Bush press conference on Iraq: “We’re not leaving so long as I’m the president.”

Patrick Martin
23 August 2006

President Bush’s press conference Monday gave a glimpse of the deepening political crisis of the US administration over the failure of its policies in Iraq and the broader Middle East. Bush was on the defensive throughout the session, struggling with questions which, if not overtly hostile, focused attention on the contradictions in his shifting rationale for the Iraq war.

Although Bush gave an opening statement on Lebanon, the press returned again and again to the Iraq war, both to the deteriorating security situation in the country and the dwindling public support for the war within the United States.

So great has been the turn in public opinion against the war that Bush himself was compelled to admit the extent of the mass opposition. He made several comments on this theme, clearly rehearsed ahead of time, acknowledging the opposition while declaring it mistaken:

“There’s a lot of people—good, decent people—saying: Withdraw now. They’re absolutely wrong. It’d be a huge mistake for this country.”

“There are a lot of good, decent people saying: Get out now; vote for me; I will do everything I can to, I guess, cut off money is what they’re trying to do to get the troops out. It’s a big mistake.”

“And there’s a fundamental difference between many of the Democrats and my party. And that is: They want to leave before the job is completed in Iraq. And again, I repeat: These are decent people. They’re just as American as I am. I just happen to strongly disagree with them”

“I will never question the patriotism of somebody who disagrees with me. This has nothing to do with patriotism. It has everything to do with understanding the world in which we live.”

This evidently was one of the main talking points Bush’s handlers had rehearsed with him before the press conference. It reflects concerns that the McCarthy-style baiting of Iraq war opponents in recent statements by Vice President Cheney, chief Bush political aide Karl Rove and other Republican spokesmen has backfired, provoking even greater popular antagonism towards the administration.

At one point Bush was directly asked about the comments of Cheney, who said that Connecticut voters who denied renomination to Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman because of his support for the Iraq war were “emboldening Al Qaeda-types.”

Bush reiterated the mantra that “leaving Iraq before the mission is complete will send the wrong message to the enemy and will create a more dangerous world.” He sought to soften the slur against opponents of the war, adding, “Look, it’s an honest debate, and it’s an important debate for Americans to listen to and to be engaged in.”

This shift in public posture is purely cosmetic. Despite the conciliatory rhetoric Monday, the White House and the Republican National Committee are seeking to whip up right-wing support in the November election by suggesting that opposition to the Iraq war is treasonous.

For that reason, Bush grossly exaggerates the “antiwar” credentials of the congressional Democrats, who support the goals of the war—conquest of Iraq to obtain oil resources and strategic dominance in the Middle East—but have criticized the Bush administration’s incompetent execution of this neo-colonial exercise.

The hollowness of Bush’s statements about the necessity and legitimacy of political debate over the war is revealed in his refusal to actually engage the arguments of those opposed to the war. His version of “debate” was to repeat, in almost robotic fashion, his other main talking point of the day, the necessity to “finish the job” in Iraq.

Bush dismissed a question about whether the US invasion and occupation had made matters worse in Iraq, repeating for the thousandth time his administration’s

© World Socialist Web Site

long-discredited claim that Saddam Hussein was a threat to the world and was on the brink of building weapons of mass destruction.

He refused to address seriously the growing Sunni-Shia conflict in Iraq, despite the statements by top American generals that the country may be on the brink of civil war, and that sectarian killings, not the attacks of terrorists, are the principal threat to the establishment of a stable US occupation regime.

This unwillingness to face reality has become the target of criticism in much of the mainstream press. *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson, for instance, cited Bush's comments about the mounting death toll among civilians and asked: "Does he believe it would be a sign of weakness to admit that the flowering of democracy in Iraq isn't going exactly as planned? Does he believe saying everything's just fine will make it so? Is he in denial? Or do 3,438 deaths really just roll off his back after he's had his workout and a nice bike ride?"

At one point, asked what Iraq had to do with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush blithely admitted, "Nothing." Then he added, "Nobody's ever suggested that the attacks of September the 11th were ordered by Iraq."

In fact, virtually every top administration spokesman made that connection, including Vice President Cheney, who peddled the claim, long after it had been discredited, that alleged 9/11 plot leader Mohammed Atta had met with Iraqi agents in the Czech Republic before the attack. Condoleezza Rice warned that the next 9/11 would be "a mushroom cloud" if Saddam Hussein was not dealt with.

Bush also distorted the basis of the opposition to the war, suggesting it was simply the result of squeamishness over the bloodshed in Iraq. "You know, nobody likes to see innocent people die," he said. "Nobody wants to turn on their TV on a daily basis and see havoc wrought by terrorists."

The opposition to the war is fueled, however, by popular revulsion to the havoc wrought by the United States, along with its allies Britain and Israel, in the region. More fundamentally, the most politically conscious elements in the popular opposition to the Iraq war reject not only the methods employed by the imperialists, but their goals, which are not to "democratize" the Middle East, but to reduce Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Iran and other countries to the status of semi-colonies, completely subordinated to the interests of American capitalism.

While Bush repeatedly claimed that the goal of the United States in Iraq was to foster democracy, he made it clear that he felt no accountability to the democratic will of the American people. Whatever the popular sentiment in the US, he declared, "We're not leaving so long as I'm the president."

This contradiction was spelled out in two comments made by Bush in the course of the press conference. He declared that the "war on terror" was directed against an ideology opposed to democracy: "And the only way to defeat this ideology in the long term is to defeat it through another ideology, a competing ideology, one that—where the government responds to the will of the people."

But towards the end of the press conference, asked whether he still hoped to convince the American people, or whether "this is the kind of thing you're doing because you think it's right and you don't care if you ever gain public support for it," Bush replied bluntly: "Look, I'm going to do what I think is right and if, you know, if people don't like me for it, that's just the way it is."

Nor is Bush's policy accountable to the "will of the people" of Iraq, since he has declared the US troops will remain, no matter what, until he leaves office.

Such assertions inevitably beg the question, what will Bush do if the majority of the Iraqi people or the majority of the American people seek to bring an end to the bloodbath prior to January 20, 2009?

Bush's categorical statements imply that his administration recognizes no limits on its war powers, and would be prepared to defy Congress in the unlikely event that it imposed a deadline for the withdrawal of US troops. As for the political situation in Iraq itself, if the supposedly democratically elected and sovereign regime attempted to cut its strings and respond to popular sentiments by demanding the removal of American forces, the US would have no compunction in organizing a coup and installing a new government.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site