

Senate Defeat of Coup d'État Leaves Bush a Lame Duck

by Debra Hanania-Freeman

Late in the day on May 23, in a series of events that few Americans yet understand, George W. Bush was rendered a lame duck President, just four months into his second term, as a move led by Vice President Dick Cheney to carry out a cold coup, by destroying the functioning of the U.S. Senate, was dealt a dramatic and stinging defeat.

There were only hours to go before there was a forced vote on an illegal change in Senate rules orchestrated by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and Vice President Dick Cheney (in his rarely occupied seat as the President of the Senate), whose purpose was to overturn the U.S. Constitution, by breaking the Senate's unique power to impose checks and balances against an out-of-control Presidency. But a bipartisan group of 14 Senators—7 Democrats and 7 Republicans—led by Senate veterans Robert Byrd (D-W.V.) and John Warner (R-Va.), announced that they had reached an agreement that would prevent Cheney and Frist from carrying out their unconstitutional “nuclear option.” Two additional members of the Senate, Daniel Innoye (D-Hi.) and Lincoln Chaffee (R-R.I.), were not present at the press conference, but were signatories to the negotiated agreement. (See *Documentation* for the text of the press conference and the full agreement.)

As an essential part of the agreement, the Republican signers pledged to block any effort by Cheney and Frist to eliminate the filibuster for judicial nominees through an illegal change in Senate rules. Also under the agreement, the seven Democrats pledged to vote to allow three of Bush's judicial nominees to receive up-or-down votes on the Senate floor, but with no guarantee that they would be approved. They further agreed that the filibuster would only be invoked under extraordinary circumstances.

Senator Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) was clearly pleased with the agreement. Appearing almost immediately after the agreement was made public, a jubilant Reid, joined by Senators Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), Richard Durbin (D-Ill.), and Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), declared: “Tonight the Senate has worked



*LaRouche Youth Movement
"Day of Action" in
Washington, D.C. on May 23,
the day of the historic
agreement to avert the
"nuclear option" in the U.S.
Senate.*

its will on behalf of reason and on behalf of responsibility. We have sent President George Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and the radical arm of the Republican base an undeniable message: Abuse of power will not be tolerated, will not be tolerated by Democrats or Republicans. And your attempt—I say to the Vice President and to the President—to trample the Constitution and grab absolute control is over.”

That Reid was pleased came as no surprise. The final agreement was, in substance, identical to a compromise that he had proposed to Frist two weeks earlier. At the time, Frist had agreed to the measure, and an announcement was scheduled for the following day. But that announcement was short-circuited when Frist was called to the White House and told by Cheney and Bush’s political guru, Karl Rove, that there would be no deal, and that the nuclear option showdown was to be put on a fast track.

Bill Frist clearly did not share Reid’s enthusiasm for the accord reached by the 14 Senators. Following the announcement, a grim Frist delivered a terse statement to the press, in which he expressed his disappointment over the measure. He claimed that the only good news was that the agreement had “disarmed the filibuster.” The statement was patently untrue. Nowhere in the agreement had anyone—neither Republican nor Democrat—relinquished the right of filibuster. Frist went on to state, rather arrogantly, that he would monitor the agreement very carefully in the months to come. But the simple fact is that Frist can monitor to his heart’s content. He was not party to the agreement and, in fact, the agreement was

negotiated and signed in distinct opposition not only to his expressed desire to ram through the measure, but to his role as Majority Leader.

LaRouche: A Victory for the Nation

Lyndon LaRouche welcomed the agreement, citing the very same words that Robert Byrd had used in announcing it. Senator Byrd had commented, “Well, I remember Benjamin Franklin, the oldest of the group that signed the Constitution of the United States. He was approached by a lady who said, ‘Dr. Franklin, what have you given us?’ And Dr. Franklin replied, ‘A republic, madam, if you can keep it.’ We *have* kept it.”

LaRouche added that the agreement constituted a major strategic defeat for the Administration and an unambiguous strategic victory for the nation, in that a bipartisan group within the Senate directly challenged Bush and Cheney on a fundamental issue of how the Senate would function, especially at a critical moment when the incumbent occupant of the White House is insane, and when there are urgent matters of war and peace, as well as economic life and death, that are on the table for urgent discussion. In the same spirit, LaRouche added that “this was a shot that will be heard around the world.”

It is important to note that the agreement came in an environment shaped by an ongoing mobilization by LaRouche’s political movement in the United States. From the very beginning of this Administration, indeed since January 2001,

LaRouche has repeatedly warned that, under conditions of intensifying financial and economic crisis, we would see this Administration move increasingly toward dictatorial, emergency rule.

When the fuse for the Cheney-Frist nuclear option was lit on May 18, as Frist brought the nominations of two controversial Bush judicial nominees to the Senate floor, LaRouche advised the Democrats that, if Dick Cheney tried to ram through a Senate rule change to cut off a filibuster—something that Cheney repeatedly said he intended to do—that their only choice was to shut down the Senate. “Cheney is out of order if he doesn’t have the 67 votes required to change the Senate rules,” LaRouche said. “That’s the end of the procedure. Shut down the Senate at that point.”

LaRouche was emphatic that any effort to change Senate rules without the required votes was nothing less than a coup d’état. “They will have violated the Constitution, and you cannot continue business in the Senate as long as they’re doing that,” he said. Several days later, LaRouche issued a statement, “Save Our U.S. Constitution Now” (reprinted below) that was mass distributed in and around the nation’s capital, as well as throughout the country.

LaRouche’s sentiments were reflected throughout the Senate debate (see *Documentation*). In his opening statement, Democratic Leader Harry Reid made clear that what was at stake was far more than the confirmation of a few judicial nominees. Reid declared that the Administration, driven by

the radical right wing, was on a dangerous drive for unchecked power both on the question of Presidential nominations in general, as well as on critical legislation like Social Security privatization. He warned the American people that what was indeed under way was an attempt to “throw out 217 years of Senate history in the quest for absolute power.”

Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) called what Cheney was planning a “coup d’état” on the floor of the Senate. Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) delivered a powerful and impassioned speech on the constitutional significance of the pending showdown, including a detailed exposure of the stated intention by the group calling itself the Constitution in Exile (which several of Bush’s judicial nominees are active participants in), to undo President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. Biden’s statements were expanded by Senators Schumer and Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.), both of whom went after statements by judicial nominee Janice Rogers Brown, that the 1937 Supreme Court decision upholding the legality of the New Deal was “our socialist revolution.”

Indeed, although it never came to that, at least a few Senators had privately vowed that, if Cheney proceeded as planned, with reckless disregard for both the spirit and letter of the Constitution, they would initiate the necessary measures to have him impeached.

One after another, Democratic Senators rose, not only to speak out in defense of the responsibility for “Advice and Consent” that the Framers of the U.S. Constitution gave the Senate, but also to make clear that the Administration’s reckless grab for absolute dictatorial power was designed to stop any action by the Senate in defense of the population when people, like George Shultz and other controllers of this Administration, proceed with their determination to rob the American people of their pensions, their health care, and bankruptcy protection against the onrushing Depression. In fact, the Senate floor debate of May 23 constituted the first time that the full scope of the economic crisis facing the United States was placed squarely on the Senate agenda.

And, in the press conference where the agreement to block the planned coup d’état was announced, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) admitted that he had initially planned to vote for the nuclear option, but then was persuaded that it would be a tragedy to shut down the Senate at this moment of crisis, when “Social Security is coming apart and kids are dying.”

A New Political Geometry

Clearly, Washington, D.C. is now a very different place. A few weeks earlier, in a lunchtime discussion with some senior Capitol Hill professional staff, LaRouche had commented that the issue of which political party held the majority in Congress was not necessarily the sole determinant of U.S. policy. said, “Give me 15 U.S. Senators who are prepared to act boldly and provide real leadership,” he said, “and I guarantee you we can change the course of history.” On May 23, a bipartisan group of 14 proved him right. They went head-to-head with an Administration that pulled out all the

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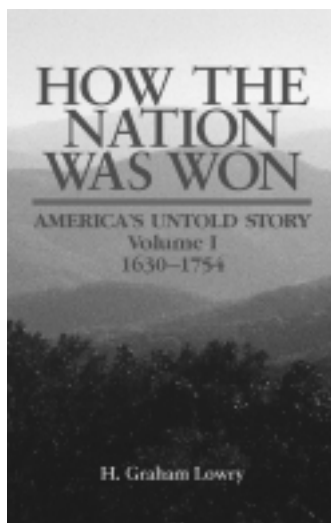
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stops, in an attempt to bully Senate Republicans to change the rules in a blatant violation of the Constitution—and the Administration lost.

The Cheney-Bush-Shultz crowd weren't the only ones who suffered defeat. The Senate, as an institution, is now freed from the blackmail of the right-wing "Christian" fundamentalists and their fascist leanings. Clearly, the issue is not religion, it is economics. The Senate, as a body, is now freed up to proceed to deal with the urgent business of finding a solution to the nation's economic collapse.

LaRouche stated the task clearly. Yes, we have kept the republic, he said. And now, patriots must seize the new situation in the Senate to press the agenda of economic reconstruction, saving General Motors, and saving the pension system. It's time to get Congress to act!