

Bush's speech on homeland defense: the banality of reaction

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The speech delivered by George W. Bush in Atlanta Thursday night was billed by his aides as the most important since he addressed a joint session of Congress nine days after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. By raising public expectations ahead of time, the White House focused attention on an event that only highlighted the combination of cynicism and intellectual incompetence that distinguishes the “commander-in-chief.”

What substance the speech had was a list of repressive measures that the Bush administration and Congress have approved over the past two months, which have gone a considerable way towards establishing the legal framework for a police state in America. The new anti-terror law authorizes widespread electronic spying and preventive detentions; armed National Guard troops have been mobilized in locations throughout the country; there is intensified police surveillance of immigrants and stepped-up patrolling of the US border. Bush appealed for thousands of public safety volunteers, vigilantes in all but name, to supplement the efforts of the local, state and federal police.

This in itself would not be worth a separate comment. Bush has repeatedly made it clear during the past two months that his entire political agenda has been radically transformed since September 11—or rather, the reactionary and anti-democratic agenda has emerged, stripped of its election-year packaging about “compassionate conservatism.”

What was notable about the Atlanta speech was the glimpse it gave of the personality of Bush—which, since he occupies the highest office in the most powerful government on the planet, has a definite significance. The American ruling class, under circumstances that should not be forgotten, chose last December to place a

man in the Oval Office who is several cuts below intellectual mediocrity.

The Atlanta address was Bush at his most incoherent and banal. One had the impression that each paragraph in the speech had been placed on a separate note card, and the entire pack was then shuffled into random order before it was handed to Bush. Hence the peculiar speaking style, in which Bush shows some familiarity with the individual words being used—he reportedly rehearses pronunciation diligently to avoid his trademark verbal gaffes—but seems unaware that words combine to make sentences and sentences to make arguments.

The 2,700-word address took half an hour to deliver, but it was devoid of any substance or logic. Viewing Bush's performance, one had the impression that the speaker himself had largely lost interest after the first 15 minutes or so.

Bush did not even attempt to deliver a reasoned argument for the policies of his administration, either in waging war in Afghanistan or conducting the “war at home.” Instead, he uttered a series of applause lines crafted by his speech writers—not a difficult job given the stage-managed circumstances of the speech, before a vetted audience of policemen, firemen, postal workers and health care workers, with a large admixture of Republican Party loyalists.

The speech was a mixture of short, declarative sentences, one-sentence paragraphs and patriotic bromides inserted without any apparent concern to provide a connected whole, together with the obligatory invocations of religion and God: “America is a great nation ... Life in America is going forward ... Flags are flying everywhere ... We are renewing and reclaiming our strong American values ... Ours is a wonderful nation...”

Bush praised firefighters, teachers, postal workers, health care workers and American soldiers. He challenged his listeners intellectually by quoting a fourth-grade schoolgirl and a four-year-old child.

It is a close call whether such a speech is more insulting to the audience that hears it, or to the speaker asked to deliver it. Bush's White House handlers clearly consider both to be intellectual pygmies, and they instructed the speechwriters accordingly.

Interspersed in the text were the barefaced lies that are unavoidable in any speech by an imperialist head of state in time of war. Bush declared, "Public health officials have acted quickly to distribute preventative antibiotics to thousands of people who may have been exposed," although postal workers in Washington, DC would be the first to scorn that claim. Two postal workers died because the authorities gave antibiotics to senators and congressmen but not to those who delivered their mail.

He claimed, "Unlike our enemy, we respect life. We do not target innocent civilians." But in Kabul, Afghanistan, US warplanes, equipped with the most advanced precision weapons, including laser targeting, have twice hit the clearly marked Red Cross warehouse. Other air strikes have destroyed hospitals, nursing homes, food supply warehouses and other international relief facilities. In so-called Taliban areas, the US is raining down death and destruction by means of carpet-bombing by B-52s as well as cluster bombs and other anti-personnel weaponry.

Bush warned, "Our nation faces a threat to our freedoms." That is true, but the real threat comes not from Osama bin Laden and a relative handful of Islamic fundamentalists, but rather from the full-scale mobilization of the repressive forces of the American government, whose target, ultimately, is the democratic rights of the American people.

"We wage a war to save civilization itself," Bush proclaimed. On the contrary, the American war against Afghanistan is only the beginning of wider and more destructive military intervention to establish US domination of the Middle East and Central Asia. This region is one of the oldest cradles of human civilization, but the US interest lies not in its culture or history, but in its oil and gas reserves, the largest in the world.

Bush concluded, "Too many have the wrong idea of

Americans as shallow, materialistic consumers who care only about getting rich and getting ahead." Perhaps these ideas were sparked by the performance of the White House and congressional Republicans, who decided that the most fitting memorial to the 4,600 people massacred on September 11 would be the passage of new tax breaks for the biggest and wealthiest corporations in America.

Bush aides had hoped to use the Atlanta speech to shore up the administration's public standing. There is intense concern in the White House that the wide but shallow support that Bush has enjoyed since September 11 is being undermined by the inconclusive military campaign in Afghanistan and the incompetent response to the anthrax attack.

But the television networks largely passed on the opportunity to provide live coverage of the president. CBS declined entirely, and NBC and Fox had their cable subsidiaries carry the broadcast, while running their regular programming. Only ABC carried the speech, and even this was arguably a commercial decision—since it meant that ABC, the lowest-rated network in that Thursday night time slot, would not have that half hour counted in the November sweeps by the rating services, thus boosting its overall average. Public television also stayed with regular programming.

Perhaps the ultimate comment on the Bush speech came from Fox, the Murdoch-owned network that is closely identified with the right wing of the Republican Party, and whose cable news channel is run by former Reagan campaign chief Roger Ailes. Fox News Channel offered coverage of the Bush speech to local stations on a "Level 2" basis, making it optional. After reported pressure from Ailes, the coverage was upgraded to "Level 1," making it mandatory. But two hours before the speech, after Fox received a synopsis of it, coverage was downgraded again, on the grounds that there was little news.



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