

SEP candidate Bill Van Auken on Bush's war anniversary speech: "Threadbare lies in defense of a criminal war"

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The following is a statement by Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Bill Van Auken in response to President Bush's March 19 speech marking the first anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq.

On the first anniversary of the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, the US president was reduced to lies and empty rhetoric in his attempt to justify a war recognized throughout the world as an illegal and unprovoked act of aggression.

Wrapping himself once again in the mantle of September 11, Bush cast the ongoing war as part of a worldwide crusade of "civilization" against "terrorism." The performance was a fraud from start to finish and offered nothing in the way of information or even rational argument.

It was delivered before an audience consisting largely of foreign ambassadors summoned to the White House for the occasion. Yet they and the flags of their countries were there solely as props, designed to obscure the obvious: the eruption of US militarism has provoked profound hostility around the globe. Both the tone and content of Bush's speech, directed as it was over the heads of Washington's diplomatic corps to the Republican Party's hard-core base, will only deepen these sentiments.

In his remarks, Bush managed to evade every issue raised by the US war in Iraq. A year ago, the administration justified the invasion with detailed allegations—every one of them a lie—about supposed stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons and the threat of an Iraqi atomic bomb. On the war's first anniversary, however, the US president failed to even mouth the words "weapons of mass destruction."

The speech came just one day after the president of Poland, which, with 2,500 soldiers, has one of the largest military contingents in Iraq, declared that his government had been "deceived" by the US administration about WMD and "taken for a ride."

While the event was billed as a speech on the Iraq war anniversary, Bush got through nearly half of his remarks before even referring to the "shock and awe" that Washington unleashed against a nearly defenseless Iraqi people a year ago. The long preamble was dedicated to the "war on terror." Again, no mention was made of the attempts of last year to justify the war by asserting nonexistent ties between the Islamist terrorists of Al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein.

There was an unmistakable hint of desperation in Bush's attempt to cast his motley "coalition of the willing" as "the civilized world," coming as it did in the wake of the political earthquake that toppled one of the principal members of that coalition—Prime Minister José María Aznar's rightist government in Spain. Replacing Aznar is a

social-democratic party, the PSOE, which has pledged to withdraw Spain's troops, and whose leader has declared the US-led war and occupation a "disaster."

Bush's most bellicose rhetoric—echoing his infamous declaration to the world in 2002 that "you're either with us or with the terrorists"—was clearly directed against the people of Spain for daring to bring down his political ally.

"Any sign of weakness or retreat simply validates terrorist violence and invites more violence for all nations," Bush said. He added, "There is no neutral ground—no neutral ground—in the fight between civilization and terror, because there is no neutral ground between good and evil."

One can only surmise that Bush has relegated the Spanish people to the "evil" column in his clerical-fascistic vision of the world. Their unforgivable sin is having thrown out a prime minister for supporting a war that was opposed by 90 percent of the population—and justified on the basis of lies—and then attempting to manipulate the horrific March 11 terrorist attacks in Madrid for political advantage.

For a US administration that dragged the American people into the war based on lies and has for two-and-a-half years justified its every policy by invoking the September 11 terrorist attacks, the sea change in Spain hit all too close to home.

The disconnect between reality and Bush's version of the state of international relations over Iraq was readily apparent. "There have been disagreements in this matter among old and valued friends," Bush declared. "Those differences belong to the past. All of us can now agree that the fall of the Iraqi dictator has removed a source of violence, aggression and instability in the Middle East."

On the contrary, the differences are intense and growing. The Spanish election has been accompanied by statements from leading politicians throughout Europe to the effect that the US occupation of Iraq has created a far graver threat of terrorism than had existed previously. While the Bush administration and its right-wing supporters portray such sentiments as "appeasement" and "capitulation," the vote in Spain is a barometer of popular sentiment throughout Europe against American militarism.

"The war on terror is not a figure of speech," Bush declared. "It is an inescapable calling of our generation."

Really? If ever there was an abstract and empty figure of speech, it is "the war on terror." Interpreted literally, this phrase means war against a type of warfare. This abstractness is a political necessity, given that this crusade is invoked by the administration to justify everything from unprovoked wars to tax cuts for the US financial elite.

To even begin to deal with the roots of the terrorist acts carried out on September 11, or more recently in Madrid, would raise far too many troubling questions for the American establishment and the current US administration.

First, there is the question of the origins and development of the Islamist terrorist movement itself, which is intimately bound up with US interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia and, in particular, Washington's support for the guerrilla war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s. This movement was further strengthened by the systematic US repression of the one force that was implacably opposed to the Islamists—the Arab socialist workers movement.

That the principal base of support for the Islamists is to be found in the Bush administration's key ally in the region—Saudi Arabia—is also obscured by this “figure of speech,” not to mention the Bush family's own intimate and longstanding financial relations with the bin Ladens.

Finally, there is the question of what history and policies have created a popular base of support for terrorist actions. According to a recently released poll by the Pew Research Center, clear majorities in Pakistan and Jordan expressed a favorable view of Osama bin Laden.

Bush claimed that the US was acting to “break the cycle of bitterness and radicalism” in the Middle East. Yet, nowhere in his speech did he refer to the illegal Israeli occupation in Gaza and the West Bank or the ceaseless death and repression that its principal regional ally metes out against the Palestinian people. That Washington has allied itself with one corrupt tyranny after another—including that of Saddam Hussein—in order to dominate the region's oil wealth likewise did not merit a mention.

The essential precondition for ending the threat of terrorism is the elimination of its root cause by ending US military, political and economic domination of the Middle East, and allowing the people of the region to determine their own political destiny and control the region's natural resources.

Much of Bush's remarks were dedicated to an Orwellian depiction of Iraq as some kind of laboratory of “freedom” and “democracy,” whose people have been “liberated” and are setting an example for the entire region.

In the hours before Bush spoke, tens of thousands of Iraqis—Shiite and Sunni alike—marched in Baghdad to demand an end to the occupation, a halt to the indiscriminate shooting of civilians by occupation troops and the revocation of the so-called interim constitution imposed by US authorities and their puppet ruling council. Colin Powell, in Baghdad to mark the anniversary, was greeted with a walkout by Arab journalists over the cold-blooded killing of two of their colleagues by US troops.

Echoing the Bush administration, television news anchors smugly insist that “no one can deny that the Iraqi people are better off today than they were before the war.”

Who says? Has anyone asked Iraqis who saw their families and children torn to pieces by cruise missiles and cluster bombs, or massacred as a result of chance encounters with US military roadblocks if they think they are better off?

What of those whose young sons were conscript soldiers in the Iraqi army and never came back after the fall of Baghdad last April? And how about the relatives of the estimated 15,000 Iraqis who have disappeared without charges into a US military gulag? Do they think they are better off today, or are they supporting the Iraqi resistance movement that is seeking to liberate the country from its so-called liberators?

It is peculiar form of “freedom” that is achieved through foreign military occupation. Bush had the gall to compare the establishment of a US puppet regime in Iraq with the downfall of the dictatorships in Spain and Portugal in the 1970s. Aside from the fact that Washington—and the Republican Party in particular—supported the fascist police state regimes of Franco and Salazar, it was the struggle of the Spanish and Portuguese people that brought about their downfall, not foreign military intervention.

Meanwhile, Bush's Democratic challenger, Senator John F. Kerry of Massachusetts, issued his own statement marking the first anniversary of the Iraqi invasion, describing the illegal war and colonial occupation as a “fight for freedom.” He praised the “enormous skill of the United States military,” but made no mention of the tens of thousands of Iraqi lives that were taken in what is described euphemistically in US ruling circles as a “war of choice.”

Nor did the Democratic candidate make any more than passing reference to the death toll among US troops—four more of whom lost their lives on the anniversary—or mention the many thousands more who have been wounded and maimed.

On the contrary, Kerry—who voted to authorize the war—has committed himself to maintaining the US occupation and even adding another 40,000 US troops to the regular army. In a speech on military policy delivered two days earlier, Kerry declared, “I will not hesitate to use force when it is needed to wage and win the war on terror.”

Any criticisms the Democratic candidate levels against the Bush administration are restricted to questions of tactics and tone. On the fundamental question of maintaining the US grip over Iraq and its oil wealth and continuing to utilize America's military might to further the interests of US-based banks and transnational corporations, Kerry and the Republicans are united.

There is an essential bipartisan consensus on Iraq. The American people will be denied any opportunity to vote on the war and the continuing occupation, or to effect any real change in US policy of military aggression around the world.

Nothing could more clearly pose the urgency of a break with the Democratic Party and the creation of a new and independent political movement of working people capable of mobilizing the mass opposition that exists within the US and internationally against imperialist war and colonial occupation.

The Socialist Equality Party is intervening in the 2004 elections to lay the political foundations for such a movement by advancing a socialist alternative to the lies and scare tactics employed by both establishment parties and the media.

On this, the first anniversary of an unprovoked act of aggression that will live in infamy, the Socialist Equality Party reiterates its demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq and for all those responsible for plotting this illegal war to be placed on trial for war crimes.



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