

Bush's prime-time speech highlights deepening crisis over Iraq

The Editorial Board
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In the buildup to Bush's Monday night speech on Iraq, the White House announced that the president would spell out a clear strategy for a "successful" outcome of the US occupation. Instead, both the content of the speech and the circumstances in which it was delivered underscored the crisis and disarray of the administration's Iraq policy.

The speech, touted as the first in a series of presidential addresses leading up to the June 30 "transfer of sovereignty" in Iraq, fell largely on deaf ears, not only among the American people, but even within the ruling circles that constituted its primary audience. The address was scheduled in response to irrefutable signs of growing public opposition to the war as well as mounting dissension and criticism within the political establishment and virtually all branches of the state—the military, the intelligence apparatus, Congress, and the Republican Party itself.

If anything, the speech exacerbated the political crisis over the war. The general verdict in the media was that Bush had failed to present any serious strategy to reverse the deteriorating military and political situation facing the US in Iraq. The speech offered nothing new and Bush's presentation—desultory and semi-literate (It did not help when the president failed three times to correctly pronounce the name of the Baghdad prison, Abu Ghraib, at the center of the US torture scandal)—only heightened the fear within the ruling elite of a looming disaster in Iraq and accelerated its loss of confidence in the Bush administration.

Bush's "five-point plan" boiled down to a reiteration of Washington's intention to continue its military occupation of the oil-rich country indefinitely, while going through the charade of "transferring sovereignty" to an Iraqi puppet regime and obtaining a United Nations imprimatur for this exercise in modern-day colonialism.

The president elected to deliver his address to a select audience of senior military officers at the US Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Bush's preference for using uniformed military or police personnel as backdrops for his major addresses is a measure of the administration's identification with militarism as well as its fear of the broad

mass of the American people.

Ironically, delivering the speech at the war college only drew attention to the growing dissension within the American military itself over the policy in Iraq. The institution, which trains the army's top commanders, has issued study after study criticizing the war and warning that the US military operation is heading for a fiasco.

The hostility within the military high command toward administration policy has found expression in scathing denunciations by retired generals such as Anthony Zinni, the former chief of the US Central Command. The organization of the US war, he stated, was characterized by "at a minimum, true dereliction, negligence, and irresponsibility; at worst, lying, incompetence, and corruption." Against those who call for staying the course in Iraq, Zinni declared Sunday in an interview on the CBS News program *60 Minutes* that "the course is headed over Niagara Falls".

The Bush administration initially promoted Monday's prime-time speech as a major policy address. But, in the end, it was not carried by any of the US broadcast networks—ABC, CBS, NBC or Fox—and the White House did not ask them to air the speech. The address was carried only by the cable news channels.

The decision of Bush's handlers to not seek the widest possible airing of the speech in all likelihood reflected their own lack of confidence both in the substance of the speech and the president's ability to deliver it. More fundamentally, the speech was only tangentially directed at the American people. It was primarily directed toward the political and media establishment, with the aim of quelling growing dissension.

This is a tall order for a president who comes before the TV cameras as a certified and documented liar. Not surprisingly, Bush's response to his administration's crisis was to peddle a new batch of lies. The old pretext for war—weapons of mass destruction—was raised only once, in passing.

A new, overarching lie formed the absurd premise behind all of Bush's blather about Iraqi self-rule, democracy,

freedom, empowerment, etc., etc. Namely, the notion that the US military occupiers represent the Iraqi people, i.e., those being occupied, and, conversely, all those who resist the US occupation are, ipso facto, enemies of the Iraqi people.

To put it somewhat differently: the Americans, who invaded Iraq and killed thousands of its people, and who occupy the country and carry out torture against Iraqi prisoners, are the purveyors of freedom and sovereignty. Those who oppose the American occupiers are, by definition, “terrorists.” Bush used the words “terror”, “terrorists” and “terrorism” no less than 19 times in the half-hour address.

Such is the Orwellian universe conjured up by US imperialism to defend its colonialist enterprise in Iraq!

The second big lie in Bush’s speech was the claim that the US “will transfer full sovereignty to a government of Iraqi citizens.” In the next breath Bush declared that the US would indefinitely maintain its present troop level of 138,000—and increase it if American generals so requested. At one chilling point, Bush said the US was prepared to use “overwhelming force” to secure its ends in Iraq.

The idea that a nation can be sovereign while its people are subjected to foreign occupation is absurd on its face. Moreover, as is clear from the resolution submitted by the US and Britain to the UN Security Council, the US is to retain unfettered control over its military forces and operations and maintain its grip over Iraqi oil revenues under the supposedly “sovereign” post-June 30 government.

With barely five weeks to go before the transfer is to take place, the Iraqi people know nothing about who will make up the regime that is being cobbled together by US officials and United Nations special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, and they have absolutely no say in the matter.

The final major lie in Bush’s speech came at the end, when he declared: “We did not seek this war on terror, but this is the world as we find it.” On the contrary, it is well known that the principal architects of the war in Iraq had plotted just such an intervention years before Bush was installed in the White House. They were brought into the Bush administration to occupy high-level posts, and welcomed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as the pretext for initiating their plans for the seizure of Iraqi oil—something seen as essential to the assertion of US global hegemony.

The only new proposal in Bush’s speech was a plan to bulldoze the Abu Ghraib prison and replace it with a “modern, maximum security prison”. The demolition, Bush said, would be “a fitting symbol of Iraq’s new beginning”. The very fact that a prison was presented as the symbol of the new, “democratic” Iraq speaks volumes about the actual

content of US-imposed “democracy”.

In response to the speech, Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry gave what amounted to a political endorsement of Bush’s prescription for continued war against the people of Iraq, while insisting that he was the better man for the job. “The president laid out general principles tonight, most of which we’ve heard before,” he said. “What’s most important now is to turn these words into action by offering presidential leadership to the nation and to the world.”

Even the polls of the corporate-controlled media show that the US population is overwhelmingly opposed to the Bush administration’s policy in Iraq, and nearly half favor the immediate withdrawal of all US troops. Yet the Democratic Party has joined with the administration in a concerted attempt to politically disenfranchise and silence the mass antiwar sentiment that expressed itself so forcefully in the initial stages of the Democratic primaries.

Stopping the war in Iraq is possible only through a break with the two-party system and the building of a new, independent mass political movement based on a socialist program that addresses the needs of the working people.

The Socialist Equality Party has intervened in the 2004 elections in order to politically arm and prepare such a movement. The SEP candidates for president and vice president—Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence—and our congressional and state legislative candidates will use this campaign to raise the demands for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq, the prosecution of the US officials who launched the war on false pretenses, and the payment of compensation both to the Iraqi victims of the war and the families of US military personnel whose lives have been sacrificed.



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