Iraq crisis dominates Bush press conference

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27 January 2005

The first presidential news conference of the Bush administration's second term was dominated by the subject Bush sought to avoid in his inaugural address: the growing crisis of the US occupation regime in Iraq.

The press conference was called on short notice, only hours after the crash of a Marine helicopter in the western Iraqi desert that killed 31 US soldiers, the greatest loss of life on the US side in a single event since Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Bush's opening statement made no mention of the disaster, but instead hailed the upcoming January 30 election in Iraq as one of a series of democratic milestones, following elections in Afghanistan, the Ukraine and the Palestinian Authority.

Bush sought to reprise his inauguration-day rhetoric about a US-led crusade for democracy, but he faced a series of questions, some critical and even hostile, about the American policy debacle in Iraq. In response to one of the first questions, he refused to say what level of voter participation was required to make the Iraqi election a success. "The fact that they're voting in itself is successful," he replied, demonstrating that his administration will hail even a minimal turnout as a victory.

Despite Bush's claims that only terrorists and enemies of democracy could oppose an election conducted under military occupation, there are already indications that the election boycott will spread well beyond the Sunni Triangle and parts of Baghdad. Turnout among overseas Iraqis—in Iran, Jordan, Syria, Britain, the United States and a half dozen other countries—is likely to be in the single digits. Only 25 percent of émigré Iraqis have registered to vote, and that figure falls to 10 percent among Iraqis living in the US. Only those registered will be eligible to vote January 30.

Bush was asked directly whether in his inaugural address he was threatening war against "certain countries, especially Iran." He did nothing to discourage the suggestion. "My inaugural address reflected the policies of the past four years that said—that we're implementing in Afghanistan and Iraq," he responded. The clear implication was that Iran could expect similar treatment to those two countries.

Another question focused on the hypocrisy of his claim of a US commitment to support freedom and democracy in every country, when many US allies—particularly those in the Middle East—are dictatorships or despotisms of the worst description. The reporter cited the arrest of an anti-Bush speaker in Jordan who called for a boycott of America and was charged under the Jordanian penal code and imprisoned.

"He stood up for democracy, you might say," the reporter declared. "And I wonder if here and now you will specifically condemn this abuse of human rights by a key American ally."

Bush sought to dodge the question by claiming ignorance of the case. Visibly flustered, he assured the questioner, "I urge my friend, His Majesty [Bush apparently could not recall King Abdullah's name] to make sure that democracy continues to advance in Jordan." He claimed that Jordan—a near-absolute monarchy in which the majority of the population, Palestinian refugees displaced from what is now Israel and the West Bank, are denied any political rights—was "making progress towards that goal."

The next question produced an equally defensive response, this time angry rather than flustered. The reporter asked about charges from Senate Democrats, during the debate over the confirmation of Condoleezza Rice as secretary of state, that Rice and the entire Bush administration had lied about weapons of mass destruction and Iraq's ties to Al Qaeda in the run-up to the war. Would Bush concede any mistakes were made?

Bush evaded the question, demanded that Rice be confirmed immediately, and went back to his theme of the supposed democratization of Iraq and Afghanistan. The Senate hearing's lame manifestation of democracy in the United States, however, seemed to infuriate him, even though only 12 of the 44 Democratic senators voted against Rice's confirmation later in the day.

The reporter persisted. "No reaction to the [charge of] lying? No reaction?" The assembled press corps tittered. Bush reddened. "Is that your question?" he replied. "The answer's no. Next."

The following question was on the federal budget deficit, but referred back to Iraq and the $80 billion supplemental appropriation for the war which the administration announced it would be seeking. Why was Bush not asking the American people to make financial sacrifices for the war, if his administration was prepared to sacrifice the lives of soldiers like the dozens killed in the helicopter crash, the president was asked.

Bush did not attempt to answer the question, instead repeating a series of platitudes and truisms: "Americans do pay taxes ... We've got people in harm's way ... I look forward to working with Congress to fund what is necessary to help those troops complete their mission ... I felt it was very important to reduce the tax burden on the American people." Eventually he ran out of breath and even the normally compliant press corps seemed to have run out of patience.

The next questioner began as though trying to explain himself to a small and obstreperous child: "Mr. President, I want to try another way to ask you about Iraq." The reporter cited recent polls showing that a clear majority of Americans believes the decision to go to war was a mistake and the cost of the war is not worth its dubious achievements. He asked, "What would you say to the

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American people, including a significant number who supported you at the beginning of the war, who now say, this is not what we were led to believe would happen?"

Bush fell back on his ad nauseam-repeated mantra: "I'd say the world is better off without Saddam Hussein in power. A world with Saddam Hussein in power would've been a more dangerous world today." He claimed progress in promoting democracy in Iraq and training Iraqi troops and police to some day replace American soldiers. Finally, he made reference to that morning's helicopter crash, admitting—in perhaps the only unrehearsed line of the press conference—"listen, the story today is going to be very discouraging to the American people. I understand that."

From there the press conference meandered to other topics, including Social Security, tax reform, the Department of Education's payments to right-wing journalists, the federal budget deficit, and the selection of a new director of national intelligence.

One questioner asked Bush about the nomination of Alberto Gonzales for attorney general, and Gonzales's role in drafting guidelines that sanctioned the use of torture by US interrogators. While Gonzales now claims to oppose torture, the reporter noted, "There are some written responses that Judge Gonzales gave to his Senate testimony that have troubled some people, specifically his allusion to the fact that cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment of some prisoners is not specifically forbidden, so long as it's conducted by the CIA and conducted overseas. Is that a loophole that you approved?"

Bush gave as brief a reply as possible. "Al Gonzales reflects our policy, and that is: We don't sanction torture. He will be a great attorney general. And I call upon the Senate to confirm him."

The final question on Iraq came from a right-wing journalist who cited criticisms of the war as a Vietnam-style "quagmire," as well as the questioning of Gonzales and Rice before Senate committees, and asked: "I wonder if you have any response to those criticisms. And what kind of effect do you think these statements have on the morale of our troops and of the confidence of the Iraqi people that what you're trying to do over there is going to succeed?"

Bush took the bait—with evident relief—declaring, "I think the Iraqi people are wondering whether or not this nation has the will necessary to stand with them as a democracy evolves. The enemy would like nothing more than the United States to precipitously pull out and withdraw before the Iraqis are prepared to defend themselves. Their objective is to stop the advance of democracy. Freedom scares them."

Returning to the subject of his inauguration speech, he gave himself a pat on the back: "I firmly planted the flag of liberty for all to see that the United States of America hears their concerns and believes in their aspirations. And I am excited by the challenge and am honored to be able to lead our nation in the quest of this noble goal, which is freeing people in the name of peace."

There was no follow-up, nor did anyone in the press corps ask Bush how his rhetoric about freedom and democracy squared with the reality in Iraq. According to a Human Rights Watch report, released Monday, torture is widely practiced in Iraq, not only in US military prisons like Abu Ghraib, but in the jails and detention centers of the stooge government set up by the United States under Prime Minister Ayad Allawi.

According to the report, many of the Iraqi police, jailers and intelligence agents are holdovers from the regime of Saddam Hussein, performing the same hideous functions under the new US-backed regime, "committing systematic torture and other abuses." The Allawi government, wrote Human Rights Watch, "appears to be actively taking part, or is at least complicit, in these grave violations of fundamental human rights."

Of 90 prisoners interviewed for the report, 72, or 80 percent, had been "tortured or ill-treated," and many provided evidence of fresh scars and bruises. Hania Mufti, Baghdad director of Human Rights Watch, told the *Washington Post*, "Many of the same people who worked in Saddam's time are still doing those jobs today. So there is a continuity of personnel and of mind-set. I think the Iraqi people themselves thought there was going to be a different system. Every day, they are finding it is not so different."

The American Civil Liberties Union released documents the same day listing dozens of charges of abuse of Iraqi prisoners at US detention centers in Iraq, including at Adhamiya Palace in Baghdad, once a residence of Saddam Hussein, now a torture chamber run by US special forces. Anthony Romero, executive director of the ACLU, said in a statement, "Government investigations into allegations of torture and abuse have been woefully inadequate. Some of the investigations have basically whitewashed torture and abuse. The documents tell a damning story of widespread torture and abuse reaching well beyond the walls of Abu Ghraib."

The methods of torture included sodomy with wooden batons and glass bottles, burning with cigarettes, electric shock applied to the testicles and other parts of the body, and severe beatings, carried out by both Iraqi and American interrogators. This is the real face of the "democracy" and "freedom" which American imperialism is bringing to Iraq.

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