

“Good Night, and Good Luck” - Joe McCarthy Rides Again

Today one substitutes "terrorists" for "communists."

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Whenever I have a dream, I ask myself: “Why this dream now? What is happening in my life at this moment that would engender these particular images?”

The same question has to be asked about “Good Night, and Good Luck,” George Clooney’s powerful docudrama about the McCarthy era of the 1950s: “Why make this film now? Is there something happening in our society, our media, our politics that would make audiences resonate with a low-budget film, shot in black-and-white, about the 1950s in America?”

It seems clear that director Clooney and co-writer Grant Heslov see a direct contemporary parallel with the anti-communist political witch-hunting of the 1950s, the unwillingness of most of the media to take on the bullyboy of that era. In our own time, an arrogant, bullying Administration is ruining the country, running roughshod over the Constitution, and questioning the patriotism of any who oppose them, much as Senator Joe McCarthy did with anyone who raised questions about his methods of hunting down suspected communists.

These days, of course, one substitutes “terrorists” for “communists.”

Think I’m exaggerating? How about the White House orchestrating a smear of Ambassador Joseph Wilson because he publicly questioned Bush’s twisted evidence for going to war in Iraq – and then, as a special revenge-bonus, key Administration officials outed Wilson’s wife, Valerie Plame, as a covert CIA officer? (Indictments in this case, and the coverup that followed, are expected within the next week or two.)

How about then-Attorney General John Ashcroft telling Congress that those who ask pointed questions about the legalities of the Administration’s “war on terrorism” give aid and comfort to “the enemy”? (Here’s Ashcroft’s exact quote: “To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty; my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists – for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve. They give ammunition to America’s enemies...”)

How about then-Press Secretary Ari Fleischer warning “all Americans that they need to watch what they say” about the Administration’s anti-terrorism policies, and the comments of Administration hatchetmen in the press, such as Ann Coulter, calling anti-Bush liberals “traitors” who deserve to be shot?

How about White House Press Secretary Scott McLellan questioning the patriotism of

veteran correspondent Helen Thomas just a few days ago because she “expressed her concerns” about the Bush Administration’s handling of the Iraq War? Here’s the official transcript of the key exchange, including ABC’s Terry Moran nailing McClellan. Thomas has asked several questions about Bush’s policies in Iraq:

McCLELLAN: Well, Helen, the President recognizes that we are engaged in a global war on terrorism. And when you’re engaged in a war, it’s not always pleasant, and it’s certainly a last resort. But when you engage in a war, you take the fight to the enemy, you go on the offense. And that’s exactly what we are doing. We are fighting them there so that we don’t have to fight them here. September 11th taught us –

THOMAS: It has nothing to do with – Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11.

McCLELLAN: Well, you have a very different view of the war on terrorism, and I’m sure you’re opposed to the broader war on terrorism. The President recognizes this requires a comprehensive strategy, and that this is a broad war, that it is not a law enforcement matter. Terry.

TERRY MORAN: On what basis do you say Helen is opposed to the broader war on terrorism?

McCLELLAN: Well, she certainly expressed her concerns about Afghanistan and Iraq and going into those two countries. I think I can go back and pull up her comments over the course of the past couple of years.

MORAN: And speak for her, which is odd.

McCLELLAN: No, I said she may be, because certainly if you look at her comments over the course of the past couple of years, she’s expressed her concerns –

THOMAS: I’m opposed to preemptive war, unprovoked preemptive war.

MR. McCLELLAN: – she’s expressed her concerns.

THE ROTTEN ODOR FROM THE TOP

Well, you get the idea. Criticize the Administration, have your ideas distorted, your reputation smeared, your patriotism questioned – with the consequences, of course, that your job, and perhaps even your life, could be placed in jeopardy. (Many of Plame’s contacts, for example, ones that she had built up over a decade as a covert CIA agent working in the field of weapons of mass destruction, were compromised and may well have been eliminated in their home countries.)

What emanates from the top works its stink down to the grassroots. There are instances of folks being refused passage on airplanes because a group with which they’re associated is critical of the Bush Administration, or they’re wearing anti-Bush buttons or T-shirts. And there are all those citizens who are bounced from Bush rallies, supposedly open to the public, because they don’t look right or are known to be Democrats. Or, a student is kicked out of school for wearing an anti-Bush logo on his T. Or, one of my favorites, Bush telling a citizen on a rope line who asked him a pointed question, “Why should I care what you think?”

We pay Bush's salary but the only people he wants to hear from are large GOP donors and the criminally-labile lackies and toadies down there in the Bush Bunker with him – or, as we learned last week, from carefully-scripted military officers in Iraq (not ordinary soldiers) feeding back to him the war talking-points they'd rehearsed with a Pentagon public-relations specialist. Oh, by the way, one of those supposed "combat troops" praising Bush's policy, the one sitting in the front row at the far left, turns out to be a Pentagon public-relations flack.

Despite the Bush Administration buying off name journalists to spout its propaganda message (the hiring of talk-show host Armstrong Williams finally is being investigated as a possible crime); despite manufacturing its own propaganda "news reports" and then sending them to TV stations around the country as real journalism; despite the staged photo-ops in New Orleans and Iraq, on sets immediately dismantled after the shoot; despite the GOP's control of the House and the Senate and most of the corporate media – despite all that, Bush's ratings continue to plummet, to the lowest point of his tenure in office, down in the 30s, even sliding fast among Republicans. Finally, the veils have come off the public vision, and they are beginning to see Bush & Co. for what it is.

BEWARE OF CORNERED, WOUNDED BEASTS

On the one hand, that's good news for those of us dedicated to a restoration of Constitutional rule, and to bringing the troops home alive from Iraq ASAP. On the other hand, I must confess I'm really nervous. The Bush Bunker crew right now are desperate, on the ropes, and have painted themselves into a felonious corner of their own devising. Beware wounded beasts; when they feel trapped, they are liable to strike out in a desperate attempt at survival.

As the Plamegate indictments approach; as Bush's popularity ratings continue to fall precipitously; as the situation in Iraq continues to deteriorate, referendum or no referendum; as the true nature of Bush's unfeeling ideology toward ordinary people became even more clear in the wake of the Katrina disaster; as the corruption and corporate thievery proceeds apace – as all these negatives continue to build pressure in the White House, one can anticipate a wide variety of major distractions and violent initiatives, both foreign and domestic.

What might some of those be? In one effort to get the Plamegate indictments off the front page, we can anticipate that Saddam Hussein's show-trial in Iraq will dominate the front pages and TV-news broadcasts to tell us yet again what a monster dictator this guy was, thus leaving precious little space or airtime available for the White House's ethical and criminal problems. (Let's just stipulate: Saddam was one of the worst dictators ever, nobody mourns his loss from power – and now let's get back to the real news.)

In addition, I would not be surprised if the U.S. or Mideast ally Israel moved to take out Iran's nuclear power plants and research facilities. A massive bombing, with all the ramifications of such action in the Muslim world, would do wonders to divert attention. Likewise, ratcheting up the military pressure on Syria, after the U.S. recently started up hostilities along, and perhaps even beyond, the border with Iraq. Or, the Bush Administration may choose once again to look the other way when a major terrorist incident is about to happen inside the U.S.

THE IMPEACHMENT SCENARIO

Karl Rove's M.O. always has always been, "when in trouble, attack." Don't let the opposition even get close to defining the agenda and parameters of discussion. As Rove himself is about to be attacked, I would think he might have even more motivation to pull out all the survival stops and arrange for something drastic to become Topic #1, rather than permitting the American public to focus on the high crimes and misdemeanors of the Bush Administration before the judicial dock.

And rest assured, the Plamegate indictments will have ramifications way beyond those charged. Once the perp-walks take place, once those trials begin – and probably long before as key elements of the case are leaked – the dirty secrets inside the White House will be revealed; Republican Senators and House members, anxious to be re-elected, might well back-pedal away so fast from BushCheneyRoveLibby that in the rush you'll barely be able to read the impeachment bill they'll agree to support.

In addition, GOP power-brokers and economic leaders, anxious to keep the markets stable and their profits predictable, might bow to the inevitable and their own self-interests and jettison their support for the Bush Administration, putting their money behind other, less-tainted politicians.

What would follow impeachment trials – assuming Bush and Cheney don't do a Nixon and resign first? One would hope that the political lessons would have been learned by those next in line – be it Hastert or Stevens or Rice or Rumsfeld. Whoever would take over from Bush would be reading the 2006 pre-election polls and, realizing that the Republicans are going to be swept out of power bigtime – to even try to manipulate the election returns in that kind of landslide would be counterproductive – might well abandon the imperial adventuring and corporate looting and advocacy of torture as state policy and shredding of Constitutional protections, etc. etc. In other words, there would be some movement toward the middle.

McCARTHYISM IN THE BUSH ERA

Which brings us back to "Good Night, and Good Luck." Something similar happened to Sen. Joseph McCarthy in the '50s: he was riding as high as any political demagogue could, for years virtually controlling the government and America's socio-political agenda in his anti-communist frenzy – ruining the reputations of honorable men and women with impunity – and then, suddenly, he went too far, was shamed and humiliated and was isolated by his fellow senators and his powers removed. He died of alcoholism-related diseases a few years later.

For those unfamiliar with McCarthy and the political/social mayhem he caused 50 years ago – along with the vigilante movement he spawned ("McCarthyism") – here's a brief primer. Waving what he claimed were lists of names of alleged communists inside the State Department and elsewhere in the government, and denouncing citizens left and right for alleged "communist sympathies," and with few in academia, the media and government willing to take him on and risk being called a "pinko" or worse, McCarthy became the locus of malevolent power in America, dispensing a kind of toxic poison all around the country that created fear and kept people from fully exercising their rights as citizens. Keep your mouth shut and your head down – that was the operating principle in the McCarthy period.

McCarthy's downfall was that he didn't know where to stop, or when; indeed, he believed he was unstoppable. But after hounding show-biz personalities and academics and media

reporters and lower-level government employees, McCarthy began attacking the U.S. Army leadership, including war-hero General George Marshall, at which point former four-star general Dwight David Eisenhower, now President Eisenhower, had had enough. The battle was joined, and CBS star newsman Edward R. Murrow attacked McCarthy frontally and wounded him enough so that others, including Boston attorney Joseph Welch and McCarthy's fellow Senators could finish him off.

But you don't get a lot of this important layering-history in "Good Night, and Good Luck," which prefers to focus almost exclusively and insularly on the battle between Murrow/CBS and McCarthy. But McCarthy's arrogant recklessness went far beyond the mass media. One of my former university teaching colleagues, for example, had been denounced by a touring McCarthy as a "communist sympathizer" from the stage of the university where he taught; my colleague (who, of course, was no pinko sympathizer, just one of the few academics in the loyalty-oath McCarthy era still courageous enough to ask questions) lost that job and, even though he located another teaching position years later, he was emotionally scarred, easily frightened and very afraid to speak his mind in public. Others suffered similar harassments even though their only crime was having names similar to the real suspects. It was a true witch-hunt, with people naming names willy-nilly – or being forced to publicly denounce their parents – just to clear themselves.

THE POLITICS BEHIND WITCH-HUNTING

The unspoken assumption in "Good Night, and Good Luck" is that there may have been a few communists inside and outside the government that were worth paying serious attention to, but if there were, laws and procedures were in place for uncovering and dealing with them; the glory of our country's system is that one can pay attention to the civil liberties afforded suspects even when going after them legally. The unspoken assumption in our own time is that there may be al-Qaida sleeper cells inside the U.S., but, even if that were true, you don't need to use a sledgehammer to kill some gnats, wrecking the entire Constitutional house in the process.

McCarthy was encouraged by Republicans in the 1950s to rampage around looking for supposed Communists – and bullying everyone in his path – because it would reap the party political advantage in the post-World War II Cold War hysteria. Republicans today encourage, or at least acquiesce to, the Bush Administration's incompetent rampaging in search of "terrorist" suspects, shredding badly the protections of the Constitution, because it serves their electoral advantage in a society frightened by the prospect of future terrorist attacks.

"Good Night, and Good Luck" – which, in a brilliant stroke, stars Joseph McCarthy as himself (from newscasts of the time) – is not a consistently great movie. It barely captures the social sweep and damage done by McCarthyism outside the CBS newsroom, and in its desire to glorify the courageous work of CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow (played brilliantly by David Straithairn) and his colleague Fred Friendly (Clooney), it overlooks that fact that others took on McCarthy long before they did. But, despite its flaws, it's a riveting and socially important film, one we need to ruminate upon for its messages for our own time and situation – lest we continue to repeat bad history.

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