

# President Bush's history lesson

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On Wednesday, President Bush delivered what the White House billed as a “major foreign policy speech” to the national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, meeting in Kansas City, Missouri.

The purpose of the speech, given, as is the custom with the president and vice president, before a military audience, was to set the tone for the report on the military “surge” in Iraq to be made to Congress next month by Gen. David Petraeus and US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker.

The address featured Bush's standard litany of banalities and lies, portraying the US devastation of Iraq as the “front line” of an “ideological struggle” to defend civilization against Islamic terrorism and extremism, safeguard the security of the American people, and spread the blessings of democracy throughout the Middle East.

It was directed against all those calling for an early end to the war, whom Bush accused of succumbing to the “allure of retreat,” and employed the usual fear-mongering ploy of invoking 9/11 and claiming that if US troops left Iraq, the terrorists would “follow them home” and kill thousands more Americans.

The center of the speech, however, was a potted history of US involvement in Asia. On the basis of a wretchedly distorted and ignorant presentation of America's conflict with Japan in World War II, the Korean War and the War in Vietnam, Bush attempted to provide a measure of historical legitimacy for the ongoing bloodbath in Iraq.

In something more akin to a twisted fairy tale than a historical review, Bush argued that America's military interventions in Asia, motivated by the most noble and beneficent aims, had produced a flowering of democracy and prosperity throughout the region, and strong pro-US regimes in Japan and South Korea—a precedent for the bright future the people of Iraq and the broader Middle East would enjoy if only the US stood firm and continued to wage the twenty-first century “war on terror.”

“I'm going to try to provide some historical perspective,” Bush said, “to show there is a precedent for the hard and necessary work we're doing, and why I have such confidence in the fact we'll be successful...”

The manner in which Bush began his pseudo-history established the method of ahistorical analogy and crude amalgam that he employed throughout. “I want to open today's speech,” Bush said, “with a story that begins on a sunny morning, when thousands of Americans were murdered in a surprise attack—and our nation was propelled into a conflict that would take us to every corner of the globe...”

“If the story sounds familiar, it is—except for one thing. The enemy I have just described is not al Qaeda, and the attack is not 9/11, and the empire is not the radical caliphate envisioned by Osama bin Laden. Instead, what I've described is the war machine of Imperial Japan in the 1940s, its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, and its attempt to impose its empire throughout East Asia.”

Here you have it! Pearl Harbor equals 9/11, and Imperial Japan equals Al Qaeda. Of course, Bush is obliged to indulge in a bit of verbal sleight of hand, equating the caliphate “envisioned” by bin Laden and his scattered terrorist bands with the economically and militarily most powerful imperialist state in twentieth century Asia.

It is not possible here to answer all of the historical falsifications and absurdities mouthed by Bush. But the most important ones need to be addressed.

It is expedient to cast the war between the US and Japan as a conflict between good and evil. In fact, it was a struggle between two contending imperialist powers for influence in the Pacific, and above all, in China. All of the wars undertaken by the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have their roots in America's emergence as an imperialist power in the Spanish American War of 1898, when the US took control of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines.

Bush's depiction of America's struggle against Japan as a humanitarian and democratic exercise conveniently omits the nuclear incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed somewhere between 200,000 and 350,000 innocent civilians. In his speech, he praises the US decision to leave intact the Japanese imperial throne—an action that belied Washington's democratic pretensions.

He lauds Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the post-war military proconsul of Japan, for establishing parliamentary institutions and giving women the franchise. In truth, America's actions toward post-war Japan were largely motivated by fear of social revolution in the devastated country.

Next Bush turns to the Korean war of 1950-53. “America intervened,” he says, “to save South Korea from communist invasion.” It was yet another crusade for democracy against totalitarianism.

But facts, as the saying goes, are stubborn things. Bush, again conveniently, omits any mention of the dictator Syngman Rhee, whom the United States installed in the South in 1948 and intervened militarily to save in 1950. Prior to the outbreak of the war, Rhee's police state detained and tortured communists and left-wing workers and students. It carried out massacres, including the bloody suppression of a leftist uprising on the island of Jeju.

Rhee was forced into exile in 1960, but the police dictatorship remained intact, with US political, financial and military support, for three decades after the war.

The US invasion to prevent the unification of Korea on a non-capitalist basis resulted in the death of an estimated 2 million Koreans and nearly 34,000 US troops. Military blunders by MacArthur and other US commanders were directly responsible for the deaths of thousands of American soldiers.

At the time, the People's Republic of China opposed, entirely legitimately, Washington's attempt to establish a US puppet regime

on its border, and intervened with millions of Red Army troops. In his potted history, Bush makes no mention of the decision by President Harry S. Truman to fire MacArthur for publicly criticizing Truman's military policy and calling for a nuclear attack on China.

Instead, he points to critics of the Korean War within the US political establishment half a century ago in order to draw a parallel with those who criticize his war policy in Iraq today. The defeatist critics were wrong then, Bush argues, and they are wrong today.

In fact, the Korean War was a serious setback for the United States, ending with a negotiated compromise that left the Communist Party regime in control of the North.

Bush then proceeds to Vietnam, advancing the politically obscene argument that the tragedy which befell the Vietnamese people was the result of America's *withdrawal*, not its more than decade-long military onslaught on the country. This argument is, of course, put forward to justify the continued devastation of Iraq.

Bush states that "... one unmistakable legacy of Vietnam is that the price of America's withdrawal was paid by millions of innocent citizens whose agonies would add to our vocabulary new terms like 'boat people,' 're-education camps,' and 'killing fields.'"

For millions of people around the world, the US war in Vietnam is associated with other terms, which have come to denote American atrocities and war crimes: terms like "My Lai," "agent orange," "napalm," "Christmas bombing" and "destroying the village to save it."

During the conflict, approximately 3 to 4 million Vietnamese were killed, in addition to another 1.5 to 2 million Lao and Cambodians. As in Korea, the United States intervened to prop up a brutal and despotic US puppet government in the South. Both wars exemplified the role of US imperialism in seeking to thwart the legitimate impulse of the Asian masses for national independence and freedom from foreign imperialist domination.

Bush does not mention the significant faction of the US ruling elite from which he himself is descended, which pushed for using nuclear weapons against both China and Vietnam.

As the historian Robert Dallek said in response to Bush's twisted reference to Vietnam: "We were in Vietnam for ten years. We dropped more bombs on Vietnam than we did in all of World War II in every theater. We lost 58,700 American lives, the second-greatest loss of lives in a foreign conflict..."

"What is Bush suggesting? That we didn't fight hard enough, stay long enough?"

One inconvenient fact Bush omits is the refusal of the United States and its puppet regime in Saigon to abide by the provisions of the 1954 Geneva Accords, which called for national elections in 1956 to choose a government of a unified Vietnam. At the time, US President Dwight Eisenhower acknowledged that if elections had been held, Ho Chi Minh would have won 80 percent of the vote.

Bush's reference—invoking the "killing fields" of Cambodia—to the mass murder carried out by the Cambodian Khmer Rouge after the 1975 defeat of the US in Vietnam is yet another grotesque whitewash of America's role. The horrific events that unfolded in Cambodia were set into motion by the United States' invasion of that country in 1970. The illegal Cambodian invasion was one of the articles of impeachment drawn up against Richard Nixon in 1974.

Following the US invasion, Washington engineered the overthrow of the government of Norodom Sihanouk and the installation of the American puppet Lon Nol, who subsequently fell to the Khmer Rouge. In the midst of the Khmer Rouge's bloody rampage, the US

supported it against the Vietnamese. The terror in Cambodia was ended only when the Vietnamese entered the country and brought down the Khmer Rouge regime.

Bush also leaves out of his account other US operations in Asia, such as the 1965 American-backed military overthrow of Sukarno in Indonesia, which resulted in the murder of 1 million workers, students and intellectuals.

In his attempt to discredit critics of the Vietnam War, Bush ventures a literary allusion, citing Graham Greene's 1955 novel about American intrigue in Vietnam, *The Quiet American*. Bush describes the main character, Alden Pyle, as a "young government agent" who is a "symbol of American purpose and patriotism—and dangerous naiveté."

He neglects to mention that Pyle is a covert US intelligence agent who promotes a right-wing military thug as a counterweight to Communist-led nationalist forces and is implicated in a terrorist bombing in Saigon. One might safely assume that Bush has never seen the film, let alone read the book.

Bush's claim that America's withdrawal from Vietnam was responsible for mass killings and other atrocities is an attempt to lend historical credibility to the constant invocations of the threat of a bloodbath in Iraq should the US end its military occupation.

This is an argument worthy of a war criminal. The United States, by invading and occupying a country that had nothing to do with 9/11 and represented no threat to the American people, has reduced an entire society to ruin and killed hundreds of thousands of its people. It has brought the horrors of Abu Ghraib, fueled sectarian warfare and ethnic cleansing, and turned Iraq into a living hell.

The supposed concern for the wellbeing of the Iraqi people comes from a government that to this day refuses to provide an accounting of the number of Iraqis killed as a result of its actions. If one were to add up the total number of people killed as a result of American military interventions in Asia, the sum would be staggering—perhaps 10 million or more.

The Iraq war, launched on the basis of lies, is but the latest act of imperialist brigandage carried out by the United States in Asia. And more are being prepared.

It is worth taking note of the response of the semi-official organ of American liberalism, the *New York Times*, to Bush's speech. In a "news analysis" published Thursday, Thom Shanker writes: "President Bush is right on the factual record, according to historians."

This attempt to dignify Bush's wretched exercise in lies as though it were a legitimate contribution to historical debate is indicative of the general environment of unscrupulousness, ignorance and deceit that characterizes the entire American ruling establishment, and underscores the complicity of all of the official parties and institutions in US imperialism's crimes.



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