

On Iraq war's fifth anniversary, Bush says US troops must stay

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President George W. Bush marked the fifth anniversary of the US war in Iraq on Wednesday by touting the supposed successes of the “surge” that sent an additional 30,000 US troops into the occupied country, while insisting that the expanded troop levels must be maintained to avoid “chaos and carnage.”

As with so many such speeches, the White House dragooned an audience of officers and enlisted men who were compelled to stand at attention when the president took the stage and applaud on cue. Had Bush dared to speak before an audience of ordinary Americans not under military discipline, he would likely have faced catcalls and boos.

A poll released by the CNN cable news network to coincide with the fifth anniversary showed Americans opposing the war by a two-to-one margin, with similar majorities expressing the view that it should have never been waged in the first place and that the next president should withdraw US troops from the country within a few months of taking office.

Significantly, 71 percent of those polled blamed the massive war spending in Iraq—now estimated at over \$12 billion a month—for the deepening crisis gripping the US economy.

Yet, with his own popular ratings remaining at near historic lows for a US president, Bush swaggered onto the stage at the Pentagon and proclaimed that “the United States of America will continue to fight the enemy wherever it makes a stand” and “will stay on the offense.”

The central policy thrust of his speech was that the escalation he ordered in Iraq over a year ago—which saw troop levels raised to 160,000—must be continued, with at least 140,000 soldiers and Marines kept in the country indefinitely.

This is a position which faces substantial opposition within the military's own uniformed command, with many senior officers warning that continuing the present deployment levels will “break” the US Army. A recent poll by *Foreign Policy* magazine of some 3,400 active and retired US military officers found that 88 percent believed that “The

war in Iraq has stretched the US military dangerously thin.”

But Bush did not direct his anniversary address to allaying fears of his military audience. Instead, he used their uniformed ranks as a prop for political attacks against those opposing the war or just merely questioning the continuation of the surge.

Much of the speech involved recycling the tired and thoroughly discredited lies that were used to justify the war at its outset. Bush began by proclaiming that the “shock and awe” bombardment of Baghdad and the subsequent land invasion were launched in March 2003 “to liberate the Iraqi people and remove a regime that threatened free nations.”

He provided no details as to the nature of this supposed “threat.” Those given at the time—alleged stockpiles of Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” and ties between the Saddam Hussein regime and Al Qaeda—have been amply exposed as crude fabrications.

Just days before Bush's speech, the Pentagon quietly released its findings based on an exhaustive study of some 600,000 Iraqi government documents captured after the invasion. It concluded that there existed no operational ties whatsoever between Baghdad and the Islamist terrorist network, something those with any knowledge about Iraq's Baathist regime had long known.

This did not stop Bush from using the word “terrorist” at least 20 times in his 25-minute speech and inserting 15 references to Al Qaeda.

As for the claims that the US invasion served to “liberate the Iraqi people” and, even more preposterously, that it has helped create a “democracy in the heart of the Middle East” that “will serve as an example for others”—the president's rhetoric would be merely laughable, if it were not for the depth of the tragedy it is meant to mask.

Iraq lives under the boot of a foreign occupation that has cost the lives of well over a million people and driven at least four million more from their homes, either as refugees abroad or internal exiles. The country's economy and basic infrastructure have been decimated. Under conditions in which more than half of the working-age population is

unemployed and 40 percent barely survive on \$1 or less a day, whatever existed in terms of social welfare and aid to the poor before the invasion has been dismantled.

Washington's divide-and-rule tactics have unleashed a savage sectarian conflict that has split long-mixed communities into hostile and segregated camps, leaving millions terrorized and homeless. Men, women and children walking in the street are subject to summary execution by US troops or private security contractors without warning. At least 60,000 Iraqi civilians are being held in detention camps and prisons run by the US military and Iraqi puppet forces, the vast majority of them without charges, much less trials. Torture remains rampant.

To speak of such conditions in terms of "freedom," "liberation," and "democracy" is an obscenity.

Incredibly, Bush turned inside out his old argument for invading Iraq—that Baghdad would supply its non-existent weapons of mass destruction to Al Qaeda for attacks on America—in order to defend the country's continued occupation. Without maintaining the current military escalation, he warned, Iraq would descend into "chaos" producing an "emboldened Al Qaeda with access to Iraq's oil resources, [which] could pursue its ambitions to acquire weapons of mass destruction to attack America and other free nations."

This new lie is every bit as grotesque as the one used to justify the war in the first place. The vast majority of those resisting US forces in Iraq are not Al Qaeda, but Iraqis who refuse to accept the foreign occupation and re-colonization of their country. Among the tens of thousands who have been rounded up by the American military, barely a handful have been identified as Islamist militants from other countries. Even the Al Qaeda organization inside Iraq—which did not exist before the US carried out its military "regime change"—has no operational ties to the organization led by Osama bin Laden or those blamed for the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Democratic presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama gave his own speech on the fifth anniversary of the war, choosing Fayetteville, North Carolina, home of the Army's Fort Bragg, as the venue for his remarks. He stressed his own commitment to the so-called "war on terror," declaring, "What we need is a pragmatic strategy that focuses on fighting our real enemies," and once again defended his position that the US should attack alleged terrorist targets inside Pakistan, with or without that country's approval.

He also used the speech to answer his rival for the Democratic nomination, Senator Hillary Clinton, who had accused him of equivocating on his commitment to withdraw US troops from Iraq. Obama again pointed to Clinton's 2002 vote in the Senate to authorize the US war,

while acknowledging that their positions on future troop withdrawals are virtually identical.

In her own remarks earlier in the week, Clinton claimed she would reduce the US troop presence in Iraq "in a responsible and careful manner." She praised the US war's impact on the Iraqis, declaring that it had "given them the precious gift of freedom," but cynically declared that Washington could not "win their civil war."

Both Clinton and Obama have advanced platforms that call for continued US military operations in Iraq for purposes of "counter-terrorism," protecting US facilities and interests and training Iraqi military forces, meaning that tens of thousands of American troops would remain in the country indefinitely.

For his part, the Republican Party's presumptive presidential candidate, Senator John McCain, echoed Bush's praise for the surge, declaring, "America and our allies stand on the precipice of winning a major victory against radical Islamic extremism."

Bush concluded his own remarks Wednesday with the assertion that the war in Iraq "is noble, it is necessary, and it is just."

Millions of people all over the world and within the US itself know that the opposite is the case. This is a criminal war of aggression waged in pursuit of the interests of America's financial elite with the aim of establishing US hegemony over one of the main oil-producing centers of the world. It has produced a dirty colonial-style occupation that has inflicted massive suffering on the Iraqi people. At the same time, it has become a debacle for US strategic interests and irreparably discredited the US government in the eyes of the bulk of humanity.



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