Bush delivers rant on Iraq to military audience as poll numbers plummet

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With poll numbers indicating that support for both his administration and the Iraq war have fallen to record lows, President Bush Tuesday delivered a militarist rant before a uniformed audience in South Carolina, insisting that the fighting must continue in order to defeat Al Qaeda.

Speaking for less than half an hour before a dragooned audience of military personnel at the Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina, Bush used the words "Al Qaeda" 93 times and made at least 23 separate references to Osama bin Laden, nearly 40 to "terror" or "terrorists" as well as eight mentions of September 11.

The broader political context of this speech was the precipitous collapse of any popular support for the war. A *Washington Post*-ABC News poll released Tuesday showed 68 percent of the population opposed to the administration's policy in Iraq and 63 percent believing that the war should have never been fought. Fifty nine percent of those polled expressed the opinion that all US troops should be withdrawn, "even if it means that civil order is not restored" in Iraq. And an overwhelming 80 percent of Americans said that Bush is too inflexible on the Iraq war—a 12 point rise since December.

The poll also indicated broad support for setting a withdrawal deadline, while 62 percent said that Congress "should have the final say" in determining the date for the pullout, as opposed to just 31 percent saying that it should be Bush. This, in particular, signaled a massive popular repudiation of Bush's assertion of unfettered executive power and idiotic description of himself as "the decider."

Meanwhile, the popular view of Congress proved little better, with 60 percent expressing disapproval. Nearly half (49 percent) of those polled indicated that their hostility to Congress stemmed from its failure to carry out more aggressive action to end the war in Iraq.

Bush's speech was part of an increasingly desperate and hysterical campaign by the administration to counter this massive opposition by browbeating the public with the supposed omnipresent threat of terror.

Just as the administration sought to drag the American people into the war on the lying pretense that the conquest of Iraq and its oil fields was a response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, so now it is claiming that a withdrawal of US troops from the country would inevitably result in the renewal of such attacks.

Appearing in Charleston just a day after the Democratic presidential candidates conducted a televised debate there, Bush declared that "America remains a nation at war." He then proceeded to blatantly exploit his captive audience of troops and their families in order to launch a political attack on the Democrats.

"There's a debate in Washington about Iraq, and nothing wrong with a healthy debate," Bush declared in his opening remarks. "There's also a debate about al Qaeda's role in Iraq. Some say that Iraq is not part of the broader war on terror. They complain when I say that the al Qaeda terrorists we face in Iraq are part of the same enemy that attacked us on September the 11th, 2001. They claim that the organization called al Qaeda in Iraq is an Iraqi phenomenon, that it's independent of Osama bin Laden and that it's not interested in attacking America. That would be news to Osama bin Laden."

The US president then went into a potted and tortuous history of Al Qaeda in Iraq, an organization that had no presence in the country until after the US invasion of March 2003, and which is a minority element within the Iraqi insurgency. He attempted to cast the entire armed resistance to American occupation—which enjoys the support of a clear majority of the Iraqi people—as a terrorist plot hatched by Osama bin Laden.

Bush leaned heavily on the National Intelligence Estimate issued by the country's spy agencies last week. Of course, the thrust of that report—which went unmentioned in the speech—was that bin Laden and Al Qaeda have been able to reorganize in the northwest frontier territories of Pakistan, largely thanks to the policies of the Pakistani dictator, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, one of Washington's principal allies in the "global war on terror." The report further indicated, in what was undoubtedly a veiled critique of the Bush

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administration's policies, that the war in Iraq has strengthened Al Qaeda because of the mass hostility of the world's Muslims towards US aggression.

In one section of the speech, which captured its overall irrationality and hysteria, Bush acknowledged that "most of al Qaeda in Iraq's rank and file fighters" are Iraqis, but then dismissed this as a "single fact." He continued: "They know they're al Qaeda. The Iraqi people know they are al Qaeda. People across the Muslim world know they are al Qaeda. And there's a good reason they are called al Qaeda in Iraq: They are al Qaeda ... in ... Iraq."

Continuing his attack on the Democrats, Bush told the assembled troops: "You might wonder why some in Washington insist on making this distinction about the enemy in Iraq. It's because they know that if they can convince America we're not fighting bin Laden's al Qaeda there, they can paint the battle in Iraq as a distraction from the real war on terror. If we're not fighting bin Laden's al Qaeda, they can argue that our nation can pull out of Iraq and not undermine our efforts in the war on terror. The problem they have is with the facts. We are fighting bin Laden's al Qaeda in Iraq; Iraq is central to the war on terror; and against this enemy, America can accept nothing less than complete victory."

He concluded with a passage that essentially cast not just his ostensible political opponents in the Democratic Party, but all those tens of millions of people who support an immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq as virtual dupes of al Qaeda.

"The facts are that al Qaeda terrorists killed Americans on 9/11, they're fighting us in Iraq and across the world, and they are plotting to kill Americans here at home again," declared Bush. "Those who justify withdrawing our troops from Iraq by denying the threat of al Qaeda in Iraq and its ties to Osama bin Laden ignore the clear consequences of such a retreat. If we were to follow their advice, it would be dangerous for the world—and disastrous for America."

The power of such heated rhetoric to convince has dissipated with every passing day of the bloody debacle created by the US invasion and occupation in Iraq. There is clearly a reason why Bush chose to deliver this speech—like so many others—to an audience bound by military discipline to put on a show of support and respect for a speech riddled with patent lies and outright stupidities.

There is, however, another and more sinister significance to Bush's decision to fly to Charleston and deliver his harangue to military personnel just a day after the Democratic debate. The aim is to foment military hostility to both the Democratic Party and the US Congress in order to forge within the armed forces themselves an alternative base of support for the thoroughly unpopular and right-wing militarist policies of the administration.

The message is clear: the Democrats are supporting the enemy in time of war and stabbing the troops in the back.

Democratic leaders reacted to Bush's tirade with predictable cowardice, making sure to declare their allegiance to the "global war on terror," while indicting the Bush administration merely for poor tactics, not for its gross criminality. The most common Democratic position is that the US should shift its troops to Afghanistan, while maintaining the Iraq occupation on a scaled-down and more sustainable level.

"All of us are committed to destroying Al Qaeda," the party's 2004 presidential candidate Senator John Kerry said, adding, "if we reduce our footprint (in Iraq) Al Qaeda will reduce its footprint."

There is little indication that the administration's reactionary and deeply dangerous political ploy has enjoyed any success in terms of the military's rank and file. The latest poll indicated that just 38 percent of those who have been deployed in Iraq or who had a close friend or relative there, back Bush on the war. A *New York Times*/CBS News poll conducted in May showed that two-thirds of American soldiers and their immediate family members believe that things are going badly in Iraq—up from just over half a year earlier—while over half said that the war should never have been launched in the first place.

Nonetheless, the administration is clearly seeking to pit the military's top brass and officer corps against Congress and the Democrats, demanding the subordination of the government's elected civilian representatives to the will of the generals—precisely the opposite of the relationship spelled out in the American Constitution.

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