

G.O.P. to W.: You're Nuts!

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It's enough to make you nostalgic for those gnarly union stevedores in "On the Waterfront," the ones who hung up rats on hooks and took away Marlon Brando's chance to be a contend-ah.

Maybe it's corporate racial profiling, but I don't want foreign companies, particularly ones with links to 9/11, running American ports.

What kind of empire are we if we have to outsource our coastline to a group of sheiks who don't recognize Israel, in a country where money was laundered for the 9/11 attacks? And that let A. Q. Kahn, the Pakistani nuclear scientist, smuggle nuclear components through its port to Libya, North Korea and Iran?

It's mind-boggling that President Bush ever agreed to let an alliance of seven emirs be in charge of six of our ports. Although, as usual, Incurious George didn't even know about it until after the fact. (Neither did Rummy, even though he heads one of the agencies that green-lighted the deal.)

Same old pattern: a stupid and counterproductive national security decision is made in secret, blowing off checks and balances, and the president's out of the loop.

Was W. too busy not calling Dick Cheney to find out why he shot a guy to not be involved in a critical decision about U.S. security? What is he waiting for — a presidential daily brief warning, "Bin Laden Determined to Attack U.S. Ports?"

Our ports are already nearly naked in terms of security. Only about 5 percent of the containers coming into the country are checked. And when the White House assures us that the Homeland Security Department will oversee security at the ports, is that supposed to make us sleep better? Not after the chuckleheaded Chertoff-and-Brownie show on Capitol Hill.

"Our borders are wide open," said Jan Gadiel of 9/11 Families for a Secure America. "We don't know who's in our country right now, not a clue. And now they're giving away our ports." The "trust us" routine of W. and Dick Cheney is threadbare.

The more W. warned that he would veto legislation stopping this deal, the more lawmakers held press conferences to oppose it — even conservatives who had loyally supported W. on Iraq, the Patriot Act, torture and warrantless snooping.

Mr. Bush is hoist on his own petard. For four years, the White House has accused anyone in Congress or the press who defended civil liberties or questioned anything about the Iraq war of being soft on terrorism. Now, as Congress and the press turn that accusation back on the White House, Mr. Bush acts mystified by the orgy of xenophobia.

Lawmakers, many up for re-election, have learned well from Karl Rove. Playing the terror card works.

A bristly Bush said yesterday that scotching the deal would send "a terrible signal" to a worthy ally. He equated the "Great British" with the U.A.E. Well, maybe Britain in the 12th century.

Besides, the American people can be forgiven if they're confused about what it means in the Arab world to be a U.S. ally. Is it a nation that helps us sometimes but also addicts us to oil and then jacks up the price, refuses to recognize Israel, denies women basic rights, tolerates radical anti-American clerics, looks the other way when its citizens burn down embassies and consulates over cartoons, and often turns a blind eye when it comes to hunting down terrorists in its midst?

In our past wars, America had specific countries to demonize. But now in the "global war on terror" — GWOT, as they call it — the enemy is a faceless commodity that the administration uses whenever it wants to win a political battle. When something like this happens, it's no wonder the public does its own face transplant.

One of the real problems here is that this administration has run up such huge trade and tax-cut-and-spend budget deficits that we're in hock to the Arabs and the Chinese to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars. If they just converted their bonds into cash, they would own our ports and not have to merely rent them.

Just because the wealthy foreigners who own our debt can blackmail us with their economic leverage, does that mean we should expose our security assets to them as well?

As part of the lunatic White House defense, Dan Bartlett argued that "people are trying to drive wedges and make this to be a political issue." But as the New Republic editor Peter Beinart pointed out in a recent column, W. has made the war on terror "one vast wedge issue" to divide the country.

Now, however, the president has pulled us together. We all pretty much agree: mitts off our ports.