

Stealth politics

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President Bush has told Congress to stop its “partisan bickering” and pass his economic stimulus package. But of course partisan politics is alive and well in Washington, however muted it is by the nation’s war on terrorism, and Bush himself is practicing it shrewdly, even a bit imperiously. With most Americans giving the president high marks for directing the war on terrorism, Bush has quietly but forcefully taken actions that, prior to September 11, would have drawn a lot more opposition.

On December 13, the day the “smoking gun” tape with Osama bin Laden was released, Bush gave notice that he was unilaterally ending U.S. participation in the Antiballistic Missile Treaty. Withdrawing from that agreement, signed in 1972 and ratified by the Senate in the same year, has been a goal for all those who want the U.S. to develop a defensive missile shield. Whatever the merits of the ABM treaty, it’s extremely rare for a president to end an international treaty without congressional action, let alone one that has played so significant a role in controlling nuclear arms for three decades.

In November, Bush moved to limit access to presidential papers that, under the 1978 Presidential Records Act, would have been opened to public scrutiny. John Dean, White House counsel during the Nixon years, said that Bush’s action “has pushed his lawmaking powers beyond their limit,” and wonders “what is being hidden and why.” Dean admits that while “some secrecy is necessary to fight a war, it is not necessary to run the country.”

Two days after Christmas, Bush made another “stealth” move, as *Washington Post* columnist David Broder termed it. He killed regulations that would have barred companies that repeatedly violate environmental and workplace standards from receiving government contracts. This action ignored an earlier congressional report which said (to quote Broder) that “the federal government had awarded \$38 billion in contracts to at least 261 corporations operating unsafe or unhealthy work sites.” This was a seasonal gift to businesses and corporations. The *Wall Street Journal*

gleefully commented that “repeal of the so-called blacklisting regulations was a major objective of the business community,” one of President Bush’s most reliable financial sources during the presidential campaign. Amid the holiday season, with the media focused on the fighting in Tora Bora, hardly anyone noticed, nor appeared to care. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, waited a week to report the rule change, and did so on page ten.

Bush has pursued a new range of presidential actions in responding to the terrorist attacks, and Americans are inclined to support him. But supporting a commander in chief in a time of crisis should not mean giving him carte blanche on domestic policy.