

A bruised body politic: Three years after the invasion of Iraq and more than five years since 9/11, real dissent in the United States is next to impossible. People who speak out against George W. Bush and his administration are paying a steep personal price, Olivia Ward reports;



STILL THE ENEMY

SECTION D

by OLIVIA WARD

The news for President George W. Bush is daunting.

Poll ratings are skidding, scandals are on the upswing, the "i" word (impeachment) is fluttering on the horizon, and his tough-talking vicepresident can't shoot straight.

But are his opponents declaring victory? Are they carried through the streets by admiring crowds,

proclaimed as prophets on the hottest news networks, vindicated in standing-room-only town hall meetings?

Not.

On the contrary, those who have famously trumpeted their critical views of Bush are still in the political doghouse, particularly if they opposed his administration on its war in Iraq or the "war on terrorism." Even as the

tide of public opinion turns, critics of American policy since 9/11 continue to pay a damaging price for their opinions.

"People are still afraid to speak out, and when they do, there are few places they can go to be heard," says Michael Ratner, an international human rights lawyer and president of the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York. "Those

who do speak out are marginalized, attacked and discredited."

When Bush first ran for office, Ratner points out, his motto was "politics is war conducted by other means," a slogan taken from a campaign pamphlet by neo-conservative activist David Horowitz that paraphrased 19th-century Prussian military strategist Karl von Clausewitz.

"In political warfare you do not fight just to prevail in an argument but to destroy the enemy's fighting ability," Horowitz declared. "In political wars, the aggressor usually prevails."

For those who missed the point, Horowitz added a quote from Vladimir Lenin "The goal is not to refute your opponent's argument but to wipe him from the face of the earth."

Spurred on by Republican eminence grise Karl Rove, Bush's campaign team galloped

off to victory in two elections. Though the numbers didn't cover them in glory, they left their enemies bleeding on the field.

And, shortly after Bush's first election victory, the 9/11 attacks set the tone of his presidency.

The trauma of the massive assault, and the belief that the country was living under an Islamic sword of Damocles, created an atmosphere of anxiety and imminent danger, resulting in a more passive attitude to authority. The subsequent invasion of Iraq also intensified the political battle, splitting parties as well as relations between the United States and other countries.

In a world assailed by fear and uncertainty, and overwhelmed by messages of unity and patriotism, dissidents were moving targets.



In America, bereaved military mother Cindy Sheehan was harassed and arrested for her high-profile protests. War-hero presidential candidate John Kerry was accused of cowardice for opposing the invasion, along with decorated veteran and Democrat congressman John Murtha. Triple amputee vet Max Cleland lost his Senate seat after his opponent ran a campaign linking him with Osama bin Laden. Oscar-winning actress Susan Sarandon was booed off the stage for speaking out against the Iraq war.

Internationally, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan was declared "irrelevant" and attacked for alleged corruption after he rejected a unilateral invasion of Iraq. Nobel Prize-winning International Energy Agency chief Mohammed elBaradei was accused of incompetence and his new term of office threatened.

In Britain, which supported the war, defence ministry official David Kelly committed suicide after disputing Prime Minister Tony Blair's claim that Iraq could fire deadly weapons on 45 minutes notice.

Diplomatic ties also frayed as French President Jacques Chirac was treated as an enemy by the White House, and Jean Chretien was regarded with contempt in Bush circles for refusing to support the Iraq war.

Most of those who have paid the highest price for dissent have been Americans.

One was Joseph Wilson, a former American diplomat who blew the whistle on a Bush administration claim that Iraq had tried to purchase uranium ore from Niger, bolstering its contention that Saddam Hussein was producing nuclear weapons.

Wilson, who went on a fact-finding trip to Niger in 2002, accused the administration of "exaggerating the Iraqi threat" in order to

launch the war in a New York Times essay in July 2003.

A week later his wife, Valerie Plame, was named as a CIA agent by right-wing columnist Robert Novak, an event that sparked a furor in Washington and appeared to be the opening shot in a campaign against Wilson. A probe of the Plame leak has continued since December 2003 and resulted in the indictment last October of Vice-President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, Lewis "Scooter" Libby.

Wilson, who was prepared for an attack by the Bush administration, was taken aback at the potentially dangerous intelligence leak aimed at his wife.

"I have in my closet memorabilia notes from the first President (George) Bush lauding my courage and leadership as a diplomat (in Baghdad and Africa)," he said in a phone interview. "I thought I could withstand any attacks that might be coming. I fully expected them to go after my credibility. But I never thought they would stoop to going after my wife."

Wilson says the campaign against him has changed the lives of his family. "It's clear that there are certain things we can't do. My wife no longer works at the Agency. And I've found it's amazing how international business shies away from somebody who challenges the administration on matters of war and security. That's why so few people want to speak out."

One reason why Bush's opponents have found themselves sidelined, in spite of numerous recent challenges to the administration, is a lack of opportunity for public debate, Wilson believes.

"A very supine press has allowed the administration far more than it deserves, considering its lack of integrity. It's a hangover from 9/11. The tone was set when Dan Rather came out and said that in a time of crisis we

are all Americans first. The administration has abused that. And it has taken a while for the press to react."

"I'd love the chance to debate those guys," Wilson says. "But the president disqualified me from the debate. He said he'd welcome an open debate as long as it's not about oil, Israel or manipulation of intelligence. As I want to talk about manipulation of intelligence, that rules me out."

Scott Ritter, a former UN weapons inspector and Marine, was one of the first to speak out against the American government's policy on Iraq. Even before the recent war, he was the target of allegations that he was an "Israeli agent," and his wife was investigated by the FBI as a member of the KGB.

But the problem runs deeper than individual slurs, Ritter contends

"I could care less if the world wakes up one day and says I was right all along," he said in a phone interview. "I want them to wake up and say, We were lied to by the government. We have a government that has behaved disingenuously and dishonourably, and there is no sign that it is changing course."

That, Ritter says, is because "it's the dynamic of organizations. When they invest heavily in a course of action, they are loath to change. The tendency is to reinforce failure until the point where they're confronted by absolute disaster. They don't want to acknowledge they've made a mistake."

On the scale of difficulties thrown in the way of suspected Bush enemies, John Graham says his is minor.

"When I take an airline flight, I have to spend an extra half an hour at the airport. They have to call Washington to let me get on the plane because I'm on a no-fly list," says the head of the Giraffe Heroes Project, which "encourages

people to stick their necks out" on issues of the public good.

Graham, a former diplomat who once held a top-secret security clearance, has been placed on a "watch list" of terrorism suspects who are barred from boarding planes. He finds it almost impossible to believe that his is one of some 325,000 names reportedly listed as possible terrorists by the government's National Counterterrorism Center.

Graham admits that his constant round of speaking engagements to encourage Americans to denounce wrongdoing makes him vulnerable to harassment.

"If they really want to hurt me," he says, "they can stop me from getting on airplanes. I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but now I'm being pushed. I have no idea what I'm doing on the list, but Bush has made an implacable political enemy."

Graham and others are working to break the isolation of people who speak out. Their plight is worsened by a lack of public support that is rooted in fear and uncertainty.

But, says Mitchell Cohen, co-editor of the magazine *Dissent*, the viciousness with which some of Bush's opponents have been attacked is part of a tradition in America.

"Politics has been very bruising here. Rhetorical venom is a fact of life, and it goes back to Thomas Jefferson. There is a sorry history of demonizing opponents within the left as well as the right," he said in a phone interview.

The personalization of political attacks has undermined democratic debate, adds Cohen, who describes himself as a "left- hawk" on the Iraq war.

"Sharp argument is a characteristic feature of democracy when there are important issues to debate. Liberal democracy requires a certain

attitude to argument; it should be the responsibility of liberals to raise the debate to the highest level it can be."

The attacks on the Bush administration by the left have also descended to the personal level, Cohen said. "Too many liberals say Bush is stupid. But he twice won the governorship of Texas and the presidency. He may not write for *The New York Review of Books*, but you have to have an understanding of what he is - not a fascist but a type of American conservative. It's important to look at things in a complex way."

Shrewd political analysis may be needed in the turbulent atmosphere of America today. But in a country traumatized by real and stated threats, dissidents often find that emotion outguns reason.

"The constant use of the war on terror to rein in people has had an effect," said Ratner. "They don't want to support those they see as outsiders or spokespeople for opposing views. We haven't been able to build a real protest movement that makes the media take it seriously."

Grass-roots activism and outspoken protest continues in the U.S. Politicians have joined a chorus of opposition to the Iraq war and the undermining of civil liberties by anti-terrorism measures. According to the latest polls, up to 60 per cent of Americans disapprove of the way Bush is handling the situation in Iraq.

But with no concerted political leadership, Bush's critics say, the opposition shows little sign of winning the day. And those who have taken major risks to publicize their dissenting views are still isolated from the mainstream.

In spite of demonstrations and the defection of a number of Bush administration supporters, Ratner admits, "it isn't enough. We're still not moving forward. There is no strong leadership, and people don't know where to turn. The Democratic Party is so weak right now that there are no real alternatives.

"Protest is good. But it must have some place to go."

