

Bush vows decades of war for “democracy” in the Middle East

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In a speech before the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) Thursday President Bush portrayed the military occupation of Iraq as only the first stage in a US crusade for “democracy” in the region that will continue “for decades to come.”

Making clear that he will be deterred neither by the rising toll of American military casualties—30 more US soldiers have been killed this week—nor the proliferation of opinion polls showing growing domestic opposition to the war, Bush declared that Washington “has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East.” He indicated that his administration’s plans for future military interventions in the region are already at an advanced stage.

“Iraqi democracy will succeed, and that success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Teheran, that freedom can be the future of every nation,” Bush said. “The establishment of a free Iraq in the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution.”

This theme echoed a thesis advanced before the war by the right-wing ideologues in the Pentagon’s civilian leadership who were the principal architects of the war. They claimed that a bold US military strike that quickly toppled the Saddam Hussein regime would spread “shock and awe” throughout the Middle East, causing the regimes in Iran and Syria to topple like dominoes and inspiring the Palestinian people to give up their resistance to Israeli aggression.

These were the same people who charged that Iraq was well on its way to developing nuclear weapons and assured the American people that US soldiers would be welcomed as liberators and greeted with flowers.

If anything, the horrific events in Iraq have united the people of the Arab world in hostility toward US imperialism. Far from seeing Iraq as “free,” the overwhelming view is that Washington has embarked on a new stage of colonialism, using its military might to seize control of oil resources and establish US hegemony over the region. There is broad sympathy for the acts of resistance fighters seeking to expel US forces from the country.

That Bush persists in the pretense of a war for “democracy” is an indication that decisive sections of the American ruling elite are committed to the disastrous policy in Iraq, seeing any retreat as a strategic defeat for their global interests.

The invocation of a uniquely American mission to spread freedom and democracy throughout the world as a mask for a predatory policy is not an innovation on Bush’s part, as he himself acknowledged. Bush compared his new Middle East doctrine to Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms.”

US imperialism historically has cast the pursuit of its global ambitions as a demonstration of democratic benevolence. Wilson proclaimed that, unlike the European powers that sought geopolitical advantage and control over the world’s resources and markets, America’s sole purpose in entering the World War was to “make the world safe for democracy.” US intervention in World War Two was similarly portrayed as an entirely selfless crusade against German fascism and Japanese militarism.

Throughout the period of the Cold War, Washington depicted every act of aggression—from the killing of 3 million people in the Vietnam War to the series of fascist-military coups that plunged most of Latin America into dictatorship—as a blow for “democracy.”

Never, however, has there been a more hypocritical invocation of democracy than Bush’s speech before the NED—a body that was set up by the Reagan administration to provide a cover for acts of counterrevolutionary subversion that were previously done covertly by the CIA.

Under conditions in which the US has conducted an unlawful war of aggression against Iraq and is ruling the country under a regime of military occupation, for Bush to pose as the champion of democratic liberation is an act of breathtaking arrogance and cynicism. It is also a warning that Washington has assumed the right to bring “democracy” to whatever nation it chooses, using similar methods. National sovereignty, international law and concern for civilian casualties will not be allowed to stand in its way.

Bush went so far as to suggest that his new policy in the Middle East was a correction of what had been a flawed US policy in the region. “Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe, because in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty,” Bush declared.

Here, the US president suggests that Washington was guilty merely of benign neglect towards the democratic aspirations of the peoples of the Middle East. One would hardly guess from his potted version of history that the region’s greatest despots—from the Shah of Iran to the Saudi monarchy—were political instruments directly imposed or propped up by Washington as a means of dominating the region and its strategic resources and suppressing popular struggles for democratic rights and social progress.

Where it suits its interests, the US will continue to rule through such client regimes. But Bush wants it known that Washington no longer feels constrained by this policy. Rather, in the name of “freedom” it is prepared to carry out direct acts of military conquest and colonial-style occupation.

The US president’s speech left little doubt as to the identity of the next targets for US “liberation.” While not repeating his “axis of evil” warnings of 2002, he directly threatened Iran, which he linked to Iraq and North Korea in coining the phrase. The regime in Teheran, he warned, must “heed the democratic demands of the Iranian people or lose its last claim to legitimacy.” Loss of legitimacy, under the Bush doctrine of preemptive war, would make Iran a candidate for US military-imposed “regime change.”

The speech further equated the government of Syria with the Saddam Hussein regime that was toppled by the US invasion. “Dictators in Iraq and Syria promised the restoration of national honor, a return to ancient glories,” Bush declared. “They’ve left instead a legacy of torture, oppression, misery and ruin.”

By counterposing the supposedly unique evils of Iran and Syria to what he indicated were strides toward democratic reform in countries ruled by US-aligned despots, Bush left no doubt that behind his freedom-loving pretensions his administration is prepared to utilize the most brutal methods in pursuing US geopolitical interests.

While castigating Iran—where elections and public demonstrations are routine—as illegitimate from the standpoint of democracy, Bush held out Saudi Arabia—where political parties, unions and human rights groups are all outlawed and the entire nation is ruled as the possession of the royal family—as a beacon of hope for the region. “The Saudi government is taking the first steps toward reform, including a plan for gradual introduction of elections. By giving the Saudi people a greater role in their own society, the Saudi government can demonstrate true leadership.”

Never mind that the Saudi regime routinely tortures prisoners, carries out public floggings and amputations, and executes citizens for the “crime” of homosexuality. It belongs to the “democratic” camp because the royal family has agreed to allow elections for 30 percent of the positions on a consultative council—three years from now.

Similarly, Bush praised Kuwait’s royal family for having a “directly elected national assembly.” That those allowed to participate in elections make up no more than 5 percent of the country’s total population does not bear mentioning, given Kuwait’s unstinting support for US interests in the region.

Oddly absent from Bush’s remarks on cultivating democracy in the Middle East was any mention of the state of Israel. Indeed, his only reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was to repeat Washington’s ritualistic insistence that the problem can be resolved only by the Palestinians ceasing any resistance to the 36-year-old illegal Israeli occupation.

“Palestinian leaders who block and undermine democratic reform, and feed hatred and encourage violence are not leaders at all,” Bush declared. “They’re the main obstacles to peace, and to the success of the Palestinian people.”

The Palestinians, and indeed people throughout the Arab world, are laboring under the misconception that the “main obstacle to peace” is the occupation itself. How democracy is supposed to emerge under conditions of military occupation—together with the seizure of Palestinian land for Zionist settlements, extra-judicial assassinations, the demolition of homes and the paralysis of economic life through the use of roadblocks, curfews and a security wall dividing Palestinians into unlivable ghettos—Bush neglected to spell out.

The US has opposed holding elections in the Palestinian territories because it knows that the Palestinians would choose leaders who are not to Washington’s liking.

“Instead of dwelling on past wrongs and blaming others, governments in the Middle East need to confront real problems, and serve the true interests of their nations,” Bush declared, in an oblique reference to the Israeli-Arab conflict. Is the presence in their midst of Israel—armed to the teeth by Washington, possessing nuclear weapons and with aggressive aims against every one of its Arab neighbors—not a “real problem”?

The “real solution” is hardly a surprise: “Successful societies privatize their economies and secure the rights of property.” This is the policy being realized in Iraq by the fiat of the US proconsul Paul Bremer: the wholesale privatization of the Iraqi economy, with the profitable sectors placed on the auction block for purchase by foreign capital and the less profitable enterprises liquidated, along with the jobs of their workers. A key strategic aim of US imperialism throughout the region is to break the existing state control over oil production and reserves and open them up to the direct control of the US-based energy conglomerates.

What the implementation of this policy would mean for the Arab masses can be seen in the path to “freedom” taken in the 1990s in the former Soviet Union, where half the country’s population was plunged into

poverty in order to create 17 billionaires.

An obvious question posed by Bush’s speech is what, precisely, his credentials are as a champion of democracy. “As we watch and encourage reforms in the region, we are mindful that modernization is not the same as Westernization,” he told his audience at the NED. “Representative governments in the Middle East will reflect their own cultures. They will not, and should not, look like us.”

Does this mean that presidents will be selected in these countries based on a counting of the vote, rather than having the loser installed by a decision of politically aligned judges? Will these presidents not arrogate to themselves the right to declare any of their citizens “enemy combatants” and order their indefinite detention without charges, hearings or trials? Bush did not make it clear if he is prepared to allow for cultural differences on such questions.

The methods and policies that the Bush administration is employing in the Middle East and internationally are an extension of those it employs within the US itself. This is an unelected government that has assumed unprecedented police powers at home, while engaging in a vast transfer of wealth from the masses of working people to the financial elite. In the Middle East, it seeks to impose neocolonial rule by means of military force in order to seize control of the region’s oil wealth and assure a new source of profits for the largest shareholders of US-based corporations. This is the criminal substance of Bush’s democratizing pretensions.

There is an element of madness in the assumption that such a policy can be implemented without any regard for the bitter legacy of colonialism in the Middle East and the history of protracted and bloody struggles waged by national movements against foreign domination. This delusion that the Arab peoples are ready to welcome US armies sent in the name of “democracy” is already producing a tragedy in Iraq. Its extension throughout the region will ignite popular revolt and bring US imperialism face-to-face with catastrophe.

Bush’s speech has met with virtually no serious criticism within either the media or the Democratic Party. The pretense that US policy is motivated by idealism and democratic philanthropy is generally accepted, even in the face of the profiteering in Iraq by Halliburton and other firms that enjoy the most intimate ties with the Bush administration.

Opposition to the policies of conquest and colonialism upon which Washington has embarked will have to come from those elements of American society that are being forced to bear its costs, both economically and in the lives of young soldiers sent to fight and die—that is, the broad mass of American working people.



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