
April 15, 2007**EDITORIAL**

The Fantasy Behind the Scandal

The more we learn about the White House's purge of United States attorneys, the more a single thread runs through it: the Bush administration's campaign to transform the minor problem of voter fraud into a supposed national scourge.

When the public first learned about the firing of eight United States attorneys, administration officials piously declared that many of the prosecutors had ill served the public by failing to aggressively pursue voter fraud cases (against Democrats, naturally). But the more we examine this issue, the more ludicrous those claims seem.

Last week, we learned that the administration edited a government-ordered report on voter fraud to support its fantasy. The original version concluded that among experts "there is widespread but not unanimous agreement that there is little polling place fraud." But the publicly released version said, "There is a great deal of debate on the pervasiveness of fraud." It's hard to see that as anything but a deliberate effort to mislead the public.

Sound familiar? In President Bush's first term, a White House official, who had been the oil industry's front man in trying to discredit the science of global warming, repeatedly edited government reports to play down links between climate change and greenhouse gases. And then there was the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq, which turned reports on old, dubious and false tales about weapons of mass destruction into warnings of clear, present and supposedly mortal dangers.

It's obvious why the Bush administration would edit those documents, but why the voting report? Because charges of voter fraud are a key component of the Republican electoral strategy. If the public believes there are rampant efforts to vote fraudulently, or to register voters improperly, it increases support for measures like special voter ID's, which work against the poor, the elderly, minorities and other disenfranchised groups that tend to support Democrats. Claims of rampant voter fraud also give the administration an excuse to cut back prosecutions of the real problem: officials who block voters' access to the polls.

There is one big catch, as Eric Lipton and Ian Urbina reported in *The Times* last week. After a five-year crackdown, the Justice Department has not turned up any evidence that voter fraud actually is a problem. Only 86 people were convicted of voter fraud crimes as of last year — most of them Democrats and many on trivial, trumped-up charges.

The Bush administration was so determined to pursue this phantom scourge that it deported a legal Florida resident back to his native Pakistan for mistakenly filling out a voter registration card when he renewed his driver's license. And it may well have decided to fire most of the eight federal prosecutors because they would not play along.

It is vital that Congress get to the truth about these firings. Last week, the Republican National Committee threw up another roadblock, claiming it had lost four years' worth of e-mail messages by Karl Rove that were sent on a Republican Party account. Those messages, officials admitted, could include some about the United States attorneys. It is virtually impossible to erase e-mail messages fully, and the claims that they are gone are not credible.

The only solution is to get these issues out into the open. It is good that Attorney General Alberto Gonzales will finally testify in the Senate this week. But Mr. Rove, who seems to be at the heart of this affair, should also be required to testify under oath — and in public. Even the Wizard of Oz eventually came out from behind the curtain.

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