

## 21. CORRUPTION AND STRIFE IN HIGH PLACES

In the years prior to Israel's demise at the hands of Assyria, political corruption and personal corruption was rife amongst the Israel's leaders. Their mistakes and failures reflected their moral degradation and lack of integrity and principle. They were roundly exposed by the prophet Micah. Upright, moral leadership is a blessing to any nation, the opposite is a curse. What of 21stC leadership?

In The Political Sphere

In 2000 Bill Clinton's Presidency of the U.S.A. came to a sordid end. It was described by one scholarly biographer as "The Rake's Progress", a disaster of sexual impropriety. His impeachment trial had brought the office of President into gross disrepute and humiliated it in the eyes of an increasingly anti-American world. Unfortunately, George Bush Junior, who followed Clinton, would bring a further Presidential disaster, though of a different kind. His personal life was without

reproach, but his tenure of office would be marred by incompetence, corruption and arrogance.

Bill Clinton had an enormous IQ and was an exceptionally able person; George Bush was quite the opposite. He had a personable common touch, but he simply did not have anything like the intellect, acumen, political depth or world experience that the presidency required. His friends and his wife knew this, but he refused their advice. He acquired the presidency largely by having a former president as his father, by having a great deal more money than his opponents, and

by a willingness to deal with his opponents by political "dirty tricks" and character assassination.

It was obvious from the start that his shortcomings would leave a very big power vacuum in the White House. He did not read, he rarely asked pertinent questions, and his ignorance was proverbial. Strenuous efforts were made to hide Bush's deficiencies from the public, but inevitably others moved in to fill the vacant space and promote their own agendas. Most

notable and powerful was Dick Cheney, the vice-president, a man of very questionable integrity and a great manipulator. Cheney quickly began to affirm complete control, but without challenging Bush's public image. For some six years Cheney was to be the power behind the throne in the White House, and his agenda was to be followed. Cheney's agenda was one Bush found very much to his liking and temperament and posed him as a man of action, When Cheney encouraged Bush to see 9/11 as a reason for global war, Bush needed little persuasion. It was to be an agenda that was utterly arrogant, impervious to any advice, frequently unconstitutional, bullying, ruthless, controlling and ultimately disastrous.

Cheney immediately restructured the White House administration to enable him to control and watch everything whilst he himself remained unaccountable. It became a virtual dictatorship disciplined by threats. He controlled access to the president, and knew all the information the president received and all the presidential decisions. Bush never saw

much of what Cheney decided. He constantly refused to work with the other organs of government, the Senate and the House of Representatives. He used the judiciary cynically for his own ends. He became secretive to a degree, withholding information from those who should have received it, both in government and the military. He inaugurated a term of Presidential administration which was extraordinary for its manipulation, high handedness and secrecy. He certainly was not practising

American democracy.

Cheney sought control because he had a personal policy to pursue and was determined that it should become U.S. policy.

What he wanted was less federal interference in people's lives, more imperial power in the White House to advance America's interests abroad, to secure energy supplies and raw materials, and to disarm any who threatened in any way. In

particular he was concerned to attack Iraq.

The first evidence of this control was seen in how he nullified the normal investigation processes seeking to find out why

the 9/11 terrorists had been so successful and why intelligence seemed to have failed. He was preventing any enquiry from stopping him using 9/11 as the catalyst for his own ambitious plans.

A much more glaring example of corrupt manipulation was in the question of whether Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and had links to Al Qaeda. There was no real evidence for either as later discoveries in Iraq showed. Unfortunately Cheney needed this WMD scare to justify his intervention in Iraq. The U.N. and European countries in particular were not ready for such intervention and needed persuading. The U.S. Congress itself was apprehensive. Accordingly every trick of misinformation and falsehood was used by the administration to fabricate a case that Saddam had WMD ready for immediate use. To compound the issue, Bush arrogantly decided he had U.N. legal authority to intervene militarily when there was grave doubt about this from most other western nations.

Sadly Britain decided to support the U.S. The Head of British Intelligence warned Tony Blair, the British P.M., that "*the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy*", rather than the reverse. He was not alone in this. There was also much debate on the legality question. Britain's position was crucial for the U.S. A refusal to support an intervention was the one remaining thing that might conceivably have stopped the war. It would have strengthened a besieged Colin Powell who was desperately trying to stem the rush. Yet Blair went to war. We still do not know why Tony Blair decided

against restraint. Like his American counterparts he has "stonewalled".

Meanwhile Cheney dealt mercilessly with any political opposition to his plans. The most outrageous act was the Wilson

case. Ambassador John Wilson had completely showed the fallacy of Bush's claim that Saddam had been working on Nigeria to get nuclear fuel. Immediately "senior administration officials" leaked the fact that his wife, Valerie, was a C.I.A. undercover agent, putting her life (and others) in imminent danger and destroying her career. It was Cheney's revenge for her husband's opposition, and designed to warn off others who might oppose him or leak the truth. Thankfully it came to court in 2005 and though Cheney wriggled off the hook, his Chief of Staff, Scooter Libby, was convicted and sent to prison.

The Bush/Cheney administration was shown at its most ruthless and desperate by the inhuman treatment of terrorist suspects at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prisons. This was a gross and cynical betrayal of the very principles of human rights that U.S. democracy stood for and was fighting for. The arresting and conveyance of suspects by "contractors" and the clandestine allowing of their torture by client states were crimes which have yet to be purged. All criticism was stonewalled.

After Bush's re-election in 2004 the devastating incompetence of the Iraq campaign could, however, no longer be hidden. Rumsfeld had to be dismissed; Cheney was later exposed and lost his control; Bush, severely chastened, had to go back to his generals and a troop surge. The Presidency limped to an end with scarcely any support for Bush. Thus came to an end one of the most damaging Presidencies the U.S. had seen. His successor, Barak Obama, was left with a wasteland to govern, and with minimal options.

#### In Finance and Business

The North American business world has in the past been graced by numerous and generous philanthropists, such as

Rockefeller and Carnegie. In our own time Bill Gates of Microsoft heads the list. Unfortunately they are very much the exception in a world of rapacious and ruthless corporate and personal greed. That greed has plumbed new depths in the last ten years or so. It is in this area more than anywhere that the strictures of Amos in his time continue to be so pertinent to our modern world.

Time and again we see this corrupt world of Mammon interlocking with the world of naked political ambition, the one serving the other. The United States Presidency unfortunately is structured in a way which makes this union almost inevitable. Elections to the Presidency cost millions of dollars, and can only be financed by those with very considerable resources – businesses and corporations etc. But big business sees its support of a Presidential candidate as an "investment"; it expects to get a return on its money through measures and legislation that will benefit them. Congress and the Senate suffer similarly.

It is no surprise, therefore, to see, for example, the oil industry's interests being well looked after by Bush when he successfully dismantled the U.S. agreement, made by Clinton, to the U.N. Kyoto accord on tackling carbon pollution. Later it came to light that the President's Council on Environment Policy was largely staffed by the Exxon Oil Company, and those oilmen were not prepared to lose any profit through a clean up.

Perhaps the most far reaching example of such collusion happened when President Bill Clinton lamely signed in 1999 a momentous piece of financial legislation. One analyst said “If you want to trace the 2008 financial meltdown to a single moment it was this (legislation)”. It was a repeal of the 1933 Glass-Steagall Act, a crucial part of Franklin Roosevelt’s legislation which had brought financial order out of the chaos of the economic collapse of the 1930s. That Roosevelt Act had, amongst other restraining measures separated the savings of investment banks from ordinary people’s savings so that they could not be used for speculation. This bulwark of proven control was now removed, and shortly afterwards a whole set of financial commodities known as “derivatives” were made exempt from financial regulation (so they could not be classified as gambling). It was the culmination of years of work by the banking and financial sector to break free from any government control. What is really significant, however, is that this legislation cost the banking sector \$300 million in lobbying fees, with \$4.6 million going to the Senator who led the campaign.

The banking world knew exactly what it wanted, and it was prepared to pay for it! It wanted de-regulation or complete freedom from any restraint of its activities so that it could get as much money as possible into the investment banking area where fat profits were for the taking. It wanted to concentrate on the simple business of speculating with the vast amounts of money that had become available in the money markets.

The flood gates were now opened. All major banks made investment banking their major activity. Hedge funds (financial concerns which invested the savings of the rich) multiplied phenomenally and were adopted by the banks. The problem of all this sort of investment was that it was not directed toward manufacturing or research to benefit the economy, but solely to making profits on the trading of millions of speculative deals. The banks lent billions of dollars to fund all this. They also funded the “private equity firms” which borrowed billions to buy up or merge large businesses primarily for the huge financial rake off that could be made. It is not too much to say the new financial world represented much more a “casino” than a useful banking system.

The U.K. And Europe

This casino type financial world was exported wholesale to the U.K. All the major U.S. Banks operated in and dominated

London with all their paraphernalia of hedge funds, equity firms, investment funds and huge lending. U.K. Banks followed suit. They were making vast profits for an elite rich from small savers and from the lesser paid generally. The “City” bonus was the banner of the decade, showing which way the wind was blowing.

As in the U.S. this new world was embraced by the political elite. New Labour neglected its Union roots to openly and diligently embrace big business and finance; it was much more profitable for party funds. Tony Blair was to run up some £25 million in loans from “the rich” to secure a second term as P.M. Those loans were also to lead to a cash for peerages enquiry! Later still came the M.P.s expenses scandals.

On a wider national canvas Gordon Brown determined that the very future of the prosperity of the U.K. was to be bound up in the new financial world. For him as Chancellor this world offered huge possibilities for taxation. So London was to become a global centre for Financial Services and the U.K. would secure a major part of its revenue from that. Oddly enough, Gordon Brown found himself obliged to offer tax breaks to the top and most rich bracket of executives of this global financial world to keep them working in the U.K., whilst pushing hard to tax the lower echelons and the ground floor workers who could not relocate to other shores!

The most painful part of this saga relates to U.K. pensions. At the end of the 1990s the U.K. pension system was the envy of the world; secure, well funded and offering a high level of retirement security. Ten years later it is in complete disarray. Gordon Brown could not raid the rich for taxes, but he certainly raided the pension funds, judging them to be over funded.

This together with a mixture of bad management by pension Trustees, and gross miscalculations in forecasting the size of future payments, left enormous black holes in pension funds and led to the closure of pensions associated with business. Vast pension losses were made and are still being made by thousands of people. Pensions are now a major issue for the future, seemingly without solution.

On the European front we have been treated to some very bizarre political behaviour by such leaders as Berlusconi and Sarkozy, to mention just two, where sordid personal scandals have gone hand in glove with corrupt business practice and where such top leadership has been left under the threat of investigation.

All in all the indicators are that leadership across the west has been too prone to the venal spirit of the age, and quality statesmanship all too rare. These are very real danger signs in the age in which we live.