

Bush at the UN—a war criminal takes the podium

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President George W. Bush's ignorant and insulting speech to the United Nations General Assembly September 23 made clear that the US administration has all but written off any hope of obtaining significant international support for its colonial venture in Iraq.

Bush came before the body as an unrepentant war criminal, whose actions had violated the UN Charter and international law by waging a war of aggression as criminal and unprovoked as those carried out by the Hitlerite regime in Germany more than 60 years ago.

Having just last week publicly acknowledged there is no evidence of a link between the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington DC, Bush began his speech to the UN by invoking the ruins of the World Trade Center as the "symbol of an unfinished war."

He likewise peddled yet again the now universally discredited pretext for the Iraq war, the claim that the Baghdad regime posed a grave and imminent threat because of its supposedly immense stockpile of "weapons of mass destruction."

This, just one week after the chief of the United Nations' own inspection agency, Hans Blix, compared the US and British allegations about such weapons to the hunt for witches in the Middle Ages and amid reports that the unit set up by Washington to scour the country for the alleged tons of biological and chemical weapons materials has halted all searches.

Indeed, Bush himself referred to the supposedly urgent hunt for deadly weapons that were about to be handed to terrorists as a sort of archival pursuit. US personnel, he indicated, are "analyzing records of the old regime to reveal the full extent of its weapons programs." In other words, there was not a trace to be found of the tons of nerve gas, anthrax, serin and other deadly agents alleged by Washington.

Did the US president's handlers believe that the international diplomats, foreign ministers and heads of state assembled in his audience at the UN building in New York are so gullible they don't even read the newspapers?

In reality, his speech was not written for them. Rather, his words were addressed over their heads to his political base among the extreme right-wingers and semi-fascists who dominate the Republican Party. He was promising them that there will be no turning back from global militarism and plunder. The US agenda of seizing by force the oilfields of Iraq and a strategic stranglehold over the Middle East remains in force.

Far from the attempt at reconciliation that had been predicted by many media pundits, Bush's speech was every bit as provocative and bellicose as his 2002 State of the Union address declaring that "you are with us or against us," and his address to the UN last year when he warned the international organization that it would become "irrelevant" if it failed to subordinate itself to the US war preparations against Iraq.

Bush told the General Assembly: "Events during the past two years have set before us the clearest of divides: between those who seek order and those who spread chaos; between those who work for peaceful change

and those who adopt the methods of gangsters; between those who honor the rights of man and those who deliberately take the lives of women and children without mercy or shame."

But a growing majority of world public opinion sees US militarism as the greatest force for chaos in the world and equates the Bush administration's methods with out-and-out gangsterism. The US president unleashed a war that is widely acknowledged even within US establishment circles as unprovoked and unnecessary. By conservative estimates at least 10,000 Iraqi civilians were slaughtered and the number of young conscript troops who lost their lives may number tens of thousands more. To claim he acted to "honor the rights of man" is obscene.

Bush appeared to gloat over the recent one-sided US military victories, while implicitly warning the assembled nations of the world that any one of them could be next.

"The former regimes of Afghanistan and Iran knew [the] alternatives and made their choices," said Bush, sounding like an assassin bragging about his latest victims. "The Taliban was a sponsor and servant of terrorism. When confronted the regime chose defiance, and that regime is no more." He improbably claimed that the US invaded Iraq to "defend ... the credibility of the United Nations," which opposed and refused to authorize the invasion.

He then proudly pointed to the presence in the assembly of Hamid Karzai, the US-installed president of Afghanistan, as representing a "free people who are building a decent and just society." Karzai heads a bankrupt regime whose authority fails to extend beyond the outskirts of Kabul and which is widely opposed even there. Meanwhile, US forces are still fighting a bloody counterinsurgency campaign against a resurgent guerrilla movement.

Bush likewise hailed the presence at the Iraqi delegation's table of "representatives of a liberated country." The camera covering the speech dutifully panned the room to alight on the frog-like face of Ahmed Chalabi, the convicted bank embezzler and neoconservative ideologue who was airlifted by the US military back into Iraq after spending more than 40 years in exile.

In one passage, in which he claimed that the US occupation is "helping to improve the daily lives of the Iraqi people," Bush recited a litany of indictments against the former Baathist government: "The old regime built palaces while letting schools decay... The old regime starved hospitals of resources... The old regime built up armies and weapons while allowing the nation's infrastructure to crumble."

Bush could just as easily have been describing the US, where the gap between wealth and poverty has never been wider, resulting in palaces for the rich and a growing army of homeless; where schools are falling apart in districts across the country; where more than 40 million people lack any health insurance; and finally where a Pentagon budget of over half a trillion dollars to build up "armies and weapons" is starving the US infrastructure and basic social needs for funding.

While Bush pointed to a handful of minor aid projects as evidence of progress in Iraq—under conditions in which masses of people have been left without jobs, safe and reliable power or water supplies or even a modicum of personal security—he can only cite tax cuts for the rich as his remedy for the growing social misery confronting much of the US population.

The US president reprised one of the more improbable justifications that has been given for the war, largely after the fact: the claim that it will inaugurate a flowering of peace and democracy in the Middle East. Instead, as US officials have been forced to acknowledge, Iraq has become a magnet for people from throughout the Arab world who are determined to fight against foreign imperialist domination and US military occupation. As for Middle East peace, the US aggression in Iraq has only emboldened the Sharon regime in Israel to carry out a wave of assassinations and repression culminating in the threat to murder the elected president of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat.

Bush had no words of criticism for Israel, which has defied United Nations resolutions demanding an end to its illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza for the past 36 years. Instead, he issued an ultimatum to the Palestinian people who are suffering under this occupation.

“The advance of democratic institutions in Iraq is setting an example that others, including the Palestinian people, would be wise to follow,” Bush declared. Is this advice or a threat? Given that the Iraqi “example” was created with cruise missiles, cluster bombs and massed armor, it could well be interpreted as a warning that Gaza and the West Bank will be next if the Palestinians fail to halt all resistance to Israeli occupation and select “leaders” acceptable to Washington.

Bush’s speech was greeted with stony silence from the majority of the UN delegates. Even UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, whose unctuous diplomacy and toothless criticisms in the period leading up to the US invasion of Iraq were aimed largely at smoothing the way to a UN-sanctioned war, found himself compelled to criticize the US administration.

Referring obliquely to the Bush administration’s national security doctrine, claiming Washington’s right to wage a “preemptive war” against any nation that it deems as a potential threat, Annan declared, “My concern is that if it were to be adopted, it could set precedents that resulted in a proliferation of the unilateral and lawless use of force, with or without credible justification.”

Annan went on to point out that the UN Charter allows the use of force only in direct self-defense, or with the sanction of the international body. “Now some say this understanding is no longer tenable since an ‘armed attack’ with weapons of mass destruction could be launched at any time,” he said. “This logic represents a fundamental challenge to the principles on which, however imperfectly, world peace and stability have rested for the last 58 years.”

It was typical of both Annan and the UN that the secretary general’s speech contained not a single reference to the illegal US war. His elliptical language seemed to suggest that the problem was merely a difference of opinion leading to hypothetical acts, rather than a bloody war that claimed tens of thousands of victims and has led to the subjugation of an entire nation by armed force.

French President Jacques Chirac was somewhat more blunt in condemning the US war against Iraq. “No one can act alone in the name of all and no one can accept the anarchy of a society without rules,” he said. “The war, launched without the authorization of the Security Council, shook the multilateral system. The United Nations has just been through one of the most grave crises in its history.”

Chirac has demanded that the Bush administration cede political control to the United Nations in Iraq, while setting a speedy timetable for the handing over of power to an elected Iraqi regime. The French government, speaking on behalf of much the European ruling elite, has made clear it

will not play the role of financing and reinforcing an occupation that is run from the top down by US administrators serving US corporate and financial interests. The French corporate establishment is not prepared to surrender the extensive financial interests it has in the region without a fight.

Bush dismissed the French demand, claiming that the transition would “unfold according to the needs of Iraqis—neither hurried nor delayed by the voices of other parties.” And who shall determine the “needs of Iraqis”? This was spelled out the day before the speech by Secretary of State Colin Powell, who declared that the US would run Iraq as it sees fit “until such time as we allow the Iraqi people to determine how they wish to be governed.”

In the meantime, the gangster regime in Washington intends to carry out the systematic plundering of Iraqi wealth, while using military force to suppress a growing movement of national resistance.

The Bush administration’s plans were spelled out over the weekend, when Washington’s handpicked finance minister in the Iraqi Quisling regime unexpectedly unveiled a blueprint for the country’s economic development.

This economic “reform” package—made public at the International Monetary Fund-World Bank meeting in Dubai and signed into law by Washington’s consul in Baghdad, Paul Bremer—amounts to a US plan for the wholesale privatization of the Iraqi economy. It imposes investment, trade and tax policies geared entirely to the interests of US multinationals at the expense of the Iraqi people.

The precedent for this plan is the kind of disastrous economic “shock therapy” introduced in the former Soviet Union more than a decade ago, leading to the plummeting of living standards for the vast majority and the creation of a wealthy criminal elite. In Iraq, however, the process is to be carried out at the point of a US gun, with the assurance that the overwhelming share of profits will be reaped by politically connected American corporations like Halliburton and Bechtel.

The plan calls for the privatization of everything from electric power, to hospitals and a myriad of state-owned industries. This process would inevitably involve a form of brutal triage, in which those few industries considered profitable would be taken over by US corporations, with the rest shut down and their workers thrown onto the scrap heap.

It allows for 100 percent foreign ownership in all sectors, save natural resources, and reduces trade tariffs to a minimum. Foreign companies would be guaranteed full and immediate remittance of all profits, dividends, interest and royalties.

While the plan formally calls for Iraq’s vast oil reserves to remain under the control of the government, the takeover of the rest of the economy by US-based multinationals will effectively ensure control of oil as well.

Washington is using its military occupation of Iraq to enforce the kind of economic and trade relations it has sought to impose on countries throughout the world by means of financial pressure.

The right-wing cabal in the Bush White House is determined to conduct a social and economic experiment in Iraq to determine how far it can carry out policies of unrestricted “free market” capitalism backed by overwhelming military force. It sees in Iraq a field for unrestrained exploitation and outright looting aimed at bringing about a desperately needed rise in profits for corporate America.

The speech delivered by Bush at the UN represents a warning both to the Iraqi people and working people in the US. Despite the growing resistance to the US military occupation in Iraq—resulting in escalating US casualties—and despite the mounting opposition of American—not to mention world—public opinion to the dirty colonial war being fought there, the administration intends to press on. No matter how much its strategy in Iraq has been discredited, it has gone too far in this criminal enterprise to turn back now.

There is no doubt that Washington’s predatory economic plans for Iraq

will provoke even broader and more intense resistance to the US occupation. Unlike the American people, the Bush administration is more than willing to accept the resulting increase in young American soldiers, reservists and National Guard members dying daily to secure increased profits for the administration's corporate backers.

Neither the United Nations nor America's erstwhile European allies will halt this deepening catastrophe. The only force that can bring an end to the war and occupation in Iraq and the growing global threat of US militarism is the international working class mobilized independently on a socialist perspective.



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