

Bush at the OAS: a profile in imperialist hypocrisy

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George W. Bush delivered a brief speech before the 35th annual Organization of American States (OAS) general assembly meeting in Fort Lauderdale, Florida on Monday, posturing as an apostle of freedom and democracy before a clearly incredulous audience.

Bush seemed uncomfortable during his 13-minute address to the OAS delegates, who failed to respond to the speech's applause lines as his regular audiences of handpicked Republican loyalists always do.

The speech was part of Washington's intervention at the meeting, which is focused on turning the Inter-American Democratic Charter enacted by the OAS in 2001 into statutes for a US-dominated tribunal that would judge the region's governments based on their commitment to democracy.

"Our people are united by history and geography," Bush told the OAS delegates. "And the United States shares a commitment with you to build an Americas that lives in liberty, trades in freedom, and grows in prosperity."

The historical relationship between Washington and the lands to its south is one of exploitation and oppression stretching back more than a century. Since the Spanish-American War of 1898, the American government has constantly been "liberating" the nations of Latin America—either at the point of a US bayonet, as in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Central America, or through US-backed fascist-military coups—in order to better control their resources and subjugate their peoples.

The intentions this time around are no different. The US-backed initiative—dubbed by some the "democracy meter"—is aimed at providing a pseudo-legal and multilateral cover for Washington's interventions in the hemisphere in general, and the ongoing campaign of provocation and aggression against Venezuela in particular.

The crusade for "democracy" in that country shares an essential feature with the one declared by the Bush administration in the Middle East: both regions boast some of the world's richest oil reserves. The nationalist policies pursued by the government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez have emerged as an impediment to US hegemony over the country's enormous energy resources.

On the eve of the OAS meeting, Bush escalated US provocations against Venezuela, holding a White House meeting with Maria Corina Machado, the director of a Venezuelan opposition group, Sumate. The organization has been criminally charged in Venezuela for its role in attempting to overthrow the country's elected government, including its involvement in the abortive US-backed coup of April 2002. That attempt failed in the face of mass opposition in the streets that forced the release of Chavez and his return to power after just two days.

Sumate is largely funded by the US government through the

National Endowment for Democracy, a conduit for money directed at subverting governments opposed by Washington.

In his weekly radio address Sunday, Chavez denounced the US proposal to the OAS, declaring, "If there is a country that should be monitored, it's them."

Terming the US plan part of an attempt to impose a "global dictatorship," the Venezuelan president added, "The times in which the OAS was an instrument of the government in Washington are gone...Those who think they can put the peoples of Latin America in a corral are mistaken."

The OAS meeting was convened in the shadow of the eruption of the people of Bolivia, South America's poorest nation. Strikes, demonstrations and road blockades have paralyzed the country as workers and indigenous peasants press their demand for the nationalization of the country's oil and gas reserves.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice referred briefly to the crisis, declaring, "We must act...to strengthen democracy where it is weak. In places like Bolivia and Ecuador and Haiti, the institutions of democracy have perhaps brittle roots."

The "roots" of the crises on the continent—including the one that toppled Ecuador's government last month and the upheaval that appears likely to result in the downfall of Bolivia's President Carlos Mesa—are decades of "structural adjustment" programs imposed by Washington and the International Monetary Fund that have left the people of these countries in increasingly desperate poverty.

The document distributed by the US at the meeting, dubbed the "Declaration of Florida," suggests that the OAS should be prepared to carry out some type of intervention to prevent and contain such popular uprisings.

As for Haiti, its elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was overthrown in a US-orchestrated coup that saw him bundled out of the country by American security agents in February 2004. The puppet regime that has replaced him has unleashed a reign of terror against the country's impoverished population, systematically repressing those loyal to the former government. The last week alone saw a bloody police operation in the slums of Port-au-Prince that left scores dead and wounded.

The thrust of the American initiative is more of the same. "An Americas linked by trade is less likely to be divided by resentment and false ideologies," Bush declared in his speech. "An Americas where all our people live in prosperity will be more peaceful."

The claim that the US doctrine of free markets and free trade represents a solution to the social catastrophe confronting the masses of Latin America is ludicrous. After more than two decades of such policies, over 240 million Latin Americans live in poverty, with 190

million subsisting on less than \$2 a day, while polarization between wealth and poverty has never been greater.

The only concrete proposal made by Bush was the implementation of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, a pact that faces substantial opposition both in the US and in Central America.

While Bush declared that the agreement demonstrates Washington's "commitment to democracy and prosperity for our neighbors," his remarks were oddly discordant, apparently aimed at placating the pact's opponents in US agribusiness and other commercial sectors. "US exports still face hefty tariffs," Bush declared. "By passing CAFTA, the United States would open up a market of 44 million consumers..."

The hypocrisy of the American president's invocations of democracy's virtues was at times breathtaking. Who, after all, is George W. Bush to talk of "sharing democracy" with anyone?

This is a government that came to power in 2000 based upon a stolen election. In four years, it has carried out the most sweeping attacks on democratic rights in US history, while waging two wars of aggression abroad and establishing a network of concentration camps and torture centers into which thousands have disappeared without being charged with any crime. It is a government mired in official corruption that defends the interests of a tiny minority at the expense of the vast majority of working people.

And what of the US record in Latin America? Bush noted in his speech that "In 1974, the last time the OAS General Assembly met in the United States, fewer than half its members had democratically elected governments."

The remark echoed a speech given the previous day by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who declared that at the 1974 meeting, the OAS "looked a lot different than it does today. Of the 23 member-states, 10 were military dictatorships. Democracy was supposedly a condition for membership—but it was one that was all-too-easily neglected."

She continued: "The General Assembly of 1974 was long on talk and short on action. For seven days, leaders of unelected governments waxed hypocritically about the 'ideal' of democracy. Between the lines, however, the message of the dictators was clear: As long as freedom was a threat to tyranny, democracy would remain an 'ideal'—not a reality."

Whom do they think they are fooling? If the OAS meeting was "long on talk and short on action" it was because the "action" was taking place elsewhere. In the torture centers and concentration camps, tens of thousands lost their lives at the hands of dictatorships that were brought to power with the direct aid of the CIA and the Pentagon. Those who overthrew the elected governments of Joao Goulart in Brazil, Salvador Allende in Chile and others throughout the continent acted as Washington's allies and instruments.

Those crimes—including the bloody crushing of unions and political organizations of the working class—were blessed by the US government in the name of the "free world." The dictators hardly needed to deliver a message "between the lines;" they were keeping Ms. Rice's predecessor Henry Kissinger informed about their campaigns of murder and torture and receiving his full support. These military regimes were seen by Washington as the guarantors of "free enterprise."

This is not ancient history that has been forgotten by the masses of Latin America. The bodies of murdered political prisoners continue to be discovered in the military bases of Uruguay and the killing fields of Central America. The attempt by Bush and Rice to falsify this history

is merely an indication that they are prepared to carry out even greater atrocities in defense of US corporate interests.

It is noteworthy that the US "Declaration of Florida" virtually dropped the question of Washington's "global war on terrorism"—formerly the justification for all US actions on the world stage. The draft document contains a single reference to terrorism, grouped together with narcotics trafficking and other criminal activity.

In its second term, the Bush administration has shifted to its supposed crusade for democracy as the principal pretext for its bullying and interventions in countries all over the globe. But the dropping of the terrorism question in the OAS forum has a particular significance. The US cannot raise the issue without calling attention to US-sponsored terrorism and the Bush administration's stonewalling of Venezuela's demand for the extradition of Luis Posada Carriles.

Posada, who was trained by the CIA and functioned as a paid agent for many years, escaped from a Venezuelan prison while awaiting trial on charges that he organized the terrorist bombing of a civilian Cuban airliner in 1976 which killed 73 people.

The Bush administration has thus far rejected Venezuela's extradition request on technical grounds, while holding Posada in what amounts to protective custody on an immigration charge.

Last week, the US ambassador to Venezuela publicly declared that the US-trained terrorist was "innocent until proven otherwise." This, despite the release of formerly classified FBI and CIA documents that make it clear US intelligence itself was well aware of Posadas' role in the bombing. In any case, Washington is blocking his extradition to prevent his being brought to trial, where his guilt or innocence could be legally established.

There appears little chance that the US "democracy" initiative will win the approval of the OAS. The major countries of Latin America have spoken out publicly against it.

Brazil's Foreign Minister Celso Amorim pointedly replied to US Secretary of State Rice, who chairs the OAS session: "Madam president, democracy cannot be imposed...The key concepts have to be cooperation and dialogue, rather than interventionist mechanisms." His government has joined with Argentina, Uruguay and Mexico in proposing an "alternative plan."

The clash over the democracy plan underscores the increasing irrelevance of the OAS, an organization founded on the basis of US imperialism's unchallenged hegemony within the Western Hemisphere. Today, the European Union has replaced the US as Latin America's leading donor and largest foreign investor, and has become its second most important trading partner. China, meanwhile, has concluded a series of multi-billion-dollar trade agreements across the continent, while establishing military cooperation agreements with a number of countries.

The arrogant character of Washington's so-called democracy initiative is itself a manifestation of US imperialism's increasing turn toward militarism and provocation as a means of compensating for its relative economic decline in the hemisphere and internationally.



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