Bush unveils plans for US colonial office

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The US government is creating a permanent agency tasked with the rapid consolidation of US control in countries targeted by Washington for military aggression. That was President George W. Bush's essential message in a speech delivered Wednesday to a Republican audience in Washington.

He announced that his administration is proposing $100 million in funding in next year's budget for a new "conflict response" fund and $24 million for a new Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization within the State Department. This office is to include an "Active Response Corps" made up of government foreign affairs specialists, as well as private consultants and contractors.

Bush wrapped this new initiative in the mantle of democracy. "We are seeing a rise of a new generation whose hearts burn for freedom—and they will have it," he declared. What they will really have, however, and what the US administration is preparing, is more war.

The president picked a sympathetic audience for unveiling his plan: the International Republican Institute, a constituent part of the National Endowment for Democracy. The NED was created more than 20 years ago to use the Republican Party, the Democrats, big business and the AFL-CIO labor bureaucracy as conduits for funding that previously was provided covertly by the CIA to destabilize foreign governments or promote US-backed movements.

The title of the new agency, "Reconstruction and Stabilization," obviously presupposes acts of destruction and destabilization, which are to be carried out by its counterparts in the Pentagon and American intelligence.

It should be pointed out that the annual funding for the global operations of this new supposedly altruistic US effort—$124 million—is barely one-seventieth of the amount contained in the latest "emergency" appropriations for the continuing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Bush claimed that the impetus for the new agency—with its ability to dispatch civilian occupation teams anywhere in the world—came from the experience of the US invasion of Iraq.

"You know, one of the lessons we learned from our experience in Iraq is that while military personnel can be rapidly deployed anywhere in the world, the same is not true of US government civilians," Bush said. He praised US officials for doing an "amazing job under extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances," while adding, "But the process of recruiting and staffing the Coalition Provisional Authority was lengthy, and it was difficult."

This is all lies and distortions. The essential problems confronting the US occupation authority in Iraq stemmed not from the lack of a "rapid response corps," but rather from the resistance of the Iraqi people and the criminality of the entire enterprise.

Those who staffed the Coalition Provisional Authority were selected not for any expertise—knowledge of the region, fluency in Arabic and government experience were viewed with suspicion by the Bush administration—but for their unconditional loyalty to the president.

Many of the young know-nothings given positions of authority in Iraqi ministries were recruited by using résumés sent to the right-wing think tank, the Heritage Foundation. The fledgling Iraqi security forces were placed under the nominal tutelage of Bernard Kerik, the ex-bodyguard and scandal-plagued former police commissioner of New York City.

The overriding objective in Iraq was neither "reconstruction" nor "stabilization," but the looting of the country's economy and the establishment of firm US control over its strategic oil reserves.

This was to be carried out through the privatization of Iraq's economic enterprises, services and, above all, a decisive share of its oil sector. The catastrophic deterioration of all major social indices cited in the recent report issued by the United Nations Development Programme (See "UN report finds US war in Iraq yields a social 'tragedy'") exposes the abject failure of the US authorities to reconstruct Iraq's war-shattered infrastructure. But they proved adept in the looting and privatization departments.

Earlier this year, a special inspector general's report revealed that the US occupation authority was unable to account for some $9 billion that was supposedly spent on reconstruction.

In a report Friday citing interviews with former US occupation officials and internal memos, the *Los Angeles Times* focused on the month of June 2004, when the Coalition Provisional Authority was formally dissolved and a puppet Iraqi regime installed.

"June 2004 has emerged as a month when both money and accountability were thrown out the window—something like a Barney's warehouse sale in the Wild West, with the US playing the role of frenzied shopper and leaving Iraqis to pay the bill," the article states.

The *Times* reports that the authority issued over 1,000 contracts that month, double the normal monthly amount. The money—wasted, embezzled and stolen—was siphoned out of accounts made up of Iraqi oil revenues and frozen assets of the Saddam Hussein regime. These funds were transferred largely to US military contractors, with some kickbacks going to corrupt members of the Iraqi puppet government.

So egregious is the theft of Iraqi and US funding that the government has found itself compelled to launch a criminal investigation into suspected embezzlement by US officials in connection with some $100 million of the funds designated for reconstruction projects that went missing.

Privatization has been secured, at least on paper. The single undeniable achievement of the occupation authority under US proconsul Paul Bremer was a revision of the Iraqi legal code that, for the first time anywhere in the Arab world, allows 100 percent foreign ownership of Iraqi enterprises. Some 200 state-owned enterprises are now targeted for privatization or liquidation by foreign capital,

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resulting in the elimination of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Later this year, the Iraqi industry ministry is expected to begin placing sections of heavy industry, petrochemical plants, sugar refineries and other enterprises on the auction block. The problem, however, is that the US military's inability to crush resistance to the occupation has left few foreign capitalists willing to invest in the country, no matter how favorable the terms.

Essentially, Bush's new Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization (ORS) is designed to carry out this same process in other targeted countries, but more efficiently. By "stabilization," the US government means primarily the suppression of any resistance to US domination. "Reconstruction," on the other hand, is a code word for the demolishing of all impediments to the exploitation of the country's resources by American capitalism.

This was spelled out by Carlos Pascual, the former US ambassador to Ukraine who has been tapped to head the ORS, in a speech delivered last October.

"The very time that you're stabilizing, you have to be thinking about the next stage, which is in many cases tearing apart the old," Pascual told an audience assembled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. First on his list "old" structures that must be "torn apart" were "the state-owned enterprises that created a nonviable economy." He reiterated, "We have to confront those issues and get into a process of tearing apart the old if we are to unleash the forces for openness and competition."

Not surprisingly, the impetus for Bush's new Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization comes from the Pentagon. The military believes it has paid a significant price for the abject corruption and criminality that pervades the Bush administration's handling of the Iraqi occupation. These traits have helped cripple restoration of basic services, further fueling Iraqi fury against US forces. The generals see the need for a more professional setup not just in Iraq, but as an integral part of preparations for further preemptive wars aimed at asserting US hegemony in strategically important and resource-rich areas of the globe.

In a report released last summer, the Pentagon's Defense Science Board counseled: "US military expeditions to Afghanistan and Iraq are unlikely to be the last such excursions. America's armed forces are extremely capable of projecting force and achieving conventional military victory. Yet success in achieving US political goals involves not only military success but also success in the stabilization and reconstruction operations that follow hostilities."

The report, titled "Transition to and from Hostilities," continues: "For countries where the risk of US intervention is high—termed 'ripe and important' in this report—the president or National Security Council (NSC) would direct the initiation of a robust planning process."

According to published reports, the Pentagon and US intelligence agencies have already drawn up a secret watch-list of 25 such "ripe and important" countries. The National Intelligence Council has been placed in charge of reviewing this list every six months, while the new Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization together with the Pentagon would be responsible for drawing up detailed plans for US invasion and occupation.

The identities of the countries on the list remain classified, but it is reported that they are heavily concentrated in the key oil-producing regions of the Middle East, the Caspian Basin and West Africa. Whether such Latin American producers as Mexico and Venezuela are also included is not known.

While providing advice on how to better prepare for the US takeover of targeted countries, the Pentagon study includes a cautionary note. It points out that, with US forces already involved in such operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and, to a lesser degree, the Balkans, and with the prospect for these deployments continuing for years to come, military manpower is stretched dangerously thin.

"History indicates that stabilization of societies that are relatively ordered, without ambitious goals, may require 5 troops per 1,000 indigenous people," the study states, "while stabilization of disordered societies, with ambitious goals involving lasting cultural change, may require 20 troops per 1,000 indigenous people. That need, with the cumulative requirement to maintain human resources for three to five overlapping stabilization operations as noted above, presents a formidable challenge."

Given the above mentioned ratio, the US should have nearly four times as many troops as are presently deployed in such a "disordered society" as Iraq.

"Today, much of our focus is on the broader Middle East," Bush declared in his speech Wednesday, "because I understand that 60 years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in that region did nothing to make us safe."

The choice of words is significant. Why 60 years? This encompasses the life span of nominally independent national states in most parts of the Middle East. Prior to the end of the Second World War, they were run by British imperialism—and, to a lesser extent, the other major European powers—as a collection of mandates, protectorates and puppet states.

In its second term, the Bush administration has begun to shift from justifying US militarism abroad in the name of the global war on terrorism to that of a supposed worldwide US crusade for "freedom" and against "tyranny."

He sounded this theme in his speech in Washington, declaring that his administration has a "forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East." In reality, what is involved here is a regressive drive to restore colonial domination, this time by US imperialism. The only "freedom" Washington is interested in promoting is that of the US financial oligarchy to seize control of wealth and markets anywhere in the world.

The real thinking of the Bush White House on this project was spelled out by one of its favorite columnists, Max Boot, in an opinion piece published last month. "In order to be better prepared the next time—and yes, there will be a next time—Washington must create a US government agency specifically tasked with rebuilding war-torn lands," Boot wrote.

"The United States needs its own version of the British Colonial Office for the postimperial age."

He continued, "The recent decision to set up an Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization within the State Department is a good start."

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