

Bush inaugurated in atmosphere of foreboding

The Editorial Board
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George W. Bush was inaugurated as president of the United States Saturday in a ceremony conducted in a subdued atmosphere. Bush's brief and defensive speech, the media coverage, the surrounding protests—even the weather, a day-long cold drizzle—gave the quadrennial ritual a somber character, rather than the usual mood of celebration.

Bush's speech after he was sworn in as the forty-third president, while reiterating his right-wing policy agenda and appeals to religion, was notable for its pessimism. This is unusual in a presidential inauguration, where the tone normally is one of optimism, or at least satisfaction after electoral victory. Even in the depths of the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt declared in his inaugural speech, “There is nothing to fear but fear itself.”

The only memorable passage in the Bush speech expressed concern over the lack of legitimacy, not only of his own government, but of the entire US social system: “While many of our citizens prosper,” Bush said, “others doubt the promise, even the justice, of our own country. The ambitions of some Americans are limited by failing schools and hidden prejudice and the circumstances of their birth. And sometimes our differences run so deep, it seems we share a continent, but not a country.”

The last remark, whether intentionally or not, is particularly revealing. It seems to acknowledge the reality that America in 2001 is a deeply divided country, and that the election contest in Florida is only a precursor of even more bitter conflicts.

Bush enters the White House not only without a mandate, but having received 600,000 fewer votes than his Democratic opponent Al Gore. He owes his office to the individual who swore him in as president, Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist, leader of the 5-4 right-wing majority on the high court which handed Bush victory in Florida and the critical Electoral College

margin.

There were reminders of the stolen election throughout the day: Rehnquist administering the oath of office, Vice President Al Gore sitting by stolidly, demonstrators along Pennsylvania Avenue who were certainly louder, if not more numerous, than the Republican Party supporters who came to cheer the inauguration. There were chants of “Hail to the thief” and placards reading “Coups” and “Selected, not Elected” and “Gore by 500,000, Bush by one” (a reference to the margin in the Supreme Court).

Even the crowd attending the inauguration ceremony itself was divided. The seated spectators, most of them Republican loyalists invited by Bush, cheered for Rehnquist and the Bush family, but sat in silence at the entry of Hillary Clinton and Democratic congressional leaders. The larger crowd beyond the seats, in the Mall, showed the opposite response, and there were many catcalls heard for Bush himself.

Bush referred to the need for unity and the danger of division at several places in his address, but nowhere was there any suggestion that he would back away from or moderate the right-wing political agenda on which he ran. He ticked off the main goals: privatization of education, Medicare and Social Security (all under the label of “reform”), an accelerated military buildup, tax cuts. The last pledge—of a policy whose benefits will go overwhelmingly to the rich and privileged—was the only one which evoked genuine enthusiasm in the guest seats.

Bush sought to paper over the deep social contradictions in American society with repeated references to religion. In a speech which lasted barely 14 minutes, there were no less than 10 mentions of religion, churches and god—more than in the invocation delivered by the son of evangelist Billy Graham.

There is, of course, ample reason for foreboding in the position of the incoming administration. It faces a worsening economic situation, with the prospect of a

recession that would rapidly eliminate the federal budget surplus. An economic downturn would not only threaten to spark an outright crisis in the financial markets, it would rapidly expose the tenuous position of millions of working class and middle class families, without significant savings and with a social safety net which has been ripped to shreds over the last two decades.

To say that Bush is unprepared for such a crisis is a gross understatement. A man who embarked on a full-time political career only at the age of 48, he takes office with only six years experience in the largely ceremonial position of governor of Texas. His social base combines the extremely narrow—the financial elite, and the extremely unstable—the frenzied right-wing elements who conducted political warfare for eight years against Clinton.

Bush's emphasis on private charity and “faith-based” solutions to social problems underscores that his administration will be unable and unwilling to deal with a serious social crisis. Bush revealed the real meaning of his calls for “personal responsibility” in his comments on the power blackouts in California, which he dismissed, ludicrously, as a state problem of no concern to the federal government.

The right-wing character of Bush's policies was demonstrated in the first action of the administration, to block or rescind scores of executive orders and regulations dealing with the environment, health, food and safety, and workplace conditions that were rushed through in the final weeks of the Clinton administration.

Bush invocations of “civility” are absurd coming from the representative of the political party which carried out the impeachment vendetta against the Clinton administration and then hijacked the presidential election in Florida. The vicious face of the new Republican administration will be demonstrated soon enough, in the midst of great social convulsions involving millions of working people.



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