

Bush inauguration: corporate America throws a party

Kate Randall
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Events surrounding this week's swearing in of George W. Bush for his second term in office have taken on a particularly grotesque character. While lavish spending on the presidential inauguration and its related festivities is nothing new—Bill Clinton's second inauguration cost \$29.6 million—there is something obscene in this year's proceedings that goes beyond the estimated \$40 million that will be spent on inaugural balls, parties and the parade down Pennsylvania Avenue.

Bush and his handlers have been unmoved by critics of the extravagance on display, who have argued that the inauguration plans are, at best, in bad taste at a time when close to 170,000 US troops are in Iraq and Afghanistan, close to 1,400 have been killed and another 10,000 wounded. These critics, in the media and the Democratic Party, neglect to mention the tens of thousands of Iraqis dead.

The critics also make the case that with more than 163,000 killed in the recent South Asian tsunami, ordinary US citizens are being asked to contribute to charities for the disaster. Meanwhile, corporations and the super-rich are forking over up to \$250,000 apiece to fund the inaugural activities. The estimated \$40 million tab for the four-day gala is almost three times the initial amount proposed by the Bush administration for aid to the tsunami victims.

In spite of these complaints, which would seem to have political common sense on their side, the White House and its ultra-right backers and corporate sponsors are proceeding with this orgy of conspicuous consumption. Having secured Bush's reelection, these social elements are eager to make this week's events as extravagant as possible, engaging in what could be argued, politically speaking, is an ill-advised flaunting of wealth and power.

Defending the inaugural pageantry, White House press secretary Scott McClellan commented Tuesday, "The inaugural is a great American tradition, and it's an opportunity to highlight democracy and freedom, and to show the world the values that America stands for." Official activities showcasing these "values"—as listed on the 55th

Presidential Inaugural Committee's Web site—include no less than three candlelight dinners on Wednesday and ten inaugural balls.

And these are only some of the officially sponsored activities. In addition, dozens of dinners, parties and receptions will be held at hotels around town, hosted by US states, corporations and individuals.

An estimated 100,000 politically connected guests, both Democrats and Republicans, top corporate sponsors and their collective hangers-on will flock to the DC area for the four days of inaugural-related events. They will book in to luxury hotels, cruise around town in limousines and dine at the finest restaurants. The four-day whirlwind has been described as "DC's Oscars," and 'anyone who's anyone' among the rich and powerful wants to be seen on the red carpet.

One of the hottest tickets in town has been the 2005 "Black Tie and Boots" inaugural ball scheduled for Wednesday evening at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel. George W. and Laura Bush were scheduled to make an appearance at this posh event hosted by the Texas State Society. The 10,000-capacity venue was reportedly oversold and tickets were spotted selling for more than \$1,500 a pair on eBay.

In keeping with the patriotic, militarist inaugural theme—"Counting Freedom, Honoring Service"—events opened on Tuesday afternoon with the military gala, "Saluting Those Who Serve," attended by members of the armed services. Following Thursday's swearing-in ceremony, 2,000 military veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will attend the "Commander-in-Chief Inaugural Ball."

Inaugural planners and the Pentagon have worked closely to vet the guest list at these military-themed events, and any critics of the Bush administration's war policy will be excluded. This utilization of the military as a backdrop for the presidential inaugural is undoubtedly seen by many soldiers and their families as a slap in the face by Bush, who—in addition to having sent thousands of men and

woman off to a war based on lies—has not seen fit to attend the funeral of any soldier killed in Afghanistan or Iraq.

To ensure an adequate flow of cash, the Bush administration has upped the amount individual or corporate donors can contribute to the inaugural kitty—from \$100,000 each, four years ago, to \$250,000 today. While federal election law prohibits individual donations in excess of \$2,000, no such restrictions exist here.

Those donating include corporations and executives whose businesses are regulated by the federal government, or are dependent on government tax and spending policies, including military contractors, pharmaceutical companies, banking and finance concerns, technology companies and energy firms.

ChevronTexaco, ExxonMobile, Occidental Petroleum, the New Energy Corporation (South Bend, Indiana) and the Southern Company—concerned about threatened environmental legislation and the energy bill stalled in Congress—donated \$250,000 apiece.

Military contractors Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman—which are actively lobbying for weapons system and other military appropriations—each chipped in \$100,000. Technology firms Microsoft and Oracle also contributed \$100,000 each. The Washington Post Company pledged \$100,000.

Other corporations giving \$250,000 included Bank of America Corp., Wachovia Corp., Ameritrust Capital Corp., Bristol-Myers Squibb, Pfizer Inc., FedEx Corp., Ford Motor Co., The Home Depot, Marriot International, Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co., United Parcel Service and United Technologies.

Texas oilman and corporate raider T. Boone Pickens individually donated \$250,000. Boone was a key backer of Bush's reelection campaign, donating \$2.5 million to the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, which attacked Democratic candidate John Kerry's record in Vietnam, and another \$2.5 million to the pro-Republican "soft-money" organization, Progress for America.

Big donors are guaranteed seats and tickets to inaugural events; \$250,000 contributors get 80 tickets to the 10 balls, receptions, galas and the swearing-in ceremony, while those giving \$100,000 or more receive 38 tickets to these events.

The key motivation for most corporate sponsors is to encourage the Bush administration and the Republicans to push through legislation favorable to their businesses. The Washington Post quotes a spokesperson for Boeing Co., which gave \$100,000, saying the corporation's donation is "to help in celebrating the defining event in the American democratic process." In fact, Boeing is presently undergoing a federal probe into methods it used to win a \$23.5 billion contract to lease and sell 100 refueling tankers to the Air Force, and is looking for a favorable outcome.

Washington, D.C., officials are reportedly upset that the federal government has told them to use grants from the Department of Homeland Security to pay costs connected with the inaugural. Much of these funds will be used for an unprecedented level of security measures to be used against demonstrators coming to the inaugural to protest Bush administration policies. [See "Massive police presence for Bush inauguration"] It is estimated that this "celebration of democracy" in the nation's capital will cost the cash-strapped District of Columbia about \$17.3 million in overtime and other costs.

Washington is one of the most economically polarized urban areas in the US. Within a stone's throw of the inaugural festivities, many city residents live in destitution: in the decade from 1990 to 2000, the number of District residents living in extreme poverty more than tripled, rising from 20,600 in 1990 to 66,000 in 2000.

At the same time, while in 2000, three in every ten single-family home sales in Washington exceeded \$250,000, by 2003 this had jumped to six in every ten. Social polarization continues to increase. Between 2000 and 2002, the average wage for chief executives in the D.C. region grew by 27 percent; while the average income for a low-paid worker (such as a parking attendant) rose by only 8 percent.

Laura Bush, who has spent thousands on her inaugural-week wardrobe, enlisting the aide of Oscar de la Renta and other high-fashion designers, defended the festivities in a White House interview: "I think it's really important to have the inauguration every time. I think it's also good for Washington's economy, for people to come in from around the country, for the hotels to be full, and restaurants to be full, and the caterers to be busy. I think that's important."

But when the celebration winds down, and the thousands of guests clear out of town, the second Bush administration will be presiding over a deeply polarized society, and conditions for working people and the poor in Washington will not have improved. The millions of dollars earmarked for the Bush inaugural—and the recklessness with which they are being squandered—are indicative of the class and moral divide that dominates not only the nation's capital but the US as a whole.



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