

Something tells me Bush holds all the aces

Mark Steyn for The Daily Telegraph

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At the beginning of the year, Thomas Lifson, who was at Harvard Business School with George W Bush, made an interesting observation about the President. He notes that young George "was a very avid and skillful poker player" when he was a Business Administration student and that "one of the secrets of a successful poker player is to encourage your opponent to bet a lot of chips on a losing hand. This is a pattern of behavior one sees repeatedly in George W Bush's political career".

Indeed one does. In the months following Mr Lifson's observation, the President sat back, as John Kerry's consultants, the Iowa caucus voters, the Democratic Party at large, and the media convinced themselves that the one card that trumps Bush's leadership in the war on terror was Kerry's four months in Vietnam, and bet everything on it. They have just lost that hand.

Kerry is in seclusion, unable to expose himself to any but the most sycophantic interviewers, and getting whumped by hundreds upon hundreds of fellow Swift boat veterans, plus former POWs, plus retired admirals, over every aspect of his brief stay in the Mekong Delta.

The Senator put his money on the wrong war. After a couple of entertaining weeks of the aggrieved Swifttees driving down his poll numbers in battleground states, it seems a shame to interrupt the implosion of the Kerry campaign for the Republican convention. But I'm sure the seared Senator is grateful for the intermission, and for the rest of us the next week affords a rare opportunity in this election campaign to catch up with the issues of the current millennium before the inept Kerry resumes bogging us down in his personal Vietnam quagmire again.

My sense is that the Swiftvets have changed the dynamics of the race. With the candidate's retro braggadocio on ice for the foreseeable future, the Kerry campaign late on Friday revived that old favourite, the Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy, releasing a flow chart full of multi-coloured arrows showing that Texas Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison is a "close friend" of

Merrie Spaeth, a public relations consultant to Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. Yawn.

The fact is, even if Kerry was a Republican, these Swift boat guys would be hounding him. In a culture where "ABB" is now media shorthand for "Anyone But Bush", you would think the press would recognise these fellows for what they are: the ABK constituency.

Meanwhile, "Bush hatred" - another losing hand the Democrats put too many chips on - has peaked, and any saggy nudists or trust-fund anarchists who succeed in pulling off some camera-worthy stunt in Manhattan this week will only be boosting the President.

"BUSH LIED!!!!!!" is likewise a bust, given generally non-damaging official reports on 9/11, Abu Ghraib, etc, and that it's Kerry who's having to modify his claims on an almost daily basis, whether over his secret Christmas mission to Cambodia (false) and the question of whether his first Purple Heart was improperly awarded for a self-inflicted wound (true). As for Iraq, ever since the transfer of sovereignty that's all but off the radar.

So unlike the touchy Kerry - threatening lawsuits, calling for bans and smearing his fellow vets as "Republican liars" - just by staying cool the President has let his many detractors exhaust the political capital of their obsessions.

Bush isn't a great orator but he can rise to the occasion, and I expect he will this week, with an optimistic forward-looking speech that stands in contrast to Senator Kerry's weird up-the-Mekong-without-a-paddle routine. Bush's speech will also have jokes.

He tells jokes pretty well, though he could do with easing up on the old self-satisfied smirk after the punchline. But smirk-accompanied jokes are still better than Kerry, who had no jokes at all except a leaden clunker about the destiny-freighted detail of having been born in a hospital's "west wing" - wouldja believe it? and how many wings does a hospital have anyway? and doesn't this communicate Kerry's sense of entitlement rather than his sense of humour - formal confirmation that he believes he was literally born to be president?

As to the serious bits, I would be surprised if Bush mentions Iran or North Korea specifically, though it's likely both will require his attention early next year. But he will talk up successes in the war and remind us that, if we

don't win it, the best prescription-drugs plan in the world isn't going to make much difference.

The Bush-haters are right about him: he is a radical President, just not in the cartoon manner they believe. So it will be interesting to hear what he has to say about tax reform and Social Security - two areas where he's got big ambitions. The rest of the week will be a soft-focus infomercial just like the Democratic Convention, but the Republican speakers - Rudy Giuliani, Arnold Schwarzenegger, John McCain and dissident Democrat Senator Zell Miller - make a much stronger line-up than the old lions on display in Boston - Jimmy Carter, Ted Kennedy, Bill and Hill, effective speakers all but strictly for the true believers. Rudy, Arnie and co have far more cross-party appeal.

The media will point out that this is a crock, it's a fraud, it's a travesty of a farrago: the Republicans are putting their social moderates out front, and burying all the hatchet-faced Right-wing meanies. And the critics have a point to this extent: reaching out to swing voters is a sham in that there don't seem to be any but the most statistically insignificant number of swing voters to reach out to.

In this election, it's more important to make sure none of your party's base vote stays home. The problem for Kerry is that Bush's base includes alienated Democrats. Al Gore lost in 2000 because he had no appeal to white rural males. That's what cost him his own state of Tennessee, among others.

Does anyone seriously think Kerry appeals to white rural males? A poll in The Los Angeles Times shows that 3 per cent of Republicans are voting for Kerry, but 15 per cent of Democrats - mainly "conservative Democrats" - are planning to vote for Bush. A crucial sliver of Democrats seem to recoil from Kerry the way effete elite Europeans recoil from Bush. Unfortunately the former, unlike the latter, can vote.

So the most likely outcome this November is an increased Republican majority in the House, a couple of extra Senate seats, and a second term for Bush. I might be wrong. Anything is possible. But the reluctance of the British press to admit the possibility that Bush isn't a loser suggests that they too have over-invested in John Kerry's very weak hand.