

Presidential elections are important

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

For anyone still wondering how Washington works, Michael Mukasey's upcoming confirmation as attorney general just about tells it all. Facing a crisis of mismanagement in the Justice Department, most senators would have favored an assertive, straightforward successor to the ineffable Alberto Gonzales. Instead, they're confirming a capable and happily noncontroversial lawyer-judge a year past what many Americans see as "retirement age."

They're doing this mainly because the president wants him. Not only wants him, but served notice that if the collective judgment of senators from the 50 states was to reject Michael Mukasey, then our most important Cabinet post of the moment would remain vacant until late January in the year 2009. George W. Bush would simply refuse to name anyone else.

So there.

It's his prerogative as president. And it tells us that the 14 months or so that lie ahead should give us Americans a practical lesson in constitutional law. Our problem of the moment, you see, can be dealt with only on Election Day.

In their horror of George III's monarchical excesses, our Founding Fathers might have been expected to impose tougher restrictions than they did on future presidents. Although denying him a crown, however, they armed the chief executive with many of the tools with which to frustrate the popular will, even in a democracy.

So let's get serious. However lightly the media may regard some leading candidates for the top job, the election of November 2008 - like many before it - looms as a real day of reckoning.

The damage of wrong electoral judgments can extend far beyond the four- or eight-year limits of a presidential choice. Many of us, I feel certain, feel slightly sick that most of the world has concluded that our country condones torture. Yet even our new attorney general could only haggle over the practice of "waterboarding." He seemed to reflect a presidential mindset that embraces presidential authority as the right of kings.

"America does not torture," Bush utters with the regularity of a cuckoo clock. It's as if presidential repetition gives such words a validity matching the Rosetta Stone. But as for waterboarding (the present-day term for a torture dating from the Spanish Inquisition and used more recently by Japanese captors against U.S. prisoners in World War II), what do we hear from someone soon to become our top lawman?

His words sounded more like those of a henpecked husband than the convictions of a man bent on establishing authority in a sadly neglected department of government. If waterboarding is torture, then it would be unconstitutional, he said - but lacking the expertise of those who have managed these things lately, he really couldn't make a judgment.

And the trouble is that no matter what our leaders may now do or say, a stretch of presidential authority has left the impression that America is not above torture - not when we couch it in verbiage like "enhanced interrogation methods."

To quote Dan Rowan of TV's "Laugh In" - try that on your Funk & Wagnalls.

From the first day of his presidency, when Bush reneged on a firm campaign promise to cut carbon dioxide emissions as an example to the entire industrial world, it was clear this man would push for every constitutional advantage a president can muster. Because his early White House years blessed him with a Republican Congress, he never once found it necessary to use the veto pen.

Bush's view of conservative leadership was to be felt in countless ways. Precious time was lost in the fight against global warming. He perpetuated a system that denies family planning advice to every overpopulated Third World country drawing U.S. assistance. When signing bills into law, he appended handwritten provisos as few previous presidents have done, often warning he had no intent to enforce the law as enacted. Parts of reports on matters like stem cell research, though prepared by competent scientists, were freely expurgated to fit administration doctrine. Availing himself of the ultimate presidential power, Bush set aside a stiff prison sentence one of his own "tough" judicial appointees imposed against a top administration official.

As with several presidents before him, Congress allowed Bush to attack Iraq without a declaration of war - this on the utterly false grounds that Iraq and the terrorist outrage of Sept. 11, 2001, somehow were linked. The costly operation that ensued has been such a dud that we're now paying officers bonuses up to \$40,000 just to re-enlist.

Oh yes, presidential elections are important.

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