

Machiavelli and Morality: Mr. Bush Goes to War

Teach-In on Iraq October 7, 2002

I. On Machiavelli

A. Has become synonymous with clever deceit and outright evil. In a certain sense this is overdrawn.

1. M did not proclaim that anything goes in statecraft--not quite. He balked at truly wicked means--even as he condoned a judicious use of deceit and murder

2. M was a true Italian patriot, sickened by the fact that his country was divided and defenseless against incursions by Spain, France and Germany. He was also sickened, as he poured over the history of Rome, how a noble Republic degenerated into a dissolute and corrupt Empire. He positively hated Julius Caesar.

B. He did, however, condone the use of means that would be deemed contrary to basic morality, so long as these would truly serve the national interest.

1. Is the Bush administration prepared to do the same?

2. Let us ask ourselves--why is the administration so bent on war?

II. Machiavellian motivations

A. It's politics, stupid.

1. Karl Rove's remark (White House political director) [Nation, 9/30/02]

2. Without a war, the Republicans would indeed be in trouble

a. Corporate scandals were getting awfully close to home: Bush intimate Kenny-boy Lay of Enron, shady dealings of his old company Harkin, the Vice-President's criminal corporation, Halliburton

As one commentator has put it: "July was a catastrophically bad month for the Bush Administration. The shady, patently illegal dealings of his old company, Harkin, were a regular topic for the news talk shows. His vice-president had gone into hiding to avoid subpoenas that would compel him to spill the beans about another criminal enterprise, Halliburton, as well as the ways and means of the back-room corporate dealings which led to the Bush Administration's energy plan. Hovering over it all like a raven was

Enron, and all the winding financial roads that led from Ken Lay to the Oval Office." [William Rivers Pitt, Murder for Profit, Truth out, 9/16]

b. The stock markets are at their lowest point in four years, the number of people living in poverty is the highest in a decade, median household incomes have declined, for the first time since 1991

3. Many economists are predicting a double-dip recession, or in any event a very slow recovery--and yet the Bush Administration has not a clue as to what to do, having tried the only thing it could think of, namely a massive tax cut for the wealthy, and seen that fizzle.

4. Thank God for September 11. Thank God for Osama bin Laden. Thank God for Saddam Hussein. Bush's fundraising efforts this year--during which he does little but talk of Saddam and terrorism--has already smashed by a wide-margin President Clinton's obscene record and there's still a month to go. And his approval rating remains strong. Thank God for Saddam Hussein.

B. "It's oil, stupid."

1. The fact is, Iraq contains the second largest oil reserve in the world--a prize that has the oil and gas industry--which pumped some \$50 million to political candidates since 2000--salivating

2. Moreover, the US is currently using oil to strong-arm China, Russia and France to allow a UN Security Resolution to pass, since the polls indicate that far more Americans will support the war if it has UN sanction. [Woolsey quote--Washington Post, 9/14/02]

C. "It's empire, stupid."

1. Jay Bookman, Atlanta Journal-Constitution (9/29/02)

"As it turns out this is not really about Iraq. It is not about weapons of mass destruction, or terrorism or Saddam or U.N. resolutions.

This war, should it come, is intended to mark the official emergence of the United States as a full-fledged global empire, seizing sole responsibility and authority as planetary policeman. It would be the culmination of a plan 10 years or more in the making, carried out by those who believe the United States must seize the opportunity for global domination, even if it means becoming the "American imperialists" that our enemies always claimed we were.

Among the architects of this would-be American Empire are a group of brilliant and powerful people who now hold key positions in the Bush administration: They envision the creation and enforcement of what they call a worldwide "Pax Americana," or American peace. But so far, the American people have not appreciated the true extent of that ambition."

2. The Project for the New American Century, Sept 2000--a year before 9/11
 - a. Called for the repudiation of the anti-ballistic missiles treaty--done
 - b. Called for increasing the defense spending to 3.8% GNP--done
 - c. Called for the development of small nuclear warheads for destroying underground bunkers--passed by House
 - d. Identified North Korea, Iran and Iraq as primary short-term targets--a year before Bush's "axis of evil" speech
 - e. Claimed that world needs US leadership, not that of UN
 - f. Called for the establishment of permanent military bases in Middle East, Southeast Europe, Southeast Asia and Latin America--since Sept 11, have established bases in Georgia and Philippines; are set to get involved in Colombia--and Iraq (There is no exit strategy for Iraq because we will not be leaving.)

3. Among the authors of the document--all civilians at the time:
 - a. Paul Wolfowitz is now deputy defense secretary.
 - b. John Bolton is undersecretary of state.
 - c. Stephen Cambone is head of the Pentagon's Office of Program, Analysis and Evaluation.
 - d. Eliot Cohen and Devon Cross are members of the Defense Policy Board, which advises Rumsfeld.
 - e. I. Lewis Libby is chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney.
 - f. Dov Zakheim is comptroller for the Defense Department.

III. Basic Morality

A. Basic fact: in a war with Iraq, many, many innocent people will die. [Newsletter of the Center for Service and Justice: "He's Bush's Enemy. She Will Die."]

1. The numbers are likely to be high--thousands, tens of thousands: American invading forces and ten times or so that many Iraqis

2. But from a moral point of view, the numbers are irrelevant. If even one

innocent person dies, that is unacceptable. It might as well be the case that George W. Bush walks down a street of Baghdad with a loaded pistol and shoots the first person he sees. A wholly innocent person dies because GW decides he should.

B. Because--there is simply no credible evidence that Iraq poses an imminent threat to anyone in the United States. To cite but one authority: Scott Ritter, the Marine intelligence officer who served as chief UN weapons inspector in Iraq until 1998 [ITT quote--latest issue, Oct 14].

C. Consider the analogy: You have a neighbor who doesn't like you. You have reason to believe he would like to kill you. (Some years ago you tried to kill him--but leave that aside.) You have no proof but you are suspicious. You are much stronger than he is, but he is devious. He has a wife, several children, aged parents, all living under his roof. He comes and goes. They can't leave.

Do you have the right to blow up his house--possibly killing him, certainly killing his family?

Does it make it more or less justifiable, the fact that you will control his quite valuable property if you succeed?

To ask these questions--which are too often obscured by the more technical debates--is to answer them.

As William Rivers Pitt has written in a very powerful essay, "This is murder for profit, a capital crime meriting the gas chamber for any American convicted of it in a court of law. Period."

IV. By way of conclusion

A. Can we stop this war? Probably not--but we are morally obligated to try. The killing will be done in our names. To do nothing is to be an accomplice. It's not enough to oppose the war in thought, in your heart. As the existentialists are fond of saying, you are what you do, not what you think.

B. Take to heart some words written a century after Machiavelli, when the Renaissance had spread to England:

Beware the leader who bangs the drum of war
 In order to whip the citizenry into a patriotic fervor,
 For patriotism is indeed a double-edged sword.
 It both emboldens the blood, just as it narrows the mind . . .

And when the drums of war have reached a fever pitch
And the blood boils with hate and the mind has closed,
The leader will have no need in seizing the rights of the citizenry.
Rather, the citizenry, infused with fear and blinded with patriotism,
Will offer up all of their rights unto the leader, and gladly so.

How do I know?

For this is what I have done.

And I am Caesar.

--William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

[The above quote circulated on the internet as a quote from Julius Caesar, but a later posting--which I received after my talk--claimed that it wasn't. I haven't had a chance to check, but I suspect the second post is right. I don't see it fitting into the play. Too bad. It's a great "quote."]