

The president gives a press conference

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In his book *Bush at War*, Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* reports being told by the president, “I’m the commander—see, I don’t need to explain—I do not need to explain why I say things. That’s the interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don’t feel I owe anybody an explanation.”

In fact, the president’s audiences may be excused for wondering whether Bush himself really knows why he says most of what comes out of his mouth. There is little evidence of any connection between conscious mental activity and the physical process by which the president produces words. Even when nothing more is required of Bush than that he read from a prepared text, the assignment seems to tax Bush’s intellectual capabilities to their maximum.

The president’s Monday press conference was a fairly typical performance. He read the opening statement with difficulty, frequently slurring his words and losing his place. Later, during direct exchanges with reporters, Bush interrupted his replies on several occasions to acknowledge that he had forgotten the question. Far from staunching concerns about the outcome of the Israeli-Hezbollah war and his administration’s conduct of foreign policy, Bush’s disoriented, meandering, frequently absurd remarks and always dishonest statements could only serve to intensify anxieties, within more knowledgeable sections of the ruling elite, about the president’s grasp of reality.

As is invariably the case in statements made by Bush, there was no attempt to persuade or convince his audience. His opening statement did not present a logically constructed argument. Bush simply made assertions utterly unsupported by facts. These statements were generally ludicrous and pitched to the level of the most reactionary, backward, ignorant, and, to be blunt, stupid sections of the American public.

In his celebrated first inaugural address in 1933, delivered in the midst of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt asserted his “firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror....” But the entire rhetorical repertoire of George Bush consists

of invoking precisely the sort of irrational fear that Roosevelt made the object of contempt. In an opening statement on Monday that ran about five minutes, Bush used the words “terror” and “terrorists” 23 times.

In Bush-speak, these two words have become universally valid synonyms for all the diverse opponents and enemies, real and imagined, of the foreign policy objectives of the United States. This universal use of the terror/terrorists epithet has deprived it of any genuinely concrete significance.

The president summed up the global scale of the war against terrorism as follows: “The world got to see—got to see what it means to confront terrorism, I mean. It’s the challenge of the 21st century. The fight against terror, a group of ideologues, by the way, who use terror to achieve an objective—this is the challenge.”

Bush is not a student of American history, but in his own way—guided by his political handlers—he is tapping into the uglier characteristics of the country’s political tradition. Approximately 40 years ago, the historian Richard Hofstadter called attention to the “paranoid style in American politics,” which he described as “a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself.”

The “paranoid style” in the politics of the United States, Hofstadter argued, was not to be equated with the clinically defined paranoia of an individual. Although both the individual and political forms of paranoia “tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others.”

Prior to the Bush administration, the quintessential expression of the political paranoia of the American right was McCarthyism, which sought to create a mass base for political reaction by fomenting a quasi-hysterical fear of an “international communist conspiracy.” In June 1951, McCarthy declared that the United States was threatened by “a great conspiracy, a conspiracy on a scale so immense as

to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man. A conspiracy of infamy so black that, when it is finally exposed, its principals shall be forever deserving of the maledictions of all honest men."

Bush is incapable of the rhetorical bombast that distinguished the junior senator from Wisconsin during the latter's hey-day more than a half-century ago. But many of the same political methods employed by McCarthyism—above all, its appeal to fear and ignorance—are revived in the Bush administration's "War against Global Terror."

As for what Bush had to say about the war in Lebanon itself, his remarks consisted of a series of political evasions and crude lies. He stated that "America recognizes that civilians in Lebanon and Israel have suffered from the current violence," as if there existed a sort of equality between the physical consequences of the war for the two countries. Or that America's "recognition" of the suffering somehow compensates for the fact that the United States delayed a cease-fire for three weeks in the expectation and hope—ultimately disappointed—that the Israeli military would totally destroy Hezbollah and murder its leadership. The scene of Condoleezza Rice cheerfully proclaiming the birth of a new Middle East as American-made bombs rained down on Beirut from American-made aircraft has become part of the collective memory of hundreds of millions of Arabs and Muslims.

Bush's assertion that "It was an unprovoked attack by Hezbollah on Israel that started this conflict" was a bald-faced lie. Putting aside the long and bloody history of Israeli military efforts to dominate Lebanon—which, since 1978, have resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Lebanese people—it is well known that in the months preceding the outbreak of war Israel had engaged in numerous violations of Lebanese territorial sovereignty.

Aside from fairly routine incidents such as over-flights of Lebanese territory, reports are now emerging that Israel and the United States discussed and reviewed plans for a military assault on Hezbollah.

According to a lengthy article by the authoritative investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, which was published in the *New Yorker* just a few days before the Bush press conference, the Bush administration "was closely involved in the planning of Israel's retaliatory attacks."

The Hezbollah capture of two Israeli soldiers was a pretext for war. Hersh writes: "According to a Middle East expert with knowledge of the current thinking of both the Israeli and the US governments, Israel had devised a plan for attacking Hezbollah—and shared it with Bush Administration officials—well before the July 12th kidnappings."

The United States was anxious for Israel to initiate large-

scale military operations for two interrelated reasons. First, the destruction of Hezbollah would eliminate an important base of Iranian influence in Lebanon. Second, to the extent that Hezbollah had been equipped with Iranian weaponry, the Israeli campaign would provide a test run for the anticipated assault against Iran for which the Bush administration is preparing.

Bush's account of the origins of the war was not challenged by the reporters at the press conference, who never confronted the president with the information uncovered by Hersh. Not one of the assembled journalistic hacks had either the courage or integrity to challenge Bush's blatant lies.

To list all the political inanities that Bush managed to cram into a half-hour press conference would require a far longer article. But two statements stood out.

"Israel, when they aimed at a target and killed innocent citizens, were upset," intoned the president. "Their society was aggrieved." How touching! The murderers wept over the corpses of their victims. Is this not an expression of their humanity?

Bush also referred to another moral virtue, attributing it to the United States: "We don't fight the armies of nation states; we fight terrorists who kill innocent people to achieve political aims."

It did not occur to any reporter to ask the president to provide a definition of "nation state." How would Bush define Serbia, which the United States bombed in 1999 for two months? Or, for that matter, Iraq? And, they might have asked, if a terrorist is to be defined as someone who is willing to "kill innocent people to achieve political aims," why should the terrorist label not be applied to the prime minister of Israel and, one might add, the current president of the United States?



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