

The *High Tower* **LOWDOWN**

Edited by Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer ♦ Vol. 11 No.2 ♦ February 2009

**"I hate war,
as only a soldier
who has lived it can,
as only one who has
seen its brutality,
its futility, its stupidity."**

—DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER, 1946

Here we go again—invading when we should be thinking **Team Obama's plan for Afghanistan is a disaster in search of a strategy**

SORRY TO INTERRUPT THE OBAMA CELEBRATION even before the man gets settled into the Oval Office, but—*what the hell is he thinking!?!*

About Afghanistan, I mean. Why begin the most exciting, most important administration in decades with yet another misguided military mission that promises to be a sinkhole for our troops, our treasury, our country's good name, and the world's hopes for this historic presidency? Yet, the Obama camp indicates that it is revving up for a troop surge in Afghanistan, claiming that this chaotic country is the central front in the global war against Islamic terrorists.

Some of the new president's top security advisors insist that this is "a war of necessity," the "good war" that George W abruptly abandoned in 2003 when he diverted our military into his misadventure in Iraq. Here's the logic: As Obama kept pointing out in the presidential campaign, Iraq had no connection to al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on America, but Afghanistan did, at least in a supportive role. While neither Osama bin Laden nor his jihadist plotters were Afghans (nearly all were Saudis), they were sequestered in safe-haven hideouts in Afghan mountains. These terrorist forces posed the gravest threat to our national security back then, say Obama's hawkish advisors, and they still do today, so let's go get 'em and secure the territory!

But, wait—are we going to let Obama hawks rush us into what *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert bluntly calls "a fool's errand?"

It most certainly would be a horrific war...and for what? What, exactly, is our national interest, our objective, our plan, our "victory," our exit point?

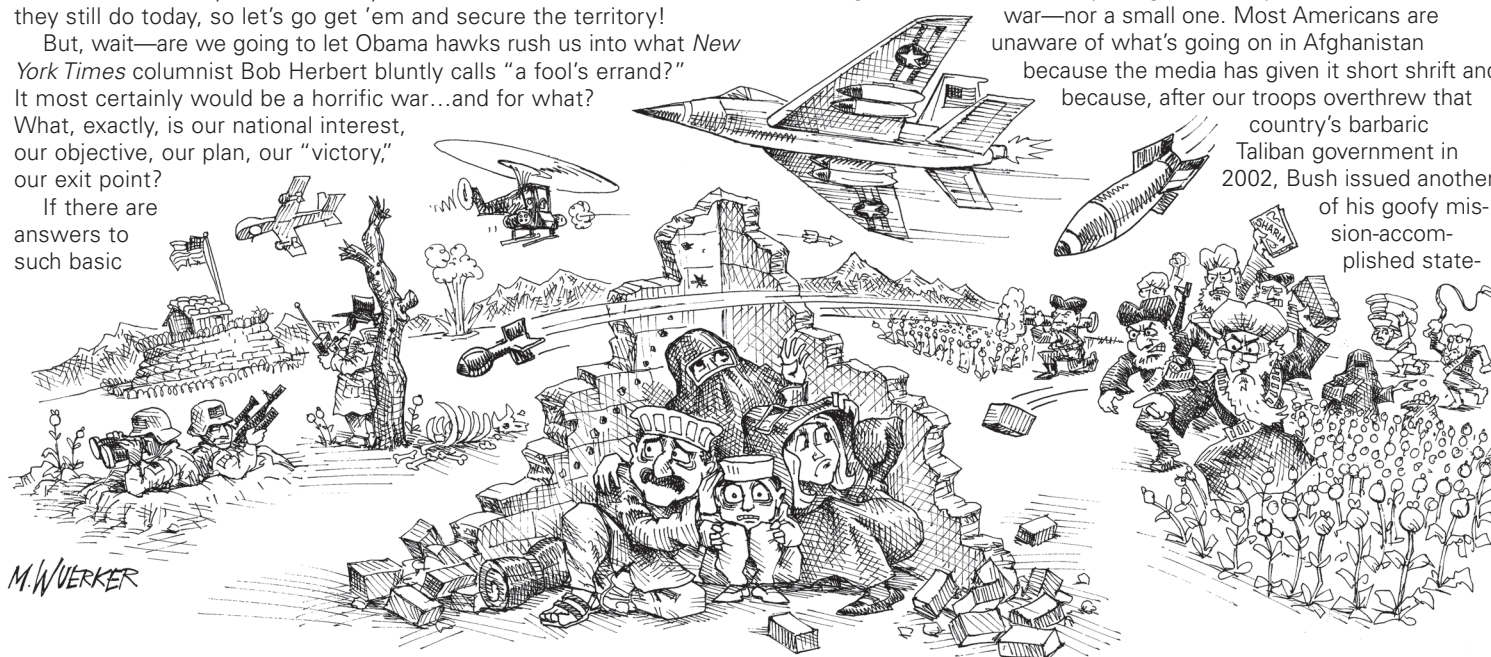
If there are answers to such basic

questions, they are not being shared with the American people. Nor are we having a national debate on the wisdom of sinking deeper into an Afghan war. Just because such Obama administration surge enthusiasts as National Security Advisor James L. Jones, National Intelligence Director Dennis Blair, Pentagon Chief Robert Gates, Special Envoy to Afghanistan/Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, and Deputy Secretary of Defense William Lynn are Democrats (or at least are advising a Democratic president) doesn't mean we—or Obama—should think they are right, much less follow them. One advice-giver, Roger Carstens, a senior analyst at the military think tank Center for a New American Security, recently expressed the shockingly cavalier attitude that seems to characterize the proposed escalation: "What we need are more troops in Afghanistan because we need security, and eventually we will get a strategy." Eventually???

That pretty well defines "backasswards," doesn't it?

A bad situation

Though it's been obscured by the glare of Iraq, this is not a new war—nor a small one. Most Americans are unaware of what's going on in Afghanistan because the media has given it short shrift and because, after our troops overthrew that country's barbaric Taliban government in 2002, Bush issued another of his goofy mission-accomplished state-



STOP CODDLING ELITE CROOKS

Bernie Madoff is the world-champion Ponzi schemer who has confessed to bilking some \$50 billion from investors, including many friends, associates, and even his 74-year-old sister who lost about \$3 million and had to sell her home.

But rather than being in jail—as any far lesser crook would be—Bernie's under house arrest, comfortably ensconced in his \$7 million Manhattan apartment and guarded by security guards he himself was allowed to hire. Last Christmas, he tried to stash about \$300 million worth of his ill-gotten loot with friends and relatives, some of it in packages he mailed containing more than a million dollars worth of precious gems and Tiffany watches. When this ploy was detected, Madoff's lawyer claimed that these were merely "a few sentimental personal items," and that poor Bernie had innocently failed to realize that it was wrong to dispense assets bought with other people's money.

Astonishingly, a judge let him get away with this, requiring only that all valuables in Madoff's apartment be inventoried, so they can be checked periodically. But—get this—the judge allowed Bernie himself to do the inventory!

Why have the authorities pampered this guy? Because he's a silk-shirt crook who was not only a Wall Street insider, but has also been a longtime crony of Washington regulators. Even while he was running his scam, Madoff was serving on several advisory committees to the very regulatory agency that was supposed to be watching him!

Throw him in a cold slammer until he accounts for every dime.

2

ments: "Coalition forces, including many brave Afghans, have brought America, Afghanistan, and the world its first victory in the war on terror."

Not quite. Bush & Company did not understand Afghanistan and its tribal nature, badly underestimated the dire poverty that drove ordinary Afghans to support the Taliban in the first place, had no strategy for consolidating what was only a temporary "win" over the Taliban, and shamefully neglected essential development programs that might have offered an alternative to more poverty and more Taliban.

As a result, the Taliban is back in full force and now controls most regions outside the capital city Kabul. Violence has worsened every year since Bush's "victory" declaration, casualties for both U.S.-NATO troops and for Afghan civilians have risen dramatically, and our own national-intelligence agencies reported last October that the country is in a "downward spiral."

All of this despite a military commitment from us that's now entering its eighth year. America already has 32,000 troops in this war, and our NATO allies have 30,000 more on the ground. We taxpayers are pumping \$2 billion a month into the Pentagon's warfare there, and NATO (which also draws substantial financial support from us) is spending another billion bucks per month. Some of the new president's advisors now propose to make this "Obama's War," presumably so he can prove his antiterrorism bonafides. As the new administration draws down troops in Iraq, it proposes to escalate the failed venture in Afghanistan by deploying up to another 30,000 U.S. soldiers there, along with many more billions of your and my tax dollars.

What are we buying into? A mess. Afghanistan is a far more daunting place than Iraq to occupy and pacify. Just ask the British and

the old Soviet Union about that, for both tried mightily and failed miserably. Ali Jaladi, a former Afghan interior minister, notes with exasperation that his country "is the theme park of problems." Let me tick off just a few of them:

- **The aforementioned poverty** is extreme and prevalent, with about 70% of Afghans living on less than \$2 a day. This poverty is made all the more intractable by a national literacy rate of only 28%.
- **Afghanistan has the youngest population** of any country, a life expectancy of only 45 years, and the world's highest infant-mortality rate.
- **Afghanistan has no substantial industries** and little economic development. Subsistence farming is the only occupation for most of the population. The country's most marketable product is opium—92% of the world's supply comes from the poppies raised on this hardscrabble land.
- **"Underdeveloped" is an understatement** for Afghanistan—three-fourths of the people are rural (half live in villages of less than 300 residents), there is little electric power (even in the capital), roads are nonexistent or poor (making military movements a challenge), the weather can be brutal, and the mountainous terrain is forbidding (it's been called "a guerrilla's paradise").
- **Afghanistan is a warlord state**, with political power carved up into hundreds of fiefdoms ruled by tribal leaders who are heavily armed and tend to be fractious and unreadable (at least to outsiders). There is no legitimate national leader and, as a former State Department analyst puts it, Afghans citizens have "no memory of a centralized state."
- **Hamid Karzai, handpicked by the Bushites** in December 2001 to

become the new Afghan president, is widely viewed as an American puppet. Bush frequently brought him to Washington to tout him to the media and Congress as a strong national leader (Bush even nominated Karzai for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002), but he has no authority outside of the capital city and is derided across Afghanistan as the "Mayor of Kabul." His "government" is seen as so ineffectual, corrupt, and fragile that it has virtually no respect anywhere in the country.

- **Afghanistan's 80,000 police officers are renowned** for their incompetence and are recognized chiefly by their outstretched palms. There is a small, poorly trained army that could be strengthened, but it would take years to make it a useful force, and even then the country has no ability to pay for a standing army.

Get a grip

Our sensible friend, Sen. Russ Feingold, recently wrote:

"Few people seem willing to ask whether the main solution that's being talked about—sending more troops to Afghanistan—will actually work. If the devastating policies of the [Bush] administration have proved anything, it's that we need to ask tough questions before deploying our brave service members—and that we need to be suspicious of Washington 'group think.' Otherwise, we are setting ourselves up for failure."

The moment for an all-out military assault in Afghanistan was right after 9/11, when our national objectives were clear. That moment is long gone. The purpose of Bush's "Operation Enduring Freedom," launched in 2001, was (1) to capture bin Laden, (2) destroy al Qaeda, and (3) crush the Taliban. None of these goals was achieved. The main accomplishment after seven years of war is that bin Laden and al Qaeda have moved their operations from Afghanistan's mountainous northeastern border into neighboring Pakistan, thus destabilizing the very country that Bush counted as America's key ally in the region. That outcome is suicidal madness. As Andrew Bacevich, a retired Army colonel and professor of international relations, wrote in a December *Newsweek* op-ed, "No country poses a greater potential threat to U.S. national security than does Pakistan. To risk the stability of that

DoSomething!

Spread the word about what's going on in Afghanistan and about the pressure on Obama to escalate.

Urge friends, family, coworkers, club members, strangers, and anyone else you can think of to protest against the surge and to express their views to Obama (www.whitehouse.gov), Congress, the media, etc.

Some good websites for keeping up with developments on this issue are:

- **Get Afghanistan Right**
<http://getafghanistanright.com/>
- **The Nation**
<http://www.thenation.com>
www.tomdispatch.com/
- **Tom Hayden**
www.tomhayden.com,
www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-hayden/
- **Rethinkafghanistan.org**
Excellent website to discuss and debate policy on Afghanistan run by the *Brave New Films* people.

nuclear-armed state in the vain hope of salvaging Afghanistan would be a terrible mistake." Amen.

Merely putting more troops in Afghanistan to do more of what the Bushites have been doing will not produce better results. Indeed, without a fundamental shift in policy, things could go very badly for Obama in Afghanistan. Not only do more troops mean more deaths, but the heavy-handed military approach presently being pursued is rife with some explosive nasties that the American public knows little about, including these ticking time bombs:

■ **CIVILIAN CASUALTIES.** Katrina vanden Huevel, writing for *The Nation*, reported last month that since 2006, there's been a drastic increase in bombs dropped on Afghanistan in U.S.-NATO air assaults, tripling the number of civilians killed by our aerial raids. Also, she writes, "up to 500 Afghan civilians are dying *monthly* from U.S. cluster bombs, most of them children and teenage boys." This carnage is hardly winning Afghan hearts and minds, instead fueling such rage toward us that the bombs have inspired a surge in the recruitment of Afghan suicide bombers.

■ **DETAINEES.** Peace activist Tom Hayden has revealed in a *Huffington Post* piece that even as Obama is getting international kudos for shuttering the Guantanamo horror pen, the military is operating some 50 firebases in Afghanistan where about 800 cases of detainee abuse have been chronicled. He adds that the CIA operates its own secret detention centers where "ghost prisoners, known as Persons Under Control, are held permanently without any public records of their existence."

The CIA'S uprising in Afghanistan

YOU'VE GOTTA LOVE THE CIA FOR TRYING. It'll give anything a shot—including a plan to assassinate Fidel Castro with an exploding cigar. Obviously, it fizzled.

Every now and then, however, one of the CIA's tricks works. In Afghanistan, for example, **agents have been trying to lure tribal patriarchs** to stop protecting Taliban commanders and Islamist terrorists in their regions. They've tried cash, cars, jewelry, etc.—all with little success.

Then, last year, a CIA officer was wooing a 60-something-year-old chieftain in Southern Afghanistan who has four—count 'em, four—younger wives for whom he was missing the required firm sexual drive. "**Take one of these,**" said the agent, handing over **four Viagra pills.** "You'll love it."

Indeed, the blue pills turned out to be golden. Four days later, the CIA agent returned to the village, and the old tribal leader was wreathed in a big grin that only sex can induce. The chieftain had never before taken sides in the American offensive, but **suddenly he was a spewing** fountain of information about the Taliban's movements. He wanted more of those blue pills.

The CIA plans to lift us to victory—one libido at a time!

War Profiteers

Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the Bushites have spent about \$5 billion on such Afghan reconstruction projects as training the police force and building schools, clinics, roads, etc. Such ground-level development is essential to the goal of stabilizing the country, but \$5 billion over six years is a pittance compared to the vast need (and contrasted to the \$24 billion a year we're spending on killing and destruction). Our money has bought little real development and won few friends. That's because, in keeping with ideological correctness, the Bushites *privatized* the effort, issuing no-bid Halliburton-style contracts to such politically connected corporate profiteers as DynCorp, Bearing Point, and Louis Berger Group. The result has been a nightmare of shoddy work, missing funds, and more Afghan anger.

One example out of many: DynCorp has pocketed nearly a billion dollars from Uncle Sam to train 30,000 Afghan police. The need for such training is obvious, but DynCorp flubbed it. As State Department official Richard Holbrooke said, the corporation's training effort was "an appalling joke... a complete shambles." (Ironically, while Holbrooke decries DynCorp's mess, he's now on Obama's team pushing hard to make a bigger mess by doubling America's military effort in Afghanistan.) Afghans complained that Dyncorp sent in groups of highly paid American "advisors" who were unqualified and knew nothing about the country. After the "training," no one at DynCorp or with the Pentagon could say how many trainees ever reported for duty, or where thousands of missing trucks and other police equipment that had been issued for the training went. A 2006 govern

OBAMA MUST BE BOLDER THAN FDR

When Franklin Roosevelt was accused of being a traitor to his own privileged class, he jauntily replied, "I welcome their hatred."

Those FDR-haters are on the prowl again, now led by right-wing think tanks and talk-show yakkers who are busy rewriting history to trash Roosevelt's New Deal. Their real target is Barack Obama's economic-recovery plan, which is largely modeled on the New Deal approach of government spending for roads, schools, parks, conservation, and other public works, putting millions of people to work on jobs that need doing.

Naysaying popinjays like the far-right-wing Heritage Foundation now claim that the New Deal was a failure. Fox News pundit Monica Crowley has said that the failure is proven by "all kinds of studies," and her Fox colleague Gregg Jarrett added, "I think historians pretty much agree on that."

Uh...no, they don't. Indeed, they pretty much agree that millions of families were saved back then by the New Deal's public-works programs, and we still benefit today from the work that those people did.

The chief shortcoming of FDR's public spending was that he didn't do enough of it. After winning a smashing re-election victory in 1936, largely based on the popularity of his New Deal, Roosevelt gave in to Wall Street interests who were demanding a cutback in federal spending. The result was a relapse into recession in 1937, a return to double-digit unemployment, and a rejection of Democrats in the 1938 congressional elections.

In 2009 we need to stand firm against the ideological naysayers and to be even bolder than FDR.

GET THE LOWDOWN!

YES! I want to receive a full year of *The Hightower Lowdown* — 12 issues in all—for an unbelievably ridiculous, low, low price.

- Send me one year of *The Hightower Lowdown* for just \$15.
(Seniors & students—\$12.)
- Send me two years of the *Lowdown* for \$27.
(Seniors & students—\$22.)

To give a gift of the *Lowdown*, enter the recipient's name and address below and include your name and address on a separate sheet.

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____
ZIP _____

Mail this coupon with your payment to:

The Hightower Lowdown, P.O. Box 20596, New York, NY 10011

2/09

The **LOWDOWN**

EDITORS: Jim Hightower, Phillip Frazer
RESEARCH: Laura Ehrlich CIRCULATION: John Ernst
COPY WIZ: Gwenda Blair ARTISTE: Matt Wuerker
LAYOUT: Sahu Barron INTERWEB EMISSARY: Deanna Zandt
PUBLISHER: Phillip Frazer

The Hightower Lowdown (ISSN 1524-4881) is published monthly by Public Intelligence Inc., 375 South End Ave #14P New York NY 10280. ©2009 in the United States. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY. Subscriptions: 1 year, \$15; 2 years, \$27. Add \$8/year for Mexico or Canada; add \$12/year for overseas airmail. Back issues \$2 postpaid. Allow 4-6 weeks for receipt of first issue and for all subscription transactions. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: *The Hightower Lowdown*, P.O. Box 20596, New York, NY 10011.

Moving? Missed an issue? Call our subscription folks toll-free at (866) 271-4900 or write lowdown@pipeline.com. Send us fan mail or hate mail at: P.O. Box 20596, New York, NY 10011 or editors@hightowerlowdown.org.

Printed with 100% union labor on 100% recycled paper.

INVESTIGATING THE BUSH REGIME

Washington insiders are circling the wagons to keep us from looking at illegalities and executive abuses committed by the Bush-Cheney regime. "A new president doesn't want to look vengeful," is how a former White House lawyer put it. "The last thing a new administration wants to do is spend its time and energy rehashing the perceived sins of the old one."

But this is not about hash—it's about the Constitution, and it's not about vengeance, but about whether presidents and vice-presidents can use executive privilege and claims of war powers to subvert the rule of law.

While the Bushites were publicly insisting that they didn't condone torture, they were aggressively practicing it in Guantanamo and elsewhere. Is there no reckoning for that? Or for spying illegally on millions of Americans? Or for unilaterally rewriting laws by tacking "signing statements" onto them? Or for politicizing the powerful role of federal prosecutors? Or for abusing the state-secrets privilege in order to impose executive supremacy over the courts and Congress?

If we just shove all these precedents in some White House closet, future presidents might haul them out whenever they want.

Bush, Cheney, and their apologists now assert that even if there were illegal acts, it's OK because they made America safer. Well, did they really? If there's no digging into what happened and what effect it had, we won't know.

Obama's White House shouldn't be the one to do this job. Congress should set up a no-nonsense investigative commission with full subpoena power to get the real story.

4

Hightower Lowdown

February 2009

ment report concluded that the American-trained police force was "largely incapable of carrying out routine law enforcement work." It also found that police incompetence was a direct cause of the Taliban's resurgence, the rise in opium production, and overall government corruption. Last August, the Bushites handed another contract worth \$317 million to DynCorp to "continue training civilian police forces in Afghanistan."

Change course

In his inaugural address, Barack Obama lifted many hearts with this declaration: "To all other peoples and governments watching today...know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and that we are ready to lead once more."

By escalating the war in Afghanistan, Obama risks bleeding his words about peace and world leadership of all substance. He also risks exhausting our already-stressed military, draining our treasury, being stained with human-rights violations, irking our closest allies, bolstering Islamic extremists in Pakistan, motivating suicide bombers, and distracting himself from his larger agenda.

Top military officials from the U.S. and allied armies have made clear that securing the country and establishing a stable national government in Afghanistan will be a costly and uncertain mission for Obama's team. "They must deploy prepared for a long fight," said the U.S. director of the Counterinsurgency Training Center in Kabul. "They must think long term and realize that victory is

unlikely on their watch." This frank assessment is echoed by Jalali, the former Afghan interior minister, who projects that it will take 10 years for allied forces to secure his country. Do we want 10 years of this?

Why is it our mission to remake Afghanistan? And why does Obama think the way to do it is by using a bigger military hammer?

He might, instead, listen closely to what our own top military commanders have begun to say. Adm. Mike Mullen, America's highest-ranking military officer, has called for a "whole-of-government approach" to places like Afghanistan, putting money, personnel, and policy emphasis into diplomacy and economic development. "I believe we [military leaders] should be more willing to... say when armed forces may not always be the best choice to take the lead," he declared in a little-noticed January speech.

Likewise, Gen David Petraeus, who is overseeing the Afghan war, cautioned in a speech last month that security there will not be improved merely by adding more armed might, but instead requires a new diplomatic and economic commitment from Washington.

Our national objective in Afghanistan is not to impose (against all odds) a central government on this historically decentralized, tribal-based people, but rather to stop terrorists from being able to use the country as a safe haven for attacking us. Brute force is not the best way to achieve this goal. We could try to earn respect, create friendships, and build alliances—so that the general population begins to side with us and to expel terrorists themselves.

Instead of more air strikes on

Afghan villages, then, let's seek more collaboration with (and give more support to) tribal leaders, citizen groups, and regular folks who reject violence; let's fund locals to build their own schools and clinics; let's enlist more American teachers, nurses, carpenters, and others to help provide humanitarian aid; and let's seek a true regional coalition to take the lead on security, with as little American military visibility as possible. And, oh yes, as even Gen. Petraeus has urged, let's reach out to Iran, which shares a border with Afghanistan, has lost thousands of soldiers in battles with Afghan drug kings, and needs a more stable relationship with its neighbor. In short, let's try to put America's best foot forward.

Afghanistan is more of a job for Hillary Clinton and the State Department than for Robert Gates' Pentagon!

Maybe Obama can be dissuaded from his troop-surge strategy. In his inaugural address, he spoke specifically about beginning to "forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan," and he purposely stated that "our power alone cannot protect us." Your and my challenge at the grassroots level is to build on these rhetorical openings, making the case directly to him (www.whitehouse.gov), to the establishment media, and to anyone else we can reach that Afghanistan requires a different approach than military domination and occupation. Now is the time to press our new president for real change, not just words.

Our 10th birthday: *This issue marks the end of the Lowdown's first 10 years. Next month: a brief look back.*

You can comment on stories in the Lowdown on the new and improved website

hightowerlowdown.org

PERIODICALS
CLASS
Postage Paid at
New York, NY

The Hightower Lowdown
P.O. Box 20596
New York, NY 10011

Moving? Missed an issue?

Please call or write us at:
The Hightower Lowdown
P.O. Box 20596
New York, NY 10011
lowdown@pipeline.com
Subscribers' toll-free
number: (866) 271-4900

11:02 February 2009

TEAM OBAMA'S PLAN FOR AFGHANISTAN IS A DISASTER IN SEARCH OF A STRATEGY

- 2 Stop coddling elite crooks
- 3 Obama must be bolder than FDR
- 4 Investigating the Bush regime