

Kerry is right, foreign leaders want Bush beaten

by Josh Marshall

An ominously off-balance White House finally seems to have found a bit of traction in taking John Kerry to task for claiming that many foreign leaders are hoping he ousts President Bush from the White House this November.

White House surrogates have spent several days pressing Sen. Kerry (D-Mass.) to name names. And yesterday, White House press secretary Scott McClellan upped the ante by claiming Kerry was lying. "Either [Kerry] is straightforward and states who they are, or the only conclusion one can draw is that he is making it up to attack the president," McClellan intoned.

Late Monday, *Boston Globe* reporter Patrick Healy, who filed the pool report that included the quote in question, announced that he'd gotten it wrong. Kerry said "more leaders," not "foreign leaders." Still, the context shows pretty clearly that foreign leaders of some sort were the folks Kerry was talking about. And in the week since the quotation was first reported, he's never denied that this was what he meant.

The first thing to note about this brouhaha is that this was a really foolish thing for Kerry to say.

As we've already seen, it's left Kerry open to all sorts of dingbat Manchurian-candidate-type slurs about his being a pawn of foreign governments or his having made unknown, scary promises to foreign heads of state.

Last week, the Republican National Committee put out a memo darkly claiming that "Communist North Korea Is Only Government On Record Supporting John Kerry."

Then a slightly less breathless Vice President Dick Cheney demanded that Kerry tell Americans what he'd promised to those foreign leaders to make them so supportive of his candidacy.

American elections aren't about the views of foreigners. They're about the views of Americans. If most people around the globe think the American president is reckless, untrustworthy or simply dangerous, that may be something American voters want to take into account in making their judgments. But that's a more subtle point—and there are better ways to address it than the one Kerry chose.

But McClellan's claim that Kerry is lying just doesn't pass the laugh test.

Yes, Kerry's remark was ill-advised. But one of the main reasons that it was a bad idea to say this is that it's so obviously true.

Indeed, up until the White House glogged onto this recent line of attack, the administration's contempt for the views of foreigners has been something it had been proud of and boasted of often. Remember the president's cocky boasts about not needing anybody's "permission" to launch the Iraq war?

Just consider a few facts.

The record of foreign elections over the last two and a half years is telling. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a foreign leader who has supported Bush in any high-profile way and then survived a national election. True, it's hard to find many examples beside Jose Maria Aznar. But that's because it's hard to find any foreign heads of state who have been supporters of the president.

More revealing is how many foreign heads of state and candidates for national office from traditional American allies have successfully played the anti-Bush card in their election campaigns.

The clearest examples are President Roh Moo-hyun, who won election two years ago in South Korea as the first South Korean presidential candidate to openly question the U.S.-ROK security alliance, and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who pulled

out a razor-thin victory in his 2002 re-election campaign by campaigning against Bush's Iraq policy.

Washington has tended to view Schroeder's gambit as cynical and craven, particularly for the leader of a country that has been so closely allied to the United States for half a century. But there's seldom a shortage of craven or cynical politicians in the world. For understanding America's current standing in the world, the key point is not so much that Schroeder was or wasn't craven as that his tactic was successful.

Nor is it much of a surprise.

As Fareed Zakaria—hardly a lefty or a Bush-hater—noted a year ago, the president's policies have “alienated friends and delighted enemies. Having traveled around the world and met with senior government officials in dozens of countries over the past year, I can report that with the exception of Britain and Israel, every country the administration has dealt with feels humiliated by it.”

For anyone who follows foreign policy even remotely closely, it has to be close to a given that the overwhelming majority of foreign heads of state and foreigners in general hope that Bush will be heading back to Crawford next January.

The president's deep unpopularity among foreigners and foreign governments is a fact that either campaign could probably use to its advantage. But the fact itself can't be denied.