

On Pak's Overt Coup and DC's Quiet One

The Coup at Home by Frank Rich
The New York Times
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This is a signal difference from the Vietnam era, and not necessarily for the better. During that unpopular war, disaffected Americans took to the streets and sometimes broke laws in an angry assault on American governmental institutions. The Bush years have brought an even more effective assault on those institutions from within. While the public has not erupted in riots, the executive branch has subverted the rule of law in often secretive increments. The results amount to a quiet coup, ultimately more insidious than a blatant putsch like General Musharraf's.

More Machiavellian still, Mr. Bush has constantly told the world he's championing democracy even as he strangles it. Mr. Bush repeated the word "freedom" 27 times in roughly 20 minutes at his 2005 inauguration, and even presided over a "Celebration of Freedom" concert on the Ellipse hosted by Ryan Seacrest. It was an Orwellian exercise in branding, nothing more. The sole point was to give cover to our habitual practice of cozying up to despots (especially those who control the oil spigots) and to our own government's embrace of warrantless wiretapping and torture, among other policies that invert our values.

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In the days since, the coup in Pakistan has been almost universally condemned as the climactic death knell for Bush foreign policy, the epitome of White House hypocrisy and incompetence. But that's not exactly news. It's been apparent for years that America was suicidal to go to war in Iraq, a country with no tie to 9/11 and no weapons of mass destruction, while showering billions of dollars on Pakistan, where terrorists and nuclear weapons proliferate under the protection of a con man who serves as a host to Osama bin Laden.

General Musharraf has always played our president for a fool and still does, with the vague promise of an election that he tossed the White House on Thursday. As if for sport, he has repeatedly mocked both Mr. Bush's "freedom agenda" and his post-9/11 doctrine that any country harboring terrorists will be "regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."

A memorable highlight of our special relationship with this prized "ally" came in September 2006, when the general turned up in Washington to kick off his book tour. Asked about the book by a reporter at a White House press conference, he said he was contractually "honor bound" to remain mum until it hit the stores - thus demonstrating that Simon & Schuster had more clout with him than the president. This didn't stop Mr. Bush from praising General Musharraf for his recently negotiated "truce" to prevent further Taliban inroads in northwestern Pakistan. When the Pakistani strongman "looks me in the eye" and says "there won't be a Taliban and won't be Al Qaeda," the president said, "I believe him."

Sooner than you could say "Putin," The Daily Telegraph of London reported that Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, had signed off on this "truce." Since then, the Pakistan frontier has become a more thriving terrorist haven than ever.

Now The Los Angeles Times reports that much of America's \$10 billion-plus in aid to Pakistan has gone to buy conventional weaponry more suitable for striking India than capturing terrorists. To rub it in last week, General Musharraf released 25 pro-Taliban fighters in a prisoner exchange with a tribal commander the day after he suspended the constitution.

But there's another moral to draw from the Musharraf story, and it has to do with domestic policy, not foreign. The Pakistan mess, as The New York Times editorial page aptly named it, is not just another blot on our image abroad and another instance of our mismanagement of the war on Al Qaeda and the Taliban. It also casts a harsh light on the mess we have at home in America, a stain that will not be so easily eradicated.

In the six years of compromising our principles since 9/11, our democracy has so steadily been defined down that it now can resemble the supposedly aspiring democracies we've propped up in places like Islamabad. Time has taken its toll. We've become inured to democracy-lite. That's why a Mukasey can be elevated to power with bipartisan support and we barely shrug.

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Even if Mr. Bush had the guts to condemn General Musharraf, there is no longer any moral high ground left for him to stand on. Quite the contrary. Rather than set a democratic example, our president has instead served as a model of unconstitutional behavior, eagerly emulated by his Pakistani acolyte.

Take the Musharraf assault on human-rights lawyers. Our president would not be so unsubtle as to jail them en masse. But earlier this year a senior Pentagon official, since departed, threatened America's major white-shoe law firms by implying that corporate clients should fire any firm whose partners volunteer to defend detainees in Guantánamo and elsewhere. For its part, Alberto Gonzales's Justice Department did not round up independent-minded United States attorneys and toss them in prison. It merely purged them without cause to serve Karl Rove's political agenda.

Tipping his hat in appreciation of Mr. Bush's example, General Musharraf justified his dismantling of Pakistan's Supreme Court with language mimicking the president's diatribes against activist judges. The Pakistani leader further echoed Mr. Bush by expressing a kinship with Abraham Lincoln, citing Lincoln's Civil War suspension of a prisoner's fundamental legal right to a hearing in court, habeas corpus, as a precedent for his own excesses. (That's like praising F.D.R. for setting up internment camps.) Actually, the Bush administration has outdone both Lincoln and Musharraf on this score: Last January, Mr. Gonzales testified before Congress that "there is no express grant of habeas in the Constitution."

To believe that this corruption will simply evaporate when the Bush presidency is done is to underestimate the permanent erosion inflicted over the past six years. What was once shocking and unacceptable in America has now been internalized as the new normal.

This is most apparent in the Republican presidential race, where most of the candidates seem to be running for dictator and make no apologies for it. They're falling over each other to expand Gitmo, see who can promise the most torture and abridge the largest number of constitutional rights. The front-runner, Rudy Giuliani, boasts a proven record in extralegal executive power grabs, Musharraf-style: After 9/11 he tried to mount a coup, floating the idea that he stay on as mayor in defiance of New York's term-limits law.

What makes the Democrats' Mukasey cave-in so depressing is that it shows how far even exemplary sticklers for the law like Senators Feinstein and Schumer have lowered democracy's bar. When they argued that Mr. Mukasey should be confirmed because he's not as horrifying as Mr. Gonzales or as the acting attorney general who might get the job otherwise, they sounded whipped. After all these years of Bush-Cheney torture, they'll say things they know are false just to move on.

In a Times OpEd article justifying his reluctant vote to confirm a man Dick Cheney promised would make "an outstanding attorney general," Mr. Schumer observed that waterboarding is already "illegal under current

laws and conventions. But then he vowed to support a new bill explicitly making waterboarding illegal because Mr. Mukasey pledged to enforce it. Whatever. Even if Congress were to pass such legislation, Mr. Bush would veto it, and even if the veto were by some miracle overturned, Mr. Bush would void the law with a signing statement. That's what he effectively did in 2005 when he signed a bill that its authors thought outlawed the torture of detainees.

That Mr. Schumer is willing to employ blatant Catch-22 illogic to pretend that Mr. Mukasey's pledge on waterboarding has any force shows what pathetic crumbs the Democrats will settle for after all these years of being beaten down. The judges and lawyers challenging General Musharraf have more fight left in them than this.

Last weekend a new Washington Post-ABC News poll found that the Democratic-controlled Congress and Mr. Bush are both roundly despised throughout the land, and that only 24 percent of Americans believe their country is on the right track. That's almost as low as the United States' rock-bottom approval ratings in the latest Pew surveys of Pakistan (15 percent) and Turkey (9 percent).

Wrong track is a euphemism. We are a people in clinical depression. Americans know that the ideals that once set our nation apart from the world have been vandalized, and no matter which party they belong to, they do not see a restoration anytime soon.

Frank Rich is a journalist, author, and writes a regular column for The New York Times.