

Bush's press conference: evasions, lies and a promise of more bloodletting

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President Bush's Tuesday night prime-time news conference was a bizarre and repugnant spectacle. After hiding out for a week at his Texas ranch, while his military forces attacked men, women and children in Iraqi cities with war planes, helicopter gunships, tanks and artillery—killing and wounding thousands—and the death toll of American soldiers soared, Bush came before the television cameras in an attempt to reassure a shaken ruling elite and stem a growing tide of popular discontent.

The political backdrop of Iraqi popular resistance and homicidal US reprisals was compounded by the mounting evidence emanating from three weeks of public hearings by the commission appointed to investigate the September 11 hijack-bombings of government negligence, if not outright complicity, in the terrorist attacks. Bush came before the American public dripping in blood from the colonial occupation of Iraq and accused by his own former counter-terrorism chief of having ignored the threat of an Al Qaeda attack within the US, and then seizing on the tragedy as the pretext for implementing long-standing plans to invade and occupy the Persian Gulf country.

Even by the dismal standard of Bush's previous few and far-between encounters with the press, Tuesday night's performance was a miserable farce. There was the usual catalogue of inanities and lies, but this time they were delivered by a haggard and distracted little man who repeatedly lost his train of thought, forgot the questions to which he was responding, and got lost in the twists and turns of rambling and evasive answers.

Sensing weakness, the normally supine White House press corps felt emboldened to ask more pointed questions, and the hapless president could do little more than rack his brain to come up with the set phrases with which his coaches had prepped him in advance of the press conference.

Given the violent and reckless thrust of US foreign policy, the resulting spectacle was more ominous than amusing.

In a 17-minute opening statement, Bush laid out the familiar framework of platitudes and lies his administration—and the entire political establishment—have used to justify the colonial subjugation of the Iraqi people. Combining the technique of the “big lie” that was the stock-in-trade of Nazi propaganda with the linguistic innovations of George Orwell's “newspeak,”

Bush declared that the US military occupation was the embodiment of freedom and liberty, while those Iraqis who were prepared to give their lives fighting foreign domination were criminals, enemies of civilization, and terrorist thugs.

Bush ignored the plain facts of recent events in Iraq, where tens of thousands of impoverished workers, Sunni and Shiite alike, have taken to the streets and thousands more have taken up arms to defend themselves and their families from arbitrary searches, arrests and killings, and to demand that the American military get out of their country. The US president declared that this eruption of resistance was “not a popular uprising.” It was, he said, a “power grab” by “extreme and ruthless elements,” whom he proceeded to link—without a shred of evidence—to major attacks of the past two decades, from the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon, to 9/11, to last month's terror bombing of commuter trains in Madrid.

What is the content of this “freedom” that Bush claims the US is ordained to dispense—with missiles, bullets, and concentration camps—to the masses of the world, and which he called the gift of “God Almighty?” It is the freedom of the American corporate and financial elite to seize territories and ruthlessly exploit cheap labor and strategic natural resources, such as oil.

In another example of Washington “newspeak,” Bush pledged to keep to his June 30 deadline to transfer “sovereignty” back to the Iraqi people. When asked, in the question-and-answer period, to whom precisely the US would hand over nominal political power, Bush admitted he did not know. That, he said, would be “figured out” by the United Nations envoy dispatched by Washington to work out the details of an interim government.

This, however, was clearly a secondary detail, since the “sovereign” government would be vetted by the US and would preside at the pleasure of the US military, which would continue to occupy the country for an indefinite period. Real power on the ground in Iraq would, in any event, reside in the hands of the US ambassador, who would shortly be named by Bush to hold court in a 3,000-strong fortified embassy in Baghdad.

This colonialist framework went unchallenged at the press conference—not surprisingly, since there is no disagreement

within the American ruling elite and both of its parties—Democratic as well as Republican—with the basic imperialist goals of the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Nor are there any moral qualms over the use of massive American firepower to kill and bludgeon the Iraqis into submitting to US domination. In the post-mortems on the press conference, the most bloodthirsty parts of Bush’s presentation escaped criticism—namely, his pledge to increase the US military presence and use “decisive force” to maintain order. This was said even as thousands of US Marines were massing outside of Najaf, Sadr City in Baghdad, and Fallujah in preparation for new, and more brutal attacks on the insurgent populations.

The divisions and conflicts within the establishment arise over the optimum political and diplomatic means to achieve the desired goals, and the competency of the Bush administration to get the job done.

Hence the hand-wringing of the *New York Times*, which complained in an April 14 editorial that Bush’s “responses to questions were distressingly rambling and unfocused.” The media reporter for the *Washington Post*, Tom Shales, made the apt observation that in his opening speech, Bush “never stressed any particular point or added any emphasis.” Shales continued: “He might as well have been reading letters off an eye chart.”

The *Post* reporter quoted NBC TV journalist David Gregory, who was among the questioners in the East Room of the White House, saying the president was “filibustering at times” with his rambling responses. Bush, Shales went on to say, “at times appeared to be teetering on the very brink of confusion.”

Even more indicative of the mounting crisis of the Bush administration was the verdict of William Kristol, publisher of the Republican right *Weekly Standard* and one of the Iraq war’s most vocal proponents. “I was depressed,” Kristol told the *Post*. “He didn’t explain how we are going to win there.”

Citing Bush’s responses to questions on the composition of the post-June 30 interim government in Iraq (“That’s what [UN envoy] Mr. Brahimi is doing”) and the need for more US troops to put down the insurgency (Bush deferred the decision to General John Abizaid of the US Central Command), Kristol said, “These two statements are in my mind a failure of presidential leadership.”

There was, in fact, little in Bush’s performance to reassure the ruling elite. Some of his lies were so crude as to invite ridicule. For example, in the course of a meandering response to a pointed question about what the reporter called the “false premises” of the US attack on Iraq—including the absence of weapons of mass destruction—Bush lapsed into one of his standard—and by now thoroughly discredited—fictions. “The United Nations passed a Security Council resolution unanimously that said, disarm or face serious consequences. *And he refused to disarm.*” (Emphasis added).

In response to a question about the now-declassified and

published Presidential Daily Brief (PDB) of August 6, 2001, which bore the title, “Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US,” Bush reiterated the absurd claim that the warning of impending terrorist attacks on the US mainland was “mainly history” and did not contain “anything new.” In the course of his response, he noted the extraordinary security precautions taken at the Group of 8 summit held less than three weeks before the August 6 PDB, and said the threat warnings surrounding that event had prompted him to ask questions about possible terrorist threats within the US.

He concluded by saying, “[H]ad I had any inkling whatsoever that the people were going to fly airplanes into buildings, we would have moved heaven and earth to save the country...”

Unfortunately for Bush, the most striking security precaution taken at the G-8 summit, as has been widely reported, was the decision to shut down air space around Genoa in order to preempt reported terrorist schemes to hijack airplanes and fly them into the summit!

By the end of the question-and-answer period, Bush’s responses were growing increasingly incoherent. Asked what he considered his biggest mistake after 9/11, the president had what can fairly be described as a “Captain Queeg” moment. Here is a portion of his reply:

“I wish you’d have given me this written question ahead of time so I could plan for it... You know, I just—I’m sure something will pop into my head here in the midst of this press conference, with all the pressure of trying to come up with answer, but it hadn’t yet...”

“See, I’m of the belief that we’ll find out the truth on the weapons. That’s why we set up the independent commission. I look forward to hearing the truth as to exactly where they are. They could still be there. They could be hidden, like the 50 tons of mustard gas in a turkey farm...”

“I hope—I don’t want to sound like I have made no mistakes. I’m confident I have. I just haven’t—you just put me under the spot here, and maybe I’m not as quick on my feet as I should be in coming up with one.”

In this babble of disorientation and reaction, one got a chilling glimpse of the toxic moral, political and intellectual state of the American ruling elite, and the profound crisis that drives its violent bid for world domination. Working people are obliged, if they are to avoid a catastrophe, to take heed and draw the necessary political conclusions.



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