

Bush's state of delusion: speech to Congress ignores crises at home and abroad

The Editorial Board
3 February 2005

The State of the Union speech is a ritual of American politics, but it has been increasingly characterized by an air of unreality.

Given the enormous social distance between the politicians of the Democratic and Republican parties and the masses of working people, it is difficult to sustain the pretense that the president is fulfilling a constitutional responsibility to report to the populace, through Congress, on the state of the country. The annual address has become, instead, a combination of media event—whose audience has steadily declined—and backslapping get-together for the Washington political elite.

Even in that context, the speech delivered by George W. Bush on Wednesday night set a new standard for platitudes, generalities and a refusal to address concretely any significant social or economic problem. Neither on domestic issues nor foreign affairs would Bush spell out specific policies for the coming year. For all his religion-tinged homilies about the glories of freedom and democracy, his administration increasingly acts as a power unto itself, rejecting even the slightest political accountability for its actions.

Accordingly, Bush refused to set any limits to the US occupation of Iraq, and failed to provide any details of his plan to radically alter Social Security by introducing private investment accounts.

Only from the standpoint of its dishonest and delusional character did the speech provide an indication of the real state of American society. It revealed a government indifferent to the economic crisis at home and the hatred its policies have provoked around the world, and preoccupied with one thing: enriching the financial elite whom both the Democrats and Republicans serve.

Bush did not in the slightest acknowledge the mounting economic problems and contradictions that underlie the real state of the union. There was not even a token allusion to the decline in the global position of American capitalism, expressed in the erosion of the US dollar on world currency markets, the \$650 billion balance of payments deficit last

year, and the \$427 billion projected federal budget deficit for the coming fiscal year. Nor did Bush address the social consequences of this deterioration: falling living standards, crumbling social infrastructure, persistent stagnation in the job market, increasingly unaffordable health care.

Here are some salient facts that were prominently reported in the American media in the weeks leading up to the State of the Union address:

- * The dollar ended 2004 having fallen over 40 percent in two years against the European currency, the euro, with major declines against other currencies such as the British pound and Japanese yen.

- * Central bank managers worldwide are shifting reserve holdings from dollars to euros, undermining the dollar's role as the principal world reserve currency.

- * US household debt now stands at \$10 trillion, 15 percent more than total personal income. Record numbers of Americans are filing for bankruptcy, more than half of them, according to a recent study, because of medical bills they cannot pay.

- * One quarter of full-time workers have no health care coverage, and those who do face dramatically higher costs: the average employee contribution for family coverage shot up 49 percent from 2001 to 2004.

Bush discussed none of these issues. Instead, he declared the US economy to be sound and prosperous, hailed the creation of 2.3 million new jobs last year—after three years in which 2.5 million jobs were wiped out—and ran through a laundry list of proposed handouts and favors to big corporations, from blocking liability lawsuits against companies that poison the environment or maim consumers, to boondoggles for the oil and coal companies, to further tax cuts for the wealthy.

The presentation of his domestic agenda was perfunctory until he came to the centerpiece, the onslaught on Social Security. While providing few details (See: "Facts and myths about Bush's plan for Social Security privatization"), Bush gave the signal for a campaign typical of the parasitic and criminal operations of modern-day American capitalism:

looting the Social Security Trust Fund to provide a new source of profit for Wall Street.

The reactionary content of Bush's agenda is disguised by an Orwellian perversion of language. Blocking victims of medical malfeasance from filing malpractice suits becomes "medical liability reform" that will make health care "more affordable." Locking the courthouse to victims of asbestos poisoning is a measure to "promote small business." An energy bill that authorizes drilling in the Alaskan wilderness is proposed in the name of "environmental responsibility." Gutting Social Security to funnel trillions into Wall Street investment houses is called "strengthening and saving" the program.

Bush touched on the right-wing social agenda of the Christian fundamentalist wing of the Republican Party, promising to support a constitutional amendment prohibiting gay marriage, to block further stem cell research, and to nominate only judges virulently hostile to abortion rights.

In the second half of the speech, devoted to foreign policy, Bush reprised the themes of his inaugural address, with its claims of a US mission to spread "freedom" around the world by force of arms. Even more grotesquely than in his domestic policy remarks, he presented an upside-down picture of reality, in which Iraq is "free and sovereign," although occupied by 150,000 US troops, and the United States—more hated throughout the world than ever before—is a beacon of freedom.

In the name of peace, Bush issued new threats against Syria and Iran, and flatly rejected any suggestion that the United States set a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq. He declared that any such deadline would "only embolden the terrorists to wait us out."

This argument is riddled with contradictions. If the January 30 election in Iraq means that millions of Iraqis have "taken control of their country," as Bush claims, and the only opposition is from small bands of terrorists, why are 150,000 American troops required to prop up the government in Baghdad? Why can't a government that supposedly represents the democratic will of the Iraqi people prevail over isolated Islamic fundamentalists and Saddam Hussein loyalists?

The truth, of course, is that the resistance to American occupation in Iraq is a rebellion against colonial-style oppression. The American troops are necessary because, as officials like Ayad Allawi and Ghazi Yawar well know, their regime would collapse in five minutes without the armed backing of Washington.

Bush represents an administration that is morally, economically and intellectually bankrupt. He is able to posture as a strong and popular president—three months after the narrowest reelection victory of any incumbent president

in a century—only because of the prostration of the Democratic Party opposition.

It was noticeable, as Bush entered the House of Representatives to deliver his speech, that many Democrats crowded to shake his hand and be photographed, including such purported representatives of the "left" as Dennis Kucinich, the erstwhile peace candidate in the campaign for the presidential nomination, and Cynthia McKinney, who once suggested—with good reason—that Bush administration had advance knowledge of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The official Democratic response to Bush's speech, presented by Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, exemplified the political vacuum in America and the absence of any credible opposition to Bush from the corpse of liberalism.

Reid sought to drag in references to God, religion, family and values in nearly every sentence, while avoiding any criticism of Bush for pandering to the social agenda of the fundamentalist right (Reid himself is an opponent of abortion rights). Delivering the domestic portion of the Democratic rebuttal, Reid concentrated on appeals to economic nationalism, denouncing India and China for "taking good-paying jobs that should be ours." His only clear disagreement with Bush was over Social Security, where he opposed privatization, but even this was couched in terms of returning to "old-fashioned moral values" liking taking care of one's parents and grandparents.

Pelosi, whose comments were devoted to foreign policy and security, began with the obligatory praise of American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, declaring "they not only defend us, they inspire us." Her three-part plan for Iraq amounted to accelerating the policies currently being pursued by Bush: training Iraqi stooge forces, rebuilding the basic infrastructure of power, water and sewer systems, and obtaining regional support so that the enterprise is not so exclusively American.

Her major criticism of the Bush administration was that it had not spent enough on homeland security. She made no mention of Abu Ghraib, the role of White House officials in promoting and condoning torture, or the attacks on civil liberties carried out in the name of the "war on terror."



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