

Bush addresses the Republican convention: social reaction in 'compassionate' garb

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The speech delivered by George W. Bush Thursday night to the Republican National Convention was hailed by the television and newspaper pundits as a tour-de-force which marked the emergence of the Republican presidential nominee as a serious political figure.

The reality is that despite 17 drafts and countless rehearsals, Bush's address was a hodgepodge of reactionary nostrums, clichés and contradictions. Various themes were raised—the succession of generations, the “era of responsibility,” etc.—and promptly dropped, without any logic or development. Reflecting the mediocrity who delivered it, the address was a graceless admixture of political barbs and bathos.

Among the most obvious absurdities in the meandering address were the following:

- * The eldest son of President George Bush presented himself as a Washington “outsider” and representative of small-town America.

- * He appealed to religious bigotry, echoing the Christian right on abortion, “faith” and “values”, while presenting himself as an advocate of “inclusion” and tolerance.

- * He pledged to “reduce nuclear weapons and nuclear tensions in the world,” while calling for the US to build a massive anti-missile system and scrap longstanding arms control treaties.

- * He attacked the Clinton White House for poisoning the political atmosphere in Washington, while accepting the nomination of the party that engaged in a nonstop campaign of dirty tricks, culminating in the impeachment and Senate trial of Clinton.

“I do not reinvent myself at every turn,” Bush declared. “I am not running in borrowed clothes.”

The Republican nominee's clothes are inherited, not borrowed. Bush is the son of a president and grandson of a senator. Like his Democratic rival, Al Gore, he is an heir to the privilege and wealth of the American aristocracy. Yet he claims to be the product of the family values of the west Texas oil town of Midland.

As for “reinvention,” the term seems appropriate for an individual who has been, in succession, a Yale fraternity boy, a failed Texas oilman, an unsuccessful congressional candidate, the front man for a syndicate purchasing a baseball team, a governor of Texas, and now, according to Republican Governor Thomas Ridge of Pennsylvania, nothing less than “the founding father” of “a new Republican Party.”

The speech indicated that the essence of “compassionate conservatism” is the proposition that those at the top of the economic ladder can indulge their most selfish and greedy instincts and simultaneously wrap themselves in the mantle of righteousness and humanitarianism. The gathering of wealth and privilege on the convention floor was understandably delighted with the message coming from the rostrum.

The substance of the program outlined by Bush was extremely right-wing. He called for the elimination of the inheritance tax and further huge tax cuts for the rich, including a reduction in the top tax rate for the wealthiest families from the current 39.6 percent to no more than 33.3 percent. While Bush maintained, “Those in the greatest need should receive the greatest help,” his tax plan would provide \$12,600 in tax cuts to those with incomes of \$200,000 a year, and nothing to those with incomes of \$20,000.

The Republican nominee pledged to improve education and save Social Security and Medicare by opening them up to market forces—the traditional nostrum of the far right. His plan for school vouchers and partial privatization of Social Security would mean the beginning of the end for public education and public old-age pensions.

Bush promised to boost military spending, slash taxes and avoid any cuts in Medicare or Social Security benefits for the elderly, all at the same time. Such pledges reveal an enormous degree of cynicism. The huge budget surpluses projected by the Clinton administration and Congress assume, against all historical experience, that American capitalism will never again face recession, let alone the bursting of the current financial bubble. Moreover, even in the most optimistic of budget scenarios, Bush's numbers do not add up. Choices will be made, and it is not difficult to guess how a Bush administration will decide when the conflict emerges between the claims of the Pentagon and the wealthy, and the needs of elderly pensioners.

As far as social and regulatory policy is concerned, Bush's rhetoric of initiating “an era of responsibility” has a definite content. It means placing responsibility on individuals, rather than on society or the state. It foreshadows the lifting of health, safety and environmental regulations and other restraints on business in the name of “economic freedom.”

Bush echoed the anti-abortion rhetoric of the Christian fundamentalists, and pledged to sign into law the bills outlawing so-called partial birth abortions, vetoed on several occasions by Clinton. At several points he spoke in the manner of a revivalist, to reassure the fundamentalists that, despite his rhetoric of tolerance, he remains the candidate who visited Bob Jones University.

In foreign policy, the selection of former Defense Secretary Richard Cheney as vice president has already sent a message that the younger Bush will be as aggressive as his father in the use of American military power to defend the global interests of American corporations and banks.

Bush added the promise that “at the earliest possible date, my administration will deploy missile defenses ... Now is the time, not to defend outdated treaties, but to defend the American people.”

This was a direct challenge, not only to the Russian government,

which has protested against a US abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty, but to China and the European powers, who have all warned that the unilateral deployment of a US anti-missile system would destabilize the world strategic balance and make the use of nuclear weapons more, rather than less, likely.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Republican convention, and the acceptance speeches of both Bush and Cheney, was the silence on impeachment. According to one press account, Bush campaign strategists forbade any mention of the “i-word” by any speaker throughout the four-day event, because of the overwhelming public hostility to the year-long Republican effort to remove Clinton from office for lying about his relations with Monica Lewinsky.

Bush made an indirect reference to the subject in his speech, saying, “I have no stake in the bitter arguments of the last few years. I want to change the tone of Washington to one of civility and respect.”

For Bush to declare “I have no stake” in the conflict in Washington is absurd. The leaders of Bush's party claimed that the issues raised by Clinton's relations with Lewinsky were so serious that they warranted his removal from office. Top congressional leaders of the Republican Party, including Newt Gingrich, Trent Lott, Tom DeLay and Jesse Helms, were intimately involved in the backroom conspiracy that produced the first-ever impeachment and Senate trial of an elected US president.

Bush wants to have it both ways, claiming in one and the same speech that he has “no stake” in the impeachment crisis, i.e., that he is neutral in the conflict between his own party's leaders and Clinton, while blaming Clinton for the divisiveness in official Washington.

The purpose of this doubletalk is transparently obvious: to maintain Bush's relations with the ultra-right and Christian fundamentalists, who played a decisive role in securing the presidential nomination, while insulating the Republican nominee from the political consequences of the impeachment debacle.

The centerpiece of Bush's campaign is an attempt to assuage popular hostility to the right-wing agenda of destroying social services and further enriching the wealthy, through public expressions of sympathy with the poor. This is the function of his principal slogan, “compassionate conservatism.”

Bush told the convention: “Big government is not the answer. But the alternative to bureaucracy is not indifference. It is to put conservative values and conservative ideas into the thick of the fight for justice and opportunity.”

Bush's campaign strategists claim to be advancing a right-wing solution to social problems. This is a fraud. Conservative values and conservative ideas are not an alternative path to justice and opportunity, but constitute the open and unabashed defense of entrenched privilege against the most minimal demands of social justice.

The Republican nominee declared, “Medicare does more than meet the needs of our elderly; it reflects the values of our society.” But Bush's own father opposed the creation of Medicare, the vast majority of his party's congressmen and senators voted against it when it was adopted in 1965, and have voted consistently to limit or reduce benefits. Most recently, they have blocked proposals to establish prescription drug benefits, something Bush claims to support.

Bush is compelled to admit that even at the height of the greatest financial boom in history, social contradictions are tearing apart American society. He said, “When these problems aren't confronted, it builds a wall within our nation. On one side are wealth and technology, education and ambition. On the other side of that wall are

poverty and prison, addiction and despair.”

This admission, however, contains an important distortion. Bush reduces the social polarization in America to the complacent stereotype of affluence for the many and desperate poverty for a ghettoized minority. In reality, only a small fraction, perhaps five percent, make up the sated upper-middle-class and ruling class layer whose interests Bush defends.

Below them is the vast majority of the population, dependent on wages and salaries rather than property income, working from paycheck to paycheck, and facing increasingly difficult conditions of life. For these 100 million working families, the loss of a job, a serious illness, or other family crisis can mean a rapid plunge into poverty and outright deprivation. Among an increasingly broad section of the working population, especially younger workers, low-wage jobs with no benefits are the rule, poverty is on the rise, and homelessness and hunger are a constant threat.

Neither Bush nor Gore can address this social reality, which is an indictment of the profit system in the richest country in the world.

In a tactical sense, Bush's combination of rhetorical concern and reactionary substance is a carbon copy of the transformation of the Democratic Party carried to its culmination under Clinton and Gore. Clinton was the true pioneer of “compassionate conservatism,” supplying the substance, if not the Madison Avenue label, in his 1992 and 1996 campaigns as a “new Democrat.”

The Clinton-Gore administration, by virtue of its continuous adaptation to the right-wing social program of the Republicans, has done more to bolster the “free market” dogma of the Republicans than the Republicans themselves. It was Clinton who carried out the abolition of the federal welfare program in 1996, and declared in a State of the Union address that “big government” was a thing of the past.

The same process is visible in relation to the impeachment issue. Bush and the Republicans seek to distance themselves from the impeachment crusade while at the same time branding Clinton a moral leper and inciter of partisan warfare. This contortionist's trick is only possible because they are secure in the knowledge that Gore and the Democrats will not dare to take up the challenge—which would mean denouncing the impeachment campaign for the right-wing conspiracy that it was.

In both his social policy and his cover-up for the impeachment conspiracy, Bush takes advantage of the collapse of any genuine opposition to his right-wing agenda on the part of the Democratic Party.



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