

Bush at the UN: a war criminal lectures the world on “human rights”

Bill Van Auken
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George W. Bush delivered his next to the last annual address to the United Nations General Assembly Tuesday. Taking the same podium that he used five years ago to condemn the world body to “irrelevance” if it failed to rubber stamp his plans for a war of aggression against Iraq, Bush cast his regime in Washington as the world’s greatest champion of human rights and its most generous and selfless benefactor.

That the assembled UN delegates could sit through and then politely applaud such a hypocritical harangue from a man who is without rival as the world’s greatest war criminal is testimony to the spinelessness and complicity of both the world’s governments and the United Nations itself.

While Bush made only the barest mention of either Iran or Iraq in his address, everyone in the hall was well aware that he is attempting once again to utilize the world body—much as his administration did five years ago in relation to purported Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction”—to secure a phony pretext for another war of aggression, this time against Iran.

No doubt Bush’s handlers in Washington recognized that to deliver a belligerent speech demanding action by the UN against Iran would only recall the lies and intimidation used by the US administration in 2002-2003 to prepare its war against Iraq.

Since then, an estimated 1 million Iraqis have been killed and nearly 4 million more turned into refugees as a result of the unprovoked US invasion with its “shock and awe” bombardments and the subsequent occupation that has destroyed every aspect of Iraqi society.

So instead, Bush came before the assembled delegates in the most improbable guise, as the apostle of liberty, equality and the rights of man.

He began his speech by hailing the founding document of the UN drafted more than six decades ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, asserting that this formal declaration in support of freedom, justice and peace “must guide our work in this world.”

“When innocent people are trapped in a life of murder and fear, the Declaration is not being upheld,” he declared. Who does the American president think he is kidding? Where on the face of the planet are more men, women and children “trapped in a life of murder and fear” than in US-occupied Iraq? The death toll for Iraqis has been estimated as high as 1,000 a week due to US military operations, the murderous rampage of mercenaries who kill with impunity and the sectarian violence unleashed by the country’s devastation at the hands of Washington.

Bush declared that the UN must work “to free people from tyranny and violence, hunger and disease, illiteracy and ignorance, and poverty and despair,” adding that “every member of the United Nations must join in this mission of liberation.”

In the Orwellian language favored by the right-wing ideologues in the Bush administration, “liberation” is continuously invoked as the description for the war to impose semi-colonial domination by the US over Iraq and its oil wealth. And it is this “mission” undertaken by means of an eruption of American militarism that Bush demands the world body sanction and support.

Bush continued by invoking the first article of the Universal Declaration, which affirms that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” The greatest threat to this principle, he claimed, comes from “terrorists and extremists.” Therefore, he argued, “all civilized nations” must join the US in its global war on terrorism.

Bush then moved on to other subjects, a wise move, given that a more detailed citation of the Universal Declaration would have sounded like a war crimes indictment against his own administration.

It includes, for example, the injunction that “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,” a principle that the Bush White House has explicitly repudiated, both by renouncing the Geneva Conventions and subjecting those detained in the US “war on terror” to waterboarding, beatings, sensory deprivation, sexual humiliation and other forms of torture and degrading treatment.

The declaration affirms that “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile,” practices that the Bush administration has carried out with impunity, through the holding of detainees without charges, not only at the infamous detention facilities in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, but also at secret CIA prisons around the world. It has introduced “extraordinary rendition” into the lexicon of foreign policy, a discreet term for kidnapping people, drugging them and then sending them in hoods and chains to other countries so that they can be tortured.

And there is also the clause of the declaration asserting that “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence.” This is a principle that the administration has explicitly violated in relation to the American people, not to mention the rest of the world, through the massive illegal domestic spying operation organized through the National Security Agency.

Given his administration's infamous reputation, the world's horror over the unfolding debacle in Iraq and the mounting fears that an even worse catastrophe is about to be unleashed in Iran, it appeared that those who drafted Bush's speech thought it was a good time to change the subject.

Thus, a major thrust of his remarks—and the issue that garnered by far the greatest press coverage—was the American president's announcement that he is ordering a tightening of economic sanctions against Myanmar (Burma).

He declared: "Americans are outraged by the situation in Burma, where a military junta has imposed a 19-year reign of fear." While no doubt the corrupt military regime that rules the country has carried out brutal repression against its people, the claim that "Americans are outraged" by these practices is belied by the fact that given the virtual failure of either the administration or the mass media to pay any attention to the developments there, most Americans know nothing about them.

Bush's new measures were hardly sweeping, amounting to further restrictions on visas for Myanmar officials and their families and financial sanctions against the ruling junta and its backers.

The pretense that the Bush administration's concerns lie with the aspirations of the people of Myanmar, who have taken to the streets in recent days in mass demonstrations, is farcical. The US government has supported and directly installed countless military dictatorships from Indonesia to Chile, helping them to carry out far worse atrocities than the Burmese junta in suppressing their own people.

Rather, under mantle of "liberation" and "democracy," US imperialism is once again pursuing its own strategic interests, attempting to bring to power a pro-American government that would open up the country to exploitation by US capital. Given the Myanmar government's close economic and political relations with neighboring China, such an exercise in regime change would significantly advance Washington's attempts to challenge Beijing for supremacy in the region, while steadily working to militarily encircle China.

Also invoked as targets for the American-led "mission of liberation" were the governments of Iran, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Belarus, North Korea and Syria, all of which Washington has presumably found guilty and sentenced to be overthrown.

Continuing with his invocation of the Universal Declaration, Bush cited a passage affirming that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food and clothing and housing and medical care."

He used this clause to engage in a round of shameless and deceptive self-congratulation, proclaiming US benevolence in the distribution of food internationally and, in particular, in assistance to the campaign to combat AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa.

The reality, as the news agency Reuters reported earlier this month, is that "food donations to the world's hungry have fallen to their lowest level since 1973." The impending crisis, which threatens starvation for sections of the world's 850 million people facing hunger, is driven by the capitalist market. Food prices have soared, in no small part due to the drive by the US to promote the

production of corn-based ethanol as an alternative to gasoline.

As for AIDS funding, Bush's presentation of Washington's role obscures the fact that the US ranks fifth among donor nations relative to the size of their national economies. Inadequate funding for the programs—as well as restrictions imposed on the use of US aid crafted to please the Christian right—means that millions of Africans will be denied any treatment.

Meanwhile, US aid as a whole amounts to a paltry sum compared to the vast wealth that Wall Street appropriates from the rest of the world and is utilized largely as a weapon to facilitate this global looting process. In 1970, international donor nations signed an agreement that they would assign 0.7 percent of their national incomes to foreign aid. While no country has come close to donating this amount, in the US last year aid amounted to just 0.17 percent of gross national income.

Finally, Bush warmed up to his subject, citing the Universal Declaration's assertion of the "right to work" and to "just and favorable conditions of work" as an argument for free-market capitalism and the tearing down of all barriers to the exploitation of the world's economy by the transnational banks and corporations.

Bush closed his remarks with a demand that the UN reform itself, again invoking "the American people" and their supposed disappointment with the functioning of the world body's Human Rights Council. In essence, Bush demanded that the council focus on denouncing Cuba, Venezuela, North Korea and Iran and halt its criticism of Israel for killing civilians in Lebanon and suppressing the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

Behind Bush's criticism is the embarrassing reality that Washington has chosen for the last two years not to seek a seat on the Human Rights Council for fear that it would fail to get the necessary votes.

The successive revelations over Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, extraordinary renditions and CIA torture—not to mention the continued use of the death penalty at home—makes the US the most fitting target for human rights charges. Yet it presumes to dictate to the world which countries should be investigated and which should not. Naturally those where Washington is seeking regime change—such as Iran, Cuba and Venezuela—are vilified, while those despotic regimes considered strategic allies of the US—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel, Washington's chief ally in suppressing the Arab masses—are declared above suspicion.

Bush's appearance before the UN General Assembly was an entirely predictable exercise in imperialist arrogance, rank hypocrisy and double-talk in service of American big business. In the final analysis, his speech was probably more significant for what it omitted than for the American president's absurd posturing as a crusader for human rights and universal liberation. Behind the virtual silence on Iraq and Iran, new and more terrible crimes are being prepared.



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