

Immigration, Iraq and oil: a bitter brew for Bush

Republicans are bitterly divided about immigrants, and the public is blaming the President for high petrol prices.
Irwin Stelzer reports on ugly times in Washington

Don't look to polling data to get an idea of what is going on in the minds of Americans. Only 29 per cent of Americans say they are satisfied 'with the way things are going in the United States at this time'. Yet 85 per cent are satisfied with 'the way things are going in their personal lives'. Three out of four say they are uneasy about the economy, but only one in ten thinks it likely he will be laid off, and consumer confidence is at its highest level in four years.

It is easier to read the mood in Washington. This is the time of year when the city is at its glorious best. Winters are dreary, autumns lack the riot of colour seen in the north-east, and the summers are so intolerable that before air-conditioning became available the British ambassador and his staff fled to America's version of India's Simla, in northern Massachusetts. For those in love with trees, flowers and all sorts of greenery, spring is the time to be in Washington.

Unless, of course, you find the natural beauty offset by the ugliness of the political mood. Christopher Caldwell pointed out in these pages last week that the Democrats are planning impeachment proceedings against the President if they gain control of the House of Representatives in November. Having accused the President of lying about WMD, of having the blood of thousands of Americans and Iraqis on his hands, of committing 'high crimes and misdemeanors' by intercepting telephone communications

between al-Qa'eda and supporters in America, the Democrats cannot be seen to be co-operating with him on important legislation. Besides, many Democrats see impeachment both as a payback for what the Republicans did to Bill Clinton, and as an opportunity to reverse the results of the 2000 vote, which produced what they still call an illegitimate president.

But there is more to the unhappy mood in this town than mutterings about impeachment. The issues that separate the parties and destroy intraparty harmony are particularly divisive. Take immigration. The Republican party is at war with itself. About half of its congressional delegation is calling for a crack-down on the 11 million illegal immigrants living here, and the construction of a wall on the Mexican border to stem the tide. The other half, backed by the Republican business community that relies on immigrant labour, wants the status of these illegals regularised, and still more authorised to join their countrymen.

The situation is exacerbated by the increasing burden the immigrants put on the school and healthcare facilities of many communities, their refusal to learn English, their decision to march under Mexican rather than (or in addition to) American flags, and the immigrants' assertion that they are merely retaking a land that was stolen by the gringos. Monday's 'Day Without Immigrants', a nationwide strike and boycott of American businesses by Hispanics, increased the determination of the anti-immigration forces to make it clear that any congressmen voting for amnesty for illegals would pay a price at the polls.

Add the new Spanish-language, altered version of our national anthem, written for the Hispanics by Adam Kidron, a British music-industry executive, and tempers flare. President Bush told a nationally televised press conference that the new 'Nuestro Himno' is not an acceptable substitute for 'The Star-Spangled Banner', and that immigrants should learn to speak English. Odd, that, from a President who proudly deployed his version of the Spanish language to win Hispanic support during both of his election campaigns.

The political mood is further soured by petrol prices that have soared above the \$3 per gallon level — about half that in the UK. Democrats blame consumers' pain on the oil companies, and accuse Texan Bush and former Halliburton executive Dick

Cheney of being in big oil's pocket. Their solution is one near and dear to the heart of Gordon Brown — a windfall profits tax. Never mind that such a tax would siphon off money that could be spent on exploration and direct it to Washington, where Congress will waste it on projects of no value except to please local constituents.

Republicans blame the Democrats for opposing every attempt to expand domestic supply by allowing drilling in Alaska and off the coasts of California and Florida, ignoring the fact that it is Florida governor Jeb Bush who has led the fight to prevent drilling off the coast of his state.

The President can't do much about petrol prices, something voters might understand if he were more skilled at explaining why that is so, and did not carry the baggage of his administration's incompetent performance after the overthrow of the Saddam regime and in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

But in the end all these issues might be handled within the normal confines of political give-and-take, were it not for two things: the Democrats' deep-seated antipathy to George W. Bush, and Iraq.

Ronald Reagan and the former Democratic speaker of the house Tip O'Neill sniped at each other by day and, in the manner of Irish pals, shared cocktails in the evening. But one can't imagine George W. Bush and the hard-left leader of the Democrats in the House, San Francisco's Nancy Pelosi, or the acerbic, humourless Harry Reid, the Nevada who leads Senate Democrats, comfortably inhabiting the same room, much less taking tea and cakes together (Bush is a teetotaler).

Then there is the continuing mayhem in Iraq. Unfortunately for the President, blood, gore and body parts make more compelling television than the opening of a water treatment plant. Worse still, Iran's march towards a nuclear weapon makes Americans wonder what the war on terror is all about. If we are impotent in the face of an Iran intent on getting 'the bomb' and threatening to cut our oil supplies, if Bush can do no more to rein in the mad mullahs than Jimmy Carter could during the hostage crisis, isn't it reasonable to conclude that we need a new team to protect the nation from its enemies?

Many Republicans agree, in part at least. They have been calling for defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld's scalp, although not immediately lest it seem he was deposed by the dissident retired generals who have been trying, in effect, to seize control of military policy from civilian authorities. There is talk of forcing Cheney to step down and replacing him with Condoleezza Rice, to position her for a run against Hillary Clinton in 2008. Not likely: the President joked last week that he has survived the shake-up of the White House staff. So will Rumsfeld, at least for now, and Cheney — dubbed the Great White Hunter by President Bush.

Irwin Stelzer is director of economic policy studies at the Hudson Institute and a columnist for the Sunday Times.

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