

Up

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So, Senator, Tell Us What You Really Think

If irreverent candor were oil, then Republican strategist Stu Spencer, all by himself, would be Saudi Arabia. Earlier this spring, Spencer offered an earthy analysis of his own party: "With the Commies gone, Republicans lost what had been their winning hand. And some of our guys on [Capitol] Hill haven't learned yet that welfare mothers are no substitute for Commies."

The GOP's global manhunt for a suitable replacement for the Soviet Union as an all-purpose villain to get tough with, denounce, demonize and scapegoat has now settled on the federal government. Heading into 1996, the U.S. government is the new communism. The red scare, if things work out according to plan, will give way to the fed scare.

Stu Spencer would undoubtedly like Sen. Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.), who can be almost as candid and irreverent and who, himself, could have benefited from a Spencer crash course on national politics before the Nebraskan launched his own ill-planned 1992 presidential campaign. But it's that refreshing candor which makes Bob Kerrey special in a profession and in a city where an elected politician who speaks or spreads the ugly truth is widely regarded as an eccentric.

Listen to Kerrey on the GOP scheme to substitute Washington for Moscow as the capital of the Evil Empire. He criticizes right-wing politicians' "constant bashing of government and the relentless assumption that forces beyond our control run our government and our lives."

If he weren't already a Democrat, Kerrey would be every Republican's dream candidate—an authentic patriot who was an officer of the elite Navy SEALs in Vietnam, won the Congressional Medal of Honor and lost a leg

there. He is a successful entrepreneur who started businesses, created jobs, met a payroll and become a millionaire in his home state. He's a popular governor who left voluntarily after one term and later won two elections to the U.S. Senate in a state dominated by the other party.

Kerrey is impatient with the political whiners and the blame-shifting: "Let us cast aside the conspiracy theories and the notion that we are victims of our own government. What nonsense! This government is ours." He offered no comfort to the self-styled civilian weekend warriors in their too-tight combat fatigues, calling them "boys with toys." He adds, "The idea that the government of the U.S. oppresses you is nonsense. We've got more freedom than any country on the face of the earth."

At the White House, where the strategy of emphasizing administration identification with conservative goals is referred to by the president's own people as "Newt Lite," the criticism of inflammatory talk-radio hosts was muted after a strong counterattack.

Avoiding platitudinous disclaimers about the First Amendment, Kerrey didn't temper his own words: "I don't say talk radio caused all this. But talk radio sells programs and sells advertising by treating people like crap. That's how the ratings go up. You get mean with somebody. You belittle them. You make fun of them."

According to some new conservatives, the nation's problems are obvious: The problem with the Poor is that they have too much money; the problem with the Rich is that they have too little. Kerrey takes that head-on, even speaking ill of congressional colleagues "making 136 grand."

"There's something rather arrogant and, in my judgment, hypocritical when I hear a 30-year-old snot-nosed lawyer who's arriving in the House of Representatives say to me that he's against raising the minimum wage because he wants the market to do it when the market wouldn't pay him \$25,000 a year."

But what about the economic stimulus of the House-passed tax cut? "Take that \$200 billion tax cut and put it where the sun doesn't shine. Forget it. We've got a deficit to deal with here."

He isn't elegant. He may not be poetic. But he sure is Kerrey the Candid.

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