

The “fiery” speeches of Mr. Gore

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Former presidential candidate Al Gore has given a series of speeches in recent weeks sharply attacking the Bush administration for its handling of the war in Iraq and the subsequent occupation. In a speech delivered in New York on May 26, Gore called for the resignations of several top administration officials and denounced Bush for the “growing chaos enveloping our entire policy in Iraq.” He made similar comments on Friday in a speech before the Washington State Democratic Convention.

Gore’s speeches are important in a number of respects. On the one hand, he is clearly making an appeal to broad sections of the American population that are opposed to the ongoing occupation of Iraq and are repulsed by the evidence of American torture of Iraqi prisoners. He is speaking to the enormous and growing hostility to the Bush administration that exists within the United States. In particular, he is speaking of the administration in terms that the presumptive Democratic Party candidate John Kerry has refused to use.

Yet while Gore is speaking *to* these sentiments within the American population, he is not speaking *for* them. As is clear from the speeches he has given—and particularly the May 26 speech in New York—Gore is in fact speaking for a section of the ruling establishment that is increasingly concerned that the Bush administration’s handling of the war in Iraq is turning into a disaster for the interests of American imperialism. His principal concern is to see that the growing opposition to the war is directed behind the Democratic Party and the election of a candidate that in no way represents a real alternative to Bush. In the case of Gore, where there is fire there is a smokescreen—behind which lies the right-wing and pro-war policy of the Democratic Party.

The focus of Gore’s speech in New York was the war in Iraq and the prison abuse scandal that has erupted over the past month. He said that Bush’s policy “has brought us humiliation in the eyes of the world...He has brought us deep dishonor.”

From the beginning, however, Gore makes clear that his differences with Bush are fundamentally of a tactical nature. “From its earliest days in power, this administration sought to radically destroy the foreign policy consensus that had guided America since the end of World War II, “ he declared. “The long successful strategy of containment was abandoned in favor of the new strategy of ‘preemption.’” This was “an exotic new approach that asserted a unique and unilateral U.S. right to ignore international law wherever it wished to do so and take military action against any nation, even in circumstances where there was no imminent threat.”

Later he added, “Unilateralism, as we have painfully seen in Iraq, is its own reward. Going it alone may satisfy a political instinct, but it is dangerous to our military...Our troops are stretched thin and exhausted not only because Secretary Rumsfeld contemptuously dismissed the advice of military leaders on the size of the needed force— but also because President Bush’s contempt for traditional allies and international opinion left us without a real coalition to share the military and financial burden of the war and the occupation.”

Here Gore is making the entirely correct point that the policy of the Bush administration represents a shift in the traditional orientation of American foreign policy, toward a much more aggressive unilateralism.

Gore’s alternative, however, is a return to a more measured approach to advance the same aims: the US cannot always act alone in the pursuit of its interests because it will need the financial and military aid of other powers.

In discussing the extreme recklessness of Bush’s foreign policy, Gore notes the extraordinary degree to which the government has resorted to lies and distortions. “The President convinced a majority of the country that Saddam Hussein was responsible for attacking us on September 11th. But in truth he had nothing to do with it...He asked the nation, in his State of the Union address, to ‘imagine’ how terrified we should be that Saddam was about to give nuclear weapons to terrorists and stated repeatedly that Iraq posed a grave and gathering threat to our nation.”

Gore again spoke to the sentiments of many Americans when he noted that the torture carried out at Abu Ghraib was not the product of a ‘few bad apples.’ Rather it was a natural outcome of the Bush administration’s contempt for international law and democratic rights.

“Private Lynndie England,” Gore noted, referring to one of those appearing in the pictures of torture abuse, “did not make the decision that the United States would not observe the Geneva Convention. Specialist Charles Graner was not the one who approved a policy of establishing an American Gulag of dark rooms with naked prisoners to be ‘stressed’ and even—we must use the word—tortured—to force them to say things that legal procedures might not induce them to say.”

Rather, “These policies were designed and insisted upon by the Bush White House. Indeed, the President’s own legal counsel advised him specifically on the subject. His secretary of defense and his assistants pushed these cruel departures from historic American standards over the objections of the uniformed military...”

Gore voiced concern that Bush “has exposed Americans abroad and Americans in every U.S. town and city to a greater danger of attack by terrorists because of his arrogance, willfulness, and bungling at stirring up hornet’s nests that pose no threat whatsoever to us. And by then insulting the religion and culture and tradition of peoples in other countries. And by pursuing policies that have resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent men, women and children, all of it done in our name.”

Later he noted that the torture of Iraqi prisoners was linked to the attack on democratic rights within the United States. Fundamental rights—including the prohibition of imprisonment without charges, the right to a lawyer, the right to appeal in court—are being undermined. “They have launched an unprecedented assault on civil liberties, on the right of the courts to review their actions, on the right of the Congress to have information to how they are spending the public’s money and the right of the news media to have information about the policies they are pursuing.... Under the Patriot Act, Muslims, innocent of any crime, were picked up, often physically abused, and held incommunicado indefinitely. What happened in Abu Ghraib was a difference not of kind, but of degree.”

Many of the points Gore makes here are entirely correct. However, Gore makes no attempt to deal with the underlying causes of these developments. What is behind the unprecedented attack on democratic rights? First and foremost, there is the enormous social inequality that

exists within the country and internationally. The entire political establishment is dominated by the interests of a tiny portion of the population that controls the major forces of economic and social life. Basic democratic norms are incompatible with such inequality.

The war itself is an expression of this inequality—and it is notable that Gore makes absolutely no mention of the real interests driving the war. Never once does he mention oil. The unilateralism of the Bush administration is not, as Gore would have us believe, simply the product of the ideology of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and the rest of the administration. It is, rather, the adaptation of American foreign policy to a new period—a period characterized, on the one hand, by the absence of any counterweight to American military power and, on the other hand, by the extreme crisis of American and world capitalism. The invasion and occupation of Iraq was an attempt to seize control of Iraq’s resources and vastly increase the power of the American ruling elite by means of military force.

Gore makes absolutely no mention—does not even hint—at any of this because in essence he agrees with this policy. His problem is with the way it is being carried out: that in the long run the Bush administration is damaging American interests by its recklessness and disregard for the traditional norms of American diplomacy.

Gore’s attempt to denounce Bush for “pursuing policies that have resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent men, women and children” is the height of hypocrisy. What of the decade-long sanctions regime carried out largely under the aegis of the Clinton Administration with Gore as Vice President? What of the millions of Iraqis who died as the country was starved of medicine and its economy destroyed? Indeed the initial facility with which the Americans were able to invade the country would not have been possible without the continual bombings carried out under Clinton.

On the question of democratic rights, Gore attempts to obscure his own complicity, evident particularly in his performance during the course of the 2000 elections when he ran against Bush. When the Supreme Court intervened to issue a blatantly anti-democratic ruling halting the recount in Florida and handing the election to Bush, Gore bowed his head. In his New York speech, he attributes this to what he saw “as my duty to reaffirm my own strong belief that we are a nation of laws and not only accept the decision, but do what I could to prevent efforts to delegitimize George Bush.” He makes the extraordinary claim that he “did not at that moment imagine that Bush would, in the presidency that ensued, demonstrate utter contempt for the rule of law and work at every turn to frustrate accountability.”

Gore could not “imagine” that Bush would “demonstrate utter contempt for the rule of law”! This from an individual who experienced first-hand the protracted attempts by the Republican right to undermine the Clinton administration by manufacturing scandals from Whitewater to Monica Lewinsky. The entire Democratic Party—including Gore—stands disgraced for having refused to expose before the American people the real aspirations of the individuals who came to power in 2000. For this reason—though not only for this reason—they are complicit in the crimes that have been carried out.

Gore and the rest of the Democratic Party remained silent then and continue to remain silent precisely because they do not represent any real opposition to these forces. Gore’s appeal in the quotations above to the “advice of military leaders” and the “objections of the uniformed military” are not an aberration. They pepper his speech. He stated that Bush “did not honor the advice, experience and judgment of our military leaders in designing his invasion of Iraq.”

Gore clearly feels he has the support of significant sections of the military brass and political elite, and specifically cites the public concerns of a number of former generals, including former head of the Central Command Anthony Zinni and former head of the Marine Corps Joseph

Hoar. According to Gore, Bush’s failure to listen to these military leaders meant that *not enough troops were sent to Iraq* and the illusion was created that “we would not need to respect the so-called Powell doctrine of overwhelming force.”

These comments echo Gore’s position during the post-election crisis in 2000, when he bowed to demands that invalid ballots sent to Florida by servicemen abroad should be counted, declaring that he would not become commander in chief against the will of the military.

Behind Gore’s fiery words lies a thoroughly conventional and conservative policy. Above all this is evident in his fervent support for the Democratic candidate John Kerry. “In my opinion, John Kerry is dealing with this unfolding tragedy in an impressive and extremely responsible way,” Gore said. “Our nation’s best interests lie in having a new president who can turn a new page, sweep clean with a new broom, and take office on January 20th of next year with the ability to make a fresh assessment of exactly what our nation’s strategic position is as of the time the reins of power are finally wrenched from the group of incompetents that created this catastrophe.”

What is Kerry’s record? What is his position now? As a Senator he voted for the Patriot Act that Gore denounces. He voted for granting the President war powers to invade Iraq. In recent weeks he has outlined a foreign policy that criticizes Bush largely from the right. He has declared that Bush has placed too much emphasis on democracy and freedom, that the US needs to place more emphasis on ‘national security’ and national interests. He has called for thousands of more troops to be sent to Iraq and has hinted at the reinstatement of mandatory military or national service for all Americans.

Gore does not call for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq or demand that Kerry do so. Rather he urges, “Kerry should not tie his own hands by offering overly specific, detailed proposals.” He urges the American people to “fire a failing leader and hire a new one,” likening the election of the American President to the selection of a new CEO. Gore would like the American people to believe that a ‘new man on the top’ will change things for the better, even though this new man has pledged to continue the occupation launched by his predecessor.

Gore’s support for Kerry highlights the role he sees for himself. He speaks from the left side of his mouth in order to channel popular opposition behind the Democrats, constraining it within the framework of the two-party system and preventing any genuine alternative. The American people must not allow themselves to be fooled by such fire and smoke.



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