bellsouth.net. Responses to email may appear in the newsletter but not necessarily be responded to personally.

Ronald Woodbury is the publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of Downside Up. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters, a friend, and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous.

Woodbury has a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in history and economics from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called Downside Up, in the Lacey, WA, Leader. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL, where he continues to be active in church and community. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.