
The Bush Mob Orders Up A Hit

by David Corn

"I can't believe they're doing it again, and getting away with it."

So said a Republican strategist not keen on George W. Bush, referring to the attack being waged against John Kerry. "The Bush gang did it to John McCain four years ago. They're doing it now to Kerry. They're like the mob."

Moments earlier, as delegates filed into Madison Square Garden for Night Three of the GOP convention, I encountered several Republicans who had worked on the McCain campaign in 2000 during the South Carolina primary. It was there that pro-Bush forces mounted the foulest political battle of recent years. McCain had cleaned Bush's clock in the New Hampshire primary. The South Carolina primary was do-or-die for Bush. So desperate Bush-backers did whatever it took. They spread vile rumors about McCain and his family. A Bush supporter who headed a marginal veterans group accused McCain of selling-out and abandoning veterans. "I tell people that if you weren't there you cannot believe what they did," one of the McCainiacs told me. Another said, "Never, never have I seen such a thing." A third exclaimed, "They were like the mob." See a pattern?

The McCain folks' remarks were timely, for on this evening the Bush campaign further exploited the ongoing attacks on Kerry's Vietnam record; and it did so like the mob. The campaign sent for a hit man from outside the family: Senator Zell Miller, a supposed Democrat from Georgia. Miller, who has been a functional Republican for years, picked up where the so-called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth left off. He did not repeat the discredited charges of the Swift Vets about Kerry's service in Vietnam, but Miller—ignoring McCain's Monday night call for civility and respect—further developed the Kerry-is-a-traitor theme that the Swift Vets have been promoting. The Swift Vets have claimed that when Kerry returned from Vietnam and led the charge against the

war, he betrayed his fellow GIs. Speaking with the zeal of a convert—Miller is the political equivalent of a Jew for Jesus—the faux Democrat maintained that Kerry and his fellow Democrats are destroying the country for partisan gain. In a loud and angry voice, he said:

"While young Americans are dying in the sands of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan, our nation is being torn apart and made weaker because of the Democrat's manic obsession to bring down our commander-in-chief."

Reviving the role of the Southern demagogue, Miller put forward a cartoonish depiction of Kerry and the leaders of the Democratic Party (yes, he still calls himself a Democrat for some bizarre reason: "In their warped way of thinking America is the problem, not the solution. They don't believe there is any real danger in the world except that which America brings upon itself through our clumsy and misguided foreign policy."

Kerry does not believe there is a threat from al Qaeda? Kerry does not believe "real danger" exists in the world? This was nonsense. But the GOP delegates clapped—as did the Bush family members (including Poppa Bush and Momma Bush) in the VIP box. Miller assailed Kerry for voting against various military systems: "This is the man who wants to be the commander-in-chief of our US Armed Forces? US forces armed with what? Spitballs?" He accused Kerry of not caring about the security needs of the United States: "Senator Kerry has made it clear that he would use military force only if approved by the United Nations. Kerry would let Paris decide when America needs defending."

This was an ugly performance, the Swift Vets gone nuclear. "For more than twenty years," Miller nearly shouted, "on every one of the great issues of freedom and security, John Kerry has been more wrong, more weak and more wobbly than

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any other national figure. As a war protester, Kerry blamed our military." That wasn't true either. During the famous testimony Kerry delivered to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—which has been mischaracterized by the Swift Vets—Kerry blamed the Johnson and Nixon administrations for screwing up the war and placing American GIs in an impossible situation. But truth didn't matter. Miller was carpet-bombing Kerry. Only three years ago, Miller had called Kerry "one of this nation's authentic heroes" and a "great" leader of the Democratic Party. Now he slammed Kerry as an "indecisive" man of "faint-hearted self-indulgence."

Vice President Dick Cheney spoke after Miller and was more subdued than usual. After all, the attack-dog speech had already been given. Often the vice presidential candidate is assigned the task of beating up the opponent. And Cheney has done so loyally and with enthusiasm—to the extent that he has risked becoming seen as Bush's hatchet man. But Miller's chest-thumping and mean-spirited address made Cheney look tame and reasonable. Cheney took only a few swipes at Kerry. He noted that Kerry "speaks often of his service in Vietnam, and we honor him for it." (Not really: many delegates earlier in the week were wearing purple band-aids to mock Kerry's Purple Heart medals—until bad press prompted the Bush campaign to put an end to this political theater.) But Cheney mischaracterized statements made by Kerry to suggest that the Democratic presidential nominee cannot be counted on to protect the United States: "He talks about leading a 'more sensitive war on terror,' as though al Qaeda will be impressed with our softer side. He declared at the Democratic Convention that he will forcefully defend America—after we have been attacked."

This was mild stuff compared to Miller's charge that Kerry only cared about his own political gain and not the security of the nation. Miller's libel of Kerry was

swiftly denounced by John McCain, who pronounced Kerry fit to serve. (Earlier in the day, McCain met with editors of The New York Times and told them that when he was a Vietnam POW his captors never used Kerry's congressional testimony to taunt or pressure him. This undermined yet another claim of the Swift Vets.) On Hardball, Chris Matthews pummeled Miller for suggesting Kerry was unpatriotic, and the interview exploded, with Miller threatening to duke it out with Matthews.

But Bush and his strategists had succeeded in the night's mission: blast Kerry as unfit to command. And they did so without Cheney having to take on the role of bad cop. Did Miller's over-the-top rant have any impact? Will it affect undecided voters? Whip up the base? It's unclear what — if anything — at the convention will make a difference. There are few swing voters, perhaps almost none. And Miller hardly came across as a persuasive voice of reason. (If the Democrats over the past twenty years have been bent on destroying the America he loves so much, why did he remain in the party all that time? On a related point, does Democratic Party chair Terry McAuliffe have the power to excommunicate a party member?)

With this convention, the Bush campaign has signaled it is prepared to make the presidential election a referendum on the war in Iraq. The first two nights it brought out the party's most appealing figures—McCain, Rudy Giuliani, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Laura Bush—to argue that Bush's actions in Iraq demonstrate he is a decisive leader who can and will do what is necessary to protect this nation. On the third night, the Bushies turned to a Democratic turncoat to make the case that Kerry is a threat to the United States. It was a brutal act of political warfare. No doubt, more is on the way.