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THE LAST PAGE

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During the first month of this year, the nation's major newspapers used the phrase "class warfare" in 267 stories, compared with 372 times in all of 2002. One might think the revolution is at hand. The reality, though, has more to do with the routines of American politics and journalism than with capitalists and workers on the barricades.

The official declaration of class warfare in America came on Thursday, January 2, when George W Bush, seeking to preempt criticisms of his tax cut plan, said, "I understand the politics of economic stimulus-that some would like to turn this into class warfare. That's not how I think."

If Bush was worried that his policy would trigger inflammatory class warfare rhetoric from Democrats, he shouldn't have been. The strongest same-day critique came from David Sirota, a spokesperson for Democrats on the House Appropriations Committee in USA Today: "Who's waging class warfare-the president, who insists on giving giant tax breaks to his rich pals ... or Democrats, who try to stop that kind of irresponsible behavior?"

Most newspapers simply framed the class warfare debate as Republicans versus Democrats, pitting advocates and opponents of Bush's policies in the standard "he said/she said" format. But the debate was pretty onesided. The key representative of the nation's working families-AFL-CIO president John Sweeney-was almost invisible in the mainstream media. Except for a January 4 story in the Chicago Sun-Times-which quoted Sweeney as saying, "The president should shelve the dividend cut and focus instead on a targeted recovery package that will help average American families"-the nation's top labor leader was basically shut out of the class warfare debate in the nation's major papers.

The real debate over Bush's statement took place on editorial and op-ed pages. An unsigned column on January 26 in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette explored the origins of the phrase (even citing the Communist Manifesto), and concluded, "Today, class warfare is a phrase that conservatives use to blast liberals, and that liberals, long on the defensive about it, are at last beginning to use to attack conservatives."

Chicago Tribune News Service columnist Matthew Miller raised the class warfare issue by posing the question, "Is the distribution of income produced by the free market presumptively moral?" After reviewing the arguments on both sides, he concluded that it wasn't, then asked his readers, "Which side are you on?"

It was the New York Times op-ed page that waged the most effective attack on Bush's economic program, with columnist Paul Krugman quarterbacking a team that included regulars Maureen Dowd, Nicholas Kristoff, and Bob Herbert. These columnists consistently and effectively criticized Bush's economic plans while chastising the Democrats for their limp response. In a January 21 column, Krugman demonstrated the devastating regressivity of Bush's tax cuts, then noted that the beneficiaries "are the usual suspects-the same small, wealthy minority that got the big benefits from the last tax cut. Does pointing this out constitute class warfare?"

The Times's editorial writers were more cautious: "It may not be class warfare, but it's breathtakingly provocative. One week after President Bush proposed billions in tax breaks for fretful stock owners, he revived a plan to wring an additional 10 hours of work each week from women with small children who are managing to hold a job under the federal welfare reform program."

Let's see: For the past year, Bush has ruthlessly used federal policy to widen the economic divide, giving huge tax breaks to the rich, weakening environmental regulations on business, cutting heating assistance to the poor in the dead of winter, and forcing welfare mothers to work extra hours. If this isn't class warfare, what is?

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