

SEP presidential candidate on Bush's "Meet the Press" interview: "A spectacle of ignorance, cynicism and indifference"

By Bill Van Auken
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The following is a statement by Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Bill Van Auken on President Bush's appearance Sunday, February 8 on NBC's "Meet the Press."

President Bush's televised interview broadcast Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press" consisted of yet another set of lies designed to stem the growing tide of popular hostility over the exposure of the previous lies used by the administration to drag the country into the Iraq war.

With opinion polls showing Bush's approval rating falling sharply and opposition to the war on the increase, Bush's handlers scheduled the interview with the aim of refurbishing the image of a presidency that is becoming synonymous with criminality and deceit. The attempt, however, failed badly.

The interview presented the American people with a spectacle of ignorance, cynicism and callous indifference towards both the mounting numbers of dead and wounded in Iraq and the swollen ranks of the unemployed within the US.

Before launching the invasion of Iraq 11 months ago, Bush and his aides repeatedly told the American people that there was incontrovertible evidence that the Iraqi regime possessed hundreds of tons of chemical and biological weapons and that US intelligence knew where the stockpiles were located. They likewise insisted that Baghdad was well on its way to making a nuclear weapon and the means to carry out attacks against American cities.

Now that a nine-month search by 1,400 US weapons inspectors has turned up precisely nothing, Bush is advancing a new justification for the war. He told his interviewer, Tim Russert, that the war was necessary because Saddam Hussein was "a dangerous man" who "had the ability to make weapons."

This is a rationale that could be used to invade literally any country in the world. There is no nation, no matter how poor, that cannot be said to have the "ability to make weapons," including chemical and biological weapons. If Washington's former ally Saddam Hussein can be deemed "dangerous," so can any other head of state.

In advancing this rationale, Bush was not only providing a threadbare alibi for waging an unprovoked and unjustifiable war in Iraq, but also signaling what his administration is planning for the future.

He began the interview by making clear that the new "independent" commission he has named to look into a supposed "intelligence failure" concerning Iraqi weapons of mass destruction has been constituted not for the purpose of investigating how it was

possible for the administration to launch the war on false pretenses, but rather to cover up its responsibility and prepare new wars on a similar basis.

The commission, Bush said, "will help future presidents understand how best to fight the war on terror." He continued: "It's an important part of the kind of lessons learned in Iraq and lessons learned in Afghanistan prior to us going in, lessons learned that we can apply to both Iran and North Korea, because we still live in a dangerous world."

There are serious questions raised by these remarks. Is the administration planning to do to Iran and North Korea—included in Bush's "axis of evil"—what it has already done in Afghanistan and Iraq? What will be the cost in human life for both the peoples of those countries and American troops?

Bush went on to state: "I'm a war president. I make decisions here in the Oval Office in foreign policy matters with war on my mind."

Finally, he declared: "I believe it is essential that when we see a threat, we deal with those threats before they become imminent. It's too late if they become imminent. It's too late in this new kind of war."

How is Bush a "war president?" There has been no declaration of war against anyone. Rather, he heads an administration that has proclaimed an open-ended "war on terrorism" that it invokes to justify everything from the takeover of Iraq and its oil fields to the wholesale assault on democratic rights at home and massive tax cuts for the administration's principal political base—America's financial elite.

As for the insistence that Washington must act militarily against "threats before they become imminent," the "new kind of war" that Bush is describing is what is known in international law as a "preventive war," or "war of aggression." It was the rationale advanced by Hitler's Third Reich for its wars in Europe and by Japan for its attack on Pearl Harbor. It is the kind of war that the Nuremberg tribunal deemed the principal war crime carried out by the Nazis.

Bush is guilty of such a war crime in Iraq. Its victims number in the tens of thousands. According to the most reliable source on Iraqi casualties—Iraq Body Count—the number of confirmed civilian deaths, most of them women and children, has now risen to 10,000.

Among the US troops sent to Iraq, 534 have been killed, while the estimates of those wounded or injured seriously enough to be medically evacuated from Iraq range anywhere from 11,000 to 22,000. The administration is deliberately concealing the precise number from the American people.

Many of these young soldiers have suffered horrifying injuries—

severe burns, multiple amputations, massive head wounds.

Asked whether this human sacrifice was justified given the fact that there were no weapons of mass destruction, Bush gave an answer that was appalling in its lack of concern for the soldiers and their families.

“Every person that is willing to sacrifice for this country deserves our praise,” said Bush, who went on to misrepresent the findings of US weapons inspector David Kay and to revive the old lie that the Baghdad regime had ties to Al Qaeda.

In reality, the Bush administration has treated those who have been sacrificed in the Iraq war with contempt. It has banned news coverage of their caskets returning to the US so as to hide their deaths from the public. It has failed to provide adequate equipment to those sent to Iraq, while lengthening their tours of duty to make up for a military manpower crisis.

The wounded have been denied adequate medical care, and have been, in the words of one officer quoted in the media, “treated like dogs.”

Meanwhile, the administration’s budget proposal for the next fiscal year offers \$2.6 billion less than what is required meet veterans’ basic health care needs, under conditions in which they are already forced to wait six months or more for a medical appointment. The Bush White House is demanding enrollment fees as a precondition for any health care access and the doubling of prescription co-payments for veterans. It has adamantly opposed proposals to modestly increase the \$6,000 that goes to families of soldiers killed in action and the few hundred dollars granted for hazardous-duty pay.

Behind all of the “support the troops” rhetoric, the Bush White House manifests the same indifference to soldiers and veterans as it does to working class Americans generally.

It is within this context that Bush’s lies about his activities in the Vietnam-era National Guard are of political significance. In the interview, Bush dishonestly tried to portray scrutiny of his own record as an attempt to “denigrate the Guard.” The issue is how someone born to great wealth and privilege used political influence to jump to the front of a line of many tens of thousands waiting to get into the Air National Guard—at the time viewed as a safe haven from the war in Vietnam—and then avoided serving his full stint.

Asked about getting out of his commitment eight months early, Bush glibly replied: “Well, I was going to Harvard Business School and worked it out with the military.”

In the last two-and-a-half years, the Bush administration has called some 300,000 members of the National Guard and Reserve to active duty. Many of these men and women have been sent to Iraq and Afghanistan where they face being killed or wounded. Many have been separated from their families and loved ones for months on end, enduring great personal distress and financial loss. How many of them are able to return home by getting into Harvard Business School and “working it out with the military?”

Bush showed similar disdain for the casualties of an economic crisis that has wiped out nearly 3 million jobs since he took office. He insisted that the solution was to make permanent the massive tax cuts that have gone overwhelmingly to the millionaires and billionaires that constitute his administration’s core constituency.

What emerges is the portrait of an intellectual and moral cipher who speaks for a ruling elite determined to continue a policy of war abroad and economic plunder at home in line with its fixation on the accumulation of personal wealth.

One of the most chilling exchanges between Bush and Russert came at end of the hour-long session:

Russert: Are you prepared to lose?

Bush: No, I’m not going to lose.

Russert: If you did, what would you do?

Bush: Well, I don’t plan on losing. I have got a vision for what I want to do for the country. See, I know exactly where I want to lead.

Coming from Bush, this is not just the conventional declaration of confidence of a political candidate. As an unelected and illegitimate president who was installed in office by a right-wing bloc on the Supreme Court despite losing the popular vote, Bush’s insistence that he is “not going to lose” constitutes a clear threat. This is an administration that is prepared to resort to war, provocation and extra-constitutional measures to preserve its grip on power.

The answer to such threats and to the entire policy of war and social reaction spelled out by Bush in his interview will not be found in the Democratic Party or any of its candidates. Bush has been allowed to carry forward this policy because of the prostration of the Democrats, as well as the complicity of the mass media.

If Democratic candidates are now engaging in populist demagoguery about the war and social policies, it is to prevent the emergence of a genuine political alternative to the domination of American working people by the corporations and banks and to block any serious challenge to the two-party system.

The Socialist Equality Party is participating in the 2004 elections to prepare just such a challenge—an independent political movement of working people fighting for the socialist transformation of society.

We warn in advance that, whatever the outcome of the 2004 election, war and attacks on democratic rights and social conditions will continue. These are not the policies of just the Bush White House and the Republican Party, but of the American ruling elite as a whole. Replacing Bush with a Democratic president will not reverse the fundamental economic and political course that has been pursued by both parties over the past three years. That requires the emergence of a mass movement from below that forges its own political alternative to the two-party system.

The political preparation of such a movement is the task that the SEP has set itself in the current election campaign. I and my running mate, Jim Lawrence, urge all of our supporters and all those who look to the *World Socialist Web Site* for political analysis to read the SEP election statement, join our campaign and attend the March 13-14 national conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which has been called to discuss the political program of the SEP and the practical measures that will be taken to carry forward this fight in the 2004 elections.