Bush press conference highlights government crisis

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The press conference held by George W. Bush on July 30 left the unmistakable impression of an administration in crisis. Wednesday's session, held three days before the president was set to begin a month-long vacation at his Texas ranch, was just the ninth press conference of Bush's term and the first since early March, before the invasion of Iraq.

It was only called after weeks of pressure from reporters, including a shouted request directed at the president by CBS News' Bill Plante after an appearance by Bush the day before. Bill Clinton had held 33 news conferences by the same point in his first term, and George H.W. Bush, the current president's father, had held 61.

The administration's aversion to press conferences has two root causes: concerns on the part of Bush's political handlers about his general lack of knowledge and limited mental capacities, and an obsession with secrecy that reflects the White House's contempt for democracy.

Based on Bush's performance July 30, his aversion to appearing before the press—even the servile crowd that comprises the White House press corps—is well founded. Despite the efforts of most reporters to lob innocuous questions, Bush proved himself incapable of formulating a coherent argument on any substantive issue. The 50-minute session was a confused collection of lies and evasions, interspersed with sound bites taken from the grab-bag of Bush administration propaganda.

The combination of arrogance and ignorance was most succinctly demonstrated in his remark about the assassination of Saddam Hussein's sons. Bush noted that it was "important that Saddam's sons were brought to justice." Brought to justice? What charges were laid against the Hussein brothers? Before what legal body were they indicted, tried and convicted? The pair were summarily executed by US troops as part of the military conquest and colonial occupation of Iraq.

In his opening statement, the president recited two of the administration's standard lies. First, that Iraq had been "liberated" by the US military and was now "free" (he used the phrase "free Iraq" six times in his news conference) and "on the path to self-government and peace." Second, that only "the violent remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime, joined by terrorists and criminals" were offering resistance to the American occupation forces. Both claims fly in the face of the facts on the ground in Iraq, even in the vetted manner in which they are presented by the US media.

In an attempt to deal with the issue of the missing Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Bush resorted to a combination of sophistry and verbal trickery. He said, "We know that Saddam Hussein produced and possessed chemical and biological weapons, and has used chemical weapons."

The undeniable fact that Hussein at one time produced and used WMD is beside the point. Washington knows about such things better than most, since it helped him produce such weapons in the 1980s and tacitly sanctioned their use when the US government was backing the Hussein regime in its war against Iran. The question is whether he had them and was prepared to use them in March of 2003.

Bush continued: "He also spent years hiding his weapons of mass destruction programs from the world. We now have teams of investigators who are hard at work to uncover the truth."

Here Bush resorted to a rhetorical sleight of hand that has increasingly been employed by administration spokesmen, i.e., substituting "weapons programs" for "weapons." This is not a slip of the tongue. The more obvious it has become in the aftermath of the invasion that Iraq had no significant WMD, the more the administration has taken to talking about weapons "programs."

Prior to the war, the administration did not limit itself to claims of Iraqi WMD programs. It asserted repeatedly that it had hard proof that Saddam Hussein was concealing actual weapons. Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell and others spoke of massive stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons, in addition to an active nuclear weapons program.

Bush and company felt the need to raise the bogus specter of *existing* chemical and biological weapons—not simply "programs"—for two reasons: first, to more thoroughly frighten and terrify the American people, and, second, to claim that Iraq represented such an imminent threat that it was necessary to halt the UN weapons inspections and launch a preemptive war.

Turning to domestic issues, Bush attempted to put a bright face on a slumping economy and the growing distress of wide layers of the population. He repeated the administration mantra that its tax cut for the rich is a "jobs program," demonstrating the White House's belief that there is no limit to the gullibility of the American people.

The unspoken agreement on basic issues between the government and the press was expressed by a reporter who prefaced a question about Bush's "flimsy" evidence with the ritualistic line, "It's impossible to deny that the world is a better place and the region certainly a better place without Saddam

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Hussein."

Really? Iraqis have died in the thousands, probably the tens of thousands. (The American government refuses to say how many it has killed in Iraq.) US soldiers are dying nearly every day. The Iraqi people have exchanged the Hussein regime—a brutally repressive regime that came to power with US support—for an American pro-consul and a puppet ruling council, following more than a decade of American aggression and devastating sanctions. There is no indication that the human material of the new administration in Iraq is in any way superior to that of the regime deposed by the American military. Moreover, the tens of billions expended on the war will be extracted in one way or another from the social programs and living conditions of the US working class.

The most searching question posed to Bush concerned alleged links between the Hussein regime and terrorist groups. Had they been "exaggerated to justify war, or can you finally offer us some definitive evidence that Saddam was working with Al Qaeda?" the reporter asked.

Bush, evidently flustered by the pointed nature of the question, rambled on about how little time had passed since the end of "major military operations." He mentioned congressional hearings on the search for the elusive WMD, spoke of how time-consuming the process of analyzing captured documents was, and then, as if remembering what the question was, muttered something about "the documentation as to terrorist links."

In the end all he could manage was: "And it's just going to take a while, and I'm confident the truth will come out."

In response to a follow-up question, Bush said, "I remind some of my friends that it took us a while to go from the Articles of Confederation to the United States Constitution. Even our own experiment with democracy, it didn't happen overnight. I've never expected Thomas Jefferson to emerge in Iraq in a 90-day period."

This bizarre historical analogy, like most of Bush's utterances, was not original. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld advanced it several weeks ago. It is a remarkable example of historical ignorance married to political reaction.

To the extent that an analogy can be made between the present situation in Iraq and the birth of the American republic, the position of Jefferson, Washington, Franklin and their comrades roughly corresponds to the position of those Iraqis who are resisting the US occupation and fighting for independence and democracy. Bush, Rumsfeld and Cheney, on the other hand, occupy the position of Britain's King George III and his supporters, who were determined to crush the rebellion and maintain control over the crown's colonial possessions.

Bush sought to cut off this troublesome line of inquiry by fielding a question—probably planted—about his views on homosexuality. He seized on the opening to toss raw meat to his fascistic base in the Republican Party, declaring his opposition to gay marriage and saying, "I think we ought to codify that one way or the other." This was a calculated incitement to those who are denouncing the recent Supreme Court ruling against anti-sodomy laws and demanding a constitutional amendment to outlaw same-sex marriages.

The sordid nature of the American political process, thoroughly dominated by the role of money and influence, was neatly captured in the following exchange:

Question: Mr. President, with no opponent, how can you spend $170 million or more on your primary campaign?

Bush: Just watch.

(*Laughter*)

Even the editors of the *New York Times*, who have engaged in journalistic contortions since inauguration day to legitimize Bush's administration and paint a flattering picture of the president, felt obliged to criticize Bush's July 30 performance. A *Times* editorial derided Bush's "vague and sometimes nearly incoherent answers" and remarked: "The president and his advisers obviously still believe that the constant repetition of several simplistic points will hypnotize the American people into forgetting the original question."

The press conference was as notable for the questions that were not asked as for those that were.

No one asked about the Pentagon plan to establish a futures market in terrorist attacks, the exposure of which has resulted in the imminent resignation of a high-ranking administration official, retired admiral and Iran-Contra conspirator John Poindexter.

No one asked about the public statements of Florida Democratic senator and presidential candidate Bob Graham, who said last Sunday on national television that if Bush were held to the standard used to charge Bill Clinton, Bush would be subject to impeachment for taking the American people to war against Iraq on false pretences.

The British *Independent* took note of the supine conduct of the press. "This ought to have been a tricky occasion for the President. His poll ratings are sagging, budget deficits are ballooning, jobs are vanishing and American soldiers are dying almost daily in Iraq. And not one of Saddam's alleged weapons has turned up. But in the end it was a breeze.

"The main lesson to emerge from the 50-minute session ... was how easily the chief executive evaded any serious damage—and how the reporters made it easy for him to do so."

There was an unreal air to the press conference. Here was a roomful of people walking on eggs, as it were. The assembled journalists shared the sense that to put Bush on the spot about any one of a range of questions—the quagmire in Iraq, the budget deficit, the growth of unemployment—carried the risk of a presidential meltdown. The timidity and banality of the questioning was, in large measure, a reflection of the growing fear within all sections of the media and political establishment, Democrats as well as Republicans, that a crisis is looming in America that could set off an unprecedented wave of social and political struggles.

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