

Spelling freedom as O-I-L

Cheney lectures Russia on “democracy”

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In a carefully scripted political provocation, US Vice President Richard Cheney delivered a bellicose speech in Lithuania condemning Russia for violating the democratic rights of its people and using energy resources to “blackmail” other nations.

Cheney’s speech was given to the “Baltic and Black Seas Democracies Forum,” attended by presidents of former Soviet republics and Eastern bloc countries that have sought to align themselves with Washington and NATO, as well as those of Germany and the Scandinavian countries.

“In Russia today, opponents of reform are seeking to reverse the gains of the last decade,” he said. “In many areas of civil society—from religion and the news media, to advocacy groups and political parties—the [Russian] government has unfairly and improperly restricted the rights of the people.”

Denouncing Russia’s energy policy, driven like that of many other oil- and gas-producing countries by rising prices and tight supplies, Cheney continued: “No legitimate interest is served when oil and gas become tools of intimidation or blackmail, either by supply manipulation or attempts to monopolize transportation.”

After presenting these indictments against Moscow, Cheney declared, “None of us believes that Russia is fated to become an enemy.”

For many Russians, however, this last assertion seemed hardly credible. The Kremlin issued a statement describing Cheney’s remarks as “completely incomprehensible.” Sections of the media, however, were far more direct, warning that the US vice president’s speech posed a real threat.

The business daily *Kommersant* published a front-page article comparing Cheney’s tirade to the “Iron Curtain” speech delivered by Winston Churchill in Fulton, Missouri, 60 years ago.

“Vice President Dick Cheney made a keynote speech on relations between the West and Russia in which he practically established the start of the second Cold War,” the paper commented. “The Cold War has restarted, only now the front lines have shifted.”

Meanwhile, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the top-selling Russian daily, published a map with the nations participating in the Vilnius conference colored in purple forming a band walling

off Russia from the rest of Europe.

Cheney closed his speech in Vilnius with a rhetorical flourish: “Let us persevere in freedom’s cause.” But there is no doubt that when the American vice president talks about freedom, it is the unrestricted right of US capitalism to dominate the world and its resources that he has in mind. And in particular, for the former Halliburton CEO, it is a matter of oil.

Tensions between Washington and Moscow have been steadily escalating in recent months, particularly over Iran. The US is attempting to bully both Russia and China into supporting a United Nations Security Council ultimatum to the Iranian government demanding that it end all uranium enrichment activities or face unspecified retaliation.

Cheney’s speech would indicate that the Bush administration holds out little hope that Russia will support such a course of action, which in virtually all of its particulars echoes the methods used by Washington at the UN in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. And there seems to be little motive for Moscow to fall in line.

It is a case of being damned if you do and damned if you don’t. Support for a resolution threatening Iran could be used by Washington to justify any act of military aggression against the country. And, failure to offer such support can be cited by US officials as a justification for bypassing the UN, flouting international law and proceeding with an attack backed by whatever “coalition of the willing” can be cobbled together.

Moreover, while more than a quarter century of US sanctions have left US-based corporations and banks with no major economic interests in Iran, it is an entirely different matter for Russia, which has multibillion-dollar investments and trade with the oil-rich country. China, Japan and western European countries have similar stakes in Iran. The US has no intention of ceding control of a country that is the world’s second-largest oil producer and boasts the world’s second-largest natural gas reserves.

Meanwhile, the second leg of his tour took Cheney to Kazakhstan, one of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. His visit Friday was the fourth in recent months by a high-level US official to the landlocked country for meetings with President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the former Soviet politburo

member who heads a repressive regime that has run the country since the dissolution of the Soviet Union 15 years ago.

Nazarbayev runs the country in the interests of his own family and cohorts who have monopolized its wealth. He has rigged elections and repressed opposition and is reportedly preparing to transfer power to one of his children. Last February, the leader of the principal opposition party, Altynbek Sarsenbayev, was shot dead, with state security forces implicated.

Cheney is not making any speeches about democracy and the “restricted rights” of the Kazakh people, however. The reason is clear: Kazakhstan sits on oil reserves that are estimated to be as much as 110 billion barrels, and Nazarbayev has let the US oil corporations operate freely in his country. Indeed, Cheney’s Halliburton is running oil-field service operations there.

The US vice president’s visit is also aimed at pursuing other means of furthering US hegemony in the oil-rich region bordering Russia.

According to Glen Howard, the head of the right-wing think tank, the Jamestown Foundation, Cheney’s trip was aimed at giving a “big nudge” to getting US-controlled pipelines built to pump gas out of Central Asia to Turkey, thereby challenging Russia’s current monopoly over gas exports from the region.

Cheney was “planting a big American flag in Central Asia,” Howard told the *Financial Times*, adding, “We are flexing our muscles a bit.”

The visit follows close on the heels of the White House welcome organized by the Bush administration for Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev, head of another gangster regime characterized by gross corruption and political repression. Again, the rights of the Azerbaijanis take a distinct back seat to US pipeline plans, which call for a terminus in Azerbaijan receiving tankers full of crude oil from North Caspian oil fields—bypassing both Iran and Russia.

These are the real great-power objectives and profit interests underlying Washington’s supposed concern for the rights of the Russian people. The fact that the Bush administration chose Dick Cheney as the man to paint the pursuit of these objectives as a crusade for democracy only underscores its contempt for world public opinion.

If ever there was an individual who personifies contempt for democratic rights, it is the American vice president.

Universally recognized as the most powerful vice president in American history, he has been the official most identified with the Bush administration’s policies of military aggression, domestic spying, government secrecy, and torture, and its wholesale assault on the US Constitution.

Who is Cheney to lecture any government in the world for having “improperly restricted the rights of the people”? The Bush administration has systematically erected the framework for a police state in America over the past five years, while repudiating international law and asserting the right to wage unprovoked wars and kidnap, torture and murder

anyone—including US citizens—whom it designates as an “enemy combatant.” It has established a network of secret prisons and concentration camps like Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib where tens of thousands are held without trial or even charges. The vice president has been the strongest advocate of unfettered executive power, claiming that the president, as the commander-in-chief, can ignore virtually any law he chooses.

The *Boston Globe* last Sunday published a survey demonstrating that the administration had “quietly claimed the authority to disobey more than 750 laws enacted since he took office,” from restrictions on domestic spying to the recent ban on torture, as well as multiple requirements that he provide information to Congress.

“This is an attempt by the president to have the final word on his own constitutional powers, which eliminates the checks and balances that keep the country a democracy,” Bruce Fein, a deputy attorney general under the Reagan administration told the *Globe*. “There is no way for an independent judiciary to check his assertions of power, and Congress isn’t doing it, either. So this is moving us toward an unlimited executive power.”

As for blackmail, this is Cheney’s political specialty. He blackmailed the American people with the supposed danger of nuclear mushroom clouds to impose the illegal war against Iraq. In the last election, he again tried to blackmail the electorate by threatening that a vote against the Republicans would make a terrorist attack on a major American city more likely.

Then there is the Valerie Plame case, where his chief aide leaked the name of a covert CIA agent in order to punish her husband, who had exposed Cheney’s and Bush’s use of lies and fabricated intelligence to justify the Iraq war.

The condemnation of using energy resources as “tools of intimidation or blackmail” is particularly rich. This, after all, is a man who is the most closely identified with Big Oil, making its interests a key driving force of US foreign policy. In pursuit of these interests, the US governments and the oil corporations have engaged not merely in blackmail and intimidation, but in military coups, unprovoked wars and mass slaughter.

The cynicism and hypocrisy of Cheney’s travels through the former Soviet Union—attacking Russia as undemocratic, while cementing close ties with ruthless dictators on its borders—only serves to demonstrate once again that Washington spells the word “freedom” as “O-I-L.”



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