

Bush on Arabic-language television: old lies and glaring contradictions

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President George W. Bush made two appearances on Arabic-language television Wednesday, in a clumsy attempt at “damage control” in the wake of the outrage provoked by the exposure of the US torture of Iraqi prisoners.

Bush gave brief interviews to the Al Hurra satellite station, the American government propaganda outlet, and the widely followed Al Arabiya, the network based in Dubai. The administration snubbed Al Jazeera, the most popular station in the Middle East, because of its relatively objective, i.e., critical, reporting of the US war effort in Iraq.

The task facing Bush’s handlers was a daunting, indeed impossible one. Their aim was to transform the president, whose record of either taking sadistic pleasure in violence and death (from the execution of condemned prisoners in Texas to the killing fields of Iraq and Afghanistan) is lengthy and well-known one, into a sensitive, caring soul. Former president Bill Clinton was much more effective at pulling a long face when necessary. Bush simply reeks of insincerity.

In his interviews Bush repeated the lies and sophistries associated with the US intervention in Iraq. He told Al Hurra that America “sent troops into Iraq to promote freedom.” In both interviews Bush claimed that the US goal was a peaceful, democratic, self-governing Iraq. In his Al Arabiyah interview, the president commented: “We want to help Iraq. We’ve made a commitment. And the United States will keep that commitment because we believe in freedom and we believe the people of Iraq want to be free.”

Masses of people around the world saw through this argument before the US invasion of Iraq last March, and properly identified the campaign against the Middle Eastern nation as a colonial war of plunder aimed at its natural resources, and countless millions more now understand this. The photographs of American military atrocities carried out against helpless Iraqis, many of them simply caught up in random sweeps, have helped clarify many in the US and elsewhere about the real character of this conflict. At one point Bush admitted that the impact in the Middle East of the images of military abuse would be “terrible.”

In his interviews the US president sounded one of the recurring themes of administration officials in response to the current torture scandal, that the “abhorrent” practices carried

out in Abu Ghraib prison “don’t represent America.” Bush told Al Hurra that the abuses “do not reflect the hearts of the American people. The American people are just as appalled at what they have seen on TV as the Iraqi citizens have [been].”

Of course there is a kernel of truth here. The torture and sadism do not reflect the heart and soul of the American people as a whole. Working people are appalled. But there are two Americas. While such savagery would be horrifying to most US citizens, it is certainly not out of place in George W. Bush’s America: the America of wealth, corruption and criminality. Brutality and repression are essential ingredients of Bush’s America, directed against the poor, the working class and political opposition in the US and against peoples abroad who are perceived as obstructing Washington’s geopolitical ambitions.

The torture of suspects has become quasi-official US policy since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks provided the Bush administration the opportunity to go on the offensive in its so-called “war on terror.”

In the wake of September 11, the media began a widespread discussion about the pros and cons of torturing detainees. *Newsweek* magazine carried a piece by Jonathan Alter entitled, “Time To Think About Torture.” Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News Channel featured a segment which anchorman Shepard Smith introduced by asking, “Should law enforcement be allowed to do anything, even terrible things, to make suspects spill the beans?” On CNN’s “Crossfire” program, right-winger Tucker Carlson suggested that under certain circumstances, torture “may be the lesser of two evils.”

US law enforcement agencies rounded up hundreds of men from Middle Eastern countries and routinely abused and beat them. A Justice Department report issued last summer revealed “a pattern of physical and verbal abuse,” particularly at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, New York, and the Passaic County jail in Paterson, New Jersey. Detainees in Brooklyn—none of whom were ever charged with terrorism—asserted that they had their heads slammed against walls, often before guards videotaped their statements. Some charged they were dragged by their handcuffs and ankle chains, and told, “You will feel pain.” Others complained that their arms, hands, wrists and fingers were twisted.

In the aftermath of the US conquest of Afghanistan Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld gave American and Afghan forces the green light to capture or kill Taliban and others caught up in the fighting and generally do whatever they liked to “people who have done terrible things.” The massacre of hundreds of prisoners at Mazar-i-Sharif was one of the direct consequences of US policy. What is Guantanamo Bay if not a concentration camp at which hundreds of internees, none of whom have been accused of a crime in a court of law, face inhuman conditions on a daily basis?

Those carrying out the abuses of detainees at Abu Ghraib have made it clear that they were following orders from higher-ups to “soften up” and break the prisoners. The actions at the Baghdad prison are not an aberration, they have become the norm for the US government and military.

Indeed, after confidently telling the Al Arabiya interviewer that the horrors at the Baghdad prison are the “actions of a few people,” Bush only seconds later declared, “I want to know the full extent of the operations in Iraq, the prison operations. We want to make sure that if there is a systemic problem—in other words, if there’s a problem system-wide—that we stop the practices.”

To admit this possibility is damning enough. The “systemic” abuse of thousands of Iraqi prisoners (reported on by US Major General Antonio Taguba in his 53-page report, which the Bush administration sat on for months) *by itself* makes a mockery of the claims that the US mission is to bring freedom and democracy to that nation.

Bush claimed in his Al Hurra interview that the US was a democracy and that “everything is not perfect, that mistakes are made. But in a democracy as well those mistakes will be investigated and people will be brought to justice.” American government conduct “stands in stark contrast to life under Saddam Hussein. His trained torturers were never brought to justice. Under his regime there were no investigations about mistreatment of people. There will be investigations. People will be brought to justice.” That the US political system has not yet descended to the level of a brutal police-state regime trying to keep the lid on a country beset by volatile social and ethnic conflicts is a small mercy indeed!

Bush told Al Arabiyah, “A dictator wouldn’t be answering questions about this. A dictator wouldn’t be saying that the system will be investigated and the world will see the results of the investigation. A dictator wouldn’t admit reforms needed to be done.” In fact, his administration did everything in its power to prevent the publication of the photographs and the dissemination of the story about the torture of the Iraqi prisoners. Even when CBS television had gotten hold of the material, the US military applied pressure on the network to kill the story. In the end, it was simply too explosive and widely known to conceal.

Elements in the Bush administration—the most conspiratorial and criminal in US history—have no doubt drawn the lesson that

further and tighter restrictions, resembling precisely those that exist under police-state dictatorships, must be placed on the American media to prevent a repetition of this damaging episode.

Bush claimed that “People will be brought to justice.” Who? A handful of military prison guards, made scapegoats for the criminality of the entire enterprise? In reality, the “chain of command” leads from Abu Ghraib prison to the military high command in Iraq, including General Ricardo Sanchez, all the way to the Pentagon and the White House, to Rumsfeld, Vice President Cheney and Bush himself. These are the genuinely responsible parties.

When asked by the Al Hurra interviewer whether he retained confidence in Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, Bush gave less than a wholehearted endorsement. If the transcribed text is correct, Bush said, “Oh, of course I have some confidence in the secretary of defense.”

The Bush administration’s Iraq policy has always had an unreal element about it. Administration officials believed they could simply say anything, make up anything, claim anything, and get away with it. The policy is now in shambles, but the mindset of the cabal in Washington has not changed. How else to explain Bush’s comment, absurd on the face of it, that “Iraqis are sick of foreign people coming in their country and trying to destabilize their country”?

The Al Arabiyah interviewer asked Bush, with intended irony or not, whether the US was planning more action “against some other countries” to make democracy “flourish” in the Middle East, such as Syria. The president became quite defensive, claiming that there were no such plans and that “Iraq was a unique situation because Saddam Hussein had constantly defied the world and had threatened his neighbors, had used weapons of mass destruction, had terrorist ties, had torture chambers inside his country, had mass graves.”

Leaving aside the lies and half-truths in Bush’s reply—after all, the US was an ally of Hussein during the years he carried out many of his crimes and no ties to terrorists were ever proved—it may very well be that the resident of the White House, neither morally or intellectually prepared for setbacks and crises, has been shaken by the disaster unfolding in Iraq. For Bush and American imperialism, however, there is no going back. The US ruling elite has set out on a course of world domination and it will respond to the exposure of its crimes by committing far greater crimes.



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