

Bush's PR stunt in Baghdad underscores US crisis

Patrick Martin

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President Bush's Thanksgiving Day visit to US troops in Baghdad, organized by the White House to shore up crumbling public support for the occupation of Iraq, only confirms the deepening crisis of the administration.

Political aides such as Karl Rove engineered the public relations stunt, hoping the televised images of cheering troops and the president serving out turkey dinners would boost Bush's standing in the polls. But the circumstances of the trip, with Bush stealing in and out of Baghdad like a thief in the night, only demonstrate the fragility of the US grip on the occupied country.

Bush told his audience of 600 soldiers at Baghdad International Airport that his government would not "retreat before a band of thugs and assassins." But the security measures taken for the trip suggest that the armed opposition to US control of Iraq is far more substantial than a handful of terrorists or Saddam Hussein loyalists.

Air Force One flew into Baghdad under conditions of secrecy so total that air traffic controllers at the airport did not know the identity of the plane. Bush was taken from his ranch in Crawford, Texas in an unmarked car, and Air Force One flew under a false call signal, with its lights off and escorted by US jet fighters. Bush spent 27 hours in the air in order to spend only two-and-a-half hours on the ground in Iraq.

The siege mentality of the administration is shown by the restrictions imposed on the handful of reporters and cameramen who accompanied the president. They were notified in face-to-face conversations less than two hours before Bush left his ranch, and not allowed to notify their editors or their families that they were leaving. Bush communications chief Dan Bartlett told them that if word of the trip leaked out, the plane would be turned around.

No reporting of Bush's appearance in Baghdad was permitted until after Air Force One had left Iraq for its return trip to Washington.

There is no doubt that the extraordinary security was

exaggerated for effect—to convey the impression that the president was exhibiting personal courage and sharing danger with the troops. Nevertheless, it indicates that the US military position in Iraq is far more precarious than Pentagon officials have suggested.

US officials claim that the security situation is improving, and that armed resistance is largely confined to the Sunni Triangle region north and west of Baghdad. Bush's own itinerary, however, suggests that the US military barely controls even the perimeter of the Baghdad airport, the headquarters of the occupation force.

The *Washington Post* noted, in its assessment of the trip, that the Iraqi population "may take the image of Bush landing unannounced at night without lights and not venturing from a heavily fortified military installation as confirmation that the security situation in Iraq is dire indeed. Bush's entourage was fitted with ballistic vests, and the plane came in with neither running lights nor cabin lights, parking on a dark landing strip."

Bush's conduct was in sharp contrast with previous trips to war zones by American presidents—during wars where the US government faced much more formidable enemies than the supposed "remnants" plaguing the occupation of Iraq.

Lyndon Johnson visited American troops twice during the Vietnam War, and Richard Nixon once. While the exact details of presidential travel were cloaked in secrecy, the trips themselves and the appearances before groups of soldiers were widely reported. During World War II, Roosevelt attended summits in Teheran and Yalta, and Truman traveled to Potsdam, in conquered Germany, without the cloak-and-dagger theatrics of Bush's trip to occupied Baghdad.

In comments to the media a few hours after returning from Baghdad, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice was on the defensive over the circumstances of the trip. She denied that the tight security demonstrated that

the US was losing ground in the war. “It’s just not true that nothing has changed” since the invasion of Iraq, she told ABC television.

“Most of the country remains quite stable,” she claimed. “Obviously, Iraq is still a dangerous place, and that’s no secret to anyone.” Rice admitted that the trip had nearly been cancelled after an incident last week when a surface-to-air missile hit a DHL cargo plane taking off from the Baghdad airport.

Bush has been widely denounced for not attending a single funeral of an American soldier killed in Iraq, and for the Pentagon’s policy of blocking media coverage of the return of the coffins of the dead from the war zone. In response to such criticism, Bush traveled earlier this week to Fort Carson, Colorado for a pro-war rally with troops, and visited privately with the families of five of those killed in the ongoing conflict.

Rice denied that the trip had been made to rebut suggestions that Bush was indifferent to the fate of the troops or to bolster his reelection campaign. “The president was concerned about one thing and one thing only,” she said. “He wanted to spend time with the troops on Thanksgiving.” She claimed that the decision to go to Baghdad “originated out of the president and the policy side” of the White House, but did not deny that Bush’s chief political adviser, Karl Rove, had advance knowledge of the trip.

Rove’s hand is certainly to be seen in the selection of the media that accompanied Bush to Baghdad. The right-wing, stridently pro-war Fox News was informed in advance of the trip and Air Force One stopped off in Washington to pick up a Fox camera crew, the only one permitted to record the event.

According to press reports, CNN’s camera crew was dismissed from the White House pool Wednesday, told that there would be no further news over the Thanksgiving holiday. CNN Washington bureau chief Kathryn Kross told the *Washington Post*, “We’re all for the president boosting the troops however the White House feels is appropriate. But apparently the White House put together its own group of people to accompany the president on this trip, and we’re real interested to learn their reasons for doing that.”

While the television coverage of the trip was largely gushing, other events in Iraq on Thanksgiving Day were anything but positive for the long-term prospects of the US occupation regime.

While Bush was meeting four members of the Iraqi Governing Council, including the Pentagon’s favored

stooge, Ahmed Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress, the current president of the council, Jalal Talabani, was meeting in Najaf with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. The senior Shiite cleric declared his opposition to the latest Bush administration plan, which calls for carefully vetted caucuses to be held in Iraqi provinces during the spring, leading to a constitutional assembly. Sistani insisted that the body drafting a new constitution be democratically elected, rather than chosen by the occupation regime.

An aide to Sistani, Mowaffak al-Rubaie, a member of the Governing Council, told the press, “Some Iraqis perceive the process as being too rushed to fit the American presidential elections.” Even Chalabi concurred in this assessment, saying of the US timetable for the constitutional process: “The whole thing was set up so President Bush could come to the airport in October for a ceremony to congratulate the new Iraqi government. When you work backwards from that, you understand the dates the Americans were insisting on.”

Another incident demonstrates the brutality of the methods being employed to suppress the Iraqi resistance. A former Iraqi air defense general, Abed Hamed Mowhoush, captured October 5, died under American interrogation Wednesday. Gen. Mowhoush lost consciousness after complaining he didn’t feel well, and was pronounced dead by a military physician. According to a wire service report, “The cause of death and the interrogation techniques are under investigation.”



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