

White House propaganda campaign: Bush, Cheney smear opponents of US war in Iraq

Patrick Martin
16 January 2007

In remarks broadcast Sunday on national television, President Bush and Vice President Cheney brushed aside the mass opposition to their war policy among the American people, declared that the US government would do “whatever it takes” to win a military victory in Iraq, and suggested that Iran could well be the next target for American military aggression.

As they reiterated their plans for expanding the war, Bush and Cheney expressed the outlook—a hallmark of dictatorship, not democracy—that the government has the right to defy the expressed will of the people on the most serious of political issues, a war in which thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have already died.

As part of a coordinated public relations offensive by the White House, Cheney appeared on the morning interview program “Fox News Sunday,” while Bush was interviewed for the CBS program “60 Minutes,” broadcast the same evening.

Both sought, in slightly different ways, to intimidate the majority of Americans who oppose the continuation of the US occupation of Iraq and want a rapid withdrawal of all American troops.

Bush painted a picture of the devastating impact of a US “failure” in Iraq, saying it would “embolden the enemy,” whom he defined as “Al Qaeda and extremists,” as well as Iran. He painted a picture of slaughter and mass suffering throughout the Middle East, although that is the catastrophic outcome already set into motion by the US invasion.

Hinting at the huge economic and strategic interests at stake in control of the oil-rich region—and contrasting them to the stakes involved in the US defeat in Vietnam—Bush said, “What happens in the Middle East matters to the homeland. And that’s different than in some past engagements.”

Cheney, as befits his role as the administration bully, warned that those who advocate a US withdrawal from Iraq would “revalidate the strategy that Osama bin Laden has been following from day one, that if you kill enough Americans, you can force them to quit, that we don’t have the stomach for the fight.”

While Cheney suggested that those opposed to the Bush administration’s war policies are capitulating to terrorism, Bush claimed that there was broad agreement within the United States on the need for “success” in Iraq, and maintained that critics of his plans to escalate the war were obliged to provide an alternative scenario to achieve an American victory.

While not challenging the basic framework of the US intervention in Iraq, and addressing Bush and Cheney with

fawning respect, the CBS and Fox journalists nonetheless posed a number of pointed questions to the president and vice-president, which evoked responses that are worth citing.

Scott Pelley of “60 Minutes” pressed Bush on the lies employed to pave the way to war in 2003. “Many Americans feel that your administration has not been straight with the country, has not been honest,” he said, singling out the claims of weapons of mass destruction and a connection between Iraq and the 9/11 attacks, as well as the administration’s gross underestimation of the cost of the war.

Bush appeared initially taken aback, sputtering, “I gotcha. I gotcha. I gotcha.” Then he resorted to the administration’s last-ditch defense of the prewar lies—the argument that the Democrats and the Clinton administration had held the same view of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. “There were a lot of people, both Republicans and Democrats,” he said, “who felt there were weapons of mass destruction. Many of the leaders in the Congress spoke strongly about the fact that Saddam Hussein had weapons prior to my arrival in Washington DC.”

Fox interviewer Chris Wallace asked Cheney about the sharp decline in public and congressional support for the war in Iraq, particularly as expressed in the November 2006 elections. Citing exit polls showing 67 percent who said the war was very important to their vote, and only 17 percent who supported the dispatch of more troops, he asked Cheney, “By taking the policy you have, haven’t you, Mr. Vice President, ignored the express will of the American people in the November election?”

Cheney responded, “I don’t think any president worth his salt can afford to make decisions of this magnitude according to the polls. The polls change day by day . . .”

Wallace persisted, “This was an election, sir.” Cheney brushed this fact aside, reiterating, “Polls change day by day, week by week ... you cannot simply stick your finger up in the wind and say, ‘Gee, public opinion’s against; we better quit.’”

The vice president went on to elaborate an outlook based on the rejection of any democratic accountability of the US government to the American people. On the contrary, he claimed, the task of the government was to be stronger than the people, to insure that the will of the chief executive (the “Decider”) prevailed against the will of the people.

“That is part and parcel of the underlying fundamental strategy that our adversaries believe afflicts the United States,” Cheney said. “They are convinced that the current debate in the Congress,

that the election campaign last fall, all of that is evidence that they're right when they say the United States doesn't have the stomach for the fight in this long war against terror.

"They believe it. They look at past evidence of it: in Lebanon in '83 and Somalia in '93, Vietnam before that. They're convinced that the United States will, in fact, pack it in and go home if they just kill enough of us. They can't beat us in a stand-up fight, but they think they can break our will. And if we have a president who looks at the polls and sees the polls are going south and concludes, 'Oh, my goodness, we have to quit,' all it will do is validate the Al Qaeda view of the world.

"It's exactly the wrong thing to do. This president does not make policy based on public opinion polls; he should not. It's absolutely essential here that we get it right."

The two interviews present an extraordinary portrait of American political life, in which the Bush-Cheney administration is pushing ahead with its policy of expanded military aggression in the Middle East, regardless of the deep popular revulsion against the war.

The White House feels it can safely ignore popular sentiment because it has long taken the measure of its congressional critics and recognizes that there will be no serious effort by the Democratic leadership to bring an end to the war.

Both Cheney and Bush spoke freely about the prospects of congressional action to cut off funding for the war. Bush seemed to concede that Congress had the constitutional authority to cut off funding for the war, but declared, "I will fight that, of course . . . I will resist that. That would mean that they're not willing to support a plan that I believe will work and solve the situation. We've got people criticizing this plan before it's had a chance to work."

Cheney again was more confrontational, dismissing a "sense of Congress" resolution, proposed by the Democratic leadership, as a meaningless verbal exercise, and declaring that Bush had the authority to send additional troops to Iraq regardless of congressional opinion. "The president is the commander in chief," Cheney said. "He's the one who has to make these tough decisions. He's the guy who's got to decide how to use the force and where to deploy the force."

While grudgingly admitting the Congress had authority over military spending, Cheney agreed with a suggestion from his interviewer that such a vote against war funding would amount to undercutting the troops.

In comments on another Sunday television interview program, "Face the Nation" on CBS, Republican Senator John McCain called the Democrats' bluff, dismissing a non-binding resolution as meaningless and challenging them to cut off funding if they truly wanted to end the war.

New House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid have disavowed any such effort, accepting and even embracing the Bush administration claim that such a vote would represent an attack on the rank-and-file soldiers now deployed in Iraq. This is a cynical and self-serving effort to de-legitimize and suppress mass antiwar sentiment, as well as to inoculate themselves against a future campaign of "who lost Iraq?" demagoguery from the Republicans.

Neither the White House nor the Democrats bother to explain why sending soldiers out to be killed by IEDs and sniper fire should be considered "supporting" the troops, while it would be a stab in the back to use the congressional power of the purse to force the administration to bring these soldiers home safely to their families.

Neither faction of the US ruling elite, of course, considers the interests of the innocent Iraqis whose lives will be sacrificed with the continuation and escalation of a war that has caused the deaths of an estimated 655,000 people.

The escalation on which the Bush administration has embarked is a threat not only to the long-suffering people of Iraq, but to the masses throughout the Middle East, and to the democratic rights of the American people as well.

In his television interview, Cheney elaborated a future of decades of war, declaring, "This is an existential conflict. It is the kind of conflict that's going to drive our policy and our government for the next 20 or 30 or 40 years. We have to prevail, and we have to have the stomach for the fight, long term."

This kind of apocalyptic language is more than just the latest rehash of the long-disproven claim that the US invasion and occupation of Iraq are a response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The demented perspective voiced by Cheney amounts to a justification for an unlimited escalation of violence in Iraq and Afghanistan and new wars against Iran, other countries in the Middle East, and beyond.

It is the basis for the onslaught being conducted against the democratic rights of the American people—something Cheney spelled out in the same interview, responding to weekend revelations about Pentagon spying on American citizens by defending this latest example of the police-state methods being employed at home.

The White House can press forward with its program of war and repression only because of the collaboration of the congressional Democrats, who will use their majority status in Congress—the byproduct of the massive antiwar vote last November—to prop up the Bush administration. The struggle against the war in Iraq and the threat of wider US military aggression can be waged only through the building of a mass independent antiwar movement based on the working people and opposed to both political parties of the American corporate elite.



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