

Bush critics barred from “town hall” meetings on Social Security

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An incident last week shed light on the authoritarian methods of the Bush administration and the absurdity of its claims to champion democracy around the world.

On March 21, Bush addressed a “town hall” meeting in Denver, Colorado, organized by the White House as part of Bush’s nationwide “Conversation on Social Security”—a series of media events staged to promote his plan to partially privatize the government benefits system for senior citizens.

As with virtually all of Bush’s public appearances, these events are meticulously vetted. Nobody is allowed entry who has not been approved by Republican operatives and given a ticket, and the softball questions lobbed to the president are generally rehearsed in advance.

But as the Denver event revealed, even possession of an admission ticket does not suffice to shield one from the Republican thought-police. Three of the ticket-holders at the Denver “conversation” were removed from the venue an hour before the president arrived. They had obtained their tickets in advance through the office of Colorado Republican Congressman Bob Beauprez.

When Karen Bauer and Leslie Weise arrived at the Wings Over the Rockies Museum, an unidentified doorman stopped them. He said they had been “ID’d,” and would have to speak with someone from the Secret Service. The two women’s names were apparently on a list drawn up by Republican Party event planners to weed out potential Bush opponents. They are both members of the Denver Progressives, a group that has protested at other Bush events.

According to the Fargo, North Dakota, newspaper, the *Forum*, Weise, a 39-year-old attorney, was told the next day by a Secret Service spokesman that the Republicans had identified them as “protest-type

people” who were part of the “No Blood for Oil group.” No such political grouping exists, but the Republican operatives had apparently spotted a “No More Blood for Oil” bumper sticker on their car in the parking lot, and fingered the two as they tried to enter the hall.

Bauer, a 38-year-old marketing coordinator, told the *Denver Post* that another unidentified man with a shaved head, earpiece and red lapel pin then approached them. “He said we were allowed to go in but, if we caused any problems, we’d be taken to jail,” Bauer said. This individual did not explain what kind of “problem” would result in their arrest. They were finally permitted to enter, along with another friend and fellow Progressives member, 25-year-old Alex Young.

But as the three were walking to their seats, they were approached, asked to leave, and escorted out of the hall. Karen Bauer said an individual put his hand on her elbow and steered her towards the door. “We kept asking, ‘Why is this happening?’ Alex Young told the *Forum*, ‘The guy said, ‘If the staff asks you to leave, you have to leave. This is a private event.’ ”

The Bush administration is well aware that its effort to open up Social Security for privatization—by allowing the diversion of a portion of payroll taxes into private accounts—is unpopular. Recent polls by *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines show that nearly 60 percent of Americans disapprove of Bush’s handling of the Social Security issue. All the more reason to bar anything remotely approaching a genuine debate from Bush’s “national conversation” on the issue.

The exclusion of the three Bush critics from the Denver event is by no means an aberration. On February 3, in Fargo, 42 people were on a list to be barred from Bush’s talk on Social Security at the Bison Sports Arena. The *Forum* reported that a Fargo city

commissioner, a liberal radio producer, a Democratic deputy campaign manager and a number of university professors were among those on the blacklist drawn up for the event. White House spokespersons have admitted that the list existed, but have denied responsibility for creating it, saying it may have been the work of an “overzealous volunteer.”

Linda Coates, the city commissioner on the do-not-admit list, commented, “This just shines light on the fact this administration doesn’t like to deal with dissent or disagreement. I find it ironic that at this event, where we’re talking about standing up for freedom, this can happen. It’s just kind of pitiful.” Coates was able to get into the event using a ticket given her by the city’s mayor.

In another incident, in Tucson, Arizona, on March 22, a University of Arizona student was denied entrance to a Bush “Conversation on Social Security” held at the Tucson Convention Center. Steven Gerner, a political science and pre-pharmacy sophomore—and member of the University of Arizona Young Democrats (UAYD)—was waiting in line for the event along with three other UAYD members. They all held tickets with their names printed on them.

A staffer, who refused to give his name, approached Gerner and asked to look at his T-shirt, which bore a Democratic Party slogan. The staffer asked for Gerner’s ticket and crumpled it up in front of him. He returned in 20 minutes and told the student that his name had been added to a list of those banned from the event.

During the 2004 presidential campaign, people seeking to attend Republican National Committee rallies for Bush-Cheney were regularly required to sign endorsement forms pledging their support for Bush’s reelection. Tony Cani, president of Young Democrats of Arizona, told the *Arizona Daily Wildcat*, “If this would have been paid for by the Bush-Cheney campaign and they discriminated entrance, it would have been unethical, undemocratic and wrong, but they would have had the right. The distinction is that this was paid for with taxpayers’ dollars.”

Jonathan Cherry, a Secret Service spokesman, said, “Secret Service agents are not ticket takers,” and added that the local Republican Party “host committee controls who gets in and gets out.” Kate Calhoun, Tucson Convention Center sales and marketing

manager, commented that “the venue does not issue or check or take tickets,” concluding that such tactics are “coming straight from the White House.”

After he was refused entry to the Bush event in Tucson, Steven Gerner joined protesters outside the convention center. According to the *Wildcat*, about 1,000 protesters lined the streets as the president’s motorcade arrived. After a 13-year-old girl threw an egg at the motorcade, she and her aunt were rushed by three police officers, dragged across the street, arrested and handcuffed.



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