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Fifteen Months is Plenty of Time to Damage a Country

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It's a rare Bush news conference these days that fails to leave you gasping for air -- sitting stunned on a curbside between amusement and horror at the depth of his special blend of denseness and arrogance.

My favorite line from Wednesday's press conference is that in the 15 months he has left in office, he will "sprint to the finish line."

His thrust, I presume, is provided by his triumphs in New Orleans and Iraq, the strength of the housing market, the liquidity in the mortgage market, moral leadership that has stamped out Republican corruption, the cohesiveness of the country, the championing of life-saving research and a global statesmanship that has made America a beacon of respect around the world.

Of course, there is that slam-bang 20 percent approval rating, consisting mainly of angry middle-aged white guys huddling around the TV to lob spit at *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

Run like the wind, Mr. President. Americans are cheering you on.

But in one respect he is right. His sprint will likely be unimpeded by a Democratic Congress. As I recall, these were the people elected to end a war, stand up for the less-fortunate, and take back the hijacked soul of a country.

On Thursday, the Democrats in the House did for uninsured children what they have done for imperiled soldiers. An affordable program that costs a fraction of what it costs to incinerate people in a misbegotten neo-con pipedream -- and paid for by a tax on cigarettes, which kill even more people -- failed again. The cigarette companies are very happy. The uninsured children: not so much.

And as the war rages, the economy teeters, and legislation for change keeps bouncing back like a bad dollar bill in a soda machine, at least Speaker Nancy Pelosi can set us

straight on the terminology of an event that happened more than 90 years ago in a place once called the Ottoman Empire. In payback to her District's strong contingent of American-Armenian voters, she has poked a stick in the eye of Turkey -- one of the few strategic countries that isn't dragging our flag through the streets.

Madame Speaker, as you argue the word genocide, that breeze you feel is the sprinter whizzing by on his way to inflicting his final 15 months of ideology-driven destruction.

Of course, what damage can a 20 percent approval-rated president do in 15 months that he hasn't done in the last 81? For one thing, he could add an exclamation point to his presidency -- and get an affectionate nuggie from Dick Cheney -- by blowing something up in Iran.

Impossible? That is what we said when it began to look like he might have been less than forthcoming about the evidence of WMD.

A more immediate concern -- at least one hopes it's more immediate -- is another important piece of legislation that Bush said he is waiting to pounce on with his special veto pen.

The House this week overwhelmingly passed a federal shield law to protect reporters from having to reveal sources in federal cases. It's the kind of protection that gives people the courage to come forward with information about things like Abu Ghraib, secret CIA prisons and Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

It's a great bill for Democracy, but a bit inconvenient for an administration with so much to hide.

Fifteen months is plenty of time to take more lives, deny help to the vulnerable, diminish a nation's global reputation, and weaken a few fundamental freedoms -- especially if you are a sprinter with nothing to lose, and nobody is standing in your way.