

Australian PM shares a farcical White House media conference with Bush

Mike Head
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In a telling sign of how seriously the catastrophe in occupied Iraq has damaged their governments, US President George W. Bush on Thursday lavished praise on visiting Australian Prime Minister John Howard and launched an extraordinary intervention into the campaign for this year's scheduled Australian elections.

Their brief media conference on the White House steps was truly surreal. It brought together two blood-soaked political criminals, clinging to each other for electoral survival. One measure of the depth of Bush's predicament is that he sought to inflate the importance of a man as politically and historically insignificant as the current Australian leader. He hailed Howard—a political flunkey whose government has slavishly followed the US administration—as a “close friend” whose “advice” and “clear vision” were highly appreciated.

A near-fiasco in the final moments of the press conference made clear the purpose of the stage-managed performance. It concerned the final question, which was put to Bush by Steve Lewis from the *Australian*, Rupert Murdoch's Australian flagship. Lewis asked Bush to comment on the pledge made by opposition Labor Party leader Mark Latham to withdraw Australian troops from Iraq by Christmas.

Lewis apparently missed his cue to present his question, producing the following exchange:

President Bush: No other questions? This is unbelievable. You better hurry ...

Prime Minister Howard: Mr. Lewis, Steve Lewis, the *Australian*.

Steve Lewis: President Bush, I'd like to ask you a question ...

President Bush: Where are you? There you are.

Steve Lewis: Just here.

President Bush: Thank you.

Answering Lewis' question, Bush made the most strident attack by an American president on an Australian political leader in living memory, describing Latham's policy as “disastrous” and implicitly accusing the Labor leader of siding with “enemy” terrorists.

“It would dispirit those who love freedom in Iraq,” Bush declared. “It would say that the Australian government doesn't see the hope of a free, democratic society leading to a peaceful world. It would embolden the enemy to believe that they could shake our will. See, they want to kill innocent life because they think that the Western world and the free world is weak.”

From any objective standpoint, Bush's diatribe was absurd. In the first place, the Howard government's troop deployment in Iraq is militarily insignificant. Of more than 130,000 foreign troops, including some 120,000 from the US, Australia has just 280 actually on the ground in Iraq, none of whom are directly involved in the major military operations against the growing insurgency.

Secondly, Labor has no fundamental differences with Howard. Rather, it regards the Iraq war as undermining the “war on terror,” as well as Australia's national security. Latham's call for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq is based on the tactical calculation that Australian military forces are needed for operations closer to home.

As for the equation of the US-led occupation with freedom and democracy, that claim lies in tatters after more than a year of mass killings and brutal repression against the Iraqi population, the exposure of systematic torture and abuse of prisoners in US jails, and the installation of a widely despised puppet government in order to secure US hegemony over Iraq's oil wealth.

Precisely because of this debacle, Bush felt the need to bolster Howard's political credentials. No one, not even British Prime Minister Tony Blair, has been a more enthusiastic or unconditional backer of the Bush administration and the illegal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, with the withdrawal of Spanish troops, followed by other members of the threadbare "coalition of the willing," Bush cannot afford to see Howard defeated.

The farcical character of the proceedings was also underscored by Bush's claim that both governments were committed to the "principles of human dignity" for detainees. That was why, Bush insisted, he appreciated Howard's "candid discussion" on the need to ensure that the two Australians detained indefinitely at the US military facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba—David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib—were treated fairly.

Given the Abu Ghraib revelations, Bush's remarks were preposterous. Even as he left Australia, Howard was forced to admit that his government had misled the public over its knowledge of the prison abuses. Equally absurd was the image of Howard championing the rights of Hicks and Habib. For more than two years, the prime minister has actively supported the illegal detention of the pair, in flagrant violation of the Geneva Convention.

Just before the White House event, more of his government's lies collapsed. Foreign Affairs officials in Canberra admitted that they had known since last year that both Hicks and Habib had complained of maltreatment, demolishing the government's claims that no evidence of abuse existed.

Asked about the treatment of Hicks and Habib, Bush gave a meaningless assurance that the US military—which administered the sadistic interrogation techniques on his orders—was investigating the allegations. He vaguely suggested that, at Howard's request, the pair would soon be brought before military tribunals, as if that would constitute "fairness". These rigged trials are likely to depend entirely on so-called confessions and other statements extracted from detainees under duress.

The only moment of candour came when Howard conceded: "In recent weeks, the news out of Iraq has not been as positive as we would have liked." When Howard first announced his trip to Washington two

months ago, it was conceived as a possible fillip for his flagging opinion poll ratings. Since then, however, the political situation has deteriorated sharply, with the eruption of nation-wide resistance to the occupation of Iraq and the leaking of the shocking prison photographs.

In return for Bush's ostentatious blessings, Howard restated his government's unqualified commitment to the war on Iraq and to the Bush administration itself. "This is not the time—it is the worst time imaginable—for allies to be showing any weakness in relation to the pursuit of our goals in Iraq. And I express my strong support for the leadership that the president has continued to display, particularly through some of the more difficult aspects of recent weeks."

As soon as the event with Howard ended, the political crisis facing Bush took another turn for the worst. At a hastily-convened second media conference, the president announced that CIA director George Tenet had resigned "for personal reasons". Until now, Bush has relied upon Tenet and the CIA to take the blame for his administration's alleged intelligence failures, including the non-detection of the September 11 attacks and the phoney reports of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

As Howard arrived in Washington, veteran political commentator Laurie Oakes observed in the *Bulletin* magazine: "Another tickle-my-tummy visit to the White House could well be the last thing Howard needs as he tries desperately to resurrect the Coalition's election chances." Oakes quoted a senior Liberal MP saying: "It's a bad time to be seen with the American president."

As for Latham, his reaction was predictably muted. Far from criticising Bush's blatant political interference, he emphasised that a Labor government would further strengthen military, intelligence and cultural relations with Washington. "I look forward to the day when we can put the mistakes of Iraq behind us," he declared.



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