A belligerent Bush addresses the UN

Washington threatens wider Middle East war

Bill Van Auken
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In a speech to the opening session of the United Nations General Assembly Tuesday, US President George W. Bush delivered a remarkably belligerent warning to the peoples of the Middle East that Washington intends to continue and even widen its campaign of military aggression.

The dominant message in the speech was contained in the implicit threats made against Syria and Iran that they could soon face the same fate as Afghanistan and Iraq.

Such are the traditions of UN diplomacy—and the spinelessness of the world's governments—that the body's delegates politely applauded as Bush absurdly postured as the liberator of the Arab masses. His government's policies of unprovoked aggression, military occupation and torture stand in direct violation of the UN charter and constitute war crimes for which he and other top US officials deserve to stand trial.

Several thousand antiwar demonstrators marched through the streets of Manhattan and then rallied in Dag Hammarskjold Plaza near the UN as Bush was making his speech.

Inside the UN, Bush served up his usual concoction of lies, threats and hypocrisy in a speech that closely tracked many of the same themes and rhetoric contained in the series of propaganda addresses he has delivered in the US in recent weeks in an attempt to shore up plummeting support for the Iraq war.

Inevitably, in his first sentence the US president invoked 9/11, once again exploiting the terrorist attacks of that day to justify all of the lawless acts committed by Washington in the five years since. He once again proclaimed that the world was engaged in the "great ideological struggle" of the twenty-first century, pitting the Bush White House against "extremists," a category in which he lumped together Al Qaeda terrorists, the Lebanese mass movement Hezbollah, and Hamas, which currently leads the Palestinian government in the Israeli-occupied territories.

Invoking the "death and suffering" inflicted upon American civilians five years ago before such an international audience clearly raises the following question: what about the far greater death and suffering unleashed upon the world by US militarism in 9/11's aftermath?

According to a recent UN report, over 100 Iraqis are being killed every day under the US occupation, meaning that Iraq suffers the equivalent of 9/11 each and every month. Since the US invaded the country three-and-a-half years ago, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died. Many thousands more civilians have been killed in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the death toll among US troops in the two occupied countries has now surpassed the number of deaths inflicted on September 11.

Bush's speech was aimed at portraying his government as having been spurred to action by the shock of 9/11 to "defend civilization and build a more hopeful future." He insisted that Washington is striving for "a world beyond terror," whose "principles...can be found in the first sentence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document declares that the 'equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom and justice and peace in the world."

With good reason, the American president did not linger over this declaration, which includes the following injunction: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." Bush had come to the UN fresh from his battle with prominent members of his own party in the US Senate for passage of a bill to "clarify" US obligations under the Geneva Conventions by explicitly permitting forms of torture that those treaties outlaw.

The declaration's ban on torture is followed immediately by this assertion: "Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law"—an assertion that the Bush administration has explicitly repudiated with its demand to try and sentence to death so-called "enemy combatants" in military tribunals based on secret evidence and without right of appeal.

And the declaration further states, "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile." Bush addressed the UN just one day after a Canadian government commission issued a blistering report on the case of Canadian computer engineer Maher Arar, who was arrested by US authorities without cause or evidence and then sent to Syria for 10 months of torture and interrogation—only one of the known cases involving the infamous practice of "extraordinary rendition."

Having cast himself as the apostle of freedom and universal human rights, Bush no less improbably portrayed the conditions in US-occupied Iraq and Afghanistan as indicative of a "bright future" beginning "to take root in the broader Middle East."

The reality on the ground in both countries makes it clear that the US wars launched to dominate the oil supplies of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf have created a humanitarian catastrophe and a political and military fiasco for Washington itself.

On the eve of Bush's appearance at the United Nations, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, recently returned from a tour of the Middle East, warned that Iraq is in danger sliding into a "full-scale civil war." Last week he said that leaders of the region had told him that the US invasion and occupation had been a disaster that has destabilized the entire Middle East.

On the day that Bush delivered his address, the commander of US forces in the region, Gen. John Abizaid, indicated that the present US troop levels in Iraq could not be reduced at least until the middle of next year because of both the escalating sectarian violence and the growing number of attacks on the occupation forces themselves. The announcement follows the leaking of a Marine intelligence report acknowledging that the US military had effectively lost the battle for control of the key western province of Anbar.

In Afghanistan, the US-led occupation has lost control of much of the country as nationalist resistance to foreign domination has grown, and casualty rates for occupation troops have quadrupled in the last two years.

Thus, Bush's singling out the presence in his audience of the besieged US stooge Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan and Iraq's President Jalal Talabani as examples of democracy's supposed forward march was both pathetic and absurd.

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Bush's descriptions of the rest of the Middle East combined gross insults with shameless hypocrisy. He dismissed charges that US militarism has destabilized the region, proclaiming that "the stability we thought we saw in the Middle East was a mirage." He declared the region "a breeding ground for extremism" in which people were "fed propaganda and conspiracy theories" and were prepared "to blow themselves up in suicide attacks."

He then lectured the region's governments, declaring, "We know that when leaders are accountable to their people, they are more likely to seek national greatness in the achievements of their citizens rather than through terror and conquest."

How would Bush know this? He is a president who has repeatedly rejected any suggestion that he is accountable to the broad sentiments of the American people against the war in Iraq. And his entire tenure in the White House has been dominated by the use of mass terror and wars of conquest aimed at furthering the US imperialist hegemony.

The rest of his speech consisted of his speaking "directly to the people across the Middle East," that is, over the heads of their governments as the leader of an imperialist state seeking to re-colonize the region.

To the people of Iraq, he declared, "We will not abandon you in your struggle to build a free nation"—meaning the US occupation will continue indefinitely; to the people of Afghanistan, "We will continue to stand with you to defend your democratic gains"—same as the above.

To the people of Lebanon, Bush sent his condolences that their "homes and communities [were] caught in the crossfire" between Israel and Hezbollah—this after a month-long US-backed Israeli bombing campaign that killed over 1,100 Lebanese and turned entire villages and neighborhoods as well as much of the country's infrastructure into rubble.

Finally, he turned to Iran and Syria. In relation to the first, he declared that the "regime" in Teheran had "chosen to deny you liberty and to use your nation's resources to fund terrorism, and fuel extremism and pursue nuclear weapons." He invoked the United Nations Security Council resolution demanding that Iran halt its uranium enrichment program. He concluded, "We look to the day when you can live in freedom—and America and Iran can be good friends and close partners in the cause of peace."

The message was one of "regime change," as in Iraq and Afghanistan. The "freedom" friendship and partnership that the Bush administration has in mind is the kind that existed when the Shah's dictatorship ruled Iran through repression and torture while defending US interests in the region.

On the eve of Bush's speech, *Time* magazine published a report indicating that US plans for war against Iran are well-advanced. It cited a "prepare to deploy" order issued to a US naval battle group consisting of submarines, a cruiser and mine-sweeping ships for October 1 as well as the Pentagon's reworking of contingency plans for blockading Iran's Persian Gulf oil ports.

The report states that "from the State Department to the White House to the highest reaches of the military command, there is a growing sense that a showdown with Iran—over its suspected quest for nuclear weapons, its threats against Israel and its bid for dominance of the world's richest oil region—may be impossible to avoid."

While making it clear that, given the crisis confronting the US military in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the risks of a ground invasion are too high, the report indicates that a massive air assault is being prepared.

"A Pentagon official says that among the known sites there are 1,500 different 'aim points,' which means the campaign could well require the involvement of almost every type of aircraft in the U.S. arsenal: Stealth bombers and fighters, B-1s and B-2s, as well as F-15s and F-16s operating from land and F-18s from aircraft carriers," *Time* reports.

It continues, "GPS-guided munitions and laser-targeted bombs—sighted by satellite, spotter aircraft and unmanned vehicles—would do most of the bunker busting. But because many of the targets are hardened under several feet of reinforced concrete, most would have to be hit over and over to ensure that they were destroyed or sufficiently damaged... U.S. submarines and ships could launch cruise missiles as well, but their warheads are generally too small to do much damage to reinforced concrete—and might be used for secondary targets. An operation of that size would hardly be surgical. Many sites are in highly populated areas, so civilian casualties would be a certainty."

In other words, Washington is making advanced preparations for yet another massive war crime.

Bush's message to the Syrian people was no less threatening. He charged that its government had turned the country into "a crossroad for terrorism" and "a tool of Iran."

The American president's annual message to the UN General Assembly serves to bring the world face-to-face with the explosive force of US militarism.

The launching of new wars of aggression, under conditions in which both countries recently conquered by US troops are spiraling out of control, may seem irrational in the extreme. But the buildup toward another round of "shock and awe" pursues a definite, if twisted, logic of military aggression.

Having failed in its attempts to turn Afghanistan and Iraq into secure US semi-colonies, thereby assuring a firm US grip on the oil supplies of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin, Washington is driven to expand its campaign of conquest. It is therefore using Iran's nuclear program as a new pretext for employing military power to assert its domination over these oil-rich regions and Iran itself, which boasts the world's third largest reserves of oil and second largest of natural gas, and lies at the strategic crossroads of the two regions.

This bloody enterprise, defended by Bush at the UN, is the consensus policy of the American ruling elite as a whole. This is made clear by the bellicose attitude taken by the Democrats, many of whom have criticized the Republican administration from the right for failing to take enough of a hard line against Teheran and for allowing US troops to be bogged down in Iraq when they could be needed against Iran.

Representative of this trend is New York's Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton, who proclaimed earlier this year, amid reports of contingency plans for nuclear strikes against Iranian targets, "We cannot take any option off the table in sending a clear message to the current leadership of Iran—that they will not be permitted to acquire nuclear weapons."

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