

Bitter recriminations in Bush camp

Pat Robertson calls for nuking the State Department

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Suppose for a moment that a prominent Islamic fundamentalist cleric in the US denounced government policy and publicly advocated placing a nuclear device—or indeed any explosive—in a major federal government building. In the midst of a media uproar, Attorney General John Ashcroft and Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge would cite the appropriate clauses in the USA Patriot Act to conduct an immediate investigation and, in all probability, a speedy detention.

Yet, a religious fundamentalist based in Virginia did just that recently, eliciting barely a yawn from the media and no call for an investigation or arrest. In this case, the fundamentalist cleric was Christian and a leading figure within the Republican right.

Televangelist Pat Robertson, the head of the Christian Broadcasting Network and a former contender for Republican presidential nomination, made the comment in an interview broadcast on his program, the “700 Club.”

Robertson suggested the nuclear incineration of the State Department while interviewing Joel Mowbray, a columnist for *National Review*, about his book, *Dangerous Diplomacy. How the State Department Threatens American Security*, a right-wing diatribe charging the State Department with “anti-Americanism.”

“When you get through you say, ‘If I could just get a nuclear device inside Foggy Bottom [the Washington, D.C., neighborhood where the State Department’s building is located]. I think that’s the answer,’” Robertson declared. “I mean, you get through this and you say, ‘We’ve got to blow that thing up.’”

The remark, seconded by Mowbray, prompted an angry protest from the State Department, whose spokesman called Robertson’s comment “despicable.” But there was no reaction from the Bush White House, not to mention Ashcroft and Ridge.

Apparently, the remark was not merely a slip of the tongue. The televangelist made a similar comment on the “700 Club” last June, declaring, “Maybe we need a very small nuke thrown off on Foggy Bottom to shake things up like Newt Gingrich wants to do.” The comment came in the wake of remarks by

Gingrich, the former Republican speaker of the US House of Representatives, denouncing the State Department for allegedly undermining the Bush administration’s policy in Iraq.

Robertson appeared far from chastened by the State Department’s protest. Indeed, on Monday he rebroadcast the key segment of the interview, mocking the characterization of his remark as “despicable” and claiming he was just trying to describe the author’s position in a “laughing manner.”

Afterwards, he declared, “I want to change my remarks.... We’re not going to nuke it, we’re going to gut it.” He also used the term “eviscerate” when describing what should be done to the US State Department.

Two things bear examination when considering the extreme violence of Robertson’s language. The first is its relationship to the fascistic sociopolitical tendency in which he plays such a prominent role, and the second is the broader political context of the deepening internecine conflicts within the Bush administration and the Republican right as a whole.

Robertson, the founder of the Christian Coalition, was the author of a book entitled *The New World Order*, which advanced the reactionary and anti-Semitic thesis that the world was controlled by a conspiracy of secret elites using the United Nations as its chosen instrument. Published in 1991, the book played a significant role in feeding the ideology of the so-called Patriot and Christian Identity movements, the milieu out of which the terrorist bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building emerged four years later.

The televangelist has also been among the most prominent in demonizing abortion and gay rights. While for reasons of political expediency he distanced himself from the violent and frequently murderous tactics of anti-abortion fanatics, he continued to provide religious and ideological justification for their actions.

So, when Robertson talks of bombing federal buildings and violence, it is not mere hyperbole. His is a theology of brutality, built on the fundamental doctrine that force works. He has publicly defended assassination as a foreign policy tool and recently led a vile anti-Islamic tirade by the Christian right—describing Muslims as “worse than the Nazis”—in

preparation for the war of aggression against Iraq.

Yet, it is hardly a surprise that his call for blowing up the State Department evoked little reaction within the Bush administration. He counts Attorney General Ashcroft as one of his closest political allies, having contributed \$10,000 to Ashcroft's political action committee in 1998. He played a major role in swinging the Republican presidential nomination to George W. Bush in 2000.

The inordinate role played by religious semi-fascists like Robertson in American politics and within the Republican Party in particular is not a small factor in the growing crisis and disorientation within the ruling circles in the US. Having lost any real social base for a policy that boils down to the unrestricted accumulation of personal wealth by the financial elite, the Republicans have found themselves increasingly dependent upon the cynical manipulation of religious ideology as a means of fashioning a new constituency.

On the issue of the Middle East, elements of the Christian fundamentalist right led by Robertson and others have allied themselves with the right-wing Zionists to promote what they call as "one-state solution" based on the Israeli annexation of all the occupied territories and the expulsion of the Palestinians. Invoking biblical prophesy linking a "Greater Israel" to the second coming of Christ, they have repeatedly mobilized their supporters against even the mildest criticism by the Bush administration of the wholesale state terror unleashed by the regime of Ariel Sharon against the Palestinian people.

The disproportionate political influence wielded by both the Christian right and the Zionist lobby has contributed significantly to a virtually uncritical US policy towards Israel and the use of Washington's ally as a surrogate military force in the Middle East. This incendiary and reckless policy has become one of the most destabilizing factors in the region.

Robertson's violent denunciation of the State Department, however, was not biblically inspired. It is symptomatic of the atmosphere of political recrimination and vendettas over Iraq that increasingly characterizes the Bush administration.

As *Time* magazine noted in its October 20 issue: "The CIA is at war with the White House; the Pentagon is at war with the State Department and the National Security Council; some elements of the uniformed military are furious with the civilian leadership of the Pentagon, partly for launching the attack against Iraq in the first place without enough allied support."

The flailing attempts to salvage the occupation and to reverse the mounting popular disquiet and outright opposition that the crisis in Iraq has provoked in the American population have only served to deepen the divisions within the administration.

Thus, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld reacted with barely contained fury over the recent announcement that Bush's National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice would coordinate reconstruction efforts in Iraq, a mission he had formerly arrogated to himself.

In an interview with members of the European press last

week, Rumsfeld said he had not been informed about the creation of the "Iraq Stabilization Group" under Rice until after it was leaked to the media. Asked why the creation of such a body was necessary, Rumsfeld rounded on a German reporter, declaring: "I said I don't know. Isn't that clear? You don't understand English? I was not there."

White House officials downplayed Rumsfeld's reaction, while Bush declared on October 13 in one of his regional television interviews to promote the "good news" about Iraq: "The person who is in charge is me."

This was followed the next day by a statement from Rice to reporters: "We are in complete agreement about this ... the Defense Department and Secretary Rumsfeld remain the lead agency in the reconstruction of Iraq."

Underlying this political disarray and the escalating war of each-against-all within the political elite is the manifest failure of the administration's war in Iraq. Far from Iraqis welcoming the US military as liberators, growing Iraqi resistance to the occupation claims the lives of American soldiers on a daily basis, while precluding any genuine reconstruction of the war-ravaged country. Of greater concern for the Bush administration and its corporate backers, the resistance has also made it impossible to reap profits from its vast oil reserves. Instead, the occupation has added \$160 billion to the US budget for the first year alone.

Within this context, Robertson's talk of blowing up the State Department is not merely the ravings of a multimillionaire religious charlatan. His statements reflect the views of the extreme right-wing element that has driven the administration's policy until now—that the solution to the deepening Iraqi crisis lies in launching new acts of military aggression, perhaps against Syria, Iran or even Cuba.

Such an escalation would inevitably entail a stepped-up attack on democratic rights and intensified repression against any political opposition to US military aggression abroad and social inequality at home.



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