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"On the first anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks, President Bush said at Ellis Island, "this ideal of America is the hope of all mankind....That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it." Those last two sentences are straight out of John's gospel and immediately recognizable to Christians. But again, the light shining in the darkness is the Word of God, and the light of Christ. It's not about America and it's values....Bush seems to make this mistake over and over again of confusing nation, church and God. The resulting theology is more an American civil religion than Christian faith"

—Jim Wallis, "God's Politics"

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Daily Topics & Commentary:

Monday, May 2

Ambitious political agenda hitting snags

Monday, May 2 (Seattle Times)—The day after he won a second term in November, President Bush offered his view of the new political landscape.

"When you win, there is a feeling that the people have spoken and embraced your point of view," he said, "and that's what I intend to tell the Congress: that I made it clear what I intend to do as president ... and the people made it clear what they wanted, now let's work together." Six months ago, this comment was widely viewed as more than just a postgame boast. Among campaign strategists and academics, there was ample speculation that Bush's victory, combined with incremental gains in the Republican congressional majority, signaled something fundamental: a partisan and ideological realignment that would reshape politics over the long haul.

Over the weekend, as the president reached the 100-day mark of his second term, the main question facing Bush and his party was whether they misread the November elections. With the president's poll numbers down and the Republican majority ensnared in ethical controversy, things look much less like a once-a-generation realignment.

Instead, some political analysts believe it is just as likely that Washington is witnessing a happens-all-the-time phenomenon: the mistaken assumption by politicians that an election won on narrow grounds is a mandate for something broad.

In Bush's case this includes restructuring Social Security and the tax code and installing a group of judges he was unable to seat in his first term. [More](#)

Friday, April 29

AN ANALYSIS OF USING "PROGRESSIVE PRICE INDEXING" TO SET SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS

Friday, April 29 (Center for Budget and Policy Priorities)—Robert Pozen, a former vice chairman of Fidelity Investments and member of President Bush's Social Security Commission, has proposed a change in the Social Security benefit structure that he refers to as "progressive indexing." Senators Lindsey Graham and Robert Bennett, among others, have indicated they are considering including this proposal in Social Security plans they are developing. In addition, President Bush praised the proposal at a March 16 press conference, and White House press secretary Scott McClellan subsequently called the proposal "very useful and constructive."

Under the proposal, low-earners would continue to receive the Social Security benefits promised under current law, which are based on a formula that uses "wage indexing," while high-earners would have their benefits calculated under a formula that uses "price indexing" instead, with the result that their benefits would be reduced. (The benefit reductions would be phased in and would grow over time.) For average workers, benefits would be calculated by using a mix of wage indexing and price indexing; their benefits would be reduced but by a smaller percentage than benefits for higher earners.

This paper analyzes "progressive price indexing." It contains five significant findings:

- Progressive price indexing would transform Social Security over time from a retirement program to more of a welfare system that provides a modest retirement benefit largely unrelated to income. Because progressive price indexing produces very large reductions in benefits over time for high earners, substantial benefit reductions for average earners, and no reductions for low earners, it eventually eliminates most differences in benefit levels. Ultimately, most beneficiaries would get the same monthly benefit, despite having paid in very different amounts in payroll taxes.

Under current law, "high earners" (those whose earnings are 60 percent above the earnings of the average earner) receive Social Security benefits that are 33 percent higher than the benefits that average earners get. Under progressive price indexing, this difference would shrink to only 7 percent for workers retiring in 2075, and the difference would be eliminated entirely by 2100. This raises the question of whether broad political support for Social Security can be sustained if workers pay very different amounts of payroll taxes but most workers receive the same level of benefits. [More](#)

Many of Bush's allies retreating on private accounts

Support lacking, conservatives say

Friday, April 29 (Boston.com)—The Weekly Standard, an influential conservative magazine, this week published an "exit strategy" for the president's Social Security plan.

Conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer says the White House plan for private accounts, the heart of his reforms, is on life support. Free-market activist Stephen Moore, who in January felt "the stars were aligned" for Congress to adopt private accounts, now says the "window has slammed shut."

Even Edward H. Crane, president of the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, and a chief architect of private accounts, said he thinks it will take another congressional election before President Bush has a realistic chance of enacting the centerpiece of his second-term agenda. "I don't see the momentum in Congress right now," he said.

Bush attempted to reinvigorate his controversial private account plan last night, promoting it during a prime-time news conference after he wrapped up his 60-day campaign on behalf of Social Security reform. But even before he spoke, many of his allies were throwing in the towel, at least for this session of Congress.

They cite grim poll numbers, a refusal of Democrats to break ranks, and an advertising blitz mounted by opponents, such as the AARP. They alternately blame presidential adviser Karl Rove, the year's stagnant stock market, and Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid of Nevada, an unflinching opponent.

But the conservative leaders who form the core of President Bush's support on Social Security reforms say they intend to prevail by making private accounts a central issue in the Senate and House races next year. "The Republicans have lost the first round of the battle, but they're winning the war," Moore insisted. "You have to have candidates run on it. You have to win races on it." [More](#)

Bush tries to make statement, change topic

Friday, April 29 (Chicago Tribune-subscription)—President Bush on Thursday used a format he does not like to discuss issues he cannot resolve in hopes that he can sell the American people on policies most say they don't want.

In other words, he has fallen into the unfortunate pattern for second-term presidents who face a broad constellation of things gone wrong and few ways to fix them quickly.

One of the great ironies of the presidency is that the strongest and most popular earn second terms only to see their public support wane and their political strength diminish.

It was into that cauldron that the president waded for a rare prime-time news conference that covered everything from personal religious faith to global nuclear war. Presidents typically only ask for network oxygen when they want to make a statement, unfiltered, or they want to change the subject.

Bush tried a little of both. [More](#)

A Gambler Decides to Raise the Stakes

President Bush made a huge gamble last night in a bid to restore momentum to his flagging proposal to restructure Social Security -- and to his presidency.

Friday, April 29 (Washington Post)—With two in three Americans disapproving of the way Bush has handled Social Security, many political observers thought it would be prudent for Bush to cut his losses and negotiate a bipartisan compromise on Social Security, perhaps without the personal accounts he has promoted for the past several months.

"I propose a Social Security system . . . where benefits for low-income workers will grow faster than benefits for people who are better off," President Bush said in opening.

Instead, Bush held a prime-time news conference and doubled down on his bet. He continued to press for private accounts while adding a proposal that would cut Social Security spending by \$3 trillion over 75 years -- openly defying the longtime belief that proposing cuts in the beloved program is bad politics.

The president's gamble was presented modestly last night, as a plan to help the working poor. "I propose a Social Security system in the future where benefits for low-income workers will grow faster than benefits for people who are better off," he said in a brief opening statement. [More](#)

Two Detail Bolton's Efforts to Punish Dissent

Friday, April 29 (Washington Post)—A former senior Bush administration official told Senate staff members yesterday that John R. Bolton, the president's nominee for ambassador to the United Nations, sought to punish two State Department officials for disagreeing with him on nonproliferation issues, congressional sources said. And a former CIA chief, disputing Bolton, said the nominee had tried to fire a national intelligence officer who believed Bolton was exaggerating evidence on Cuba, they said.

John S. Wolf, who served as assistant secretary of state for nonproliferation and as President Bush's senior envoy to the Middle East until last year, and Alan Foley, who ran the CIA's weapons of mass destruction office, were two of six people who were interviewed by staff members

on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Bolton's nomination before the panel has been stalled by allegations that he bullied intelligence analysts, harassed colleagues and exaggerated threats posed by Cuba, Syria, North Korea and Iran.

The allegations, some of which remain unsubstantiated, caused enough concern among committee members, including several Republicans, that a vote has been delayed until May 12 to allow time to investigate. The White House has responded with a forceful lobbying and public relations campaign, and is considering ways to push through the nomination on the Senate floor even if it fails in committee. [More](#)

A Private Obsession

By PAUL KRUGMAN

Friday, April 29 (New York Times)—American health care is unique among advanced countries in its heavy reliance on the private sector. It's also uniquely inefficient. We spend far more per person on health care than any other country, yet many Americans lack health insurance and don't receive essential care.

This week yet another report emphasized just how bad a job the American system does at providing basic health care. A study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation estimates that 20 million working Americans are uninsured; in Texas, which has the worst record, more than 30 percent of the adults under 65 have no insurance.

And lack of insurance leads to inadequate medical attention. Over a 12-month period, 41 percent of the uninsured were unable to see a doctor when needed because of cost; 56 percent had no personal doctor or health care provider.

Our system is desperately in need of reform. Yet it will be very hard to get useful reform, for two reasons: vested interests and ideology.

I'll have a lot more to say about vested interests and health care in future columns, but let me emphasize one key point: a lot of big companies are essentially in the business of wasting health care resources. [More](#)

Thursday, April 28

The battle over birth control

The right has moved its war on abortion from the clinic to the pharmacy, where it now seeks to cripple the sale of contraceptives.

Thursday, April 28 (Salon.com-subscription)—One controversy over the morning-after pill is whether it prevents pregnancy or terminates it. Opponents equate the use of "Plan B," as the emergency contraceptive is called, to a chemical abortion. Supporters -- and most physicians -- counter that it does not destroy the embryo but blocks a fertilized egg from becoming implanted in the uterus. But in one sense, contraception may indeed be the new abortion -- that is, the next battleground for reproductive rights.

From conservative pharmacists refusing to dispense birth control pills to abstinence-only programs and anti-condom campaigns, access to contraception is facing tough challenges from the right. The strategy is similar to one that conservatives have used for abortion: Since overturning Roe vs. Wade looks unlikely in the near term, opponents have turned their sights on limiting access to the procedure. Now members of the religious and political right -- including the Bush administration -- are focusing on contraception, raising concern that they will succeed in curbing women's birth control choices and the ability to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

"I am deeply concerned that they have gone further than I have ever seen them. This is far past a woman's right to make decisions regarding abortion to the point now that it's about their right to make decisions on contraception," Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., told Salon. Murray and her Senate colleague Hillary Clinton have blocked President Bush's nominee to head the FDA, Lester Crawford, over his inaction as acting director of the agency to approve the morning-after pill for over-the-counter sale. An FDA advisory committee has given the drug overwhelming support as safe and effective, and Canada approved its nonprescription status last week. Publicly, Crawford says his indecision on the drug has nothing to do with ideology, but privately he told Murray it raises his concerns about "behavior," apparently alluding to arguments that the pill will encourage promiscuity. [More](#)

Ed note: [Check out this report](#) on the inadequacies, lies and mismanagement of abstinence-only programs....

The general's revenge

Colin Powell, no longer the loyal soldier, rises up to help stop conservative hard-liner John Bolton from becoming U.N. ambassador.

Thursday, April 28 (Salon.com-subscription)—From the redoubt of his retirement, former Secretary of State Colin Powell is beginning to exact revenge. His sterling reputation was soiled when he lost most of the important battles within the administration during President Bush's first term. Although he lamented that he had been "deceived" into presenting false information before the United Nations to justify the Iraq war, he acted as the good soldier to the end, giving every sign of desiring to fade away. But now he has reemerged to conduct a campaign to defeat Bush's nomination of conservative hard-liner and former Undersecretary of State John Bolton as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

In seeking to prevent the bullying and duplicitous ideologue from representing the United States before the international organization, Powell is engaging in hand-to-hand combat with his successor. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's first true test has not arrived from abroad. Caught by Powell's flanking movement, she is trapped in a crisis of credibility, which she herself is deepening.

Powell's closest associate, his former deputy Richard Armitage, is orchestrating much of the action. Senators who are wavering on Bolton are directed to call Powell, who briefs them on Bolton's demerits. And Powell's former chief of chief, Lawrence Wilkerson, has surfaced to give an interview to the New York Times, declaring that Bolton would be "an abysmal ambassador." Other former Foreign Service officers have queued up to provide ever uglier details of Bolton's career as a "serial abuser" and "a quintessential kiss-up, kick-down sort of guy," as Carl W. Ford Jr., the former director of intelligence at the State Department, described him before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

[More](#)

In text message, student denies hate mail: prosecutor

Thursday, April 28 (Chicago Sun Times)—Less than a half-hour after her release from jail Tuesday night, a Trinity College student accused of sending bogus hate mail sent a text message to a friend denying her involvement, prosecutors said.

The message allegedly sent by Alicia Hardin said, "she had not done it and she was forced to say what she said," Lake County assistant state's attorney George Strickland said Wednesday.

Hardin was apparently referring to her alleged confession Monday, in which police claimed she broke down and told them she had sent three racist, threatening notes to other minorities at Trinity over a two-week period. Hardin, 19, of Chicago, was allegedly trying to convince her parents that the Christian liberal arts college in north suburban Bannockburn was not safe so she could transfer back to Jackson State University in Mississippi. The threats led the school to evacuate dozens of minority students.

She was charged Tuesday with misdemeanor disorderly conduct and a felony hate crime. [More](#)

Goldsmith: Not certain we could survive legal challenge

Thursday, April 28 (Telegraph.co.uk)—There was a "reasonable case" for invading Iraq without a second UN resolution, the Attorney General said in key advice published today.

However, Lord Goldsmith said that given the opposition to the war it would be "surprising" if there was no legal challenge.

Lord Goldsmith's advice presented both sides of the debate

And the peer warned Tony Blair: "We cannot be certain that they would not succeed."

Downing Street published his full legal advice to the Prime Minister following damaging leaks.

The peer said UN resolution 1441, which warned of serious consequences if Saddam Hussein refused to disarm, "leaves the position unclear".

Statements from UN Security Council members "suggest that there were differences of view" on its legal effect.

"Arguments can be made on both sides," Lord Goldsmith said.

"In these circumstances, I remain of the opinion that the safest legal course would be to secure the adoption of a further resolution to authorise the use of force.

"I have already advised that I do not believe that such a resolution need be explicit in its terms.

"The key point is that it should establish that the Council has concluded that Iraq has failed to take the final opportunity offered by resolution 1441."

However, the Attorney General went on to say that given the arguments advanced by the US administration "I accept that a reasonable case can be made that resolution 1441 is capable in principle of reviving the authorisation ... without further resolution." [More](#)

Economy Grows at Slowest Pace in Two Years

Thursday, April 28 (Washington Post)—The U.S. economy grew at its slowest pace in two years in the first three months of 2005, the Commerce Department reported today, thanks to slowing consumer and business spending, rising energy prices and the expanding trade gap.

The rate of growth of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) -- the broadest measure of economic activity -- slowed to 3.1 percent, today's report said, down from 3.8 percent in the previous quarter and significantly below the 4.5 percent growth rate in the first quarter of last year.

Today's figure of 3.1 percent also failed to meet the expectations of economists for a growth rate of 3.6 percent.

The report, an estimate which is often revised up or down, was yet another sign of a slowing economy even as prices, and inflation, are on the rise.

"Stagflation is rearing its ugly head," said Peter Morici of the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, referring to a term coined in the 1970s for simultaneous economic stagnation and inflation.

"Higher prices for imported oil are weighing down consumer spending, and the growing trade deficit is discouraging business investment. Recent retail sales and durable goods orders confirm these trends."

"Paying so much for gas, consumers can no longer hold up the economy," he said, "and the anticipated boom in business investment is not materializing to pick up the slack.

[More](#)

Ed note: The final sentence in this snippet tells another tale of the Bush tax cuts. We were told by el Presidente that big tax cuts to business would help drive the economic boom that would lead us out of the 9/11 recession. We gave his ideas a chance. We can clearly see they are a bust. In 2008, will we believe the next Republican who says the same "tax cut-supply side-business first" thing, but in a slightly different way?

Bush Unveils Energy Proposals

Industry Analysts Question Whether Initiatives Would Help

Thursday, April 28 (Washington Post)—Industry analysts reacted skeptically to new energy proposals President Bush announced yesterday, saying they would do little to bring down soaring prices of gasoline and other forms of energy.

Bush, whose aides blame high oil and gasoline prices for his sagging poll numbers, made several proposals, including allowing refineries to be built on closed military bases and renewing consumer tax credits for hybrid vehicles. This was his second speech in two weeks devoted to energy. Bush is scheduled to hold a news conference tonight at 8:30 to press his energy plan and give specifics about his proposals for restructuring Social Security.

"See, we've got a fundamental question we got to face here in America," Bush said at the Small Business Administration conference in Washington. "Do we want to continue to grow more dependent on other nations to meet our energy needs? Or do we need to do what is necessary to achieve greater control of our economic destiny?"

Some of the ideas, which administration officials announced in a briefing Tuesday night, are already in the mix on Capitol Hill, while others could result in only minimal change, several experts said. "At best we're talking about a marginal benefit over the long term," said Ben Lieberman, a senior policy analyst with the Heritage Foundation, a conservative Washington think tank....Amy Myers Jaffe, associate director of the energy program at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University in Houston, said neither the energy legislation nor the latest Bush proposals would make a significant dent in prices.

"There are other things that could be proposed that would be more politically costly but have a more immediate impact," she said, such as increasing fuel-efficiency requirements. [More](#)

House Overturns New Ethics Rule as Republican Leadership Yields

Speaker J. Dennis Hastert said he acted to help Tom DeLay.

Thursday, April 28 (New York Times)—In a rare retreat, the Republican-led House on Wednesday overturned contentious rule changes made to the House ethics process, with Republicans saying they surrendered to the Democrats to try to restore a way to enforce proper conduct in the House.

"I am willing to step back," said Speaker J. Dennis Hastert of Illinois, the moving force behind ethics revisions forced through by the majority in

January.

After a closed-door meeting with House Republicans, Mr. Hastert indicated that the reversal was primarily motivated by a need to resolve the torrent of questions surrounding the conduct of Representative Tom DeLay, the majority leader.

Mr. Hastert's relenting to Democrats' demands marked a startling turn as Republicans confronted the fallout from a stalled ethics process that Democrats said was rigged to protect Mr. DeLay, who was admonished three times by the ethics committee last year. The Republican majority has also come under increasing criticism for the rule changes, which their opponents said would render the committee impotent to pursue wrongdoing by members. [More](#)

Tuesday, April 26

Microsoft paying Religious Right leader Ralph Reed \$20,000 a month retainer

Tuesday, April 26 (AmericaBlog)—AMERICAblog.com has learned that Microsoft is currently paying a \$20,000 a month retainer to former Christian Coalition head Ralph Reed's consulting firm Century Strategies. Which now begs the question of whether Reed was in any way involved with Microsoft's recent decision to abandon its decades long support for gay civil rights in order to curry favor with anti-gay bigots of the radical right. [More](#)

Ed note: Check this one out. Along with being more reliable, easier to use, and better looking, Macs are not made by a company that monetarily supports religious bigotry.

2:47 pm—Tolerance, as Practiced by the Rev. James Dobson

Each time this man opens his mouth, he makes me ashamed I listened to his radio show back in the 70's:

People, we are living in the modern era of Pharisees and Saducees. Religious men who put power and wealth before the God they worship.

2:23 pm—Somewhere Karl Rove is Laughing. Uncontrollably.

Well America, we tried to tell you. But we'll let our friends do it for us....

Half of all Americans, exactly 50%, now say the Bush administration deliberately misled Americans about whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, the Gallup Organization reported this morning.

"This is the highest percentage that Gallup has found on this measure since the question was first asked in late May 2003," the pollsters observed. "At that time, 31% said the administration deliberately misled Americans. This sentiment has gradually increased over time, to 39% in July 2003, 43% in January/February 2004, and 47% in October 2004."

Well, so much for the president not using questionable intelligence for political purposes. For a party of liars, immoral secular humanists, and cowards, we seem to be right. Again.

1:25 pm—In Other Words, "Game On"

Democrats Moving Forward With Promise Of America Agenda

Monday, April 25, 2005

WASHINGTON, DC – As Senate Republicans move closer to a partisan power grab that deals less with substance and more with right wing politics, Democrats are ready to move forward with an agenda that addresses the concerns of regular Americans throughout the nation.

Invoking a little-known Senate procedure called Rule XIV, the Democrats put nine bills on the Senate calendar that seek to help America fulfill its promise.

"Across the country, people are worried about things that matter to their families – the health of their loved ones, their child's performance in schools, and those sky high gas prices," said Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid. "But what is the number one priority for Senate Republicans? Doing away with the last check on one-party rule in Washington to allow President Bush, Senator Frist and Tom Delay to stack the courts with radical judges. If Republicans proceed to pull the trigger on the nuclear option, Democrats will respond by employing existing Senate rules to push forward our agenda for America."

Democrats have introduced bills that address America's real challenges.

1. Women's Health Care. "The Prevention First Act of 2005" will reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and abortions by increasing funding for family planning and ending health insurance discrimination against women.
 2. Veterans' Benefits. "The Retired Pay Restoration Act of 2005" will assist disabled veterans who, under current law, must choose to either receive their retirement pay or disability compensation.
 3. Fiscal Responsibility. Democrats will move to restore fiscal discipline to government spending and extend the pay-as-you-go requirement.
 4. Relief at the Pump. Democrats plan to halt the diversion of oil from the markets to the strategic petroleum reserve. By releasing oil from the reserve through a swap program, the plan will bring down prices at the pump.
 5. Education. Democrats have a bill that will: strengthen head start and child care programs, improve elementary and secondary education, provide a roadmap for first generation and low-income college students, provide college tuition relief for students and their families, address the need for math, science and special education teachers, and make college affordable for all students.
 6. Jobs. Democrats will work in support of legislation that guarantees overtime pay for workers and sets a fair minimum wage.
 7. Energy Markets. Democrats work to prevent Enron-style market manipulation of electricity.
 8. Corporate Taxation. Democrats make sure companies pay their fair share of taxes to the U.S. government instead of keeping profits overseas.
 9. Standing with our troops. Democrats believe that putting America's security first means standing up for our troops and their families.
- "Abusing power is not what the American people sent us to Washington to do. We need to address real priorities instead -- fight for relief at the gas pump, stronger schools and lower health care costs for America's families," said Senator Reid.

This is the first skirmish of the 2006 election.

Bush adds DeLay to Social Security tour

Tuesday, April 26 (CNN.com)—President Bush is adding a helper to his Social Security road tour: House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who is facing allegations of ethical improprieties but is seen by the White House as crucial to pushing Bush's plans through Congress.

In Galveston, Texas, on Tuesday, Bush was discussing his proposal to add private investment accounts to Social Security. DeLay was scheduled to attend the event with the president and, along with a few other Republican members of Congress from Texas, fly back to Washington with him on Air Force One.

DeLay is facing questions about the source of funding for some of his foreign trips, political fundraising for Texas elections and his ties to a lobbyist under federal criminal investigation. He has repeatedly denied wrongdoing.

DeLay raised \$47,750 from January through March for his legal defense fund, far less than the \$254,250 the fund collected in the last quarter of last year, a report he filed Monday showed. DeLay spent at least \$34,000 from the fund so far this year, mostly for attorneys.

DeLay also has attracted criticism for his comments on the judiciary after the death of Terri Schiavo in Florida last month. DeLay has urged

investigations and even possible impeachment of "activist" judges, a label conservatives apply to those they believe are failing to strictly interpret the Constitution. [More](#)

Ed note: So a president with approval ratings in the mid-40's enlists the aid of a congressman with 38% support in his own district to support a proposal that only 35% of Americans think is a good idea. Behold the end of the myths of Republican superiority on leadership, morality, and financial competence. All at a single photo-op. Plus, if DeLay leans on a congressman as hard as he did to pass Medicare "reform," there's nothing he can do to keep the person in line. That congressman can run and win on his "proven" independence from DeLay.

Faith 'War' Rages in U.S., Judge Says

* A Bush nominee central to the Senate's judicial controversy criticizes secular humanists.

Tuesday, April 26 (LA Times)—Just days after a bitterly divided Senate committee voted along party lines to approve her nomination as a federal appellate court judge, California Supreme Court Justice Janice Rogers Brown told an audience Sunday that people of faith were embroiled in a "war" against secular humanists who threatened to divorce America from its religious roots, according to a newspaper account of the speech.

Brown's remarks come as a partisan battle over judges has evolved into a national debate over the proper mix of God and government and as Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) ponders changing the chamber's rules to prevent Democrats from using procedural moves to block confirmation of conservative jurists such as Brown.

Her comments to a gathering of Roman Catholic legal professionals in Darien, Conn., came on the same day as "Justice Sunday: Stop the Filibuster Against People of Faith," a program produced by evangelical leaders and simulcast on the Internet and in homes and churches around the country. It was designed to paint opponents of Bush's judicial nominees as intolerant of believers.

Though unrelated to that program, Brown's remarks sounded similar themes.

"There seems to have been no time since the Civil War that this country was so bitterly divided. It's not a shooting war, but it is a war," she said, according to a report published Monday in the Stamford Advocate.

"These are perilous times for people of faith," she said, "not in the sense that we are going to lose our lives, but in the sense that it will cost you something if you are a person of faith who stands up for what you believe in and say those things out loud." [More](#)

Filibuster Rule Change Opposed

Tuesday, April 26 (Washington Post)—As the Senate moves toward a major confrontation over judicial appointments, a strong majority of Americans oppose changing the rules to make it easier for Republican leaders to win confirmation of President Bush's court nominees, according to the latest Washington Post-ABC News poll.

GOP leaders are threatening a rule change to prohibit the use of filibusters to block judicial nominees and have stepped up their criticism of the Democrats for using the tactic on some of Bush's nominees to the federal appellate courts. They say they are prepared to invoke what has become known as the "nuclear option" to ensure that Bush's nominees receive an up-or-down vote on the Senate floor.

But by a 2 to 1 ratio, the public rejected easing Senate rules in a way that would make it harder for Democratic senators to prevent final action on Bush's nominees. Even many Republicans were reluctant to abandon current Senate confirmation procedures: Nearly half opposed any rule changes, joining eight in 10 Democrats and seven in 10 political independents, the poll found. [More](#)

Senate Committee Takes Up Bid to Overhaul Social Security

Tuesday, April 26 (New York Times)—After months of political maneuvering, presidential campaigning, advertising and ultimatums, the 20-member Senate Finance Committee plans to start grappling this week with overhauling the Social Security system.

So far, the committee has proven to be just about as divided - and stalled - as the Senate at large. Senator Charles E. Grassley of Iowa, the chairman of the committee, says somewhat ruefully that most of his committee members simply wish the issue would go away. Advertisement

Instead, with the Senate now expected to move before the House on Social Security, Mr. Grassley's committee could play a decisive role in President Bush's drive to create private investment accounts in the government pension program.

The committee has a long tradition of bipartisan deals, with close friendships across party lines and a membership that includes some of the last remaining centrists in the Senate. Over the years, on issues from revamping the tax code to restructuring Medicare, "they've always been able to go into a back room and get things done," said former Senator John B. Breaux, a Louisiana Democrat who was a longtime member of the panel.

But Mr. Bush's private accounts may be the ultimate test for a committee that prides itself on being above the partisan wars. [More](#)

Monday, April 25

RE: A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

Report on New National Survey Showing U.S. Public Looking for Major Change in Direction

Monday, April 25 (Democracy Corps)—There is a crisis of confidence in the Republican direction for the country. Voters have turned against the Republicans' priorities and major policy initiatives, the arrogance and style of governance, and complacency before the country's major problems.

Voters are poised to turn against the leaders of the "Washington mess." That has dropped Bush and the Republicans to the lowest point of their governance, though voters have not yet turned to the Democrats as an instrument of change. When they do, we could witness electoral changes on a very large scale.

This report is based on a national survey of 1,058 likely voters conducted for Democracy In simple political terms, Democrats have emerged with a 5-point lead in the generic race for Congress. We also created a fictionalized change in the U.S. Constitution to allow President Bush to run against former President Bill Clinton: the incumbent gets crushed, taking only 4 percent of the vote and losing by 10 points.

The faltering electoral position of the Republicans is not yet crystallized. In this survey, Bush's job approval dropped to 48 percent. That is low, but not yet a repudiation of his presidency. Positive and warm feelings for the president have fallen to 47 percent – the lowest point of his presidency – but not nearly to the point of our scandalized presidents.

Nor have voters fully concentrated their ire on the Republicans and the Republican Congress. Both have witnessed noticeable drops in public affection, but they are not yet scorned. [More](#)

Minority students return to Trinity campus

Monday, April 25 (Chicago Sun Times)—The minority students who moved into a hotel after someone on their Christian campus mailed racist letters checked out of their temporary home Sunday and returned to their dormitories, as authorities continued their probe, police said.

Trinity College officials moved dozens of minority students off the suburban Deerfield campus Thursday night and into a hotel for safety after three minority students received racially motivated, threatening letters. The third letter threatened a black female student with a weapon, Bannockburn Police Chief Kevin Tracz said.

Investigators have interviewed about a dozen people but did not have a suspect Sunday, Tracz said.

"Everyone would feel better if we had a suspect," he said. "I'd even feel better." [More](#)

Ed note: Good to see the Christian college students are loving each other as they would love themselves....

Vatican condemns Spain gay bill

Monday, April 25 (BBC News)—The Vatican, under the new leadership of Pope Benedict XVI, has condemned a Spanish government bill allowing marriage between homosexuals.

The bill, passed by parliament's Socialist-dominated lower house, also allows gay couples to adopt.

A senior Vatican official described the bill - which is likely to become law within a few months - as iniquitous.

He said Roman Catholic officials should be prepared to lose their jobs rather than co-operate with the law. [More](#)

12:34 pm—The Conundrum, Explained?

Perhaps this is something any new DNC chairperson would have undertaken, but the poll Howard Dean took on analyzing the electorate is as unnerving as it is confirming. Here's the key snippet from the [Washington Post](#) article:

But Belcher's survey also persuaded Dean and other DNC officials that these voters may not be beyond their reach. "These so-called values or faith voters are some of the most economically anxious voters in the electorate," Belcher said. "They're tremendously cross-pressured between their pocketbook concerns and their moral values concerns."

Dean believes that provides an opening for Democrats, but only if Democratic candidates learn to speak a different language. *"Democrats wonder why people vote against their own economic interest," he said. "The answer is that Democrats don't connect with people's fears about how to raise their children in a difficult social environment. (emphasis mine)"*

For years, Democrats have been trying to figure out why market forces haven't influenced some GOP voter behavior. Why do poor and lower-middle class folk vote against their own economic self-interest and support Republicans over Democrats? The average Dem pundit and political operative would have said they were brainwashed by GOP blue-sky rhetoric. But this shows that this section of the electorate (and perhaps more) vote GOP because they are a better bet when it comes to moral issues.

They probably think Schaivo was an overreach, and the "nuclear option" is more Beltway confusion. But when it comes to a party that can be relied on to help guide issues like sex on TV, violence in the media, etc; it's the GOP for them. Since it sounds like it's a tortured decision, these are voters that we can have if we just reveal a little more about ourselves.

This is not bad news for Dems, rather yet another opportunity for us to show the rest of the country what we've known for decades: the Democratic party is a party of morals. We not only profess diversity, we live it in the discussion of our views, and in our representation. We are spiritual, even though we all don't worship an Anglo-Saxon protestant God.

This poll is a repudiation of those in our party that equate free speech with responsible speech. I'll defend someone's right to burn the flag, but will openly question them on the wisdom of using such an inflammatory statement to make their point. This poll is a repudiation of those that think voters are "brainwashed." It reminds us that people aren't as dumb as we'd like to think they are. It repudiates that section of our party that sees government as a solution instead of a partner.

I hope Dems actually pick up on some of this. We most closely represent the true face of the American people. It's time we act like them as well.

Friday, April 22

4:39 pm—Equitable Deception

Via the [Christian Science Monitor](#), with thanks to Talking Points Memo:

It's a sign that, even without the formal adoption of a so-called "flat tax," America's tax system is getting flatter.

Ever since the introduction of the modern income tax in 1913, US policy has been guided by the notion that the rich should pay a larger of their income in federal taxes, since they arguably owe something extra to a government that protects their greater wealth, and to a society that has helped them prosper.

But a debate has long waged over just where to draw the line, with populists pushing to "soak the rich" and conservatives arguing that a too-progressive tax structure creates a disincentive for the creation of jobs and wealth that benefit the whole nation.

Chalk up President Bush as not just a tax cutter but also a tax flattener. Under Mr. Bush and a Republican Congress, big tax cuts since 2001 have given major tax reductions to those wealthy individuals presumed, up to now, to be able to afford paying a bigger chunk of their income in taxes. By one measure of the federal, state, and local tax burden, just 3.4 percentage points separate the effective tax rate paid by the top 1 percent of earners from the other 99 percent of American households.

So while talking about the wonders of the supply side economy, the Bushies have managed to shift the tax burden to the middle class. Check this out, from the same article:

What Americans pay in taxes: getting less progressive

This chart shows effective tax rates by income group. The gap has narrowed between the tax rate paid by the top 1 percent (now 32.8 percent of income) and the other 99 percent of earners - who now pay 29.4 percent of income (see bold numbers below).

| Income group | Average income | SHARES OF ... | | TAXES AS A PERCENTAGE OF INCOME | | | |
|--------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|
| | | Total income | Total taxes | Federal | State/local | Total taxes | Total before Bush |
| Lowest 20 % | \$10,400 | 3.4% | 2.2% | 7.9% | 11.8% | 19.7% | 20.4% |

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------|---------|-------|-------|------|------|------|------|
| Second 20 % | 21,200 | 7.0 | 5.5 | 11.4 | 11.9 | 23.3 | 25.1 |
| Middle 20 % | 34,500 | 11.7 | 10.5 | 15.8 | 11.2 | 27.0 | 29.0 |
| Fourth 20 % | 56,300 | 19.2 | 19.0 | 18.7 | 11.0 | 29.8 | 31.9 |
| Next 15 % | 96,700 | 25.2 | 26.5 | 21.1 | 10.5 | 31.6 | 34.3 |
| Next 4 % | 201,000 | 14.4 | 15.3 | 22.5 | 9.7 | 32.2 | 35.0 |
| Top 1 % | 978,000 | 19.1 | 20.8 | 24.6 | 8.2 | 32.8 | 37.1 |
| All | 56,800 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 19.8 | 10.3 | 30.1 | 32.8 |
| Addendum: | | | | | | | |
| Bottom 99 % | 47,500 | 81.0 | 79.1 | 18.6 | 10.8 | 29.4 | 31.7 |

Note: Taxes include all federal, state, and local taxes (personal and corporate income, payroll, property, sales, excise, estate, etc.) For calculations of income shares and taxes as a percentage of income, income includes employer-paid FICA taxes (allocated to workers) and corporate profits net of taxable dividends, neither of which is included in the average cash income figures shown.

Instead of being outraged about the shift of the tax burden, I'm up in arms about the moral lessons here. Movement Conservatives, in the name of God, Country, and Party are rewriting one of the prime moral lessons we learned as children: share if you have more than you need. Look out for those less fortunate than yourself. If you have the means, lead by example.

WWJD? He'd never be a Movement Conservative, and might not even be a Democrat. He would fight for a tax code that didn't "soak the rich," but would require those that can to pay their share to take care of those that couldn't. He wouldn't allow the poor to lay on their backs, instead requiring them to better themselves any way they can. In my opinion, his statement "there will always be poor" wasn't a reason for us to give up on; rather it was a charge to lift our entire country by lifting the least in our country.

I recently read an article that claimed the Bush tax cuts had lowered the tax burden on the top 1% by \$85,000 on average. That's a lot of money, and even more to you and me. But on a proportional level, how much is \$85,000 to someone who is worth \$5 million? \$20 million? \$200 million? Think back to the stories of how Michael Jordan would bet \$10,000 on a golf hole. Remember the common response, something along the lines of "that's nothing to a guy with that kind of money?" Same story.

This is the 4th year under an unprecedented set of tax cuts, engineered by the best Republican minds. We have yet to enjoy the economic growth promised by the supply-siders. What we are enjoying is a moribund economy. We see deficits everywhere you look. We feel the pressure of interest rates heading upward. We see a set of economic circumstances that will easily crush whatever positive momentum this economy can muster.

We were told that the rich would create jobs, found new industries, spark a new wave of American opportunity on a wave on entrepreneurship.

Where is their promised civic responsibility?

Feds' weather information could go dark

Friday, April 22 (Palm Beach Post)—Do you want a seven-day weather forecast for your ZIP code? Or hour-by-hour predictions of the temperature, wind speed, humidity and chance of rain? Or weather data beamed to your cellphone?

But under a bill pending in the U.S. Senate, it might all disappear.

The bill, introduced last week by Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., would prohibit federal meteorologists from competing with companies such as AccuWeather and The Weather Channel, which offer their own forecasts through paid services and free ad-supported Web sites.

Supporters say the bill wouldn't hamper the weather service or the National Hurricane Center from alerting the public to hazards — in fact, it exempts forecasts meant to protect "life and property."

But critics say the bill's wording is so vague they can't tell exactly what it would ban. [More](#)

Powell Playing Quiet Role in Bolton Battle

GOP Senators Sought Views on Nominee

Friday, April 22 (Washington Post)—Former secretary of state Colin L. Powell is emerging as a behind-the-scenes player in the battle over John R. Bolton's nomination as ambassador to the United Nations, privately telling at least two key Republican lawmakers that Bolton is a smart but very problematic government official, according to Republican sources.

Powell spoke in recent days with Sens. Lincoln D. Chafee (R.I.) and Chuck Hagel (Neb.), two of three GOP senators on the Foreign Relations Committee who have raised concerns about Bolton's confirmation, the sources said. Powell did not advise the senators to oppose Bolton, but offered a frank assessment of the nominee as a man who was challenging to work with on personnel and policy matters, according to two people familiar with the conversations.

"General Powell has returned calls from senators who wanted to discuss specific questions that have been raised," said Margaret Cifrino, a Powell spokeswoman. "He has not reached out to senators," and considers the discussions private.

A spokesman for Chafee confirmed that at least two conversations took place. Bolton served under Powell as his undersecretary of state for arms control, and the two were known to have serious clashes.

Powell's tenure as secretary of state was often marked by friction with the White House on a range of foreign policy issues, disagreements that both sides worked to keep from surfacing. It is not Powell's style to weigh in strongly against a former colleague, but rather to direct people to what he sees as flaws and potential problems, former associates say. Powell's views are highly influential with many Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill.

[More](#)

NASA Is Said to Loosen Risk Standards for Shuttle

Friday, April 22 (New York Times)—NASA officials have loosened the standards for what constitutes an acceptable risk of damage from the kind of debris that led to the disintegration of the shuttle Columbia as it was returning from space two years ago, internal documents show.

The move has set off a debate within the agency about whether the changes are a reasonable reassessment of the hazards of flight or whether they jettison long-established rules to justify getting back to space quickly.

Experts who have seen the documents say they do not suggest that the shuttle Discovery - scheduled to lift off from Cape Canaveral, Fla., on

May 22 - is unsafe, but a small but forceful minority say they worry that NASA is repeating a practice that contributed to the Columbia disaster: playing down risks to continue sending humans into space.

The documents were given to The New York Times by several NASA employees, who asked not to be named, saying they feared retribution.

Documents that had been revealed earlier showed that NASA was struggling to meet safety goals set by the independent board that investigated the Columbia accident. The new documents suggest that the agency is looking for ways to justify returning to flight even if it cannot fully meet those recommendations. [More](#)

Passing the Buck

By PAUL KRUGMAN

Friday, April 22 (New York Times)—The United States spends far more on health care than other advanced countries. Yet we don't appear to receive more medical services. And we have lower life-expectancy and higher infant-mortality rates than countries that spend less than half as much per person. How do we do it?

An important part of the answer is that much of our health care spending is devoted to passing the buck: trying to get someone else to pay the bills.

According to the World Health Organization, in the United States administrative expenses eat up about 15 percent of the money paid in premiums to private health insurance companies, but only 4 percent of the budgets of public insurance programs, which consist mainly of Medicare and Medicaid. The numbers for both public and private insurance are similar in other countries - but because we rely much more heavily than anyone else on private insurance, our total administrative costs are much higher.

According to the health organization, the higher costs of private insurers are "mainly due to the extensive bureaucracy required to assess risk, rate premiums, design benefit packages and review, pay or refuse claims." Public insurance plans have far less bureaucracy because they don't try to screen out high-risk clients or charge them higher fees.

And the costs directly incurred by insurers are only half the story. Doctors "must hire office personnel just to deal with the insurance companies," Dr. Atul Gawande, a practicing physician, wrote in The New Yorker. "A well-run office can get the insurer's rejection rate down from 30 percent to, say, 15 percent. That's how a doctor makes money. ... It's a war with insurance, every step of the way."

Isn't competition supposed to make the private sector more efficient than the public sector? [More](#)

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