American media whitewashes Bush's global bullying

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25 January 2005

If the president of China, Russia, Japan or Germany had given a major speech in which he claimed the divinely ordained right to remake the entire world as he saw fit, the American media would lose little time in denouncing that individual as a megalomaniac and threat to world peace. There have been no such blasts from US newspaper and television pundits, however, against George W. Bush, whose inaugural address put forward just such a perspective.

Bush presented a messianic picture of America as the world's liberator, declaring, "Today, America speaks anew to the peoples of the world. All you who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you." He made no reference in the 18-minute speech to the ongoing occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, where the United States plays the role of neo-colonial overlord, and tens of millions of people regard American imperialism—and Bush in particular—as *their* oppressor.

Nor did he mention that, for the past half-century, the vast majority of the dictatorial and antidemocratic regimes in the world have based themselves on military, political and economic assistance from the United States. Even as he addressed the crowd on Capitol Hill on the evils of tyranny, his administration continued to maintain close ties with barbaric quasi-feudal monarchies in Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf sheikdoms and Morocco, with military dictatorships in Egypt, Pakistan and half a dozen African countries, and with ex-Stalinist police-state regimes throughout Central Asia and in China.

US newspaper editorials and television news programs have generally treated Bush's speech respectfully, praising the president's supposed idealism and devotion to freedom, with criticism limited to suggestions that he was overly optimistic about what could be accomplished through US pressure on dictatorial regimes, or that his generalities about freedom and democracy were unaccompanied by specific proposals for action. No one would know, based on such accounts of the inaugural address, that the man who delivered the speech is reviled throughout the world as the greatest single purveyor of violence and oppression.

Bush touched on this himself, perhaps inadvertently, when he said in the speech that popular resentment of undemocratic regimes overseas would find expression in violent attacks on the United States. He did not attempt to explain why the oppressed should target the United States rather than their homegrown tyrants, but Bush, or at least his speechwriters, made a damaging admission: in the eyes of the hundreds of millions of oppressed people—especially in the Middle East—the United States is the underwriter and policeman of their oppression.

There was barely a hint of these realities in the analysis of Bush's speech in the American media. Perhaps the most credulous commentary came from the *New York Times*, which declared: "The president is expected to deliver an address that emphasizes the basic principles that unite the country. On that count, George W. Bush did his job... Mr. Bush's declarations about promoting global democracy ring true as a statement of American ideals."

The *Los Angeles Times*, an occasional critic of the Bush administration and the war in Iraq, also praised the speech, writing: "His second inaugural address was that of a large man indeed, eloquently weaving the big themes of his presidency and his life into a coherent philosophy and a bold vision of how he wants this country to spend the next four years."

The newspaper cautioned that the radicalism of Bush's approach carried with it the danger of over-reaching and hubris. Comparing Bush's rhetoric about freedom and tyranny to Reagan's, the editorial concluded, "In most other presidents, we would take all this talk with a grain of salt. But we suspect that Bush means it, which will make the next four years interesting, if nothing else."

The *Washington Post* was only slightly more critical, describing Bush's speech as "an inaugural address of expansive idealism, breathtaking ambition—and uncertain relevance to the policies he will pursue in a second term." It noted the contrast between Bush's rhetorical embrace of

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promoting democracy and his administration's first-term policies of cementing relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China, and soft-peddling criticism of Russia. "Anyone judging by Mr. Bush's speech yesterday would have to conclude that U.S. policy toward those countries, and many others, is on the verge of a historic change," the newspaper observed.

The *Post* has been a fervent supporter of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, and its criticism was strictly limited to expressing concern that Bush might not consistently pursue the aggressive approach outlined in the inaugural address. It warned that if this proved the case, "his promise of 'the greatest achievements in the history of freedom' will be remembered as grandiose and hollow."

The television news coverage of the inauguration was entirely reverential. No pundit challenged Bush's credentials to speak as the tribune of democracy and freedom and against oppression and violence. No one dared contrast this pretense with his record of waging war abroad and attacking democratic rights at home—to say nothing of his personal bloodlust as Texas governor, when he rubber-stamped the execution of more than 150 Death Row prisoners.

The television networks devoted almost no time to the anti-Bush and antiwar protest demonstrations, far larger and more intense than the protests in 2001, after the Supreme Court intervention into the Florida vote-counting and the theft of the presidential election by the Republican Party.

Overseas, even staid and conservative bourgeois newspapers expressed shock at the extremism and religious mania of Bush's inaugural address. "Blood-curdling," "bizarre," "messianic," were some of the terms used. *Die Tageszeitung* in Berlin wrote: "If you take seriously what Bush said before and during his inaugural address, you will really dread this US government." The Bush administration will "do whatever it thinks is right and won't have anybody else disturb it. ... The horror is justified."

In Paris, *Le Monde* spotlighted the cynicism of the appeals to freedom and democracy, writing, "We can fear that, in the eyes of Mr. Bush, the criteria for tyranny would essentially be hostility toward the United States, and that he would be inclined to close his eyes to the democratic failings of regimes that show cooperativeness."

Another French newspaper, the Bordeaux-based *Sud Ouest*, published a column warning, "With this president, the world feels like it's dancing on a volcano. We're not only talking about his foreign policy, which set Iraq on fire, worsened the situation in the Middle East and loosened the link with European allies. We also think about his economic policy based on abysmal deficits which put the USA (and therefore the rest of the world) on the edge of a financial crash."

In response to these widespread expressions of concern—as well as private communications no doubt received from such pro-Bush despots as President Mubarak of Egypt, Pakistan's General Musharraf and the Saudi royals—the administration told the US media Friday that the inaugural address did not signal any change in policy towards longstanding US allies. Unnamed high-level White House officials specifically reassured Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt that they were not being targeted because they were supposedly taking steps towards democratization.

On Saturday came an even more curious reassurance. Former President George H. W. Bush, the president's father, made a rare appearance in the White House press briefing room to dispel the impression left by the inaugural address. "People want to read a lot into it—that this means new aggression or newly asserted military forces," the elder Bush said. "That's not what that speech is about. It's about freedom." People "certainly ought to not read into it any arrogance on the part of the United States," he added.

No amount of backpedaling and diplomatic handholding can erase the impression that Bush's speech has made on the world. Every potential rival of American imperialism has been put on notice—they too can be subjected to the treatment meted out to Saddam Hussein, and subjected to an international campaign of diplomatic provocation culminating in an American invasion.

In that context, the absence of critical commentary in the US media on Bush's inaugural speech has a definite objective significance. Bush's ravings resonate with the US ruling elite, which sees in the untrammeled use of American military power—under the fig leaf of the struggle for "freedom"—an antidote to the increasingly precarious economic and financial condition of American capitalism.

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