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Our Little Secrets

How Go the Dems ?

BY ALEXANDER COCKBURN
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Not too well, if one week in February is a reliable guide. First we had the Senate Democrats taking a dive on the nomination of Michael Chertoff as Tom Ridge's successor as director of the Department of Homeland Security. This offered a fine opportunity for Democrats to resurrect one of the big issues they had going for them in the spring of 2004, before John Kerry decided it would be in poor taste to raise the issue of torture in his campaign. Now, as then, Americans are uneasy about the use of torture as a public instrument of national policy and have awaiting decent leadership on the matter.

Kerry offered none and the press signally failed to force the issue even as a topic for the campaign debates. Chertoff's nomination offered the chance for a reprise.

In Bush's first term he was John Ashcroft's assistant attorney general, and crafted some of the legal justifications for the detention, interrogation and ultimately torture of suspected terrorists placed in the legal limbo of "enemy combatant" status.

If indifferent to the matter of torture, some Senate Democrats might have wanted to give Chertoff a hard time out of the pure spirit of revenge. Chertoff was chief counsel to Al d'Amato's special Whitewater Committee and hence a prime engineer of the prolonged, incredibly costly and ultimately null probe into the Whitewater affair. Surely Senator Hillary Clinton of New York would have wanted to give Chertoff at least fif-

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Innocent Lads, Depraved Killers, Predatory Priests

Pittman and Shanley as Demons

BY JOANN WYPIJEWSKI

If Christopher Pittman had had sex with a man at the age of 12, however willfully and however young the man — 14 is the age of consent for boys in South Carolina, his state of residence — he would be, in the eyes of law and society, a victim, a child, incapable of reasoned decision-making. As it is, he killed his grandparents, and so when he waived his rights to an attorney, when he confessed and a judge in Charleston decided to try him in criminal court, he became an adult. On February 16 he was convicted, sentenced to 30 years in prison. At 12 his was "a dark heart, an evil heart", prosecutor Barney Giese had told the jury.

When Pittman, then 5 foot 2 and 90 pounds, told police, after the murder on November 28, 2001, that his grandfather beat him with a paddle, that he was living with Joe and Joy Pittman because of a destructive relationship with his father, who had given him the .410-gauge shotgun used in the murder, the occasion did not prompt a national conversation about violence and children, or about the justice of allowing kids to waive their civil liberties.

When it came out that this white child, found wandering in the woods after killing the grandparents, igniting their house and stealing their SUV, had originally invented a 6 foot 2 black man whom he said committed the murder and abducted him, no news teams probed the means by which white children learn racist thinking and then rely on it reflexively.

When it came out that Pittman had once tried to hurt himself, had been in a

psychiatric center, that he was diagnosed with depression, prescribed first Paxil then Zoloft, was agitated and fighting with classmates, the case was bound to become part of the debate about antidepressants and their effects. But those facts were not enough to keep the case in family court (where he's now being tried separately for arson), or to challenge the social acceptance of widespread psychiatric medication of children.

Those circumstances of Christopher Pittman's life and crime, like his self-loathing — "I'm useless" he told a deputy sheriff at 12 — were too common for scandal. Besides, at the time the murder occurred and as details of the events seeped out, America was becoming engrossed in a certified scandal, built around the alleged victimization of certified children.

As it happens, the final act of that scandal, the priest/sexual abuse scandal that riveted the press, was playing itself out in a courtroom in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the same time as young Pittman, now 15, was quietly sniveling at the defense table in Charleston. The coincidence ought to provoke consideration of America's hypocrisy toward children, and of the distracting, damaging effect of media sex panics.

Paul Shanley, previously Father Shanley, was formally convicted of child rape and abuse on February 7. He had been convicted in the press long before, beginning in early 2002, when he was made the marquee monster in the scandal, prior to any charges being brought.

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 ten minutes of discomfort?

It was not to be. The Senate Democrats gave Chertoff a cordial welcome, with the only probing questions asked by Senator Carl Levin in Michigan, and even Levin threw them into the ring in an off-hand manner, as if to undercut any appearance of partisan intent. When the vote went to the Senate floor, it was 98 Ayes for Mr Chertoff, none opposed.

In the same week came the Administration's request for a supplemental appropriation of \$82 billion for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Here surely was a peg on which to hang some pointed criticisms of a war which in its current phase sees all major roads into Baghdad held by the insurgents, though we could forgive the Senate Democrats and their staffs for not knowing this, since the CounterPunch website has been virtually alone in reporting this telling fact. (See Patrick Cockburn's story from Baghdad, www.counterpunch.org/patrick02122005.html)

No sooner had the request landed on the floor of the senate than none other than John Kerry sprang from his seat to announce that he was eager to vote for the money. This brings his career flips flops on war funding closer to double digits. Kerry is not alone. Many of his senate colleagues have indicated they also sup-

port the request, thus confirming our suspicions during the campaign that, for many Democrats, opposition to the war ended with the presidential campaign.

A few days later Kerry went further, calling on Bush to increase the size of the military by 40,000. Kerry apparently still entertains hopes of capturing the nomination again in 2008 and will be pounding the war drums for years to come. After the Iraqi elections of January 31 Ted Kennedy very creditably said that Bush should take the occasion as the signal to start withdrawing US troops. Kerry and Joe Biden both raced onto the Sunday shows to denounce Kennedy and any talk of the troops coming home.

Even when it comes to Social Security the Democrats can't hold a decent line for long. In fact it looks as though Bush might crash on this one mostly because the Republicans in Congress don't want privatization hung round their necks in the 2006 campaigns. Bush, desperate to get somewhere on his prime domestic issue, said in mid-February that he is ready to consider a progressive FICA tax on incomes over \$90,000. At present everyone, no matter with what income, pays the same tax rate, which is how FDR managed to sell the program in the 1930s, but liberals have long denounced the cap as regressive, which of course it is.

As the Economic Policy Institute recently outlined, if the FICA tax rate was to be increased by a mere one per cent on incomes over \$90,000 the projected Social Security shortfall over the next 75 years would be entirely eliminated. In his lust for private accounts Bush has opened the door to protecting Social Security over the long, long term, by increasing taxes on the rich. What did the Democrats do? They sent out Donna Brazile to denounce the plan and to accuse Bush of being a hypocrite for breaking his pledge not to raise taxes. (Fans of bipartisanship should note that Bay Buchanan and Ms Brazile disclosed on Judy Woodruff's CNN program that they had talked about Bush's plan in the green room, had agreed that it would cut into their own \$100,000-plus incomes and by golly, they were against it.)

The Democrats may shirk the grim task of taxing the rich, but would they not rush to protect the trial lawyers, the last reliable source of large donations to the Democratic Party? They would not. In the third week of February, many Democrats

in the House okayed a Republican bill to transfer large class action suits from state to federal courts. It's the state courts with real juries that have awarded the big settlements against the tobacco and asbestos companies. Federal judges have consistently cut back the big awards. Transfer of the suits would be a huge victory for the business lobby.

Just to stick it to the trial lawyers, the bill limits the compensation for plaintiffs' attorneys in certain kinds of settlements. Earlier in February the Senate passed the same bill, 72 to 26. Among Democrats voting for a bill written by the Chamber of Commerce and National Association of Manufacturers were such supposed bright hopes as Obama of Illinois, Salazar of Colorado, Bayh of Indiana, along with possible aspirants for the 2008 nomination as Dodd of Connecticut. This is only the first of three bills designed to crush any possible consumer/trial lawyer resistance.

Symbolic of the inability of the Democrats to exhibit any sort of sinew was their whines of "unfair" when the Republicans attacked Democratic senate minority leader Harry Reid of Nevada. The Republicans sent out a 13-page letter going through Reid's voting record and also noting that he lives in a high-price condo. Forth hastened Democrats Schumer and Durbin to complain that this persecution of their colleague amounted to "a knee-capping" (this was Schumer's contribution) and to "Abu Ghraib", Durbin's deft parallel.

PLANTED QUESTIONS AT WHITE HOUSE BRIEFINGS? WE'RE SHOCKED!

Liberal columnists are quivering with delighted outrage at the discovery that the White House press office had okayed a ringer to toss softball questions at Bush in White House press conferences. Better still the ringer turned out to be working under an alias, spending other portions of his working 24/4 as an escort, with web photos and the word militarystud in his email address.

After spending three decades watching the mostly sheep-like press corps toss marshmallows at one president after another we find it hard to do much more than cheer on "Jeff Gannon" as the logical consequence of years of subservience. Our cynicism is buttressed by the particularly

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