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Moose on the Loose

By Marshall Wittmann

Bush had a chance after 9/11 to create a bold new politics of national purpose that would make Teddy Roosevelt proud. But he blew it. A modern Bull Moose progressive now finds common cause with Kerry and Edwards.

Editor's Note: *This article is taken from the upcoming issue of Blueprint Magazine.*

This unreconstructed Bull Moose will run with the donkey in November.

I am an independent McCainiac who hopes to revive the Bull Moose tradition of Theodore Roosevelt, and I support the Kerry-Edwards agenda. Don't get me wrong -- this Bull Moose is not completely in agreement with the Democratic donkey. But the Bush administration has betrayed the effort to create a new politics of national greatness in the aftermath of 9/11.

If John Kerry wins, it remains to be seen whether his administration will be more willing to break with its ideological base than a Bush team that has been slavishly loyal to its corporate paymasters. But there is no remaining shred of doubt that another four years of a Bush presidency would have a toxic effect on American politics. If George W. Bush is re-elected, unlimited corporate power, cynicism, and division will ride high in the saddle.

In the past few years, there has been an effort by the neoconservative center-right to forge a new politics of national greatness. Although this new political perspective was never spelled out in specifics, its adherents (including me) envisioned an energetic federal government that would implement a foreign policy advancing American interests and human rights, along with a domestic policy that would promote national service, and an economics focused on benefiting the middle class.

Our model was Theodore Roosevelt, the original Bull Moose, who did not flinch from taking on the special interests at home while aggressively promoting American interests abroad.

The modern champion of conservatives for national greatness is Sen. John McCain. In the 2000 campaign, he advocated rogue state rollback, reform of government, an economic plan that focused on middle-class tax relief, and national service. He inspired Americans "to enlist in causes greater than their self-interest."

Of course, the Republican establishment rallied behind Bush, who used "compassionate conservatism" rhetoric to hide a corporate conservatism agenda. In Bush, the GOP moneyed establishment saw a candidate who served its self-interest, comforting the comfortable and catering to fat-cat contributors -- the new Republican base.

When McCain threatened Bush in the 2000 primaries, we got the first real glimpse behind the curtain of Bush World -- with its vicious and ferocious assault on McCain's patriotism and character. What the Bushies used against McCain was an unholy coalition of the two primary wings of the Republican Party -- the Corporate Warriors and the Prayer Warriors. These unlikely allies united against McCain despite the fact that he had a strong pro-life record and a conservative congressional record.

The alliance of Mammon and the religious right was consummated in opposition to McCain's support for campaign finance reform. The embodiment of this coalition was a key operative who implemented the anti-McCain assault in South Carolina -- former Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed, a Karl Rove crony who was also on the payroll of Enron. Reed had been my boss when I worked as legislative director of the Christian Coalition. Before the primaries, Reed warned me that he would implement an under-the-radar slime assault on McCain if he posed a threat to Bush -- just what happened in South Carolina after Bush's loss to McCain in the New Hampshire primary.

Anyone who was involved in the 2000 McCain campaign, as I was, knows exactly who is responsible for the "Swift boat" slime attack on Senator Kerry -- in Bush World, all low roads lead to Rove.

When I was at the Christian Coalition, I witnessed first-hand the alliance of the deregulation, no-tax crowd with the religious conservatives. Ironically, the rank and file of the religious right are hardly the country club set. They are largely middle-class Americans who don't rely on trust funds or dividend checks for their livelihoods. But the leaders of the religious right have betrayed their constituents by failing to champion such economic issues as family leave or access to health insurance, which would relieve the stresses on many working families. The only things the religious conservatives get are largely symbolic votes on proposals guaranteed to fail, such as the gay marriage constitutional amendment. The religious right has consistently provided the ground troops, while the big-money men have gotten the goodies.

The realization that the religious right had essentially become a front for the money men of the Republican Party was a primary source of my disenchantment with that movement. And without a doubt, the GOP has merely become a vehicle for unbridled corporate power. Such a party cannot provide a home for a movement that strives for national greatness.

In 2000, the Republican Party clearly had the opportunity to recapture the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt, by advocating government as an agent of national greatness and insisting on reforming government and corporate influence on it. However, that path was far too threatening to the Republican elites. Then, and now, they have chosen the dollar over the flag by favoring corporate cronies over a politics of national unity.

The first few months of the Bush administration were uneventful and predictable. Despite his narrow victory, President Bush made no effort to reach out to his adversaries. After all, the donors had to be reimbursed. Consequently, the primary focus was on passing a massive giveaway to the wealthy with a few crumbs for the middle class.

A central feature of the tax cuts was what has become the blessed sacrament of the modern Republican Party -- repeal of the estate tax. This boon for billionaires has become an obsession for the Republican Party, even in the face of huge deficits and the mounting costs of war. Perhaps not surprisingly, the estate tax was a product of T.R.-inspired progressivism that sought a more equitable distribution of the tax burden. Welcome to the second Gilded Age!

Everything could have changed in the aftermath of 9/11. For a while it appeared that it had. Bush displayed moral clarity and leadership worthy of national greatness. However, it was short-lived. It turned out that Bush would be more of a Tom DeLay than a Winston Churchill. On the domestic political front, there was a brief interregnum of national unity. Bush rhetorically sought to bring together the nation in the fight against the terrorist enemy. However, it was soon clear that no political imagination would be employed to forge a new politics. Rather than challenging Americans to enlist in national service, the administration told them to "go shopping." Rather than asking more of those who have more, the administration refused to explore a progressive way to finance the war against terror. In fact, before long, the president returned to his mantra of permanent elimination of the "death tax." Yes, Virginia, there is a war going on, but the donors must be reimbursed!

Bush wisely initiated the overthrow of the Taliban and the liberation of Afghanistan. But as Kerry and others have pointed out, the Rumsfeld Pentagon pursued liberation on the cheap and did not aggressively pursue Osama bin Laden and the remnants of the Taliban in the battle of Tora Bora. As a result of the failure to devote sufficient resources to secure the peace in Afghanistan, that country's future is uncertain.

As the 2002 election approached, Bush had a choice. He could have valued national unity over partisan gain. He could have opted for national greatness over political cravenness. Instead, he chose to conduct a cynical and unprincipled campaign that harkened back to the 2000 South Carolina primary and consequently divided the country. After first opposing the Department of Homeland Security, he reversed course by supporting it and brandishing the proposal as a weapon against Democrats who opposed a minor labor provision. Then there is the story of triple-amputee Vietnam veteran Max Cleland, the U.S. senator from Georgia who was portrayed by the Georgia Republicans as soft on terrorism and a veritable Osama lover for his position on this labor provision. Once again, Ralph Reed -- now chairman of the Georgia Republican Party -- was at the scene of a political crime, taking out a war hero so Republican money power could be safe and secure. Praise the Lord, indeed!

The net result of the 2002 campaign was that the GOP was back in control of the Senate, and the united red, white, and blue country had returned to the divided red and blue states.

I had long supported regime change in Iraq. Saddam's threat to regional stability and the prospect that he would obtain weapons of mass destruction, along with his massive human rights violations, argued that he be removed, particularly after 9/11. But what I could not have anticipated was the Bush administration's abysmal incompetence in both the timing of the war and the execution of a post-war plan.

It is unlikely that the administration deliberately lied about the WMD intelligence. But it now appears that there was some hyping of the data in order to go to war sooner rather than later. We now know that al Qaeda had more extensive ties with Iran, Hezbollah, and forces in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia than it did with Iraq. Florida Sen. Bob Graham deserves belated credit for being a prophet on this score. Meanwhile, we did not secure the peace in Afghanistan, and now the Taliban is reconstituting. But more disturbing was the unforgivable failure to prepare for the post-war period.

Instead, what we got was a landing on the aircraft carrier in the "Mission Accomplished" presidential political photo-op. It was abundantly clear that this was an effort by the Rove team to "cash in" politically on the military victory. It was unwarranted triumphing unworthy of an American president.

While bipartisan voices, including McCain and Delaware Sen. Joe Biden, advocated more troops in Iraq to secure the country, the administration ignored their pleas, and the chaos deepened. When the prisoner abuse incidents at Abu Ghraib were revealed, the president failed morally to step up to the plate and immediately and forcefully denounce the outrageous behavior.

Incompetence and hubris in the defense of liberty are not virtues.

Despite Bush's pledge to restore a culture of responsibility, no one was held accountable for either the WMD fiasco or the post-war foul-up. Apparently, accountability only applies to low-income welfare mothers and not to high-ranking Pentagon officials.

Now, the effects of the law of unintended consequences are being felt in Iraq. Iran, one of the charter members of the "axis of evil," may emerge as the big winner in this war, as its influence grows in the Shia south. American credibility, which will be needed in the future as we confront threats, has been incalculably damaged. Our military is overstretched, and it will be difficult to find the resources for expansion because of the deficits created by the irresponsible tax cuts.

It will now be far more problematic to employ force in humanitarian situations such as the Sudan or certainly against the other players in the axis of evil -- North Korea and Iran. Paradoxically, a President Kerry may be more able to use military force than a re-elected President Bush, because he will have more credibility with the international community and the American people than the current incumbent.

What exactly have rock-ribbed conservatives gained from this administration? As conservative commentator Andrew Sullivan has observed, "Domestically, moreover, Bush has done a huge amount to destroy the coherence of a conservative philosophy of American government; and he has been almost criminally reckless in his hubris in the conduct

of the war." Of course, if liberals had their way they would expand the welfare state. In contrast, the Bush administration expands the corporate welfare state. Once again, the donors must be reimbursed! Deficits be damned!

So what does the Bull Moose think of the donkey? In the early primaries, I thought Karl Rove had induced a mass brainwashing of the Democrats as they flocked to Howard Dean. If the Deaniacs had seized the party, the Bush-Rovian dream of realignment might have been realized. Dean was their dream opponent -- a socially liberal, anti-war candidate from Vermont. However, the good centrist sense of the Democratic rank and file prevailed.

This Bull Moose is not all the way with Kerry, but part of the way with JFK. I am generally to Kerry's right. However, on the key issues of progressive economics and a muscular and smart foreign policy, John Kerry's ideas are far preferable to George W. Bush's. And, with his gesture this summer in approaching McCain about the vice presidency, Kerry demonstrated that he is committed to a new politics of national unity.

Although I had my differences with Kerry during the Cold War, he has demonstrated by his hawkishness on Kosovo and Afghanistan that he is willing to use force to defend American ideas and interests. He advocates increasing the size of the U.S. military. On domestic issues, Kerry has positioned himself in the New Democrat tradition. Kerry has proposed an ambitious national service program. He would retain the tax cuts for the middle class while rolling them back on the super-rich. And he would reform, rather than eliminate, the estate tax.

If Kerry is victorious, there will no doubt be a battle within the Democratic Party between the left and New Democrat wings. Perhaps, just perhaps, a progressive national greatness wing can emerge that combines a commitment to national service and progressive economics with a dedication to defending America and promoting its ideals. Fortunately, there is a model for progressive national greatness in the presidency -- the previous JFK. President Kennedy combined a muscular foreign policy with a call to service and a domestic progressivism. Kennedy brought Republicans into his administration and governed from the vital center.

A President Kerry also should embrace a reform agenda that will attract the constituencies of McCain and H. Ross Perot. An overhaul of the tax system that would eliminate loopholes should be undertaken. A few years ago, Rep. Dick Gephardt offered a modified flat tax proposal that would both simplify the system and retain progressivity. A left-right coalition to eliminate corporate welfare should be built. A Kerry administration should promote efforts at the state level to depoliticize congressional redistricting.

In the war against terror, it is vital that America be united. We have real enemies who seek to do us harm. Contrary to the conspiracy theories of Michael Moore and the loony left, Bush did not invent our enemies. But, despite all his bravado and swagger, he has made it more difficult to build a domestic and international political coalition to ultimately prevail against our terrorist adversaries. He has bred distrust by driving a cynical partisan agenda that seeks to reward the wealthy, while branding his political adversaries as vaguely unpatriotic.

Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have waged an unprecedentedly cynical and divisive campaign. The campaign has proven that there are no guard rails when it comes to a scorched-earth effort to hold on to power. However, Democrats can seize the opportunity to reach out to disaffected moderate Republicans and independents to build a new political coalition of national unity. That is both the hope and the cause of this unreconstructed Bull Moose.

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