

WILD CARDS

By Michael Ventura

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Wild Card No. 1: The Joker. In an op-ed piece for USA Today, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld wrote that "when he assumed office President Bush announced that he wanted the Defense Department to transform. ... We are in a new century, and we have to make sure that we are organized and equipped for this new century" (Dec. 21, 2004, p.13). A year later, an element of this transformation was revealed in one of the most important, yet least reported, changes in U.S. military protocol. The Associated Press (on AOL News, Dec. 29, 2005): "In a Bush administration revision of plans for Pentagon succession in a doomsday scenario, three of Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's most loyal advisers moved ahead of the secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force." This was accomplished by "a little-noticed holiday week executive order from President Bush ... [moving] to near the top three under-secretaries who are Rumsfeld loyalists and who previously worked for Vice President Dick Cheney."

Doomsday scenario, indeed. Should worse come to worse, the shots will be called, not by experienced strategists, but by Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld "loyalists," specialists in ignoring reality – the same breed of ideological fanatics who've blundered into the tragic quagmire that is today's Iraq. Of course, the authority to give orders does not translate into power unless those orders are obeyed. In a doomsday situation, pragmatic officers might refuse crazy orders. This is perhaps the reason that the Air Force – the armed service that can do the most damage with the fewest personnel – is being systematically staffed with evangelical Christians.

The Week (May 6, 2005, p.18): "Born again Christians have become so aggressive in proselytizing at the U.S. Air Force Academy that 55 cadets have filed formal harassment complaints. In response, the academy has begun a course called 'Respecting the Spiritual Values of All People,' though some evangelical cadets are questioning the need to take it ... [saying,] 'We are in the majority, why do we have to do this?'" On June 3, 2005, The Week (p.16) summarized a Los Angeles Times report that the academy "has essentially established evangelical Christianity as its official religion." The academy's head chaplain preaches that "those not 'born again' will burn in the fires of hell. ... Younger cadets who skip the prayer services have been hunted down by seniors, who call them 'heathens.' Even the football coach has joined in, putting up a banner in the locker room urging his players to join 'Team Jesus Christ.' ... A team of visiting chaplains from Yale Divinity School found a shocking level of religious intolerance on campus."

USA Today (June 22, 2005, p.3): "An Air Force Academy chaplain who criticized a 'pervasive evangelical bias' on campus among born-again Christian commanders, chaplains, and cadets submitted her resignation from the Air Force. ... Capt. Melinda Morton, a Lutheran minister ... [said] she has had 'no indication that either the academy or the Air Force is going to take the very difficult and necessary steps to bring the academy back' from unconstitutional mixing of religion and state."

This caused a stir. Academy commander Lt. Gen. John Rosa said, "I know I have problems in my cadet wing. I have issues in my staff, I have issues in my faculty." (The Week, July 1, 2005, p.7) A "task force" proposed reforms, emphasizing the necessity to respect all religious beliefs. The stir died down. But recently a one-paragraph item appeared in The New York Times (Feb. 10, p.17): "Air Force Revises Religion Rules – The Air Force released new guidelines for religious expression, dropping a requirement for chaplains to respect others' rights to their own beliefs and no longer cautioning top officers about promoting their personal religious views." (I had to read that twice. It was difficult to believe the first time.) USA Today (March 10, sorry, I forgot to note the page number) reported that Air Force recruiters "use religion as [a] tool." Several Air Force personnel filed suit alleging "illegal proselytizing by evangelical Christian chaplains, officers and cadets at the Air Force Academy and throughout the service." [My italics.] Master Sgt. Phillip Burleigh, an Air Force Reserve recruiter and 24-year veteran, said he "has been subjected to regular and persistent proselytizing by his superior officers against his will." Burleigh says recruiters are told "they need to accept Jesus Christ in order to perform their job duties" and "to use faith in Jesus Christ while recruiting."

An Air Force Academy graduate called this state of affairs "absolutely horrifying," which sounds to me like no exaggeration. An individual's personal faith is his right and is usually no more or less harmful than other aspects of his individuality. But to instill extreme, intolerant, and (often) apocalyptic beliefs into an entire branch of the military – especially the Air Force, with all its bombs, nuclear and otherwise – is definitely, in Rumsfeld's words, a "transformation." What could be more dangerous than fanatics in command of fanatics? What will be their feeling toward Muslims, these pilots indoctrinated by the Air Force Academy's head chaplain to believe that "those not 'born again' will burn in the fires of hell"? (For that matter, how will those pilots feel about San Francisco or New York? About Catholics? Jews?) With just a few carefully selected squadrons, it would be easy to unleash hellfire. "Absolutely horrifying" fits the case.

We can be certain that Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld have indoctrinated the Air Force and restructured the "doomsday" chain of command for a purpose. What that purpose might be, we can only imagine – since neither Congress nor the national press are asking.

Wild Card No. 2: Jack of Spades. "The Army just awarded Halliburton a \$385 million contract to build detention centers for the Department of Homeland Security" (The New York Times, Feb. 4, p.13). Who is to be detained and why, under what laws, and why does Homeland Security need its own prisons? Homeland Security isn't part of the military, so why is the money coming from the Army – that is, from Rumsfeld's Pentagon to Cheney's Halliburton? Perhaps because an Army purchase needn't be specifically approved by Congress, thus there's no public debate? Depend upon it: Folks who are now not "detained" are about to be. Yet this is another nonissue for our elected representatives and the national press.

Wild Card No. 3: Ace of Hearts. Latinos are on the march – hypocritically criticized for taking pride in their heritage by fourth-generation Americans who still brag of Irish or Italian roots. Be that as it may, history teaches one truth over and over: If enough people

take to the streets for a cause, and if they stay in the streets and see it through, sooner or later they get what they want. Especially (in the West) if they are well-organized and peaceful. No one on any side of the immigration question anticipated the massive, energetic, well-organized Latino demonstrations all across this country. Now Latino-American citizens finally have an issue – and apparently an organization – that can draw them to the polls in numbers representing their actual presence in our society. And if that happens, everything may change.

The facts: "Nearly 23% of all people born in the U.S. in 2002 had a foreign-born mother" (The Week, July 22, 2005, p.18). That's a quarter of the newborn population – which signals enormous change not far down the road, no matter what happens now. But for the present: California, New Mexico, and Texas have non-Anglo (mostly Latino) majorities, while Maryland, Mississippi, Georgia, New York, and Arizona are 40% non-Anglo (The Week, August 26, 2005, p.16). If the immigration issue galvanizes Latino citizens to register and vote, they won't vote Republican; in that case, previous midterm election calculations in states like Florida and Texas will be obsolete. If (a big if) Latino organizers can find common ground with other non-Anglos, Democratic prospects across the country get even better. And if (a wild if) this movement sticks to its ideals, it just might force key Democratic politicians to remember their constituents' ideals. I'm no optimist – and no pessimist – but it's clear that this Latino-organized movement has the potential to create the most transformative change in American politics since 9/11.

In an irony typical of our era, immigrants may supply the galvanizing issue that wrests our government from the fanatical right and returns America to the charge and care of common Americans.

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