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The Incredible Shrinking Presidency and Other Exciting Stories

This is shaping up to be one of the most inept administrations in America's history, with George Bush as its dumbest president. We reckon it would be a decent wager that vice president Richard Cheney, facing probes of his scoundrelly book-cooking at Halliburton, will not last out his term. Even the worms in the White House pressroom are beginning to turn at long last. There were derisive titters in the last press conference as Bush wanly stumbled through his excuses about his crooked dealings at Harken, the oil concern where his insider trades netted him nearly a million while the public stockholders lost a bundle.

As Bill Clinton could tell Bush, once they get you on the slippery slope, it's hard to stop the slide. From the crooked dealings at Harken the press can now gnaw all the old bones they carefully overlooked in Bush's 2000 race. We can start recycling our old stories, right down to the allegations of Bush's dealings in cocaine at Yale.

It's scarcely news that the 90s balloon was lofted in part by deceptive accounting and bogus valuations that netted billions for the insiders. It's the way speculative booms always work. Take WorldCom, a balloon puffed up across a decade by Bernie Ebbers who engineered around 75 mergers and acquisitions, using as leverage his company's stock value inflated by analysts led by Jack Grubman, who was at Salomon Smith Barney. Then in 1999 came the \$35 billion takeover of MCI. At the time it was one of the largest

mergers that had occurred, resting on the shakiest financial basis, with MCI valued at something like double what it should have been. WorldCom's own stock was so highly inflated that the company could afford to pay double the value of MCI. At the time, before the merger was consummated, Dan Schiller, now at the University of Illinois, wrote a report for the Economic Policy Institute, criticizing it in part on the precise grounds of the overvaluations that finally came home to roost this summer.

For CounterPunch the sharpest memory of the insanity of the bubble that has led to about 90 per cent over-capacity in long distance communications came this spring in Nevada. The all-night clerk at the Lincoln motel in Austin, Nevada, said she was 81 and putting in two part-time jobs, the other at the library, to help her pay her heating bills since she couldn't make it on her Social Security. She imparted this info without self-pity as she took our \$29.50, saying that business in Austin last fall had been brisk and that the 57 motel beds available in the old mining town had been filled with crews laying fiber-optic cable, along the side of the road, which in the case of Austin meant putting twenty feet under the graveyard which skirts the road just west of town.

Earlier that day we'd seen the end of that same cable sticking out of the ground on the outskirts of Ely, Nevada, on Route 50. The crews were set to cross the Great Basin. It's probably still sticking out of the dirt, a piquant little roadside marker

commemorating the 90s bubble.

With Enron, WorldCom and Halliburton there are issues of individual "malfeasance" (to use Bush's grope for the word), but of course the whole corporate culture is rotten to the core, festering into deeper corruption decade after decade.

In the old days a symbolic corporate ruffian was led off in chains, but even these appeasing rituals may be a thing of the past. Don't expect tips on prison-cell décor from Martha Stewart.

Democratic Party pwogwessives like Robert Borosage have been piping up that now liberals have to "save" capitalism, FDR-style, with powerful regulatory reforms but don't take this patter too seriously. We note that Senator Joe Lieberman and Rep Harold Ford of Tennessee, both stalwarts of the Democratic Leadership Council, have been quick to denounce even the ritualized populist talk coming from Rep Dick Gephardt and others.

Our spaniel press makes Herculean efforts to pass over the fact in silence, but the fact is George W. Bush is the laughing stock of the world, by dint of the obvious fact that his maximum level of competence was that of greeter at the ball park in Arlington, which as our friend Dave Vest recently remarked, is the only real job he ever had before he met Ken Lay.

Edward Said puts it well in a recent

column: "To say that he and his disheveled administration 'want' anything is to dignify a series of spurts, fits, starts, retractions, denunciations, totally contradictory statements, sterile missions by various officials of his administration, and about-faces, with the status of an over-all desire, which of course doesn't exist. Incoherent, except when it comes to the pressures and agendas of the Israeli lobby and the Christian Right whose spiritual head he now is, Bush's policy consists in reality of calls for Arafat to end terrorism, and (when he wants to placate the Arabs) for someone somewhere somehow to produce a Palestinian state and a big conference, and finally, for Israel to go on getting full and unconditional US support including most probably ending Arafat's career. Beyond that, US policy waits to be formulated, by someone, somewhere, somehow."

Iraq? It was the acme of the axis of evil. Then it wasn't, because the Joint Chiefs said it would be tough to invade the place. Now talk of invasion is seething once more, after the New York Times got hold of what sounds like an options memo, outlining a three-pronged invasion by quarter of a million US troops to topple Saddam early next year.

We didn't believe the invasion talk in the spring and we still don't. The White House is pushing along with what used to be called a strategy of tension, no doubt hoping that the brawny talk about attacking Iraq will overshadow unwholesome coverage of Bush and Cheney's own crooked business affairs. The US military is still dead against invasion, as are America's European allies, Tony Blair's chirps of encouragement notwithstanding.

Derisive comments about Bush, particularly on his current role as Ariel Sharon's errand boy, continue to flow in from foreign shores. In Britain the Sunday Telegraph recently ran a piece by John Simpson, BBC World Affairs editor, quoting senior civil servants in Whitehall, normally a purse-lipped bunch, particularly on the topic of a US president, as scathing on the topic of President Dumbo, describing his policies, particularly on trade and the Middle East as "puerile", "absurdly ignorant" and "ludicrous".

We'll say this for the Pres. He's had his lucky moments, just like Bill. Of course under Bill the country felt it was sharing in the luck, whereas under W it's been one damn thing after another. Thus

far the history of the Bush Presidency has been the history of falling masonry. President Rubble. But, just like Bill, W has been the huge beneficiary of Terror. With Bill it was the Oklahoma Bombing. It turned his presidency around. With W it was 9/11. Without it he'd be a laughing stock inside the national jurisdiction as well as overseas.

STRIKERS AS TERRORISTS? RIDGE CALLS LONGSHOREMEN'S CHIEF

At the rate things are going, it won't be long before labor organizers are being thrown into military prisons, held without warrant as "enemy combatants". In late June Tom Ridge, director of the Office of homeland Security phoned Jim Spines, head of the West Coast's Longshoremen's Union, saying that a strike would be bad for the national interest.

June 30 saw expiry of the current three-year contract between the Longshoremen and the employers, grouped in the Pacific Maritime Association. If the 10,000-strong longshoremen go on strike, ports from Seattle to San Diego could shut down, meaning a big jolt to the already floundering US economy. Steve Stallion of the ILWU says the union does not contemplate a strike and the only way a stoppage could occur is if the PMA stages a lockout. At the moment, the union and the PMA are extending the contract on a daily basis.

A call to Spinosa by the Secretary of Labor would not be surprising, given the stakes, but a call from the man in charge of coordinating the battle against terrorism on America's home turf confirms widespread fears that as so often throughout the twentieth century, national security can be used to justify strike-breaking, invocation of the Taft/Hartley Act and declarations of national emergency to shut down labor activism and if necessary throw labor organizers in jail.

Longshoremen don't need to be told this. They know it's what happened to their most famous leader, Harry Bridges. In World War II the US government, particularly on the East Coast through the US Navy, cut deals with the Mob (mainly involving a hands-off posture on the drug trade), giving the gangsters specific orders on which labor leaders to rough up and murder. Between 1942 and 1946 there were 26 unsolved murders of labor organ-

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izers and dockworkers, dumped in the water by the Mob, working in collusion with Navy Intelligence. (For more see the editors' Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press, available at a good price from our office.)

Jack Heyman, business agent of the San Francisco Longshore Union (ILWU), tells us that Ridge called Spinosa, ILWU international president, in late June in the midst of negotiations. "He said that he didn't think it would be a good idea if there was a disruption in trade and went on to say that it is important to continue negotiating."

Ridge's astounding and sinister intervention comes in the midst of tense negotiations between the Pacific Maritime Association representing shipowners operating on the West Coast and the ILWU. The prime issue is technology, where the employers seek change in work rules.

"The big thing," Heyman says, "is the hiring hall. The PMA wants to computerize the hall. Longshore workers died in the 1934 strike for the hiring hall. It dictates who controls distribution of jobs, who controls the waterfront. We eliminated corruption and favoritism with establishment of union hiring hall. They want to put in computer cards. When you go to hiring hall you schmooze, see what is going on. Employers don't want that."

The trans-Pacific trade has grown to become one of the largest in the world. The West Coast now has four of the top six U.S. container ports. Longshoremen have always made it a rule in negotiations not to make any concession without an equivalent concession from the employers. Heyman mentions the push by European unions for shorter work weeks as one model for demands here.

This year's contract talks are particularly fraught. The rapid gains in trade volume are over for the moment, as both the U.S. and Asian economies struggle to emerge from recession.

Shipping revenues are down. Since Sept. 11, security has replaced commerce as the transportation industry's main priority. Residents of port communities beef about against the long lines of trucks at container terminals that cause gridlock on their roads and pollute the air. With the huge new container ships now being built, such problems will get worse.

There are other sinister signs that "homeland security" is being used as a club to bash labor. The right wing is work-

ing fiercely to make the prospective new umbrella Homeland Security Agency non-union, again citing national security. Once again this takes us back to the darkest days of domestic repression at the dawn of the Cold War.

TERROR BY RAIL: SENATE OKAYS YUCCA MOUNTAIN DUMP

It's an all-too-rare pleasure to see the nuclear industry sweat, but in the run-down to the wire, there were clear signs of panic in the campaign to push through the US senate a plan to ship the nation's commercial nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain outside Las Vegas.

When Bush came to power, the nuke lobby thought they had it made. The days of competition between the oil industry and the nuclear lobby are long gone. Now they all belong to the same conglomerate. Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, perhaps the only member of the cabinet who requires a more simplified briefing book than Bush, was an old industry pal, long since bought and paid for.

Bush himself called for more subsidies

account the toll that might result from an act of sabotage or, more likely, a simple train derailment or jack-knifed tractor-trailer truck that sends highly-radioactive waste spilling into rivers, lakes and neighborhoods. The DOE has estimated that close on 300 crashes could occur in the foreseeable future, once shipments commence.

So the nuclear industry had to act fast. It threw \$5 million in PAC money to senators and senatorial candidates. It deployed a legion of K Street lobbyists, many with ties to both the Bush administration and big time Democrats, and high-powered PR firms to clear the way.

The US Chamber of Commerce beamed a wave of wildly misleading radio ads across the country aimed at securing senate passage of the Yucca Mountain bill. The Chamber's ads were little more than focus-group tested scare tactics claiming that the Yucca Mountain plan, which enviros have shrewdly dubbed Mobile Chernobyl, is actually a "way to get nuclear waste out of your communities." This is in reference to the nuclear waste now being stored at commercial reactors. Of course, the waste will continue

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to nuclear power and reversed his election-eve opposition to the nuke industry's most fervent dream: the Yucca Mountain dump for nuclear waste from around the country, hauled in by rail. 9/11 changed all that. Not immediately, mind you. But as the patriotic afflation, in which it was deemed un-American to question any Bush proposal, began to subside, people began to conclude that the scheme to truck 77,000 tons of radioactive waste through their communities wasn't the brightest idea.

Maps of the possible transport routes show that more than 50 million Americans live within one mile of these nuclear corridors. Even the rosier scenario painted by the Department of Energy concedes deaths from cancers associated with the passage of these radioactive boxcars. Naturally, that prediction doesn't take into

to pile up at those sites as long as the plants operate and for years after they are mothballed. In fact, all nuclear waste must "cool" for at least five years before they can even consider shipping it off somewhere.

Under the Yucca Mountain bail-out plan, with an estimated cost of \$58 billion, the lethal waste will go transcontinental, rolling through 44 states, plus the District of Columbia, passing through communities now far removed from nuclear plants and through states that have decided to reject nuclear power. The ads also tried to calm the public's nerves by suggesting that once entombed in Yucca Mountain the nuclear waste will be safely contained for all time or at least 10,000 years. As one might expect, The Chamber delicately sidestepped the question as to

"Up popped 'A Mind of Its Own: A Cultural History of the Penis.'"

whether or not Yucca Mountain isn't in fact a kind of geological sieve.

The disposal site sits on top of an aquifer that is becoming more and more important as a source of drinking water for the ever-expanding Las Vegas metro area. Even the DOE's own geological investigations reveal that the earthquake prone nature of the Yucca Mountain site may create fissures in the earth that will allow the waste to seep into the underground reservoir.

The July 9 US Senate vote on Yucca Mountain offered a chance for progressives and environmentalists to strike back at the nuclear power industry. The omens seemed auspicious, with rising public concern, plus Senate leader Tom Daschle's pledge that the Democrats would stop the Yucca Mountain plan. He was wrong.

In the crunch Daschle could muster only 36 Democrats against the Yucca Mountain plan, with Patty Murray of Washington, Dick Durbin of Illinois, John Edwards of North Carolina, Ernie Hollings of South Carolina and Pat Leahy of Vermont all siding with the nuclear industry.

Now come a long battle in the courts, appropriation fights over the billions the plan will cost and then almost certainly civil

disobedience. Perhaps we will live to see the congressional delegation of Nevada and its governor sitting on the railtracks, being denounced by the Office of Homeland Security as terrorists.

WHAT CAN A SENATOR DO?

Your CounterPunch editors caused a flurry not so long ago by writing a fairly unsparing assessment of the achievements of Senator Paul Wellstone, who is now embarking on what many Minnesotans reckon is a doomed effort to win a third term. Wellstone's opponent is Norm Coleman, former mayor of St. Paul and enjoying all the endorsements and swag the RNC can throw in his direction. The odds are against Wellstone. Coleman is a lot tougher than the senile Rudy Boschwitz, whom Wellstone beat in 1996, and many Minnesotans aren't enchanted about his breach of a pledge that year to hold himself to two terms.

But ignoring Wellstone's dubious future, liberals are now screaming about "the spoiler," who takes the form of Ed McGaa, a Sioux born on the Pine Ridge Reservation, a Marine Corps vet of the wars in both Korea and Vietnam, an attorney and author of numerous books on Native American religion. The Minnesota Green Party picked him as its candidate on May 18 at a conven-

tion of some 600, a lively affair in which real politics actually took place in the form of debates, resolutions, nomination fights and the kindred impedimenta of democracy.

Furious progressives are claiming that even a handful of votes for McGaa could cost Wellstone the race. Ludicrously inflated assessments of Wellstone's national stature as a progressive leader have been churned out by John Nichols in *The Nation*, as well as by Harold Meyerson and Mark Cooper, both of whom live in Los Angeles and could perhaps spend their time more profitably writing about the lousy performances of Dianne Feinstein and Gray Davis.

If there was one opportunity for Wellstone to challenge the system (as he pledged to do when he was elected in 1990) on an issue of democratic principle it was surely after the shenanigans in Florida after election day, November, 2000. Why didn't he exercise his option to protest the counting of the electoral ballots early in 2001 as did the Black Caucus in the House (far too mildly, we should add). If at least a single Senate member had protested, some sort of additional delay and investigation would have ensued before the new President could be installed. Why wasn't Wellstone the one to have had Congress officially weigh in on the controversy? It would have been

Bought Any Dirty Books Lately?

CounterPuncher Susan Davis (who's now teaching at the University of Illinois in Urbana) did. Here's her account of what happened next:

Worry all you want about John Ashcroft, but I'm worried about the convergence of Amazon.com with my credit card company. Yesterday I was messing around on Amazon looking for a CD by a group called The Flatlanders, when I remembered that for research purposes I really did need to order Slade's "Pornography in America: A Reference Handbook." This is a guide to, among other things, all the legal decisions concerning obscenity in United States. I also remembered that the library keeps recalling its copy of Estelle Friedman and John D' Emilio's breakthrough book "Intimate Matters: a History of Sexuality in America." So I decided to order up a used one of that definitive volume to keep on hand.

You can guess what the Amazon server did now: it brought to my attention a long and most unchaste list of books about sex. But since I'm writing a profile of a folklorist who was also a sex researcher (and you will read it here first!), I usually skim these lists to see if there's anything I can use. This time there was. Up popped "A Mind of Its Own: A

Cultural History of the Penis," and it had great academic as well as popular reviews.

I considered that my folklore-sex guy was very interested in — you might say obsessed with — what he called "the phallic problem," and so I added "A Mind of Its Own" to my shopping cart. What the hell, my family thinks I'm nuts anyway. I browsed some more, placed my order, picked up my papers and shuffled home. When I got there, my husband met me at the door with an upset look at his face. "You've just had an urgent call from CapitalOne Visa. They want you call back RIGHT away!"

In my ensuing conversation with CapitalOne Visa, a young woman inquired whether I had just placed several orders with "a bookstore, for items totaling about \$45". I allowed as how I had. What was the problem? I've done much bigger volume in a single day than that. Just a routine check, she said. "Is it the content of what I bought?" I wondered. Or is it that a few months ago I reported by Visa card lost and had to get a new one? Neither, she reassured me, just a routine check. The book snoops are back, so expect more "routine checks". CP