

Can This Presidency Be Saved?

"I DREAMT LAST NIGHT of the three weird sisters," said Banquo, "To you they have show'd some truth." "I think not of them," replied Macbeth, lying.

For Bush the three sisters have names: Cindy, Katrina, Harriet.

As he flew off to Crawford in August, the president was riding high. His energy and transportation bills had been passed, the latter larded with pork. He had won the battle of CAFTA by one switched vote. The press had begun to concede that their previous reports of lame-duckhood may have been seriously exaggerated.

But since then, Bush has been bedeviled by the three sisters. At Crawford, it was Cindy Sheehan and an indulgent press trekking to Camp Casey to carry Cindy's antiwar message to America.

His vacation was cut short by Katrina, who did as much damage to his reputation as a leader as she did to New Orleans. Then came the nomination of Harriet Miers to fill the seat of Sandra Day O'Connor, which did for Bush's relationship with conservatives what breaking the "no new taxes" pledge in 1990 did for his father's.

As these lines are being written, reports are coming in of the 2000th U.S. soldier to die in Iraq, the White House awaits word on indictments from special prosecutor Fitzgerald, and the president's approval rating has fallen beneath 40 percent. The *New York Daily News'* Tom DeFrank describes a "frustrated, sometimes angry and even bitter" president, lashing out at aides, "a mass of contradictions: cheerful and serene, peevish and melancholy, occasionally lapsing into what he once derided as the 'blame game.'"

Bush has encountered the second-term turbulence that broke the presi-

dency of Nixon and almost brought down Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan. Are we witnessing the breaking of a presidency?

We are nowhere near that yet. But instead of cussing out aides for mistakes that are his own, George W. Bush, if he wishes to save his legacy, should call counselors—insiders and outsiders whom he trusts—to Camp David to map his way out of the storm.

Unlike Watergate, which brought down Nixon, Plamegate has yet to touch the Oval Office. Unlike Monica, there is no squalid cloud of personal scandal hovering over the president himself.

As Reagan, after six months of stumbling in the Iran-Contra affair, emerged to run up a string of successes in foreign policy that enabled him to leave office with 70 percent approval and enter the history books as the most successful president of the 20th century, Bush is not done—yet. This is not to minimize the perilous straits into which he has maneuvered himself—and his country in Iraq.

What needs to be done? Begin with basics. Repair ruptured ties to the base. Swallow hard, set aside wounded pride and the congenital Bush dislike of the Right and—to replace Miers—send up a Michael Luttig, Edith Jones, or Sam Alito, one after the other if need be, as nominees to the Supreme Court. A bench-clearing brawl with Bush leading his party and coalition in battle will hastily heal the breach. If the McCain Seven threaten not to break a Democratic filibuster, let them vote with the Democrats.

Though Bush has put at risk a legacy of having recaptured the court for constitutionalism with his two stealth nominees without paper trails, this cause is not yet lost.

Second, tell Congress to put off the guest worker program and call for tough legislation to protect the bleeding U.S. border: fences at every vulnerable crossing point, expedited deportation of arrested illegal aliens, an end to sanctuary cities, a strengthened Border Patrol, denial of all but vital social services to illegal aliens, and a national crackdown on employers who chronically hire illegal aliens.

While the president would be instantly at war with the media and corporate elites, the nation would be behind him. And there is nothing wrong with changing one's priorities when the situation has changed.

Third, support the Republican backbenchers' revolt against wastrel spending and accept across-the-board cuts to pay for the damage done by Katrina, Rita, and Wilma.

Fourth, recognize that the bottom is falling out of support for the war, announce a withdrawal of some troops, and move others into strategic enclaves where they can act swiftly to block any Tet Offensive, while turning over the bulk of the fighting to the Iraqis. Americans will not indefinitely support the present level of forces in Iraq, nor should the president increase it.

The U.S. military in Iraq may be the only force blocking an insurgent victory, but its presence in Iraq is also the reason for the insurgency. The answer is Iraqization.

Do as Nixon did, draw down U.S. forces and begin turning the war over to the Iraqis themselves. Sooner or later they will have to save, or lose, their own country and their own democracy.

Now is as good a time as any to see if they can hack it and what needs to be done if they cannot. ■

[the era of big government]

Everyone's Entitled

Rising spending and an aging population combine to create a fiscal crisis.

By Doug Bandow

FOR YEARS REPUBLICANS promised revolutionary change in Washington. But after Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, they complained that the GOP needed to run Congress. After Republicans gained control of Congress in 1994, they said they needed the presidency as well. Now, with both the White House and Capitol Hill under firm GOP control, Republicans have no more excuses.

Unfortunately, the budget results have been ugly, and the future looks even worse. Notes Peter Ferrara of the Free Enterprise Fund, “under current law Federal spending as a percent of GDP will rise from 20 percent today to 34 percent by 2030.” That is higher than at any other point since World War II. Toss in state and local spending, and half the economy will be in government hands. And these estimates ignore the natural tendency of government outlays to climb far faster than projected.

President George W. Bush submitted a \$2.57 trillion budget for 2006. Under Republican stewardship, a \$236 billion surplus in 2000 turned into a deficit exceeding \$400 billion last year. Only higher than projected revenues will push the deficit down to an expected \$333 billion this year.

The administration's future fiscal projections are about as accurate as its WMD claims for Iraq. For instance, writes Stephen Slivinski of the Cato

Institute, “the new budget estimates assume that non-entitlement spending will be *cut* by \$36 billion between 2006 and 2009. Yet there has never been a period over the past 40 years in which such spending has dropped more than \$12.2 billion.”

Moreover, noted Robert L. Bixby, executive director of the Concord Coalition, “to leave out Social Security, the AMT [alternative minimum tax], and the war costs and say you have a plan to cut the deficit in half over five years is beyond chutzpah.” Including these and other Bush objectives, such as making the tax cuts permanent, “could add almost \$3 trillion more to the national debt than Bush's budget will claim,” according to Howard Gleckman of *Business Week*.

Earlier this year Vice President Richard Cheney declared that the 2006 proposal was “the tightest budget that has been submitted since we got here.” If true, that merely reflects the laxity of earlier submissions. The president's first term featured record-setting increases in domestic outlays, highlighted by such special-interest gifts as the \$170 billion farm bill. Overall, notes Veronique de Rugy of the American Enterprise Institute, in “the last four years, total spending has risen 33 percent—a figure larger than Clinton's two terms combined.” It's the fastest domestic growth since Lyndon Johnson.

In recent months the GOP passed bloated energy and highway bills. The unexpectedly difficult Afghanistan and Iraq occupations are costing more than a billion dollars a week, and estimates for next year have jumped \$50 billion since just February.

The Medicare drug benefit—the biggest expansion of the welfare state in 40 years—is set to take effect next year. The expense, writes Derek Hunter of the Heritage Foundation, “will soon grow dramatically once roughly 70 million baby-boomers begin retiring in 2008.” Over the next 75 years, the pharmaceutical program is predicted to run \$8.7 trillion—nearly a third of Medicare's current unfunded liabilities and more than Social Security's deficit. And that assumes no changes—unlikely once recipients discover that Congress created the so-called “donuthole,” through which coverage disappears at mid-expenditure levels.

Indeed, the drug benefit illustrates the real federal financial crisis—programs devoted to America's elderly. The Cato Institute's Chris Edwards warns, “The federal government is headed toward a financial crisis as a result of chronic overspending, large deficits, and huge future cost increases in Social Security and Medicare.”

Over the long term, Social Security and Medicare are the true budget busters—accounting for \$518 billion