

CounterPunch

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Our Little Secrets

AHOY THERE 005!

BY ALEXANDER COCKBURN

A way we go, dipping our oars into the stormy waters of 2005, no voyage for faint hearts. But, as always, the good ship CounterPunch is freighted to the bulwarks with optimism, Dr Pangloss beaming in the bows, telescope akimbo.

Consider, soon the dark clouds may roll away and we'll find the nation's affairs being guided by Dennis Hastert, speaker of the House of Representatives, or by Ted Stevens of Alaska, the current president pro tem of the US Senate and, as such, fourth in line to succeed W. Bush, as designated by Title 3, Chapter 1, Section 19 of the United States Code also known as the Presidential Succession Act. Stevens, senior congressional representative of the arms industry and notoriously choleric, is one ahead of Condoleezza Rice, two ahead of John Snow, and three ahead of the Don di tutti Donderheads, Rumsfeld.

We are not dabbling in hypotheticals here. I draw your attention to a riveting report by C.L.Hallmark, run just before Christmas by Indymedia, Houston. (houston.indymedia.org).

With file photos Hallmark demonstrates, convincingly in my view, that George W. Bush "is wearing a medical device for 'persons at risk of cardiac arrest.' It is a Life Vest wearable defibrillator. He started using it sometime after his January 2002 fainting spell, which was attributed to choking." This was the notorious pretzel incident, when said pretzel lodged in Bush's throat, thus stimulating the vagus nerve to send a signal to his heart, slowing it down and reducing blood flow so much (OLS *continued on page 2*)

Occupation on Borrowed Time

BY PATRICK COCKBURN

Baghdad.

A month before the Iraqi election and Iraqi officials still claim they have the resistance on the run and life for ordinary Iraqis is slowly getting better. Neither point is true. A better guide to the state of government morale is ministers' enthusiasm for foreign travel.

In the Iraqi press it is a standing joke that at any one time half the government is representing Iraq abroad. From the safety of Washington, London, Moscow, Geneva or Dubai ministers speak optimistically about Iraq turning the corner after the poll on January 30. On the rare occasions that they return to Baghdad they lurk in the Green Zone protected by bodyguards from western security companies.

Before Christmas I went to the Iraqi Airways office in the lobby of the Palestine Hotel to buy a ticket for the flight from Baghdad to Amman. It is the safest way out of the country because resistance fighters and bandits largely control the road across the desert to Jordan. I had to wait for my ticket because the man behind the counter was busy on the phone. I could hear him patiently explaining to some official at the Ministry of Planning that their minister could not have a first class ticket on the plane the next day because, unfortunately, the cabin was already full up with the Minister of Oil and his entourage. "We should be called ministerial airways", he said impatiently as he put down the phone.

Life in Baghdad is probably more miserable now than at any time since looters were rampaging through the streets in the weeks after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Then at least there was hope that conditions would get better. But in the last three months they have got visibly worse.

Not far from where I live in the heavily

defended al-Hamra Hotel in the Jadriyah district of south Baghdad there is a permanent line two miles long of cars and pickups waiting to get fuel at a gas station. Sometimes drivers sleep in their cars two nights in a row before they reach the head of the line which stretches over a bridge across the Tigris into Dohra, a tough largely Sunni Muslim district where the resistance periodically puts up its own roadblocks and takes control. The waiting cars gingerly skirt a crater in the middle of the bridge where a month ago the resistance tried to blow up a police patrol. It is not a very big hole but nobody has tried to fill it in.

The drivers on the bridge agree that the election is probably important but they speak of it as if it has limited relevance to their own lives. It is very cold at the moment in Baghdad and at night it is freezing. At best the electricity is on for two hours and then off for four. People try to heat their houses with kerosene heaters but kerosene is expensive and in short supply. A few months ago the most common sound in Baghdad was not gunfire, though this was frequent enough, but the put-put of \$100 generators. They produce enough electricity to power the lights and television but now they are falling silent because of the gas shortage.

The world outside Iraq focuses on the dramatic events like the US Marines' assault on Fallujah in November or the election at the end of this month. But Iraqi families are too absorbed in the daily struggle to survive to think about much else. Outside the schools in Baghdad every afternoon there are crowds of parents picking up their children because they are terrified that they will be kidnapped. The kidnapping of foreigners is heavily publicized but 99 per cent of kidnap victims are (Iraq *continued on page 6*)

(OLS continued from page 1)

he passed out, according to White House physician Col. Richard J. Tubb, M.D.

“Based on photos showing him wearing the device”, Hallmark goes on, “one can conclude the fainting was due to atrial fibrillation, which his father also had. His father’s AF was caused by Graves’ hyperthyroidism, which Barbara Bush also has. Bush Jr likely has AF and, less likely, Graves’, based on his family history and symptoms. The AF may have caused a stroke or TIA (mini-stroke), of which physicians watching the debates detected symptoms. Observers have noted psychological symptoms consistent with this and with Wernicke-Korsakoff disease. . .”

When the monitor detects a life-threatening heart arrhythmia, it sends a signal to a small module on Bush’s belt which can activate a sequence whereby the defibrillator connected to the monitor sends an electrical pulse to the large “shocking electrode” on Bush’s back between his shoulder blades (visible in outline in photos of the president in the second and third debates, and thought by some to be a W/T interface with Karl Rove) and a smaller one on the chest. The pulse can be repeated until the heart starts pumping blood effectively, up to five pulses.

Hallmark explains that “in the January 2002 pretzel-choking episode, accord-

ing to President Bush, the period of unconsciousness was brief – a few seconds. When fainting begins and ends suddenly, the cause of fainting usually is not what his doctors reported (vaso-vagal syncope) but instead is an abnormal heart rhythm such as atrial fibrillation (AF). Chronic AF is consistent with Mr. Bush’s requirement for constant monitoring and immediate access to defibrillation. Atrial fibrillation can lead to disastrous consequences if the patient is capable of sustaining a very rapid preexcited ventricular response with conduction over the accessory pathway. The rapid heart rate can produce syncope (fainting); or, more important, AF may cause ventricular fibrillation and sudden cardiac death. The LifeVest the president wears terminates ventricular fibrillation or ventricular tachycardia (overspeed) to prevent sudden cardiac death. This may be the reason the president wore the device during the debates, even though he risked exposing his vulnerability, especially if the device alarm sounded.”

President Bush’s father had the same problem. Jogging at Camp David on a Saturday afternoon (May 4, 1991), Bush Sr developed shortness of breath, chest tightness, and a general feeling of fatigue. A White House physician discovered Bush had a rapid irregular heartbeat, ultimately diagnosed as atrial fibrillation caused by Graves’ disease, a form of hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid).

Hyperthyroidism, hypertension, and other diseases can cause arrhythmias, as can recent heavy alcohol use. Some cases have no identifiable cause. The president says that he stopped drinking when he was 40 so, if he’s to be believed, booze is not an issue.

The earliest photo of President Bush wearing the LifeVest, Hallmark says, was one taken in August 2002. He probably started wearing it between the January 2002 pretzel incident and this date. The most likely time would seem to be after his June 28, 2002 colonoscopy, for which he was put under anesthesia at Camp David, MD — that is, some time in July 2002.

At any rate, the president bears watching for symptoms of AF, which include: heart palpitations (sensation of rapid heartbeat), irregular pulse, shortness of breath (especially during physical activity or emotional stress), chest pain (angina), weakness and fatigue, dizziness lightheadness, or confusion. If the condi-

tion remains untreated, serious complications may occur, including stroke, heart attack, and heart failure.

Has Bush had a stroke? Hallmark says carefully, “The evidence of a stroke or TIA (transient ischemic attack) is less strong. It is symptomatic and based observation-at-a-distance – TV appearances and news reports – but it is there.”

After watching the third presidential debate, Dr. Tongier, an anesthesiologist for 15 years, posted on the Dallas Morning News website a note about his concerns that the president may have had a stroke. His post said:

“Having watched the first two debates from start to finish, I was looking forward to listening to a spirited debate between Bush and Kerry. Unfortunately, I barely heard a word that was said. Instead, I found myself staring at and concentrating on the president’s drooping mouth.”

“As a physician and a professor, I tend to pick up on signs and symptoms of physical problems better than most other people. I am highly concerned with what I saw. The drooping left side of the President’s face, his mouth and nasolabial fold (the crease in the face running from the nostril to the side of mouth) may be indicative of a recent stroke, TIA (transient ischemic attack) or, possibly botox injections. I sincerely hope this was nothing more than botox injections. The other options are truly scary given an upcoming election for president in three weeks.

“It certainly could be something as benign as an overzealous botox injection, which causes the paralysis, which is essentially how botox works. A lot of people will get them around the nasolabial fold to decrease those lines. If it’s botox, it can be a short-term reaction after an injection. It could last for 24 hours and be gone. But I’d like to see the Bush campaign at least give an explanation.”

There was no explanation and the president delayed his annual medical examination until after the election. “The President remains in superb physical condition,” said Adam M. Robinson, Jr., commander of the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, MD, after the president’s fourth annual physical at the center on December 11. These days Bush bicycles most days and nearly brained himself last July after a tremendous toss off his custom \$3000 Trek Fuel 98 mountain bike while careening down a trail at his Crawford, TX, spread.

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