An administration in deepening crisis: Some reflections on the Bush press conference

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The Tuesday press conference held by George W. Bush at the White House was another display of the banality and sheer intellectual incapacity of the 43rd US president, and of the mounting contradictions which are undermining the most reactionary administration in American history.

First, there is the man himself, visibly deteriorating under the impact of disasters in both domestic and foreign policy. Several media accounts made reference to Bush's peculiar demeanor and erratic behavior at the event, which was called on only 90 minutes notice in order to insure that the press would be even less prepared than usual to ask searching questions.

One columnist noted a "senior moment" of Reagan-style forgetfulness, as Bush, who has long cultivated the White House press corps with jocular greetings and pet nicknames, was suddenly unable to recognize even the most senior reporters, such as Terence Hunt, the longtime Associated Press correspondent who traditionally asks the first question. Bush later stumbled over other names, and even blurted out, during a rambling non-answer about interest rate policy, "I'm stalling for time here."

Bush did no better when fully engaged, as in his well-publicized clash with Helen Thomas, the longtime UPI correspondent and dean of the White House press corps who is now, at age 80, a Hearst columnist and critic of the war. After three years of deliberately avoiding any interchange with Thomas, Bush, perhaps in another moment of forgetfulness, called on her as the second questioner, and received a pointed inquiry about the real reasons for the invasion of Iraq.

All the reasons given initially, such as WMD and ties to Al Qaeda, proved not to be true, Thomas observed, and the White House denies that either oil or support for Israel were a factor. So what were the real reasons, she asked. Bush responded first with an evasion—claiming that he had never wanted war, although that was not the question, and his denial is scarcely credible.

Then he changed the subject, substituting Afghanistan for Iraq, declaring that he ordered the invasion because the regime was harboring those who planned and carried out the 9/11 terrorist attacks. When Thomas sought to bring him back to her question, pointing out that there was no connection between Iraq and 9/11, Bush sputtered on semi-coherently. The transcript gives the flavor of the exchange:

BUSH: My attitude about the defense of this country changed in September the 11th. When we got attacked, I vowed then and there to use every asset at my disposal to protect the American people. Our foreign policy changed on that day. You know, we used to think we were secure because of oceans and previous diplomacy. But we realized on September the 11th, 2001, that killers could destroy innocent life. And I'm never going to forget it. And I'm never going to forget the vow I made to the American people, that we will do everything in our power to protect our people. Part of that meant to make sure that we didn't allow people to provide safe haven to an enemy, and that's why I went into Iraq.

(CROSSTALK) [Thomas trying to object]

BUSH: Hold on for a second. Excuse me for a second, please. Excuse me for a second. They did. The Taliban provided safe haven for Al Qaeda. That's where Al Qaeda trained and that's where...

THOMAS: [Off-mike] Iraq didn't do anything to you.

BUSH: Helen, excuse me. That's where—Afghanistan provided safe haven for Al Qaeda. That's where they trained, that's where they plotted, that's where they planned the attacks that killed thousands of innocent Americans. I also saw a threat in Iraq. I was hoping to solve this problem diplomatically. That's why I went to the Security Council.

In the one substantive remark in the hour-long appearance, Bush flatly declared that US troops will remain in Iraq until at least 2009. The remark produced a spate of headlines the next day in the American press, but little discussion of the chilling implications of this statement, both for the population of Iraq and that of the United States.

By reserving any decision to end the American occupation of Iraq to "future presidents and future governments of Iraq," Bush was not only restating his personal commitment to maintaining the US military grip on that tormented country. He was committing the *present government of Iraq* to supporting the occupation as well, inadvertently conceding that the current regime does not exercise genuine sovereignty and cannot tell the US military to go home. The government in Baghdad consists of American stooges who will do as they are told by Washington.

Despite the now-familiar claim that he launched the war against Iraq as part of a crusade to democratize the Middle East, Bush's insistence that he will continue the war until the last minute of his presidency amounts to a repudiation of democracy at home. He is almost boasting of the fact that despite majority opposition to the continuation of the war, there is no political mechanism in the United States to articulate the demand for an American withdrawal, let alone compel the government to carry it out.

In expressing his determination to continue the occupation of Iraq indefinitely, Bush is letting the cat out of the bag. The real purpose of the US invasion and occupation was to establish a long-term military presence for the United States in the Middle East, using Iraq as both a launching pad and fuel depot for American domination of the region

Significantly, in an article published Friday, the *Los Angeles Times*

noted that the latest emergency appropriation for the Iraq war includes $348 million to improve and expand the four military bases in Iraq which are central to US strategic purposes—Balad and Taji, north of Baghdad; Tallil, near Nasiriya in the south; and Al Asad in the western desert.

According to a report by the House Appropriations Committee, referring to the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, it "has become clear in recent years that these expeditionary operations can result in substantial military construction expenditures of a magnitude normally associated with permanent bases."

At both the press conference and in speeches in Ohio and West Virginia this week, Bush went out of his way to display his indifference to public opinion in the United States, which has turned strongly against the war. He reiterated his determination to prosecute the war without regard to the mounting opposition and horror among the American people over the swelling death toll in Iraq.

He suggested that the only basis for opposition to the war was lack of confidence in the prospects for an American victory, reiterating that "we have a plan for victory, and it's important we achieve that plan." This is certainly true of the "opposition" to the war on the part of congressional Democrats, who are convinced, with ample reason, that the Bush administration is incapable of conducting an effective and efficient counterinsurgency war in Iraq.

But what of those who oppose the war, not because the US occupation is in danger of defeat, but because the occupation itself is the product of unprovoked military aggression launched by the Bush White House on the basis of lies? Principled opposition to the war must be based, not on regretting the Bush administration's incompetence at imperialist robbery, as the congressional Democrats do, but on the rejection of all forms of imperialist robbery, however conducted.

For such opponents, Bush's declaration must be turned on its head. If, as he declares—and there is no reason to doubt this—he will continue the war until the last day of his presidency, then it is the task of those who oppose the war to build a political movement whose goals will include removing Bush from the White House, making his presidency and the associated bloodbath in Iraq as short as possible.

Bush feels free to make his arrogant declaration of "war until I leave the White House" because he knows that the American people have no recourse within the existing political structure. The Democratic Party, the nominal opposition, is just as committed to a US military victory in Iraq.

If the Democrats, as today appears likely, win control of one or both houses of Congress in the November election, they will neither legislate an end to the war nor cut off funds for it. Rather, they will insist on being taken into partnership with the Bush White House, so that the strategy and tactics of US imperialism in Iraq reflect the input of both the major big business parties.

Bush went out of his way to bait the Democrats at his press conference, knowing that its congressional leaders and candidates do not dare to offer any alternative to the majority of the American people who oppose the administration's policies both in Iraq and at home.

Asked about Democratic Party criticism of the illegal spying by the National Security Administration, Bush sneered, "I did notice that nobody from the Democratic Party has actually stood up and called for the getting rid of the terrorist surveillance program. You know, if that's what they believe, if people in the party believe that, then they ought to stand up and say it. They ought to stand up and say, 'The

tools we're using to protect the American people shouldn't be used. They ought to take their message to the people and say, 'Vote for me. I promise we're not going to have a terrorist surveillance program.' That's what they ought to be doing. That's part of what is an open and honest debate."

A genuine and principled opponent of the Bush administration would reject the Orwellian language of this challenge and reply: these police-state methods are not aimed at protecting the American people from terrorists, but at protecting the US government and ruling class from domestic political opposition.

A variant on this theme is the comment by Republican Senator Pat Roberts, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, that critics of the illegal National Security Agency spying "believe the gravest threat we face is not Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, but rather the president of the United States."

This type of bullying invariably produced a cowed silence from the Democrats, followed by frenzied professions of their hatred of terrorism. A real opposition would respond that of course George Bush is a far greater threat to democratic rights than Osama bin Laden. Terrorist atrocities can kill innocent people, but only the US government and the US ruling elite could impose a dictatorship on the American people.

The Democratic Party is incapable of taking such a stand because it is a political instrument of the same privileged ruling elite. It is a capitalist party which disputes various tactics and methods employed by the Bush administration, but only from the standpoint of a more effective or less reckless campaign to secure the interests of American imperialism.

On homeland security, it desires nothing more than the opportunity to attack Bush from the right, as it did in the furor over the sale of loading facilities at a half dozen US ports to a company owned by the Arab sheikdom of Dubai. On the war in Iraq, all of the leading congressional Democrats, and presidential hopefuls like Hillary Clinton, are committed to salvaging the best possible outcome from Bush's adventure.

The Socialist Equality Party is campaigning in the 2006 elections on the basis of a socialist program that is equally opposed to the Democrats and the Republicans. Both are parties of imperialist war abroad and social reaction at home. We oppose an American "victory" in Iraq, not only because it would be a tragedy for the Iraqi people, subjecting them to an indefinite occupation and the plunder of the country's oil resources, but because it would set the stage for new and even more bloody adventures in Iran, Syria and elsewhere, at terrible cost to both the people of those countries and to the working people of the United States.

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