

## Garment owners' threat to close down factories

*Industrial police is not the only panacea*

THE ultimatum of the RMG factory owners of Ghazipur, to close down all RMG factories in that area unless adequate security was provided to them by September 25, is surprising. But this is reflective of the state of desperation they are in, with the situation going out of their control. To say the least, the owners' response is least expected, come as it does from the captains of this industry. It amounts to an attitude of chopping off one's head to cure the headache.

Having said that we hasten to add that nobody can fail to see some of the reasons that have caused the factory owners to react in the way they have. The last several months have seen the sector in a simmer, a large number of garment factories were subjected to vandalism that have resulted in losses running up to hundreds of crores of taka, not to speak of the loss due to cancelled orders.

It might not be farfetched to suggest that there may be elements that are out to subvert a highly potential export sector of the country. However, what the concerned persons, including the owners, have failed to notice is that had there not been the seething workers' discontent due to genuine grievances, the situation could not have been exploited by the vested quarters.

Thus, all concerned must address the real issue germane to the problem. And the most important of them is the matter of pay and benefits of the employees, in spite of the contention of the BGMEA president that many of the factories that have been vandalised are the ones that are 'compliant' factories. Given the spiralling prices of essential commodities the pay scale fixed in 2006 fall far short in real value terms today to meet the basic needs of the workers. Sale of some basic essential during the month of Ramadan by certain segment of the garment industry is indeed laudable, but this is on a limited scale and is at best a temporary palliative. A durable plan must be worked out to ensure that the garment employees are able to subsist reasonably well, which they are barely able to do now.

Some of the points in the eight-point charter of the owners are very relevant to the smooth functioning of the industry, which the government should consider. No doubt adequate security must be ensured to prevent the factories being subjected to violence. But one wonders whether deploying industrial police as suggested will alone radically improve the situation. There is a need to take a re-look at the state of owner-worker relationship, which regrettably has assumed an adversarial character. It is much better to make the workers feel that they have a stake in the factory. That is a way to ensure their participation in the safety and wellbeing of the factory.

## Zardari at the helm

*Can he measure up to the task?*

AFTER nearly a decade of autocratic rule of Parvez Musharraf, Pakistan has got a democratically elected president in the person of Asif Ali Zardari. He secured 281 out of 426 parliamentary votes, and won a majority vote in three of the four provincial assemblies forming the presidential electoral college. Jubilant as they are, his close aides lost no time in saying that it was a historic win, a victory for democracy. Zardari's sweeping to victory provides an occasion to reflect on 'tides in the affairs of man' in the Shakespearean aphorism. A man not having many credible years as a politician, and someone who has left an indelible trail of controversies behind, it is indeed worthy of note how he rose to the most powerful position enduring jail terms for nearly 11 years as well as a long exile. There were charges of wide-scale corruption and even murder against him. Ironically, an amnesty signed by Parvez Musharraf last year had cleared him of all the charges. And this ought to be remembered that his remarkable turn around happened only nine months after the assassination of his charismatic wife, Benazir Bhutto.

Now that Zardari has become the 14<sup>th</sup> president of Pakistan, he will no doubt have his plate full once he takes oath and begins to run the world's only nuclear-armed Islamic state, which is again a strong ally of the West in the 'war on terror'. With an elected government installed, the burning questions that will surface inside parliament and street corners are what is he going to do about restoration of the judges who had been sacked by Parvez Musharraf, or how fast he will address the issue of concentration of power in the hands of the president who can dissolve parliament with the stroke of a pen. These are the main impediments to democracy that the politicians had raised their voice against. Pakistan's friends and foes will also watch what steps his government takes against the rising spectre of militancy, with Pakistan's allies on war on terror claiming that the country's tribal areas have become a safe haven for Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants. Zardari's government will have to pay serious attention to the economic downside that caused high inflation and 40 percent fall in the stock market since January.

Regional stability is another vital issue that will largely depend on a stable and democratic Pakistan; as such, Zardari will have to go an extra mile to measure up to the tasks ahead of him. We, as a member state of the SAARC community, want to see democracy find a deep root in Pakistan so that the government in power may finally divert attention to the development of the economic and social sectors of the country.

## Rising poverty



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

FOUR with six zeroes looks tidy as a figure, but it gives us an uneasy feeling when the World Bank says that four million people in the country have been pushed back further below the poverty line, due to abnormal rise in food price. The WB on August 26 said that the food price shock is projected to have raised poverty rate by around three percent from the baseline poverty rate of 40 percent in 2005.

In his presentation on "Bangladesh: The Economics of Food Crisis," the WB lead economist Vinaya Swaroop said, that WB's recent poverty report on Bangladesh suggests that the stronger GDP growth between 2005 and 2008 was expected to reduce poverty by around five percent, but the food price shock has raised poverty rate by around three percent.

Referring to 2005 household income and expenditure data of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the WB economist said that pov-

erty rate declined to 40 percent in 2005 from 49 percent in 2000, because of strong economic growth.

Between January 2007 and March 2008, the gross income of the poor decreased by 36.7 percent mainly due to price surge of food items, pushing 25 lakh households below the poverty line, observed the Centre for Policy Dialogue recently.

The Chronic Poverty Report 2008-09, launched in July by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre, also presented a grim picture of extreme poverty in the country. According to the report, around three crore people in the country live in extreme poverty.

Differing with the official ones, the leading economists of the country believe that recent skyrocketing of the prices of essentials has forced another three to four crore people under the poverty line.

Bangladesh got a bumper boro harvest this year, and the government hoped that this bumper crop production would somehow relieve them of the economic and

## BY THE NUMBERS

Self-sufficiency in foodgrain has gained much importance in order to ensure survival of the rural and marginal masses living in poverty. Bangladesh can attain self-sufficiency in food production, provided the government ensures supply of quality seeds, fertiliser, diesel and electricity, and other inputs to farmers in time at affordable prices.

political crisis. But the bumper boro harvest did not help the government to shield local market from global food price rise.

The government set a target to procure 12 lakh tons of rice and 3 lakh tons of paddy at the rate of Tk. 28 and Tk. 18 per kg respectively in the crop season to build up a food buffer stock and geared up all relevant agencies under its control to make the boro procurement drive a success. But only a half of the procurement target has been achieved so far in the three-month drive that ended on August 31.

The WB economist underscored the need for increasing rice production of the country, which is 40 percent lower than that of China, and 20 percent lower than that of Vietnam. He, however, said that raising yields has a huge potential in Bangladesh and productivity can be increased by 30 to 60 percent by using hybrid seeds, by rationalising input utilisation, and by improving other crop management procedures.

The food production of the

country, both rice and wheat, was barely 100 lakh tons in the year 1971-72. Bangladesh attained self-sufficiency in food production in 1999-2000, when the country's gross production in rice and wheat reached at 249 lakh tons.

The food grain production reached nearly 311 lakh tons in 2006-2007, which was probably the country's highest food production since independence. But the trend of self-sufficiency in food production could not be sustained due to ever increasing consumption.

Bangladesh can produce seven crore tons of rice a year, more than double the present quantity, by ensuring proper irrigation, use of fertiliser, and bringing fallow lands under cultivation. This was revealed in a study conducted by M. Eftekharul Alam, assistant chief engineer of BADCO, who carried out the study for more than two decades.

The country now grows nearly three crore tons of rice a year with boro output 3.66 tons per hectare and amon a little above two tons. But boro yield can be raised to six

tons and amon output to five tons a hectare, the study said.

A yield gap of more than two tons now exists between the present and potential output per hectare, which can be overcome by ensuring proper irrigation and rationalising other input utilisation.

The government of China undertook a decade long (2001-2010) development-oriented program named Poverty Reduction Program for Rural China with a view to boost its rural economy by promoting agriculture-based industries. It also launched manpower development programs in the rural areas to cater the needs of trained manpower in the urban areas.

The number of chronic poor in China decreased to 23.65 million in 2005 from 32 million in 2000 after the implementation of its Poverty Reduction Program. This approach is very relevant for Bangladesh, as the country is still searching for a potential program for poverty alleviation.

Indian government has launched a good number of programs, including the Rashtriya Krishi Bikas for Rs. 25,000 crore, Food Security Mission for Rs. 5,000 crore and Horticulture Mission for Rs. 20,000 crore to promote agricultural growth and safeguard food security.

Philippines is another country that is spending an additional \$36.12 million on higher yielding rice varieties and also implementing measures to avoid a shortage

of the staple cereal. It has allocated an additional 1.5 billion pesos to buy higher yielding rice seeds, to be distributed among the farmers, to increase rice production. The Philippines has also announced a ban on converting farmland for other uses in the latest government move to cut rice import.

The small farm management revolution in China, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea has combined technologies of "mass production" and "production by masses" and stimulated farmers with marginal and small holdings to work for their income security in the rural areas and food security for the nation.

Self-sufficiency in foodgrain has gained much importance in order to ensure survival of the rural and marginal masses living in poverty. Bangladesh can attain self-sufficiency in food production, provided the government ensures supply of quality seeds, fertiliser, diesel and electricity, and other inputs to farmers in time at affordable prices.

The government has to disseminate validated agricultural information to farmers and make sure that those are updated with latest technologies to get the best harvest and protect crops from any diseases. Self-sufficiency in food can cause substantial poverty reduction as it is, because of food price shock.

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## On Sharada Prasad



M.J. AKBAR

HIS laugh was always a little less than a laugh, and his smile much more than a smile. This was not uncertainty; it was a discretion that suited the gentle character of a true gentleman, H.Y. Sharada Prasad, aesthete, scholar, author, adviser to two prime ministers and a muse to whoever was privileged enough to be friend.

His warm heart lived on his face; his measured tones were a reflection of his temperament. He believed in understatement, not because he had less to say, but because neither assertion nor aggression was his preferred virtue. If you could not hear, he did not have much to say.

That made him a bit of misfit in the culture of government of India, where assertion/aggression between colleagues is matched only by the competitive degrees of sycophancy displayed towards the boss, no matter how often the

boss changes. I got to know him when he was working as the senior bureaucrat in the prime minister's office during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure in the mid-Eighties. Continuity across generations is not the easiest of transitions. Sharada Prasad had been Ms. Indira Gandhi's most trusted adviser, joining her in 1966 when she first became prime minister and lasting till 1977 when she was voted out of office in India's most dramatic election.

He had the prickly (the euphemism was 'sensitive') portfolio of press relations, not an easy job at the best of times and self-defeating during those interminable 19 months of censorship during the Emergency.

He was perhaps the only member of Ms. Gandhi's inner circle to emerge from that calamity with his reputation unscathed. The first decision that Ms. Gandhi took on her return to power, in 1980, was to reappoint him to the PMO. That says it all.

## BYLINE

It is not easy to survive in a PMO. There is too much power, and with it too much temptation. That Sharada Prasad managed to survive without the faintest whiff of sycophancy was a marvel. That, trust me, is an achievement in Delhi. But Sharada Prasad could never be part of a rat race. He did not belong to the species.

But it is a very rare jewel that shines in an heir's court as well. Delhi is more familiar with the Abul Fadh syndrome: Emperor Akbar's star courtier was killed by his son Salim (later Jehangir). Death is not a modern solution, but a rough nudge into an inconsequential placebo, like an ambassadorship to a trouble-free capital.

Rajiv Gandhi kept Sharada Prasad on board, not so much for media but to continue in his parallel role, to pen a sagacious speech, often livened by a brilliant turn of phrase.

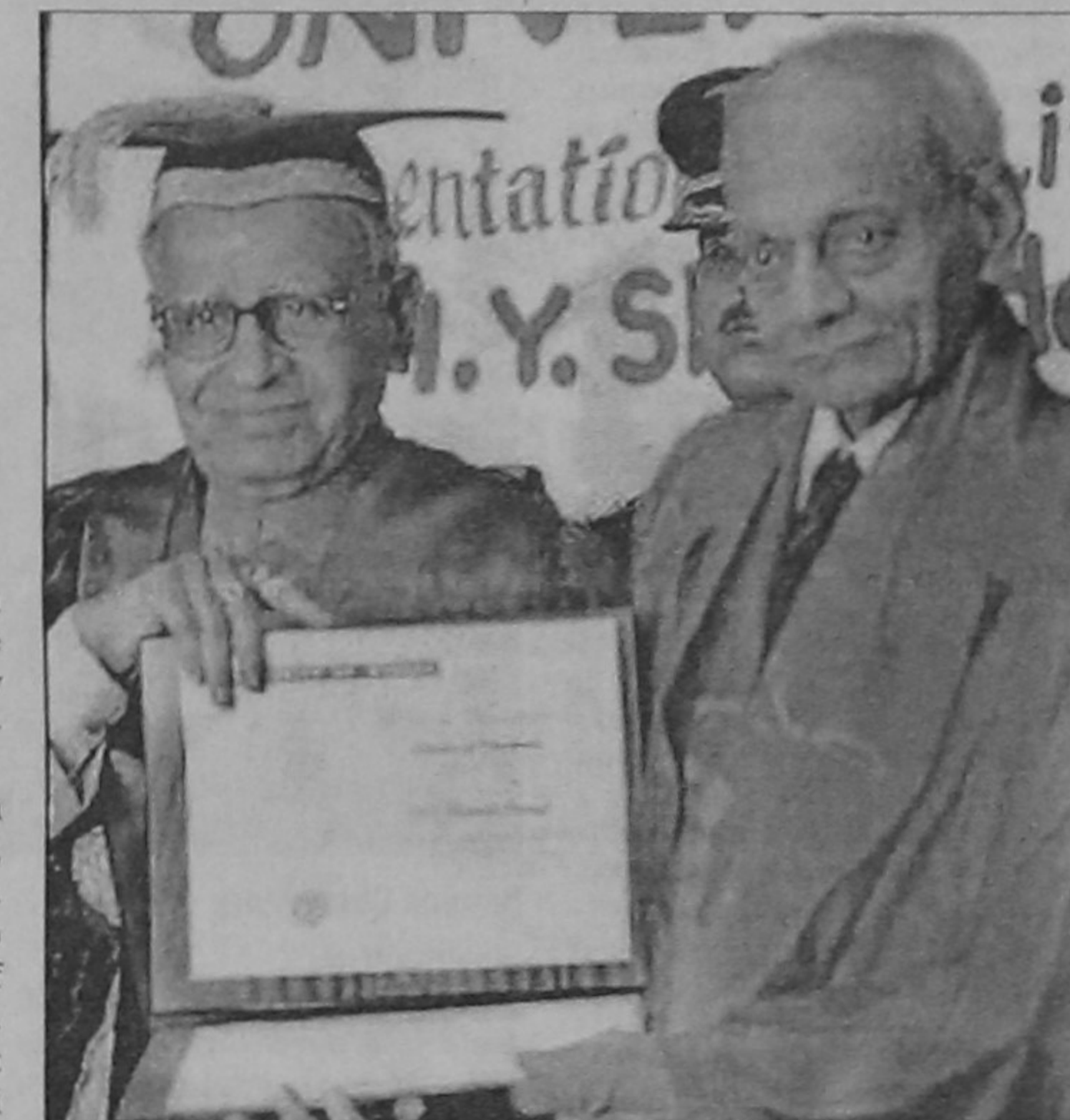
There is a great distance between the draft of a prime minister's speech and its final delivery. A host of hovering "specialists" is eager to intervene. Competition over paragraphs can be sharp, as envy jostles with the urge for self-promotion.

Sharada Prasad never disturbed the inevitable interference after having crafted the framework. He was never possessive. But if a speech ended up

resembling an out-of-control buffet, you could always tell which sections were the creation of a master chef. It was quite different from the slaphappy offerings of butlers masquerading as cooks.

It is not easy to survive in a PMO. There is too much power, and with it too much temptation. That Sharada Prasad managed to survive without the faintest whiff of sycophancy was a marvel. That, trust me, is an achievement in Delhi. But Sharada Prasad could never be part of a rat race. He did not belong to the species. He left government with the same lack of fuss with which he had survived in it.

Departure was a moment of release, not loss. Imperceptibly, and with some vigorous encouragement from a friend, he began writing a column that grew gradually upon its readers till it became an institution. When a collection of his columns was published, it became the surprise bestseller of that season.



H.Y. Sharada Prasad (right)

For the first time, a larger world knew of his extraordinary understanding and love for Carnatic music. He found it difficult to be critical of even those whom he disliked, but he did not refrain from using a pin to prick ego-bubbles. But he did it always with that endearing half-laugh, full-smile.

Wisdom has its own equity. I recall a bit of advice he gave me after being part of a conversation

or two: "You can always tell a king," he said, "but you cannot tell him too much."

It is not advice that I have always followed, being in a profession where the risk of stating what you know, against the power of government, must be taken. But you can argue that wiser words were never said for those who want to live in Delhi.

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## John McCain is no war hero

### LETTER FROM AMERICA

War heroes, like George Washington, fight bravely for their country and help it to win. McCain did neither. John McCain was a bad naval aviator. Two of the planes he flew crashed, and one collided with power lines. In October 1967, he was shot down over Vietnam, and spent 5 years as a prisoner of war. A POW does not fight. So what makes McCain a war hero? That he was shot down? That he was a POW?

FAKHURUDDIN AHMED

THE Republican Party has utter contempt for the American voters, especially women. They believe that the Americans are so dumb that they will believe anything they are told if repeated often enough through television commercials.

Last week's Republican Convention in St. Paul was an exercise in utter deception and hypocrisy. Even though McCain promised to eschew divisive politics, every speaker from McCain and Palin on down, attacked Barack Obama and the Democrats with the most vile and vitriolic gutter language.

The hypocrisy was staggering. A New York Times reader put it most succinctly: "What a hilarious sight to watch the Republican Party in St. Paul repudiating the

nearly eight-year record of the Republican Party in Washington and then asking us to trust the Republican Party to extricate the nation from the mess the Republican Party has created."

It was comical to listen to the Republican nominee John McCain tell America during his acceptance speech that "change is coming to Washington." Change is coming to Washington through John McCain? The McCain, who has been a regular fixture on the Washington scene for the last 26 years, as a Congressman and Senator? And, by the way, a Republican has been the president for the last eight years, and for twelve of the last fourteen years, Republicans have been the majority party in the House and the Senate!

For the first time in the history of national conventions, the

sitting president of the party in power did not attend his party's convention. Bush addressed the convention via satellite. Dick Cheney conveniently fled the country during the convention and was seen saber rattling the Russians from Georgia.

After months belittling Obama's "inexperience," and unfitness to be the commander-in-chief, John McCain unveiled his selection for VP, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin; a total novice on the national and international scene. Palin was the mayor of a town of 6,000 people before becoming Alaska's governor 18 months ago.

McCain and his storm troopers immediately pronounced Palin more fit to be the commander-in-chief than Obama, without presenting any evidence whatsoever!

It was common knowledge that

McCain's VP short list included only Gov. Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota, former Gov. Mitt Romney and Senator Joe Lieberman. When Obama picked Joe Biden rather than Hillary Clinton, in a very cynical move, McCain chose the totally unknown Palin to woo Hillary Clinton's disaffected women supporters.

It is as though American women are so dumb that as long as Palin has the "same internal plumbing" as Hillary, women would flock to her, although Palin is on the wrong side of every issue Hillary's women supporters care about (Palin is against abortion, pro-gun rights, pro-drilling).

Now the Republicans are marketing Palin as the best thing since sliced bread. She is the darling, the "babe" of the Republican right; "a pit bull with lipstick," a "game changer." But wait a minute! Palin, a staunch advocate of family values, told an embarrassed nation that her unmarried 17-year old daughter, Bristol, is pregnant! Not an issue at all, the right-wingers say, dismissing the scandal; the important thing is Bristol is going to keep her baby! Palin's infant son has down syndrome. What a pro-lifer, the right-wingers exult!

But wait a minute! If you are truly pro-life, why check the

baby's health before he is born. After all, a pro-lifer should be happy with any kind of baby from God! Could Palin possibly have been thinking abortion? Palin is also under investigation for possibly ordering the firing of an official for refusing to fire her brother-in-law from his job because he had divorced her sister.

Palin took several potshots at Obama during her acceptance speech, mocking Obama's "inexperience" and work as a community worker. Clearly, both the community workers and the poor people they assist are objects of ridicule to Palin, McCain and the Republican Party. If asked to comment what makes Palin qualified to be the VP, the McCain surrogates go ballistic. I actually heard a Republican governor promote Palin's foreign policy credentials thus: "Her state (Alaska) borders, Canada and Russia; so she has more foreign policy experience than Obama!"

But the McCain campaign will not let the press interview Palin. She will only give speeches in front of adoring fans, a la George W. Bush, but will take no questions from the press. Yet, the McCainites bristle at the suggestion that McCain campaign is shielding Palin from the press's probing questions which may

expose her lack of knowledge.

Talking of knowledge, Palin attended six colleges before graduating from Idaho State. John McCain did not attend any college; his education came from the Naval Academy where he was admitted as a legacy student and where he graduated 894th out of 899 cadets. But McCain and Palin are quick to ridicule Obama's Columbia and Harvard education. In the Orwellian universe of the Republican Party, higher education is bad, less education is good.

Let us see how less education has served America. George W. Bush, the C student, was marketed in 2000 as the "guy Americans would love to have a beer with." Well, that beer has cost America trillions of dollars, two wars, tripling of gasoline prices, unprecedented house foreclosures, a tanking economy, a recession and loss of respect abroad.

McCain has voted 90% of the time with Bush, and on camera has said that he does not understand the economy, and that on important issues he has always sided with Bush. As the Obama campaign says, McCain will be Bush's third term.

Let us contrast an unintelligent president with an intelligent one. During Bill Clinton's 8-year presidency, America enjoyed unprece-

dent peace, prosperity and respect abroad. Since Bill Clinton is a Rhodes Scholar, there is something to be said about intelligence and success as a US President.

In his acceptance speech, John McCain recounted in great lengths his experience as a prisoner of war. That is when he became proud of his country, he said. If McCain was a Democrat, Karl Rove would be ripping apart McCain's so-called "war hero" claim as savagely as he destroyed the 2004 presidential campaign of the real war hero, John Kerry, who actually fought bravely for his country and won a chest-full of medals for bravery.

War heroes, like George Washington, fight bravely for their country and help it to win. McCain did neither. John McCain was a bad naval aviator. Two of the planes he flew crashed, and one collided with power lines. In October 1967, he was shot down over Vietnam, and spent 5 years as a prisoner of war. A POW does not fight. So what makes McCain a war hero? That he was shot down? That he was a POW?

Show me another person anywhere in the world who demands adoration for being shot down, and imprisoned as a POW! Now that McCain has made it an issue, the Democrats should cut McCain's so-called war heroism

down to its puny size. Otherwise, they will lose in November.

A commentator aptly noted that John McCain is like "Mrs. Doubtfire" in the movie of that name. Mrs. Doubtfire was a man who failed miserably as a father; but after divorce, because he missed his children, he cross-dressed and became their nanny.

John McCain and the Republican Party have failed America miserably over the last eight years. They are the establishment party. So what do they do? They change their clothing. They pretend to be the insurgent party; the party of "change," stealing Obama's mantra of the last two years. They would like America to believe that a Democrat, rather than Bush, has been the President for the last eight years!

The McCain campaign is betting that they can sell America the lie that John McCain is a "maverick," rather than the right-wing Republican he actually is; that he is "bipartisan," when he has actually supported the extreme right agenda of Bush over 90% of the time; that he is a "moderate," when in reality McCain is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

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