

Bush Is 'Unfit' to Lead U.S., Kerry Charges

By David M. Halbfinger and Michael Janofsky
The New York Times

Friday 03 September 2004

Springfield, Ohio - Roaring back at his Republican rivals, Senator John Kerry called President Bush "unfit to lead this country" for "misleading" America into war in Iraq and said Mr. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney avoided fighting in the Vietnam War.

"For the past week, they have attacked my patriotism and even my fitness to serve as commander in chief," Mr. Kerry told thousands here at a midnight rally shortly after Mr. Bush accepted the Republican nomination for a second term and questioned Mr. Kerry's support for combat troops in Iraq.

"Well, here is my answer to them," Mr. Kerry said to cheers. "I will not have my commitment to defend this country questioned by those who refused to serve when they could've and who misled America into Iraq."

The Kerry campaign scheduled the event days ago in an effort to reclaim the initiative in the race without letting a single news cycle pass. Mr. Kerry spoke a mere half-hour after the president had ended his acceptance speech, and Kerry aides issued his prepared text even before Mr. Bush spoke.

Mr. Cheney capped a weeklong assault on Mr. Kerry's character and national-security credentials at the Republican convention on Wednesday, saying that he honored Mr. Kerry's service in Vietnam but that the senator's 20-year voting record on foreign policy and military issues made him unfit to be president.

Mr. Bush, for his part, depicted Mr. Kerry on Thursday as a tax-raising big-spending social liberal who had defended his vote against an Iraq appropriations bill by saying the question was complicated.

"There is nothing complicated about supporting our troops in combat," Mr. Bush said.

Mr. Kerry, criticizing "the anger and the distortion" of the Republican convention, hit back in his toughest appraisal yet of the incumbents' qualifications.

"The vice president called me unfit for office last night," Mr. Kerry said. "Well, I'm going to leave it up to the voters to decide whether five deferments make someone more qualified than two tours of duty."

Mr. Cheney received five deferments and did not serve in the military. Mr. Bush was in the Texas Air National Guard and did not serve overseas.

Mr. Kerry was even harsher in attacking what he called Mr. Bush's "record of failure" as president.

"Let me tell you in no uncertain terms what makes someone unfit for office and unfit for duty," Mr. Kerry said, turning to Mr. Bush. "Misleading our nation into war in Iraq makes you unfit to lead our country. Doing nothing while this nation loses millions of jobs makes you unfit to lead this country. Letting 45 million Americans go without health care for four years makes you unfit to lead this country.

"Letting the Saudi royal family control the price of oil for Americans makes you unfit to lead this country. Handing out billions of dollars in government contracts without a bid to Halliburton while you're still on the payroll makes you unfit lead this country.

"That, my friends, is the record of George Bush and Dick Cheney - and that only begins to scratch the surface."

A Bush campaign spokesman, Steve Schmidt, called the remarks "another example of John Kerry's trying to divide America over the past."

"The contrast between the president's hopeful, optimistic vision for the future that is laid out in his acceptance speech versus John Kerry's politics of anger and pessimism will be totally clear to the American people," Mr. Schmidt said.

Mr. Kerry and his running mate, Senator John Edwards, rendezvoused here outside a history museum before they and their wives fanned out on bus trips across the crucial states of Ohio, Iowa, Wisconsin and Michigan.

Mr. Edwards, introducing Mr. Kerry, called the attacks on him amazing. "They'll say just about anything, won't they?" Mr. Edwards asked. "He wasn't wounded quite often enough, is that it?"

Reminding the crowd of Mr. Bush's acceptance speech in 2000, Mr. Edwards recalled how Mr. Bush had "over and over" said: " 'They have not led. We will.'

"Well, let me ask you, have they led us to more jobs? Have they led us to better health care for our people? Have they led us to cleaner air, cleaner water? Have they led us to better schools and education for our kids?

"Here's the truth. They led us from the edge of greatness to the edge of a cliff. And it's time to lead them out of town."

He scoffed at Mr. Bush's repeated references to his "next term" in his speech on Thursday, as the crowd signaled its scorn. "They seem to have forgotten they already had a term."

He listed what he called the administration's failures, five million Americans who have lost health coverage, four million who have fallen into poverty, nearly two million who have lost private-sector jobs and soaring costs for health insurance, college tuition and fuel.

Earlier on Thursday, Mr. Edwards had said Mr. Kerry's rivals were attacking him because they had achieved so little worth celebrating.

"I can understand why the vice president spent so much of his time talking about John Kerry," Mr. Edwards said at a rally in Norristown, Pa. "It's because he doesn't want to talk about what they did the last four years."

Later, at a community recreation center, Mr. Edwards implored his audience to recall the less strident tone that the Democrats projected at their convention in July- give or take an Al Sharpton - and to compare it with what they saw on Wednesday.

When Mr. Edwards invited audience members to ask questions, one man suggested that the Democrats were campaigning too timidly, a criticism that many Democrats around the country are beginning to raise.

"You're up against the dirtiest fighters in the world," the man said. "If they hit you, you've got to hit back twice. How are you going to handle it the next two months?"

"There's a difference between how you fight and who you're fighting for," Mr. Edwards said, choosing his words carefully. "It's one thing to engage in a lot of personal assaults, like some of the things we saw last night. It's another thing to fight with everything you've got for the American people and the people you believe in."

Text Of Speech:

A New Course For America

Remarks of John Kerry

Friday 03 September 2004

Springfield, OH - The election comes down to this. If you believe this country is heading in the right direction, you should support George Bush. But if you believe America needs to move in a new direction, join with us. John and I offer a better plan that will make us stronger at home and more respected in the world. We offer responsible leadership and with your help, we're going to bring that leadership to the Washington!

For four days in New York, instead of talking about real plans for creating jobs, strengthening the economy, expanding health care, and bringing down gas prices, we heard almost nothing but anger and insults from the Republicans. And I'll tell you why. It's because they can't talk about the real issues facing Americans. They can't talk about their record because it's a record of failure.

Tonight, President Bush got up and told us that he's got a plan for the economy. That's exactly what he said four years ago. But with the largest deficit in American history, I don't think we can afford four more years of this president's plans. That's because for four years, this president has taken us in the wrong direction.

But the plans he offered tonight are just more of the same policies that are failing at home and in Iraq now. And we know he won't change them. In fact, the President is quite proud of the fact that not even failure will force him to change course.

You all saw the anger and distortion of the Republican Convention. For the past week, they attacked my patriotism and my fitness to serve as Commander-in-chief. We'll, here's my answer. I will not have my commitment to defend this country questioned by those who refused to serve when they could have and by those who have misled the nation into Iraq.

The Vice President called me unfit for office last night. Well, I'll leave it up to the voters to decide whether five deferments makes someone more qualified to defend this nation than two tours of duty.

Let me tell you what I think makes someone unfit for duty. Misleading our nation into war in Iraq makes you unfit to lead this nation. Doing nothing while this nation loses millions of jobs makes you unfit to lead this nation. Letting 45 million Americans go without healthcare makes you unfit to lead this nation. Letting the Saudi Royal Family control our energy costs makes you unfit. Handing out billions of government contracts to Halliburton while you're still on their payroll makes you unfit. That's the record of George Bush and Dick Cheney. And that only scratches the surface. I believe it's time to move America in a new direction; I believe it's time to set a new course for America. And together, you, John Edwards and I will do that on November 2nd.

For four years, George Bush has stubbornly misled America and taken us in the wrong direction.

He's misled America's workers - he told them his economic plan would create 6 million jobs. The truth is we've lost nearly 1.8 million since George Bush took office. He said his plan would create 266,000 jobs in Ohio. Instead Ohio has lost 230,000 jobs since he took office - 112,000 jobs since the recession ended in November of 2001. Earlier this week, his Labor Secretary even said outsourcing was good for America. I don't believe that. John and I have a plan that will put an end to tax breaks for companies that ship jobs overseas and reward companies who create and keep jobs here in America. And we have a plan that will give tax credits to employers who create new jobs - and we'll eliminate capital gains taxes for those who make long-term investments in their small businesses. We'll also help small businesses meet the rising costs of health care - costs that keep so many of them from hiring and expanding.

For four years, George Bush has misled America's families - saying he had a health care plan for America. The truth is he's done nothing as 5 million more Americans have lost their health care, bringing the total number to 45 million people without coverage nationwide. In Ohio, 114,000 people have lost their health coverage since bush took office, bringing the total number of Ohioans without coverage to 1.4 million.

John and I have a plan to make quality health care affordable for all. Because we believe that your health care is as important as any politician's in Washington, DC.

When it comes to getting gas prices under control, George Bush has misled America. America is more dependent than ever on Mid-East oil. John and I have a plan to make America energy independent by investing in new technologies and alternative fuels. John and I believe we need to rely on American ingenuity and brainpower to ensure our country's freedom and independence, not on the Royal Saudi family.

Worst of all, George Bush misled America when he took us to war in Iraq. The truth is, when it comes to Iraq, it's not that I would have done one thing differently; I would've done almost everything differently. I believe it's time we had a president who told the American people the truth.

We need to take America in a new direction. And we have a specific plan to do just that. So tomorrow morning, John and Elizabeth and Teresa and I are hitting the road on a bus tour across America's heartland. From here, we'll go out and talk with Americans in towns across Ohio, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Michigan. And because a stronger America begins at home, we'll talk about our plan to create jobs, cut taxes for the middle class, lower health care costs, and make America safer and more secure.

I believe we can be stronger at home - we can create jobs again, get health care costs under control, and make ourselves independent of Mid-East oil - but George Bush's policies won't get us there. And I believe we can be more respected in the world - but it won't happen with George Bush's arrogant, go-it-alone foreign policy.

