

White House cancels poetry symposium in response to protest

David Walsh
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The office of Laura Bush, wife of the president, announced February 5 the indefinite postponement of a symposium on the American poets Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Langston Hughes in response to plans by some of those invited to protest the war against Iraq.

The Bush White House responded with its usual contempt for democratic rights to the threat of popular sentiment being aired, issuing a statement that read, "It came to the attention of the First Lady's Office that some invited guests want to turn what is intended to be a literary event into a political forum. While Mrs. Bush understands the right of all Americans to express their political views, this event was designed to celebrate poetry."

The planned protest was principally the work of Sam Hamill, publisher of Copper Canyon Press and one of the invitees to "Poetry and the American Voice." Hamill wrote to others who had been invited urging that a protest against the impending assault on Iraq be made at the event.

Hamill explains how the idea originated: "When I picked up my mail and saw the letter [the invitation to the symposium] marked 'The White House,' I felt no joy. Rather I was overcome by a kind of nausea.... Only the day before I had read a lengthy report on George Bush's proposed 'Shock and Awe' attack on Iraq, calling for saturation bombing that would be like the firebombing of Dresden or Tokyo, killing countless innocent civilians. Nor has Bush ruled out the use of nuclear weapons. I believe the only legitimate response to such a morally bankrupt and unconscionable idea is to reconstitute a Poets Against the War movement like the one organized to speak out against the war in Vietnam."

The response was overwhelming. Hamill's web site,

www.poetsagainsthewar.org, now contains 4,600 poets from various countries in its database. He suggested that the collection might represent "the largest unified voice of poets ever assembled ... all basically saying the same thing in one way or another." Hamill noted the obscenity of organizing such an event honoring Whitman and Hughes in particular, known for their radical and anti-establishment views: "So why they thought they could have a symposium on Whitman, and Hughes and Dickinson and have no politics involved is utterly beyond me."

Former US poet laureates Stanley Kunitz and Rita Dove were among those who refused to attend the event. Kunitz told *CBS News*, "I think there was a general feeling that the current administration is not really a friend of the poetic community and that its program of attacking Iraq is contrary to the humanitarian position that is at the center of the poetic impulse."

Dove explained she had intended to decline the invitation "at a time when the White House is gearing up for a unilateral war of aggression.... The abrupt cancellation of the symposium by the White House confirms my suspicion that the Bush administration is not interested in poetry when it refuses to remain in the ivory tower, and that this White House does not wish to open its doors to an 'American Voice' that does not echo the administration's misguided policies."

Former poet laureate Richard Wilbur, along with Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, current poet laureate Billy Collins and about 40 other writers and artists signed an anti-war petition last month. Commenting on the Hamill protest, Collins commented, "If political protest is urgent, I don't think it needs to wait for an appropriate scene and setting and should be as disruptive as it wants to be."

Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, founder of the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, told the media, “The poet by definition is the bearer of freedom and love, and ...by definition he has to be an enemy of the state and everything the state does, and one of its primary activities, which is war.” His poem, “Coda,” includes the lines, “And America turns the attack on the World Trade Center / Into the beginning of the Third World War.” Jay Parini, one of the invitees to the White House, told the press that he had accepted the invitation “because I thought I could have said something about the war directly to Mrs. Bush.”

The distinguished poet W.S. Merwin, now 75, commented on Hamill’s site: “It would not have been possible for me ever to trust someone who acquired office by the shameful means Mr. Bush and his abettors resorted to in the last presidential election. His nonentity was rapidly becoming more apparent than ever when the catastrophe of Sept. 11, 2001 provided him and his handlers with a role for him, that of ‘wartime leader’, which they, and he in turn, were quick to exploit. This role was used at once to silence all criticism of the man and his words as unpatriotic and to provide the auspices for a sustained assault upon civil liberties, environmental protections, and general welfare.”

Merwin continued: “I think that someone who was maneuvered into office against the will of the electorate, as Mr. Bush was, should be allowed to make no governmental decisions (including judicial appointments) that might outlast his questionable term, and if the reasons for war were many times greater than they have been said to be I would oppose any thing of the kind under such ‘leadership’. To arrange a war in order to be re-elected outdoes even the means employed in the last presidential election. Mr. Bush and his plans are a greater danger to the United States than Saddam Hussein.”

Veteran poets Robert Bly, Robert Creeley Grace Paley, Adrienne Rich and Sandra Cisneros also contributed to Hamill’s web site. In his poem, Bly writes: “Tell me why it is we don’t lift our voices these days / And cry over what is happening. Have you noticed / The plans are made for Iraq and the ice cap is melting? ... How come we’ve listened to the great criers — Neruda, / Akhmatova, Thoreau, Frederick Douglass — and now / We’re silent as sparrows in the

little bushes?”

Various events are being organized nationwide on February 12, in the name of “Poetry Against the War.” Hamill intends to compile an anthology of the poems he has received and present them to the White House on that day.

The ultra-right, stung by the fiasco, reacted with venom. T.R. Ponick in the *Washington Times* commented that Hamill had “quickly e-mailed a few hundred of his closest radical poet friends, soliciting anti-war-verse stink bombs to shower on Mrs. Bush and her husband’s administration. These and other ‘poems’—hastily scribbled, unrevised, anti-U.S. free-verse screeds clearly cobbled together in 10 minutes or less from a knapsack full of Marxist clichés—are popping up on the Internet.”

Roger Kimball, managing editor of *The New Criterion*, self-styled defender of Western civilization, observed in the *Wall Street Journal* that, contrary to Hamill’s claims about the Bush war plans, “Every report I have seen has dilated on the extraordinary efforts of US military planners to minimize civilian casualties by the use of precision weapons, tactics to isolate Saddam from control of his weapons of mass destruction, and so on.”

Kimball goes on: “But somehow the headline ‘US Strives to Remove Brutal Dictator, Liberate the Iraqi Populace, While Keeping Civilian Casualties and Damage to Infrastructure to a Minimum’ doesn’t play well to the gallery.”

The *New York Times*, in its inimitable fashion, carried a column February 8 by Leonard Garment, who from the moral high ground he gained as counsel to the late Richard Nixon, laments the damage being done by the poets’ protest. He complains about the “bad behavior” of those opposed to the war and argues that it is in the best interests of artists concerned with their careers to curry favor with those in power. “Such relationships,” he writes, “will thrive only if politicians and artists display mutual restraint.”



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