

## The Bush "Unsustainability" Rhetoric by Clifford L. Staples

In the latest Bush propaganda campaign we've been hearing the word "unsustainable," as in "the Social Security system is unsustainable." Let's consider for a moment the Bush use, and non-use, of arguments about the unsustainability of social programs and social life.

The President and his advisors are very familiar with the rhetoric of "unsustainability." It has been used against them for many years by those of us who have argued that a civilization based on a rapidly vanishing exhaustible resource like oil is "unsustainable." But, of course, the President, like most presidents before him, has turned a deaf ear to this argument because to accept it would mean abandoning the view that there are no limits to oil-based economic growth; telling American citizens that their oil-powered party is just about over; and admitting that Americans and Iraqis are dying in order to bring the remaining proven oil reserves under U.S. control. It would also mean telling his friends in the oil industry that there are more important things in the world (e.g. ecological viability and a future for our kids) than short-term profit-making. He's not about to say or do any of these things, and so all evidence and arguments about the unsustainability of our oil-drenched lives are dismissed, denied or suppressed while the unsustainability of Social Security is endlessly repeated until people believe it. If it worked with "weapons of mass destruction," there's no reason it can't work with Social Security.

It is a deft political move to co-opt the argument you reject in one context and apply it to advance your interests in another. It's also a cynical move to the extent that it hopes and bets on a citizenry that will be, on average, too gullible, ignorant, or distracted (preferably in prayer) to hold anyone accountable for the inconsistency. Indeed, this is an administration that, as a matter of acceptable political practice, actively fosters ignorance and stupidity (and models it!) in its citizenry in order to better advance and hide its partisan agenda of using the government to serve only the interests of the already wealthy and powerful.

Such maneuvering is clearly beyond the President, and so no doubt the idea to deploy the rhetoric of unsustainability to attack Social Security probably bubbled up out of the Karl Rove cauldron of political perversity. But to counter the Bush proposal on Social Security under the assumption that this Administration really is interested in providing social security for the average American citizen—as many critics of the Bush policy seem inclined to do—is, I think, both a tactical mistake and, at this late date, terribly naive. We've seen nothing from the Bush Administration to suggest it has much interest in the security of anyone other than its wealthy patrons and corporate sponsors. Destroying Social Security in order to save it is all about continuing the political strategy, begun in the Reagan years, of undermining the security of average working people so that they will be more dependent upon, and thus more exploitable by, corporate capital. This really shouldn't be surprising to anyone; these are the people for whom this President works.

But, bringing us back to that other, unmentionable, unsustainability, there's probably not much point in countering this bit of class-warfare on the part of the Administration since it is, in any case, nothing more than rearranging those proverbial Titanic deck chairs; neither social, nor economic, nor in fact personal security is achievable, let alone sustainable, for a society (and increasingly a world) that continues to act as if oil is inexhaustible. When worldwide oil production peaks, as it is likely to do within the next few years (assuming it has not already done so), while demand for it increases, and as a result the price of gas goes up to fifty dollars a gallon, no one—wealthy or woeful—is going to be feeling very secure, with or without

Social Security. And then all hell is going to break loose.

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