Bush's State of the Union: Threats, lies and delusion

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In his third State of the Union address since his installation as president, George W. Bush Tuesday night spelled out an election-year agenda consisting of stepped-up global militarism, the continued looting of the economy to augment the fortunes of America's super-rich and an appeal to social and religious backwardness.

It was a speech devoid of any new proposals and lacking even a hint of comprehension of the intense political, economic and social crises that are racking American society.

Instead, behind the obvious lies and deliberate distortions, what predominated was the self-delusion of a ruling elite that has never been more distant from the problems facing the vast majority of the American people and believes that reality is whatever it claims it to be.

The annual address is supposedly a solemn occasion in which the government gives an accounting to the people. In reality, the spectacle provides the public with a glimpse into a US political system that increasingly resembles a private millionaires' club whose wealthy members slap each other on the back and rise in uproarious cheering for statements that they all know are false.

In place of the pretense of social vision or the announcement of new political initiatives that are the standard fare of these speeches, Bush's central message was one of fear. In his nearly hour-long speech to a joint session of Congress and the viewing public, Bush used the words "terror," "terrorist," and "terrorism" no less than 21 times.

"Twenty-eight months have passed since September 11, 2001—over two years without an attack on American soil—and it is tempting to believe that the danger is behind us," he declared. "That hope is understandable, comforting—and false."

For all of those 28 months, the Bush administration has invoked the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to justify virtually all of its policies—from the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq to its massive tax cuts for the wealthy and even the gutting of environmental regulations.

Yet, what happened that day remains shrouded in mystery, largely because of the administration's own stonewalling of every attempt to gain access to government information. Just this week, it was reported that the administration and the Republican leadership in Congress will refuse a request by the independent commission formed to investigate the attacks for more time to complete its work. The administration is also seeking to block any release of findings by the commission until after the presidential election in November.

One year ago, Bush used his 2003 State of the Union address to declare an unprovoked war on Iraq. Lying to the American people and the world, he advanced as a pretext for invading the besieged Middle Eastern country the claim that Baghdad was in possession of a vast arsenal of chemical and biological weapons, and was on the verge of developing nuclear weapons that could be used to attack the US or given to terrorists.

In his speech Tuesday, Bush made no attempt to explain the glaring discrepancy between these claims and the failure of thousands of US military and civilian experts sent to Iraq to hunt for this supposed arsenal to turn up a single such weapon.

Instead, he continued the lying and doubletalk, declaring: "Already the Kay report identified dozens of weapons of mass destruction-related program activities and significant amounts of equipment that Iraq concealed from the United Nations." In fact, the central content of the report issued by the 1,200-member Iraq Survey Group led by David Kay, a strong supporter of the administration, was the failure to find weapons of mass destruction of any kind. Kay himself is reportedly preparing to quit his job, the clearest signal that nothing remains to be found.

Bush used his speech to amplify his previously enunciated doctrine of "preemptive war"—i.e., unprovoked wars of aggression against nations seen as potential threats to US interests. He proclaimed that Washington had a divine mission: the use of its unrivaled military might to impose a "democratic peace" upon the world and "lead the cause of freedom."

"We have no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire," declared Bush, contradicting what has become evident to peoples in the Middle East and throughout the world as the US military has established military bases in some 130 countries.

Bush portrayed the two wars that he has launched during his three years in office as conquests for democracy, despite stark indications that the situation is spinning out of control in both countries, with little prospect for an end to US occupations that have stretched the country's military to its breaking point.

Surrounding Laura Bush in the visiting gallery were several members of the Iraqi Governing Council installed by the US occupation authority, including Ahmed Chalabi, the former bank embezzler and leader of the Iraqi National Congress, who was a principal source for the phony intelligence about alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Members of the US Congress, Democratic and Republican alike, rose to their feet to join Bush in paying tribute to these corrupt stooges, who enjoy no visible popular support in their own country. In Washington, however, they are recognized as key allies in the drive to impose US control over Iraq's vast oil reserves.

Bush's emphasis on terror and on the supposed US mission to wage a crusade for "regime changes" wherever it sees fit constitutes a stark warning that new shocks may well be in store before Election Day in November. Elements within the administration may well see another terrorist attack or another war as the most effective means of deflecting political opposition and solidifying the administration's grip on power, with or without a vote.

The address also invoked the threat of terror to demand that Congress renew the USA Patriot Act, sections of which are to expire next year. The act codifies sweeping attacks on basic democratic rights imposed by an administration that claims the right to indefinitely imprison US citizens without trial or even charges on the order of the president.

On the economy and social questions, Bush's speech combined fantasy and reaction. He spoke of recent events having "revealed the fundamental strengths of the American economy" under conditions in which

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Washington is running an annual current accounts deficit of over $500 billion and requires infusions of foreign capital amounting to $2 billion every business day just to finance its payments gap.

"Jobs are on the rise," declared Bush, who has presided over the destruction of 2.5 million jobs in five years and stands to be the first president to record a net reduction in employment in the course of a four-year term since Herbert Hoover in the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The line that drew the lustiest cheers from the floor of the Congress was Bush's demand that "the tax cuts you passed should be made permanent." Vice President Richard Cheney, who is estimated to have pocketed as much as $116,000 annually based on the tax cuts, rose to his feet along with the scores of other millionaires in the House and Senate. For 88 percent of the US population, these same cuts produced a savings of only $100 or less. Making the $1.7 trillion in tax cuts permanent would ensure the elimination of whatever remains of spending on social programs benefiting the majority of the population.

Bush proposed no major new initiatives. A job-retraining program that he unveiled would provide a scant $120 million—less than $15 for each of those officially listed as unemployed—in grants to community colleges.

The rest of his proposals amounted to election-year sops offered up to the religious right at the cost of further degrading the crumbling separation between church and state in America.

He called for doubling federal funding for programs promoting sexual abstinence among teenagers, funding that the administration will undoubtedly try to funnel into the coffers of his supporters among the Christian fundamentalist churches. Similarly, he demanded that Congress pass legislation allowing the awarding of federal social service grants to religious institutions.

Finally, in what was viewed by White House political operatives as the most important statement in terms of mobilizing the Republicans' right-wing and fundamentalist base, Bush came out for the "sanctity of marriage," opposing the legalization of same-sex unions, whose legality has been upheld by several courts as a fundamental issue of equal treatment under the law.

How extending this right to gay couples threatens to topple what Bush described as "one of the most fundamental, enduring institutions of our civilization," the US president did not bother to explain. Instead, he solidarized himself with proposals of the extreme right for a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages. This would mark the first time in US history that the constitution has been amended to deny basic democratic rights to a segment of the population and to impose religious dogma as the law of the land.

In its response to Bush's speech, the media was even more fawning than usual. Typical was the *New York Times*, which commented in its news report: "Mr. Bush's demeanor was one of sober gravitas as he sought to portray a mature, experienced leader who had guided the nation through the 9/11 attacks—an accomplishment that no Democrat would be able to claim." Gravitas may be in the eye of beholder, but the *Times*'s description hardly seemed to match the smirking man at the podium, who seemed at times to barely comprehend the text he was reading.

One exception to the general obsequiousness of the broadcast and print media was a piece by Tom Shales, television critic for the *Washington Post*, who wrote more honestly: "The speech was pretty much so-so, and Bush's gung-ho delivery—something approaching the forced jollity of a game show host—lacked dignity and certainly lacked graciousness. Bush has never been big on those things anyway."

As for the Democrats, the official response, delivered by Representative Nancy Pelosi, the party's leader in the House, and Senator Tom Daschle, the Democratic leader in the Senate, conceded virtually everything to the Republican administration, accepting the "war on terrorism" as good coin and quibbling merely on a few tactical matters of foreign and domestic policy.

Pelosi, whose bulging stock portfolio and real estate holdings are worth an estimated $92 million, and Daschle, who has mobilized sufficient numbers of Democratic senators to pass virtually every major reactionary initiative of the Bush administration, were fitting representatives of a party that represents the same essential social interests as the Republicans.

"We must remain focused on the greatest threat to the security of the United States—the clear and present danger of terrorism," declared Pelosi, echoing the administration's own fear campaign. While gushing in her tributes to the "noble service" of US occupation forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, she made no mention whatsoever of the sweeping attacks on democratic rights at home.

Her aim, like that of Bush himself, was clearly to counter the growing popular feeling that the greatest threat to the security of the masses of American working people is not terrorism, but unemployment, poverty and the soaring costs of health care, higher education and other basic necessities.

For his part, Daschle talked vaguely of creating an "opportunity society," without advancing any proposals for new programs or even for reversing the reactionary social and tax measures introduced by the Bush administration over the past three years.

Neither of them, nor for that matter any leading figure in the Democratic Party, is capable of speaking the truth about the Bush administration: that this is a government that dragged the American people into a war of aggression based on lies. It is responsible for war crimes: the killing and maiming of tens of thousands of Iraqis as well as the deaths of over 500 US troops and the wounding of thousands more. And it is a government that has presided over the criminal looting of the American economy and the destruction of jobs and living standards to further enrich a narrow layer of multimillionaires and billionaires.

Nor, of course, did they dare counter Bush's appeals to the religious right and social backwardness.

Those looking to the Democratic Party to provide an alternative to the Bush administration's reactionary agenda are only deluding themselves. Genuine political opposition to these policies can be mounted only as part of a grassroots movement of working people advancing a socialist alternative to militarism, social inequality and repression. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party are committed to politically facilitating the emergence of such a movement.

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