

Robert Byrd, from his 45-year perspective in the US Senate, understands that cheques and balances are essential to avoid tragedy, even if they, at times, impede progress. His book, *Losing America*, contains several 'under-the-table' looks at Congress and the manipulations and arrogance of the coterie of ideologues who surround George W. Bush. Byrd, from the Southern tradition of politeness and respect, which often cloaks bar-room politics, is steeped in the history of the institution of the Senate. He is personally offended by Bush's lack of interest or curiosity in the legislative process prior to 9/11, and his dishonesty and deception afterwards. Byrd's address to the Senate on the eve of the war on Iraq was widely quoted and is contained in this book. While people marching in the streets made headlines, it was an 85-year-old senator, not previously known as an outraged progressive, who took on both the Administration for its hypocrisy and many of his colleagues for their lack of courage and principle. He voted against the war and continues to point out the dishonesty of the people who guide it. The book reads with a sensibility from another age. Although his own history is certainly not without problems, Senator Byrd's belief in the true democratic process, rather than the gun-barrel approach of George W. Bush, should be given the respect that he, and it, deserve.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr has been writing history since 1946 and has Pulitzer prizes to prove he does it well. His voice is considered, thoughtful, and scholarly — as one might expect from a historian and distinguished teacher. Toward the end of his book *War and the American Presidency*, however, Schlesinger's voice rises with outrage at those who surround and influence George W. Bush, the 'small group of Messianic statesman whose self righteousness bids fair to wreck our age'. He writes of the imperial presidencies of the early years of the country, which repressed dissent during wartime, and how the US moved from wars based on pique to engaging international diplomacy and internationalism. Schlesinger reminds us that all presidents since Wilson, with George W. Bush being the glaring exception, believed in statesmanship, diplomacy, alliances to guard against capricious choices and, when necessary, taking on common enemies.

Much of Schlesinger's book, however, also chronicles the record of the current Administration which, by being 'judge, jury, and executioner resurrects the imperial presidency'. An imperial presidency in the age of frigates and single-shot rifles cannot be compared with one that possesses weapons of mass destruction and a woolly-headed sense of divine guidance. We used to think of Henry Kissinger as the prototype for Dr Strangelove, but I wish Kubrick were still alive to do the remake with Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld in mind.

Needless to say, the recent election, instead of relegating George W. Bush and his

hangers-on to the historical trashbin, has pushed them to the front of the international agenda. A secretive, defensive, unreflective president will now shape the world for our grandchildren. Each of these books elaborates on the ineffectiveness of Bush dealing with the real enemy while he digs deeper into a country where he is creating more enemies by the day.

One has to ask why, instead of quietly writing their memoirs, two distinguished 87-year-old statesmen are raising the alarm and shaking us by the throat — like the aging Thomas Jefferson who, in his famous letter of 1820, said of the first compromise to try to divide the country between slave and free states: 'this momentous question, like a firebell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror'. Byrd and Schlesinger hear the firebell and are ringing it to wake us up. Another quote that might better capture Bush and his legacy would be from the Bible he uses as justification for his policies: 'He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind' (Proverbs 11, 29).

John Frey

NHS Plc – The privatisation of our health care
Allyson M Pollock
Verso, 2004
HB, 256 pp, £15.00, 1 84467 011 2

THIS is likely to be a controversial and much discussed book. It will be very unpopular in the corridors of power, which alone should ensure a wide readership. Having last worked in the NHS in 1986 and suffered under the New Zealand health reforms of the 1990s, I shouldn't perhaps have been surprised by this book. I was, however, not just surprised but appalled at the facts and figures, which Professor Pollock has assembled to support her account of the disastrous privatisation of the NHS in recent decades. She describes in detail the ideological obsession of successive governments with the belief that the market will solve the problems created by decades of underfunding a system that once was the envy of the world. Her recurring thesis is that the involvement of private business in the private funding initiatives (PFIs) led inevitably to expensive, yet smaller, hospitals offering less comprehensive services. These reductions were exacerbated by the hospital trusts having to service the new, and massively increased, debt from their operating budgets. The efficiencies needed to achieve the necessary savings resulted in a cascade of more restricted services; an army of managers and accountants needed to track expenditure. Savings were made by casualising the nursing workforce, outsourcing ancillary services, and higher transaction costs led to further cuts ... and so on.

The evidence presented seems almost too persuasive, so I was grateful for the opportunity to run the arguments past a senior Labour politician. The (somewhat

defensive) response was that outcomes are what is important and the waiting time for a hip replacement in England is a quarter that for the same operation in Wales (which, apparently, has not embraced involvement with the private finance sector in the same way). Why is it that waiting times for elective surgery seem in the minds of politicians to be the only arbiter of quality and effectiveness? Something about grumpy constituents perhaps?

The professional bodies — in particular the British Medical Association — do not emerge with much credit in this sad story. Indeed, many in senior positions within the profession seem to have been complicit, or at least asleep, to the implications of what was going on. Professor Pollock pulls no punches in naming names and the huge salaries paid to those who have benefited most from the backdoor privatisation of the health service. The tactics employed by government to discredit the author and her unit bring little credit to the former and would, I am sure, merit greater publicity.

The section on the evolution and reform of general practice/primary care in recent decades is interesting, if too brief. The effect of the new contract is only superficially discussed, however the local improvement finance trust (LIFT) scheme rates a mention and is portrayed as the thin edge of the same privatisation wedge. Erstwhile, primary care fundholding enthusiasts should definitely read this account; perhaps they will have a different perspective on the last two decades?

This book is very readable, unsettling, and particularly persuasive. I would recommend it to all those with an interest in the future organisation and delivery of primary and secondary care in the UK, as well as those in countries that consistently follow UK policies, irrespective of the evidence. The reforms of recent times have been profound and, clearly, the way in which we have traditionally practised will never be the same again. Will the changes ultimately be better for the patients as end users and for the health professionals working in the system? Time will tell if the 'efficiencies' gained will outweigh the transaction and opportunity costs, and the fundamental shift from a professional to an accounting paradigm of medicine and of health care in general.

It is a great shame that policy makers insist on repeating, rather than learning from, the mistakes of others. Ideologically driven blind faith in the omnipotence of market principles remains the greatest threat to health systems worldwide — the more so in the UK as this heavy-handed, misguided evangelism seems to have infected both sides of the political divide.

All in all, definitely worth a read, but not late at night — it is too troubling.

Les Toop