

# Bush addresses the US Congress: An illegitimate president, a dubious surplus, a mounting social crisis

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There was more than the usual degree of political hokum in the nationally televised speech to Congress delivered by George W. Bush Tuesday night. Both the political events surrounding Bush's entry into the White House and the policies advanced by the Republican president contributed to an air of unreality, if not outright fraud.

There was the traditional pomp and circumstance of a presidential address: a joint session of Congress; the presence of the cabinet, the diplomatic corps, the military brass and other assorted dignitaries; a simultaneous broadcast on all the major television networks. But these could not disguise the fact that Bush took the rostrum as a political pretender.

Bush owes his presidency not to the will of the electorate—who preferred Democrat Al Gore by a margin of 600,000 votes—but to the anti-democratic intervention of a 5-4 majority on the US Supreme Court. No president for more than a century has assumed office with less of a popular mandate for his policies.

Opinion polls published on the eve of the speech showed Bush to be less popular after his first month in office than any president at a similar point in his administration over the previous 50 years. He stands lower in the polls than Clinton did before the latest wave of media scandal-mongering about presidential pardons.

Despite the efforts of Bush and the Democrats to appear cordial, the tensions stemming from the Florida election crisis were visible at the joint session. When the House usher announced the arrival of the Supreme Court justices, there was audible booing from the Democratic side. In the event, only one justice entered the chamber, Stephen Breyer, who had voted in favor of continuing the recount in Florida. As he passed down the aisle, a top Republican, House Majority Leader Richard Armey, refused to shake his hand.

The absence of the remaining eight justices, including all five who favored the Republican candidate in their December 12 ruling in *Bush v. Gore*, has a political significance. Most likely the right-wing majority calculated that their presence at the speech would have focused attention on their unprecedented role as kingmakers in the presidential contest.

Bush devoted the bulk of his speech to arguing that the federal budget surpluses projected over the next decade are so massive that his proposed \$1.6 trillion tax cut—half of which goes to the wealthiest one percent of Americans—is really quite modest and affordable.

This policy is based on willful blindness to economic reality. It assumes that American capitalism will never again experience a significant recession; that the United States can continue an unprecedented financial boom indefinitely, regardless of global conditions; that the contradictions of the profit system, expressed in the fluctuations of the business cycle and in larger and more protracted financial crises, are no longer a factor.

This is assumed under conditions where the US economy is visibly

moving into recession. Bush hinted at this trend, suggesting that his tax cut plan would stimulate the economy and guard against a slump. The president did not address the obvious corollary: any slowdown in the US economy, especially in the booming financial markets, will cut government revenues, sharply reduce the projected surpluses, and make a mockery of the budget forecasts on which the administration's tax cut plan is based.

Even a right-wing supporter of Bush's policies, retired congressman Bill Archer of Texas, former chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, suggested that making firm predictions about the performance of the US economy 10 years into the future means entering into "never-never land." Yet it is precisely on such financial fairy tales that Bush's budget plans are predicated.

While the surplus is largely hypothetical, the use which Bush plans for it is not. He proposes to begin immediately the biggest-ever transfer of wealth from working class Americans to the super-rich. This includes the abolition of the inheritance tax, costing upwards of \$200 billion as it is phased out over 10 years, and \$50 billion a year thereafter; a reduction in income tax rates across the board, with the biggest reduction for the highest incomes; and other provisions that will disproportionately favor the wealthy.

It is remarkable that an American president can deliver a speech which begins with a litany of unmet social needs—poverty, failing schools, elderly people unable to afford prescription drugs, an energy crisis—and yet propose, as his single largest outlay, funneling nearly \$800 billion into the pockets of the wealthiest Americans.

It is even more remarkable that the speech meets virtually no serious opposition within the political establishment. Bush proposes to give the surplus to the wealthy. His spineless Democratic opponents, together with some Republicans, suggest that it is more important to pay down the national debt. Not one Democratic or Republican politician suggests that the budget surplus should be used to increase spending to meet social needs.

Bush's budget speech was more than a manifestation of right-wing politics, catering to the crass self-interest of the wealthy. It demonstrated the disorientation of a government and a ruling elite that are poorly prepared for the inevitable emergence of a sharp economic, social and political crisis.

An important factor in this crisis—although concealed by the fawning press coverage of Bush's first month in office—is the intellectual and political vacuity of the man who occupies the White House. As in his two press conferences, the first in Mexico and the second last week in Washington, the speech to Congress provided an embarrassing glimpse of the inner Bush.

His language was banal in the extreme, crafted by speech writers intent

not so much in talking down to the American people as in keeping the argument on a plane commensurate with the intellectual abilities and knowledge of the speaker. Any and all phrases that might have led to a repetition of the verbal stumbles of the election campaign were avoided. Hence the short, simple, declarative sentences, the quotes from Yogi Berra and the echoes of the children's tale about Goldilocks—a tax cut not too big, not too small, but “just right.”

Following Bush's press conferences, Michael Allen of the *Washington Post* wrote, somewhat charitably: “Throughout his first month in office, the president's remarks on substantive issues have been consistent but in every case brief, leading policy analysts and congressional leaders to question whether the pattern is more indicative of an exceptionally disciplined politician, or one with a shallow grasp of the issues at hand.”

As bizarre as it might seem, the president of the United States appears to be a man not terribly interested in politics. A barely noted fact about Tuesday's speech is that it was the first such event which George W. Bush has ever attended personally, even though his father delivered three State of the Union addresses to joint sessions of Congress, and sat in the vice presidential chair as Ronald Reagan delivered eight more.

During the four years of his father's presidency, the younger Bush indicated no real interest in politics or policy, preferring instead the fellowship of oil millionaires and baseball owners. Not until 1994, at the age of 46, did he decide on a serious political commitment, running for governor of Texas, against the advice of his parents and Republican Party professionals.

George W. Bush enters the White House, not only as the least experienced president of the past century, but also as the least traveled. The American ruling elite likes to think of the United States as the world's only remaining superpower, but the new chief executive knows little or nothing about that world.

Bush has traveled to Europe only once in his life, despite the opportunities provided by wealth and his father's political position. His one visit was a brief stopover in Italy to visit his daughter while she was studying there. He has never visited Britain, France, Germany, Japan or Russia. His only long overseas trip was to China, while his father was US envoy there, and he has been to Mexico, mainly brief trips across the Rio Grande from his home state of Texas. He has never been to South America, Africa, India or Australia.

The new president not only does not like to travel, he does not like to read—reportedly preferring executive summaries to the texts of documents, and avoiding books unless they concern sports. (During the Florida election crisis he was engrossed in a biography of baseball player Joe DiMaggio.) His weekends resting at the ranch, his abbreviated office hours and frequent naps—despite apparently excellent health—suggest that President George W. Bush does not like to work very hard.

These facts are largely concealed by the press. The *New York Times*, for instance, in its editorial on the budget speech, called it a “poised, focused and warmly received address ... with some eloquent flourishes that showcased Mr. Bush's likability [and] self-confidence.” CBS news anchor Dan Rather said the speech demonstrated Bush's “political growth” in the brief period since his inauguration.

In the initial stages of the Bush administration, there were attempts to put a good face on the president's less than strenuous activity level, suggesting that Bush and Vice President Richard Cheney would team up in the style of a corporate CEO and Chief Operating Officer—one setting policy, the other supervising its day-to-day execution. Another interpretation was that Bush would act as ceremonial head of state, with Cheney serving as de facto prime minister.

Such musings ignore a fundamental fact of the US constitutional structure: there is not a separation, as in other capitalist democracies, between the head of state and head of government. While in many countries a constitutional monarch or president carries out ceremonial

functions, while the prime minister actually directs policy-making and the daily operations of government, in the United States these roles are combined in a single office.

The US president is ultimately answerable to the ruling corporate and financial oligarchy, but his office is not that of a mere figurehead. The presidency is at the center of a vortex of conflicting social and political forces. The occupant of the White House holds the highest office in a massive, highly complex and volatile society. Recent events—the impeachment of Clinton, the election crisis of 2000—have revealed an enormous sharpening of tensions, both between the major social classes, and within the ruling economic and political strata. There are many signs of deep divisions and the growth of centrifugal tendencies within the political establishment. Especially under such conditions, the political, emotional and intellectual demands on the president are considerable.

The divisions that exist within the US ruling elite as a whole are reflected within the Bush administration. Overseas commentators have raised concerns over the apparent lack of cohesion within the Bush administration, especially in foreign policy matters. It is well known, for example, that there are divisions within Bush's foreign affairs team over US policy toward Iraq, with Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld skeptical, at best, over the proposal of Secretary of State Colin Powell to scale back the sanctions regime against Baghdad.

But with the installation of Bush—in a manner that has compromised his legitimacy from the outset—the American ruling elite has elevated a man wholly unqualified and unequipped to meet the demands of his office. There exists a gaping vacuum of leadership at the center of the American government, a vacuum that, like the tax cut plan, expresses both disorientation and recklessness on the part of decisive sections of the US ruling elite. They are consumed by the most short-term considerations, above all, by the state of their stock portfolios. All other issues are subordinated to the overriding question of how to enrich those who are already wealthy beyond belief.

Not since the waning days of the Reagan administration has a US president been so visibly out of his depth and politically disengaged. The consequences then were the Iran-contra affair and the emergence of a secret “government within the government”—a network of military and intelligence operatives that carried out its own foreign policy, with the tacit approval of the president.

The American ruling class is unprepared, both in terms of its policies and its leading personnel, for the shocks that it will inevitably encounter. It faces a host of political flashpoints overseas, from Russia to the Middle East, from Indonesia to Colombia. It faces a mounting economic and financial crisis both within the US and internationally. And most importantly, it faces powerful but as yet inarticulate opposition from the great mass of working people at home.



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