

## POLITICS

## It's all so dismally familiar

■ Don't be saying you can call this election, and don't be celebrating anything yet.

Stunning coincidence. The verdict in the long-running trial of Saddam Hussein in Iraq is due two days before our congressional elections in November. Astounding. How ineffable.

Sometimes you know the Republicans have just lost it completely. Last week, Dick Cheney said to Rush Limbaugh regarding the Iraqi government: "If you look at the general, overall situation, they're doing remarkably well."

The vice president also acknowledged there's some concern because the war wasn't over "instantaneously." We have been in Iraq just one

month shy of the entire time it took us to fight World War II. At the time I wrote this, 70 Americans dead so far in October. Electricity in Iraq this year hit its lowest levels since the war started.

What infuriates me about this is the lying. Why can't they level with us? Just on the general, overall situation.

Put me in the depressive Dems camp. We always look good going into the last two weeks, until we get hit with that wall of Republican money.

I'm hard to shock on political ads, but I do get more than miffed when they take the truth and just stand it on its head.

For example, if ever there has been a friend to Social Security, it would be U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards from Waco, a D loyal to the tradition of FDR, LBJ and government-exists-to-serve-the-people.

So what are the R's attacking him on? Not supporting Social Security.

All this kind of thing does is render political debate completely meaningless.

The argument is that D's have a seven-point structural deficit going into any election. I see the problem — I just have no idea what the actual numbers are.

Let's start with the easy end: the Senate.

From the book *Off Center* by Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, as recently quoted by Eric Alterman on his blog:

"The mismatch between popular votes and electoral outcomes is even more striking in the Senate. Combining the last three Senate elections, Democrats have actually won two-and-a-half million more votes than Republicans. Yet now they hold only 44 seats in that 100-person chamber because Republicans dominate the less populous states that are so heavily over-represented in the Senate. As journalist Hendrik Hertzberg [*of The New Yorker*] notes, if you

treat each senator as representing half that state's population, then the Senate's 55 Republicans currently represent 131 million people, while the 44 Democrats represent 161 million people."

OK, we all know about the small-state advantage in the Senate. How did the People's House get so far out of fair?

*New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman explains: "The key point is that African-Americans, who overwhelmingly vote Democratic, are highly concentrated in a few districts. This means that in close elections many Democratic votes are, as political analysts say, wasted — they simply add to huge majorities in a small number of districts, while the more widely spread Republican vote allows the GOP to win by narrower margins in a larger number of districts."

I'm the one who has been writing for two years that the American people are fed up with the war in

Iraq and with the Bush administration's lies and incompetence. I'm the one who keeps beating the Washington press corps about the head over how out of touch it is. I'm the one who has been insisting that there's a Democratic tide out here, and that the people are so far ahead of the politicians and the media that it's painful to watch.

So how come I'm not thrilled? Because I watched this happen two years ago — same rejection of the Iraq war, same disgust with Bush and Co., same understanding that Republicans are for the rich, period, same polls showing D's with the lead going right into Election Day.

And the same geographic gerrymander and the same wall of money in the last two weeks. I'm not close to calling this election, and I'm sure not into celebrating anything yet.

Molly Ivins writes for Creators Syndicate, 5777 W. Century Blvd., Suite 700, Los Angeles, CA 90045

## History: Look at record for novelty candidates

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votes out of 428,629 cast. His tenant-farmer bill passed, only to be declared unconstitutional shortly thereafter. After a bitter fight with the University of Texas (Jim wanted to dictate who got hired and fired there), a legislative investigation uncovered serious personal financial irregularities, including a questionable \$156,500 personal loan whose source the governor would not disclose.

Ferguson was ultimately impeached, convicted on a lengthy list of corruption charges and banned from holding office in Texas. Never one to back down, he ran his wife, Miriam (who became "Ma" to his "Pa" in the public vernacular), for governor in 1924, promising "two governors for the price of one."

Ma won, and she served a second term in the 1930s. Legislative ineffectiveness and outright corruption were the principal hallmarks of her administrations.

But Texas wasn't done with joke candidates.

W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel was a Fort Worth flour-mill manager who exceeded a popular noon-time radio program to promote his Hillbilly Flour brand. In 1938, O'Daniel, who had never even voted, announced his candidacy for governor. (He would've felt comfortable with Kinky's oft-repeated rationale for running: "Why the hell not?")

Pappy took his hillbilly band on the road, campaigning on the platform of the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. He privately admitted that he might not win, but all the publicity was "sure good for business." He won without a runoff in the Democratic primary.

Once in office, O'Daniel outdid Pa Ferguson in corruption and incompetence. Having promised to oppose a sales tax, end the death penalty, abolish the poll tax and raise old-age pensions, he kept none of these pledges.

His tax plan was written almost entirely by industry lobbyists. He hysterically accused labor unions and the University of Texas of harboring communists and traitors. He appointed a feeble, 87-year-old man to a vacant U.S. Senate seat, knowing that when the old man died, the seat would be his for the taking.

As UT-Arlington historian George Norris Green has written, O'Daniel "demonstrated no regard for truth, documentation, or rational discourse." And as a Senate colleague of his put it, O'Daniel did more

than anyone since Reconstruction to "break down confidence in the institution of government."

None of this is meant to suggest that a Gov. Friedman would behave as badly as Ferguson or O'Daniel did once in office. I have no reason to doubt his honesty or sincerity.

But the things that have attracted thousands to the Kinkster's banner are the same things that led to the election of Pa and Pappy: the public's desire for "straight talk" from a political outsider, and a longing to see the Austin political establishment shaken up. Much like Kinky, Pa and Pappy proposed popular (if sometimes simplistic) solutions to complex problems. They surely would have agreed with Kinky's campaign slogan: "How hard could it be?"

The problem, of course, is that it was hard, as Ferguson and O'Daniel learned.

Both alienated their legislatures, and their policy initiatives languished. Both ended up embarrassing the state and disgracing their office. These one-time "joke candidates" ended up right back where they had started: as jokes. And Texas suffered in real ways from their failings.

I truly like Kinky. I've bought his albums and mystery novels, and I loved his columns in *Texas Monthly*. I applaud his environmental policies and his calls for lobbying reforms. I find his frank talk refreshing. God knows that the corrupt gang of incompetents running our state government deserves to be booted all the way down Congress Avenue and into the Colorado River.

But if history serves as any guide, the Governor's Mansion is no place for a political novice, especially if he has no party to back him up. At least the Fergusons and O'Daniel were nominally Democrats, even though many in their party

shunned them. Still, they could count on a certain degree of party loyalty, a commodity of which Kinky will have none.

Perhaps a Gov. Friedman would prove to be a master coalition-builder, getting his legislative agenda passed into law in ways that eluded Ferguson and O'Daniel. But I wouldn't bank on it.

Texas history may not always repeat itself, but it often serves as a useful guide to what we may expect. So, fellow Kinky fans, cast your vote in November for the lovable "joke candidate" with the black hat and cigar; just know what to expect if he should actually get elected. Remember Pa and Pappy.

And that's no joke.



Pakistanis burn an effigy of the Danish prime minister on Feb. 15 in Karachi to protest cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad.

## Religion: Islam getting short shrift from some

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evidence that any attempt to "make nice" with it constitutes feckless appeasement. They celebrate that the new pope is more belligerent in asserting the superiority of Western civilization than his more repentant and reconciling predecessor.

Yet what should we make of a Western giant such as Martin Luther? When he wasn't condemning the pope as the Antichrist or insisting that popular rule is incompatible with Christianity, he raged against other targets.

"Now just behold these miserable, blind, and senseless people," he wrote in 1543 in one of his lesser-known books, *The Jews & Their Lies*. In a manner that would fuel generations of German anti-Semitism, Luther advised his countrymen to burn synagogues and raze Jewish homes "in honor of our Lord and of Christendom."

Meanwhile, in Geneva under the influence of the brilliant theologian John Calvin, blasphemy and unbelief often led to being burned or hanged. Paintings and statues of religious figures — even reverential works — were as forbidden as any caricature of a Muslim prophet. Dancing was a jail-worthy offense, as was immodest hair on women.

As Bush would say, these pillars of Western civilization hated the freedoms that we enjoy.

Having long been attracted to American evangelicalism, I drifted away after 9-11. American evangelicalism began to reveal itself as less interested in the distinctive character of Jesus and more interested in defending the divine nature of contemporary American consumer culture.

American evangelicals rationalize the lapses of Protestantism's greatest leaders in light of historical issues or the prevailing culture of that era, 16 centuries after Christ. They are far less charitable regarding Muslims' foibles 1,400 years into their own journey of faith.

American evangelicals can view their religion as peaceful — despite believing in the absolute authority of a Bible whose deity directed his people to take conquered women as plunder (a true family values conundrum).

In Deuteronomy 20, God also instructs his followers thusly: "[I]n the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes." That includes livestock.

And he directs his people to besiege their neighbors but not their neighbors' fruit trees — because the trees have more value.

The same evangelicals who believe that such words were a direct revelation of God's desires insist that relatively milder passages in the Quran are a sign of Islam's inferiority.

They and their right-wing peers are rightly bothered when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad publicly claims that not as many Jews were killed in the Holocaust as have been reported. Yet they neglect the fact that Luther contended in his own day that too few Jews were being killed for his tastes, writing, "We are at fault in not slaying them."

American hawks often declare that the slightest criticism of Israeli policies is tantamount to loving Adolf Hitler. Yet they are spiritual descendants of Europe's anti-Semites, though they claim to jealously protect Jewish people while grasping for a politically acceptable substitute for their rage.

A visit to the Tower of David Museum in Jerusalem reminds visitors today that, before Ahmadinejad or Luther, Muslims protected Jews in the Holy Land — whereas Crusaders typically massacred any Jews they could find en route to and in Jerusalem.

While moderate Muslim leaders such as Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Jordan's King Abdullah II nudge embittered citizenries to see the benefits of a productive relationship with the West, right-wing American pundits who condemn Islam are polarizing American and Mideastern populations into war positions.

In light of the West's own follies, Americans would do well to extend to Christianity's younger sibling Islam a bit of what is supposedly Christianity's essence: grace.

robashgar@yahoo.com

## IRAQ | WAR

## The war was a mistake — so ...

■ Is there an alternative in Iraq besides bugging out or staying the course? Yes.

There's a strict taboo in the column-writing business against recycling ideas. So let me start with something fresh: The Iraq war was a mistake.

I know, I know. But I've never said it before. And I don't enjoy saying it now. I'm sure that to the anti-war crowd this is too little, too late, and that's fine because I'm not joining their ranks anyway.

In the dumbed-down debate we're having, there are only two sides: pro-war and anti-war. This is silly.

First, very few folks who favored the Iraq invasion are abstractly pro-war. Second, anti-war types aren't really pacifists. They favor military intervention when it comes to stopping genocide in Darfur or starvation in Somalia or doing whatever it was that President Clinton did in Haiti.

But truth is truth. And the Iraq war was a mistake by the most obvious criteria: If we had known then what we know now, we would never have gone to war with Iraq — at least not the way we did.

I do think that Congress (including Democrats Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Jay Rockefeller and John Murtha) was right to vote for the war given what was known — or what was believed to have been known — in 2003. The claims from some former pro-war Dems that they were lied to strike me as nothing more than cowardly buck-passing.

The failure to find weapons of mass destruction is a side issue. The WMD fiasco was a global intelligence failure, though calling Saddam Hussein's bluff after 9-11 was the right thing to do.

Washington's more important intelligence failure lay in underestimating what would be required to rebuild and restore post-Saddam Iraq. The White House did not anticipate a low-intensity civil war in Iraq, never planned for it and would not have deemed it in the U.S. interest to pay this high a price in prestige, treasure and, of course, lives.

According to the goofy parameters of the current debate, I'm now supposed to call for withdrawing from Iraq. If it was a mistake to go in, we should get out, some argue.

But this is unpersuasive. A doctor will warn that if you see a man stabbed in the chest, you shouldn't rush to pull the knife out. We are in Iraq for good reasons and for reasons that were well-intentioned but wrong. But we are there.

Those who say it's not the central front in the war on terror are in a worse state of denial than they think Bush is in. Of course it's the central front. That it has become so is a valid criticism of Bush, but it's also strong reason for seeing things through. If we pull out precipitously, jihadism will open a franchise in Iraq and gain steam around the world, and the U.S. will be weakened.

Bush's critics claim that democracy promotion was an afterthought, a convenient rebranding of a war gone sour. That's unfair, but even if true, it wouldn't mean that liberty isn't at stake. It wouldn't mean that promoting a liberal society in the heart of the Arab and Muslim world wouldn't be in our interests and consistent with our ideals.

In war, you sometimes end up having to defend ground that you wouldn't have chosen with perfect knowledge beforehand. That's us in Iraq.

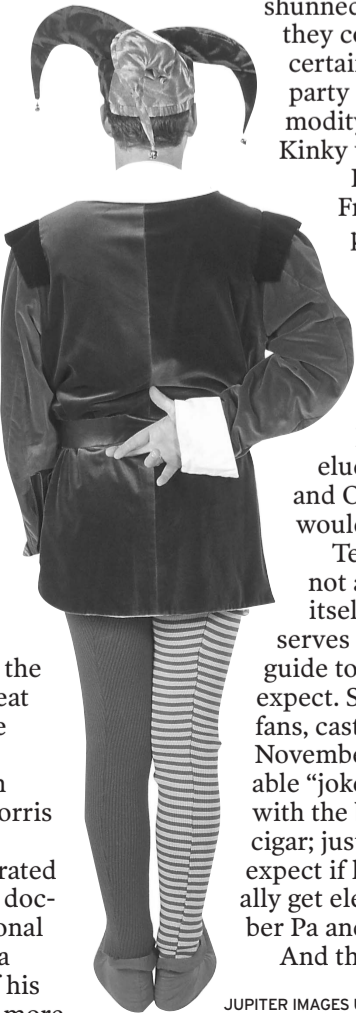
According to the conventional script, if I'm not saying "bug out" of Iraq, I'm supposed to say "stay the course." But there's a third option. We should ask the Iraqis to vote on whether U.S. troops should stay.

Polling suggests that they want us to go. But polling absent consequences is a form of protest. With accountability, minds may change, and appreciation for the U.S. presence might grow.

If Iraqis voted "stay," we'd have a mandate to do what's necessary to win, and our ideals would be reaffirmed. If they voted "go," our values also would be reaffirmed, and we could leave with honor. And pretty much everyone would have to accept democracy as the only legitimate expression of national will.

Finishing the job is better than leaving a mess. And if we can finish the job, the war won't be remembered as a mistake.

Jonah Goldberg writes for Tribune Media Services. [JonahsColumn@aol.com](mailto:JonahsColumn@aol.com)



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