Shame on Bush -- and us

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THE MEDIA'S Stockholm syndrome finally seems to be wearing off.

Like freed hostages who gradually cease to identify with their captors, mainstream media outlets seem to have been seized by a new spirit of liberation in their coverage of the Bush administration. Lately, we've seen a rash of astonished, outraged stories and editorials relating to the administration's recently discovered malfeasance.

They go something like this:

• President Bush committed "Scooter" Libby's prison sentence! That's outrageous! Bush's own Justice Department routinely calls for some of the harshest sentences available under the federal sentencing guidelines! Why, Bush is a hypocrite!

• Bush is ignoring his constitutional duties! As the New York Times ponderously opined two weeks ago: "President Bush is notorious for issuing statements taking exception to hundreds of bills as he signs them. This week, we learned that in a shocking number of cases, the Bush administration has refused to enact those laws...." Why, the executive branch doesn't even pretend to execute laws it doesn't like!

• And, hey, this whole time, Dick Cheney's been completely off the reservation! The guy kept everyone out of the loop, including the Cabinet, as a recent Washington Post series meticulously documented. When senior administration officials learned — belatedly — of Cheney's machinations on military commissions, Guantanamo and interrogation tactics, many of them considered the vice president's positions unjustified, outrageous, even dangerous. Why, much of the time, virtually no one seems to have supported the controversial positions Cheney took, except for Cheney himself, a handful of dedicated acolytes and the clueless president (who was allowed to be "the decider" only as long as Cheney rigged the options in advance).

The new media message is righteous and clear: Administration officials tricked us — all of us! They assured us that everything they did was legal ... necessary ... for our own good ... but now we see that they were lying!

Well, yeah. So what else is new?

I don't want to be a party pooper, but I'm finding all this astonishment and giddy outrage a little off-putting.

It's not that outrage at the Bush administration isn't justified. It's entirely true, as an editorial in this paper declared stoutly Wednesday, that all "the Fourth of July language in the presidential statement" on the commutation of Libby's sentence shouldn't "disguise the [administration's] corruption of a fundamental American value: that all must be equal before the law."

It's also entirely true that Cheney turned himself into a virtual regent for the Bubble Boy in the Oval Office. He ignored Congress. He ignored most of his executive branch colleagues. He had trained seals on his legal team develop "legal" arguments for ignoring the Constitution and the law altogether.
The list of administration outrages could go on and on, so if the media have finally noticed that the emperor has no clothes, it's all to the good. Still, I'm troubled by the suggestion that all of us were somehow "tricked" by administration subterfuge into accepting its nefarious policies.

From the very beginning, this administration had no real plan, no coherent ideology, no evidence behind many of its assertions (including the ones that led to our ruinous war in Iraq). That's been entirely obvious for more than five years now.

Bush and Cheney valued power and expediency, nothing more — and much of the time, they didn't even bother to cover their tracks when they bypassed long-standing laws and regulations. Similarly, when it came to compliance with our laws and constitutional traditions, they hardly even pretended to give a hoot.

So why did it take us so long to notice?

Someday, historians will ponder our strange collective passivity in the face of Bush-Cheney madness. Why did the editorial boards of our major newspapers either parrot the administration line or raise only muted criticism on so many issues, and for so long? Where were the tough journalistic questions? Why didn't more members of Congress protest the administration's blatantly unjustified policies and transparent unconstitutional outrages?

For that matter, when Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, John Ashcroft and countless others found that the administration was, at Cheney's insistence, adopting policies they knew to be irresponsible and even illegal — when they found they had been locked out of the decision loop entirely — why didn't any of them go public with their protests back when it would have made a difference?

It's hard not to conclude that collectively, we were all too cowardly, slothful or puffed up with our own self-importance to ask the right questions and stand up for principle. The administration didn't trick us; we tricked ourselves.

Someday, the Bush era may come to seem like a bad dream, a shameful, inexplicable interlude in American history. We're right to be outraged by Bush and Cheney, but we should also save a bit of outrage for when we look in the mirror.

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