White House press conference

Bush rejects any US military pullback in Iraq

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The Thursday morning press conference by President Bush demonstrated the unbridgeable gulf between the Washington political and media elite, who reflect the interests of the US financial aristocracy, and the vast majority of working people, who are increasingly opposed to the war in Iraq and the administration that perpetrated it.

Even by the standards of a Bush press conference, the president's performance was remarkable for its preposterous and lying distortion of the reality in Iraq. His opening statement presented a picture of conditions in that devastated country that would find few supporters even among Republicans in Congress.

The press conference, held only minutes after the official release of a new administration assessment of "progress" in the war, was an effort to shape media accounts of that report, characterizing it as a "mixed" and interim verdict from which no sweeping conclusions could be drawn.

The report, however, despite its deliberately vague language, effectively concedes that the US-imposed regime in Baghdad has proven incapable of carrying out the commands of its masters in Washington, failing to end to sectarian bloodshed, achieve a settlement on the country's political structure, or enact an oil law to give American companies access to Iraqi energy resources.

The statement that was perhaps most at odds with reality in Bush's opening remarks was this: "The real debate over Iraq is between those who think the fight is lost or not worth the cost and those who believe the fight can be won, and that, as difficult as the fight is, the costs of defeat would be far higher."

This is a distorted characterization of the divisions in official Washington between the Bush administration and congressional Democrats, which involves increasing numbers of congressional Republicans switching sides as well. Among the big business politicians and media pundits, there is a shared desire for "success" in Iraq, defined as maintaining US control over the country's vast oil resources and maintaining US domination of the wider Middle East. More and more of the political representatives of the corporate ruling elite have concluded, however, that the war is a failure, and that US troops must be redeployed—not withdrawn—in order to salvage what can be saved from the wreckage of Bush's policies.

Among the American people, however, the surge in antiwar sentiment has a much different meaning. The mass opposition is not, as Bush repeatedly asserts, simply a matter of skepticism over the prospects for winning the war, but rather a deep-going moral and political revulsion at the criminality of the war and of those who conspired to carry it out.

The war was launched on the basis of lies. Despite all the efforts of the media and the political elite to gloss it over, that fact has enormous and enduring consequences. The majority of the American people, according to opinion polls, believe that Bush, Cheney & Co. deliberately lied to make their case for war—lies that were exposed when the conquest of Iraq provided no evidence of weapons of mass destruction or ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda.

Bush returned to this issue later in the press conference when questioned about the mounting public opposition to the war. "I understand why the American people are—you know—they're tired of the war," he said. "People are—there's war fatigue in America. It's affecting our psychology. I've said this before. I understand that. This is an ugly war. It's a war in which an enemy will kill innocent men, women and children in order to achieve a political objective. It doesn't surprise me that there is deep concern amongst our people. Part of that concern is whether or not we can win, whether or not the objective is achievable. People don't want our troops in harm's way if that which we're trying to achieve can't be accomplished."

It is worth the effort to disentangle this mass of falsehoods, distortions and half truths. Bush suggests that opposition to the war is based entirely on exhaustion—"war fatigue," as he put it. In other words, he is suggesting that his aims in launching and prosecuting the war are widely accepted and popular, and that opposition reflects only the difficulty of the struggle and the meagerness of the results. But tens of millions of American working people increasingly recognize the war not as a case of poor judgment or incompetent management but as a historic crime.

Bush refers to the war as ugly, as "a war in which an enemy will kill innocent men, women and children in order to achieve a political objective." There are millions of Americans who believe, quite rightly, that those words are an exact description of the methods of the Bush-Cheney regime, which is

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responsible for launching a war that has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of "innocent men, women and children" in order to achieve its "political objective": American domination of the center of world oil production.

There is an ominous and profoundly undemocratic logic to Bush's language about war weariness. He is essentially suggesting that the American people are weakening under the toll of attacks by Al Qaeda terrorists, and that it is his job, as president, to provide the strength and determination that they lack. The implication—not yet openly drawn but obvious—is that the president must defy the will of the American people, and perhaps even prevent them from expressing their "war fatigue," in pursuit of victory in the "war on terror."

This anti-democratic trajectory was also revealed in Bush's discussion of congressional efforts to put restrictions on the conduct of the war, such as the series of amendments to the defense authorization bill now being debated and voted on in the Senate and House of Representatives.

One reporter asked him about his role as commander-in-chief. "Have you entertained the idea that at some point Congress may take some of that sole decision-making power away through legislation?"

Bush responded by essentially ruling out any congressional role in war policy other than as a financial rubberstamp. "I don't think Congress ought to be running the war," he said. "I think they ought to be funding our troops."

He continued, "I'll work with Congress. I listen to Congress. Congress has got all the right to appropriate money. But the idea of telling our military how to conduct operations, for example, or how to, you know, deal with troop strength, is—I don't think it makes sense."

This conception turns the US constitutional structure upside down, making the president an elected dictator whose only obligation, in waging a war now in its fifth year, is to "consult" with the legislature, which has no power to decide anything, and must provide funding for the war as directed by the chief executive.

As a political event, the main purpose of the press conference was to appeal to congressional Republicans not to lend their support to any of the various Senate and House measures that would restrict the conduct of the war, although all the measures backed by the Democratic leadership leave final decision-making in the hands of the president, who can waive limits on troop levels and missions simply by declaring it to be in the interests of "national security."

Bush repeatedly invoked the name of General David Petraeus, the overall commander in Iraq, whose appointment was approved unanimously by the Democratic-controlled Congress early this year. Petraeus is to report by September 15 on Iraqi progress on meeting the 18 benchmarks laid down in the emergency funding bill enacted by Congress in May. But Bush made clear that the decision on continuing the war indefinitely had already been made.

Once again falsely claiming that the war in Iraq was a necessary response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush claimed, "The same folks that are bombing innocent people in Iraq were the ones who attacked us in America on September the 11, and that's why what happens in Iraq matters to security here at home."

One reporter challenged him on this claim, asking, "On that point, what evidence can you present to the American people that the people who attacked the United States on September 11th are, in fact, the same people who are responsible for the bombings taking place in Iraq?"

Bush evaded the issue, pointing to the links between Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Al Qaeda organization of Osama bin Laden, without addressing the fact that the vast majority of the violence in Iraq has nothing to do with Al Qaeda. It is a combination of sectarian civil war between Shiite and Sunni elements and attacks by all factions of Iraqis on the American forces, motivated by nationalist hostility to the occupation of their country.

He said that the war would be continued by his successor after January 20, 2009, a statement that is undoubtedly true, given that every major Democratic and Republican presidential candidate is committed to the continued US military occupation of Iraq.

Bush reiterated the warnings of apocalyptic consequences of a US defeat in Iraq that have become a staple of the official discussion of the war. Some of those consequences—"mass killings on a horrific scale" in Iraq, for instance—are already taking place, and are caused by the US occupation regime.

He also returned again to the question of popular opposition to the war, and his determination not to concede an inch to it. He derided all concern with public opinion as "running a focus group." Most significantly, he cited the resistance of the military itself to any popular check on war policy.

"I'm pretty confident our military do not want their commander in chief making political decisions about their future," he said. The threat here is transparent: Bush was telling his Democratic (and Republican) critics that the military would not tolerate congressional interference with the war. And he was suggesting that he might well defy any congressional restriction on the war and rely on the military for support.

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