

**THE BLOG****These Are The Final Days**

By Marty Kaplan

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Has he fallen off the wagon? Are he and Laura splitsville? Is he taking midnight dictation from his Higher Father? Autoerotically self-asphyxiating on pretzel bits? We don't know, and maybe we'll never know. But the truth is that it doesn't matter. Except to titillate us with lurid symptoms, there's no need for some future Woodstein to reveal the Nixonian dementia that was going on behind closed doors; the real horror show is hidden in plain sight, right now, for all to see.

But with a handful of exceptions, the press is behaving as though the denouement of the W story must be known before the beginning and middle can be told. They're begging off on connecting the dots today, as though the picture could end up being drawn in different ways, depending on how it all turns out. The MSM are saying, in effect, that if Bush is not impeached, and if Giuliani or Thompson or Romney or McCain ends up being the next President — that is, if the Rove voter-fraud fraud, tallied by Diebold AccuTouch [sic] machines, manages to deliver the rurally-rigged Electoral College to a Republican — then the underlying reality of 2001-2008 will retroactively turn out to be different than the nightmare that the vast majority of Americans, right now, already know that it actually is.

Sure, the race for 2008 is suspenseful, and a good story, but there's currently a wildfire raging in our democracy that's being covered like a political chess game, not a five-alarm disaster. Each week brings new reasons for the press not to wait for tomorrow to nail what's happening today. Dick Cheney calls the Democrats "cynical," on the same day that Jessica Lynch, and Pat Tillman's brother and colleagues, provide the textbook example of actual cynicism. Bush declares that the 2006 vote gave him a mandate for escalation, that failure to achieve victory in Iraq will be the Democrats' fault, on the same day that the Iraqis demand the US "gated-community" walls be torn down, that the death rate in Iraq approaches a nauseating new record, and that the number of Americans who want an orderly withdrawal from Iraq to begin now, and not wait until 2009, escalates toward everyone but his dog Barney.

The issue isn't competence (though incompetence has had devastating consequences, from FEMA to the Coalition Provisional Authority); the issue is ideology. The issue isn't corruption (though corruption, from DeLay and Abramoff to Halliburton and Enron, has ravaged lives and pillaged treasure); the issue is the constitution. Alberto Gonzales, whose honesty W praised this week, isn't (just) an inept, detached Attorney General; he's the perfect tool to politicize the Justice Department and make the third branch of government the handmaiden of Republican Party as run from the West Wing via Karl Rove's RNC email account. Paul Wolfowitz isn't (just) an arrogant unreconstructed neocon enjoying absolute power and a tax-free salary; he's the servant of the religious right, imposing Robertson-Falwell-Dobson abstinence-only insanity on the AIDS-ravaged young people of the developing world.

It's hard to overstate the awesome discretionary power that the press has in framing a story. Deciding what to cover, and how much play to give it, and how much context to provide, and what headlines and terms to use: for reporters, producers, and editors, these are Prospero's staff. A reporter can let Matt Drudge (and thus movement conservatives) set the media agenda (as ABC News's Mark Halperin happily acknowledged), or he can let his own instincts, and shoe-leather, define what's news (as did the *Boston Globe's* Charlie Savage's Pulitzer-winning reporting on Bush's Congress-nullifying signing statements). A reporter can be a conduit for Republican smears (*The New York Times's* Adam Nagourney retailing the Edwards-as-"Breck Girl" meme), Republican lies (the *Times's* Judy Miller doing Scooter Libby's WMD dirtywork), and Republican Luntzism (The *Politico's* editor-in-chief John F. Harris alleging that Democrats themselves — rather than the RNC — were calling an Iraq withdrawal a "slow bleed" strategy). Or they can do what Murray Waas and Josh Marshall do, and what Bill Moyers and David Brancaccio do, and what the reporters in Knight Ridder's (now McClatchy's) Washington bureau do, and behave like journalists, not courtiers.

We don't need to know the ending to know what the story is right now. We don't need to find out later that nose-candy or End Times blow or a call-boy ring was the shocking secret backstory to the decade, in order to understand the frontstory that has already, painfully, unfolded in front of our eyes. Why wait for the Libby pardon to seal the reputation of this Administration? These are definitely not the good old days, but they are surely, already, the incomparably awful final days.

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