

Unprecedented security cocoon for Bush's Australian visit

Terry Cook, Mike Head
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United States President George W Bush's fleeting visit to Australia this week took place behind unprecedented levels of security. Thousands of armed police, soldiers and US security personnel practically "locked down" the capital city to ensure that ordinary people would not get near enough to Bush to voice any opposition to his administration's criminal war on Iraq.

During his 21-hour visit, as part of a whistle-stop tour of Asia, Bush spoke only to dignitaries, parliamentarians, a handful of vetted guests and military personnel. Even the Australian media—not known for challenging the Bush administration's war crimes—was barred from speaking to the president, a privilege accorded only to selected White House journalists.

While the official purpose of his trip was to "thank the Australian people" for the Howard government's participation in the Iraq war, Bush avoided visiting any major cities, confining his stopover to Canberra, Australia's isolated rural capital.

The visit began with a moment that was truly surreal. After his plane touched down at Fairbairn air base, Bush and Australian Prime Minister John Howard, together with their wives, posed at the top of the plane's steps waving as if to a large crowd of well-wishers. A photograph of the scene appeared on newspaper front pages around the country. The tarmac, however, was empty except for US diplomatic personnel, contingents of security agents and White House journalists.

The stage-managed event captured the real character of the brief visit and its complete separation from reality. With not a single "weapon of mass destruction" having been found in Iraq and the US-led occupation descending into a catastrophic quagmire, Bush had to be firewalled from any contact with the public. The extraordinary security precautions—military planes and helicopters hovered noisily overhead—also served to familiarise the population with such police-state measures.

Throughout the visit, air force jets and helicopters patrolled the skies, with pilots under orders to shoot down any unauthorised aircraft. More than 1,000 Federal Police and security agents were deployed around the city, with the army's elite SAS units on standby. A large contingent of US secret service personnel arrived in Bush's 650-strong entourage, having received unprecedented permission to carry weapons in the parliamentary precinct.

For the first time since Federation in 1901, Parliament House was completely closed to the public, while Bush addressed a joint sitting of the House of Representatives and the Senate. All access roads were closed off and barriers erected over 100 metres from the front entrance to cordon off the 5,000 or so demonstrators who booed and jeered Bush's arrival at parliament.

In his speech, billed as the centrepiece of the visit, Bush contemptuously rehashed a series of bare-faced lies about the Iraq war. After months of scouring Iraq, his own Iraq Working Party could produce no evidence of chemical or nuclear weapons. But confident that he would face no challenge, Bush told the assembled parliamentarians: "Since the liberation of Iraq, we have discovered Saddam's clandestine network of biological laboratories, the design work on prohibited long-range missiles, his elaborate campaign to hide illegal weapons programs." There was not a murmur of dissent.

Apart from seeking to boost Howard—Bush repeated his ludicrous description of the prime minister as a "man of steel"—the speech contained nothing new. Even the anxious efforts of the Howard government, the media and sections of business to seal a "free trade" deal with Washington went unrewarded. Bush devoted just one sentence of his 20-minute address to the subject, committing himself to nothing.

In fact, the president's speech appeared to be largely a stock repeat of lines delivered elsewhere. It was so

vacuous, pedestrian and unconvincingly delivered that it even drew criticism from unabashed advocates of the most intimate ties with Washington. Paul Kelly, editor-at-large of Rupert Murdoch's *Australian*, labelled Bush's address an "anti-climax". It was, he wrote, "a narrow cast speech too preoccupied about Iraq and too defensive. Most of its content could have been delivered in the capital city of another country."

As directed by Labor Party leader Simon Crean, the entire Labor caucus listened to Bush with respectful silence and applauded politely at the end. Two Labor MPs, Carmen Lawrence and Harry Quick, had earlier addressed the protestors outside, expressing concerns that the attack on Iraq had been conducted without an explicit UN mandate. But the pair uttered not a word inside.

The fact that the UN Security Council has now sanctioned the ongoing US-led occupation of Iraq has removed the last figleaf of Labor's attempts to distance itself from the war. Labor's accommodation to Washington's militarism was summed up in a letter signed by 41 MPs, including Lawrence and Quick, and presented to US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. The letter reaffirmed Labor's commitment to the US military alliance and effectively legitimised the occupation of Iraq, calling on the US "to redouble its efforts to enlist the help of the world community to bring peace and rebuild Iraq and then withdraw as soon as practicable".

The stifling of any semblance of democracy was underscored when the Greens made two token protests inside the chamber, momentarily interrupting Bush's speech. Neither interjection concerned the Iraq war.

Senator Bob Brown called on Bush to "respect Australian law" by repatriating David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib, two Australian citizens illegally detained for more than 18 months as "enemy combatants" at Guantanamo Bay without charge or access to lawyers. Brown did not call for their release, instead saying they should be placed on trial in the same way as John Walker Lindh, the young American who was jailed for 20 years after a backroom plea-bargaining agreement. If Bush did so, Brown advised the president, he would earn worldwide "respect".

Green Senator Kerry Nettle later voiced an objection to the proposed free-trade agreement between the US and Australia. The parliamentary speaker ordered attendants to remove her and Brown, but both senators refused to leave, relying upon rules that MPs can be ejected from the house only on a majority vote.

One person, however, was physically removed. Habib's 18-year old son Ahmed was in the public gallery along with his mother as a guest of the Greens. Parliamentary attendants evicted him after he stood up to call for his father's release.

Despite the nominal character of the Greens' interjections, they provoked physical violence on the floor of parliament. When Nettle and Brown attempted to approach Bush after his address they were pushed and jostled by a cordon of government MPs, led by Liberal Senator Ross Lightfoot, Bill Heffernan, Howard's former parliamentary secretary, and Howard himself.

Once Bush left the chamber, the speaker reconvened the assembly and the government pushed through a resolution on the voices suspending both Brown and Nettle from parliament for 24 hours. Not a single Labor or Australian Democrat MP raised any objection.

The Greens are neither genuine opponents of imperialist war nor of the criminal policies of the Bush administration. That is why, after making his limited protest, Brown rushed to shake Bush's hand, later boasting that he "got a double handshake". But the anti-democratic treatment of the Greens demonstrates that not even the mildest criticism of official policy can be tolerated in ruling circles. Media outlets dutifully joined the attack on the Greens, decrying their conduct as "crass" and "embarrassing".

Bush's visit was conceived as an opportunity for Howard to bolster his prestige, or, as one commentator put it, "to bask in reflected glory". It turned out, however, to be anything but triumphal for either leader.



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