Ted Kennedy's Iraq Ravings
By Charles Krauthammer
Washington Post | September 26, 2003

"There was no imminent threat. This was made up in Texas, announced in January to the Republican leadership that war was going to take place and was going to be good politically. This whole thing was a fraud." -- Sen. Edward Kennedy on Iraq, Sept. 18

The Democrats have long been unhinged by this president. They could bear his (Florida-induced) illegitimacy as long as he was weak and seemingly transitional. But when post-9/11 he became a consequential president -- reinventing American foreign policy and dominating the political scene -- they lost it.

Kennedy's statement marks a new stage in losing it: transition to derangement. As such, it merits careful parsing:

(1) *Imminent threat?* How many times does one have to repeat this: When Bush laid out the case for the war in his 2003 State of the Union address, he deliberately denied imminent threat. "Some have said we must not act until the threat is imminent," he explained, but this president disagreed. The entire assumption underlying the Bush Doctrine of preemption is that Sept. 11 taught us that we live in a world where the enemy is too stealthy, his capacity for destruction too great and the margin for error too small to permit the traditional luxury of waiting for imminence. Indeed, in the U.N. speech one year ago that launched us on the road to war, Bush spoke not of a "clear and present danger," the traditional formulation of imminence, but of a "grave and gathering danger," an obvious allusion to Churchill's two-decade-long "gathering storm."

(2) *Texas?* A lovely and telling geographic tic, betraying the Massachusetts liberal's regional prejudice. For a president to unleash an unnecessary, cynical war he needs to be as far removed as possible from sanity (Hyannisport?). You head south and west -- to redneck country -- to plan your killings.

(3) *Good politically?* There are a host of criticisms one might level at Bush's decision to go to war -- that it was arrogant, miscalculated, disdainful of allies, lacking in foresight, perhaps even contrary to just-war principles. I happen not to agree with these criticisms. But they can be reasonably and honorably made. What cannot be reasonably and honorably charged, however, is that Bush went to war for political advantage.

On the contrary, this war was an enormous -- and blindingly obvious -- political risk. It was clear that if America failed either in the conduct of the war itself (a bloody Battle of Baghdad, for example) or in the aftermath (a failure of reconstruction), Bush would be deeply wounded politically.

And indeed he has been. The unsettled outcome and mounting casualties have so damaged his standing that his poll ratings are now at their lowest ever.

A year ago Bush was riding high. He decided nonetheless to put at risk the great political advantage he had gained as a successful post-9/11 leader -- an advantage made obvious by the Republican gains in last year's elections -- to go after Saddam Hussein.

Politically, the war promised nothing but downside. There was no great popular pressure to go to war. Indeed, millions took to the streets to demonstrate against it, both at home and abroad. Bush launched the war nonetheless, in spite of the political jeopardy to which it exposed him, for the simple reason that he believed, as did Tony Blair, that it had to be done.

You can say he made a misjudgment. You can say he picked the wrong enemy. You can say almost anything about this war, but to say that he fought it for political advantage is absurd. The possibilities for disaster were real and many: house-to-house combat in Baghdad, thousands of possible casualties, a chemical attack on our
troops (which is why they were ordered into those dangerously bulky and hot protective suits on the road to Baghdad). We were expecting oil fires, terrorist attacks and all manner of calamities. This is a way to boost political ratings?

Whatever your (and history's) verdict on the war, it is undeniable that it was an act of singular presidential leadership. And more than that, it was an act of political courage. George Bush wagered his presidency on a war he thought necessary for national security -- a war that could very obviously and very easily have been his political undoing. And it might yet be.

To accuse Bush of going to war for political advantage is not just disgraceful. It so flies in the face of the facts that it can only be said to be unhinged from reality. Kennedy's rant reflects the Democrats' blinding Bush-hatred, and marks its passage from partisanship to pathology.