Buying silence: Bush awards Medal of Freedom to key figures in Iraq debacle

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16 December 2004

President Bush's awarding of the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Tuesday to three of the chief architects and executors of the Iraq war is an affront to the concept of freedom of Orwellian proportions.

The White House ceremony that saw Bush bestow the gold medallions on retired general Tommy Franks, former CIA Director George Tenet and former US administrator in Iraq L. Paul Bremer for their roles in an illegal war and brutal occupation that have killed 100,000 Iraqis and 1,300 US soldiers could not come as a shock to those who follow this administration with a degree of critical thought and are genuinely devoted to the principle of freedom. Many people throughout the world will react, appropriately, with revulsion.

The Medal of Freedom is the highest civilian honor bestowed in the name of the American people. The dispensation of the award for overtly political purposes is by no means unprecedented. President Lyndon B. Johnson, for example, in the final 24 hours of his presidency in January 1969, gave out 20 medals, including to McGeorge Bundy and Walt W. Rostow, two leading Vietnam War advisers.

Johnson, however, used the award to defend his war policies on the eve of leaving office in response to mounting popular opposition and growing conflicts within the US ruling elite fueled by the worsening military situation in Southeast Asia. The timing of Bush's awards, and the individuals honored, are clearly meant to show that the military quagmire in Iraq, the continuing opposition within the American population, and the increasingly bitter divisions within the state apparatus—including the military itself—will not deter his administration from continuing its militaristic policy—not only in Iraq, but against future targets of US aggression.

The glaring contradiction between Bush's praise for the three honorees and the disasters over which they presided—in Tenet's case, within the US as well as in Iraq—points to an additional motive behind the awards. In the atmosphere of crisis and palace intrigue surrounding the Bush White House, the medals suggest a payoff to buy the silence of individuals in a position to tell tales that could prove highly damaging.

The awards ceremony took place only days after US soldiers about to be shipped to Iraq confronted Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in Kuwait on the lack of armored vehicles and the "stop loss" policy of forcing soldiers to remain in the military beyond their agreed term.

An indication of the anger growing among the troops was given by Paul Rieckhoff, a former Army lieutenant who served in Iraq and presently heads an organization of veterans opposed to the war. He called the awards "a slap in the face to the troops" from "an administration that loves the big PR move...It validates how out of touch Washington is with the reality of what is on the ground in Iraq."

On the very day of the ceremony, Republican Senator John McCain declared that he had "no confidence" in Rumsfeld. The same day, the Senate Armed Services Committee announced plans to hold hearings when the new Congress convenes next month on the unprepared state of the military and complaints from troops on shortages.

The triumphant pose struck by Bush, the honorees and the assembled dignitaries in the East Room of the White House was belied by the actual records of the recipients. Bush heaped praise on three men who retired from their posts in semi-disgrace. Each, in his own way, had a direct role in what will be reckoned by future historians as major debacles for US imperialism.

Bush lauded Franks, who was the overall commander of the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, for his Iraq war plan, which utilized "a force half the size of the force that won the Gulf War" to reach Baghdad in less than a month,

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“the fastest, longest armored advance in the history of American warfare.” He did not reprise his talk from last summer of a “catastrophic success” in Iraq—Bush’s way of acknowledging that Frank’s military plan failed utterly to anticipate the fierce resistance to US occupation—a popular insurgency for which the US military was unprepared.

But, as Bush well knows, Frank’s military plan was dictated by the civilian leadership at the Pentagon, headed by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and backed by Vice President Dick Cheney. Basing themselves on the delusions of the neo-conservatives in the Pentagon such as Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, they insisted that a small US force could not only quickly oust Saddam Hussein, but that the American invaders would be hailed by the Iraqi people as liberators and Washington would have little difficulty installing a puppet regime and begin drawing down its troop strength within months of the invasion.

Franks, who initially opposed Rumsfeld’s plan and called for a much larger US military force, could add a great deal of fuel to the bitter divisions that already exist within the military and between sections of the military brass and Rumsfeld. He could also, were he so inclined, explode the lie that Bush decided on war against Iraq only as a last resort, and document first hand the detailed planning for an invasion that began even as the war in Afghanistan was in progress.

Bremer, installed as the US proconsul in Iraq within weeks of the March, 2003 invasion, presided over a humanitarian catastrophe for the Iraqi people and a political and military debacle for the US. The growth of the insurgency and fragility of the US occupation were underscored by his somewhat farcical exit from Iraq. At the White House ceremony, Bush praised the “transfer of sovereignty that ended [Bremer’s] tenure” at the end of June 2004, but failed to note that the “end” of the US occupation and handover of power to Washington’s hand-picked interim prime minister, Iyad Allawi, was hurriedly arranged two days early and held in secret for fear that insurgents would attack the affair. Bremer himself stole from Iraq, quite literally, like a thief in the night.

He has since come under attack from sections of the political establishment and the media for his decision to disband the defeated Iraqi Army and exclude former Baath Party members from any role in the occupation government, relying instead on US-backed exiles. Bremer himself caused political problems for the Bush reelection campaign last October when he told a meeting he had repeatedly asked for more US troops and had been turned down, by implication blaming his failure to secure the country and win the support of the population on the smallness of the US military presence.

Tenet, a holdover from the Clinton administration who headed the Central Intelligence Agency for seven years until his June, 2004 resignation, figured centrally not only in the preparations for the Iraq invasion, but also the greatest intelligence disaster in US history—the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington DC. On both counts, he became a symbol of incompetence, conspiracy and deceit. He has been roundly criticized by congressional committees and the 9/11 commission for his roles in connection with the 2001 terrorist attacks as well as the Iraq war.

Tenet supplied and vouched for the phony intelligence on alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and Iraq-Al Qaeda ties that was used to justify the war. Potentially even more explosive is his knowledge of the events surrounding the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

To this day the utter failure of the Bush administration and the CIA to take any serious measures to thwart an Al Qaeda attack that was known to be in the offing remains unexplained. Tenet, better than most, would know precisely who in the US intelligence establishment and Bush administration allowed the attacks to take place. The political motives for doing so were already clear in the way the Bush administration seized on the tragedy to implement both foreign and domestic policies of a far-reaching and reactionary character that would have been politically impossible, except under the banner of a “war on terror.”

If and when those responsible for the atrocity unfolding in Iraq are brought to justice, the latest Medal of Freedom recipients, and the man who bestowed them, will find themselves reunited in the dock of a war crimes tribunal, where they belong.

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