

“Appeasement” clash gives foretaste of McCain-Obama contest

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President Bush’s provocative speech before the Israeli Knesset last week, drawing a direct analogy between the Middle East policies of Democratic Party presidential front-runner Senator Barack Obama and the “appeasement” of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, touched off a political firestorm in Washington and provided a revealing glimpse of what will likely be the character of the upcoming race for the White House.

Bush’s remark was probably the most politically significant development in a five-day Middle East trip that failed to alter the Israeli-Palestinian equation in the slightest, secure any meaningful concessions on oil supplies for the Saudi monarchy or drum up any new support for the US occupation of Iraq.

It demonstrated that the lame-duck president can still set the political agenda in the 2008 presidential race, for better or worse, as far as his own party is concerned.

“Some seem to think that we should negotiate with the terrorists and the radicals, as if some ingenious argument will persuade them that they have been wrong all along,” Bush declared in his 23-minute speech to the Israeli legislature. He continued: “As Nazi tanks crossed into Poland in 1939, an American senator declared: ‘Lord, if I could only have talked to Hitler, all this might have been avoided.’ We have an obligation to call this what it is—the false comfort of appeasement, which has been repeatedly discredited by history.”

The White House publicly denied that the president was referring to Obama when he made his “appeasement” comment, but the president’s representatives privately assured the media that he was doing just that.

Asked about the Bush’s remarks, the Republican Party’s presumptive presidential nominee, Senator John McCain, chimed in: “Yes, there have been appeasers in the past. The president is exactly right. One of them was named Neville Chamberlain.”

This potted history of World War II and empty analogy to the present situation in the Middle East amounted to little more than the US president playing the Nazi card in Israel while he and McCain attempt to reinvigorate the flagging Republican campaign to terrorize the American people with the supposedly omnipresent threat of terrorism.

Needless to say, Bush didn’t bother spelling out that the American senator whose 1939 utterance he quoted was a prominent member of his own party, William Borah, an Idaho Republican who headed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Nor was there much elucidation, aside from McCain’s helpful recall of the name of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, of what “appeasement” actually referred to in the run-up to World War II. It was not a decision to talk to Adolf Hitler—Germany’s Nazi chancellor

enjoyed diplomatic relations with every major power at the time, as well as cordial commercial relations with such American corporate giants as Ford Motors Co., which continued to produce military vehicles for the Nazis and profits for the Ford family through the war.

Rather, the charge of appeasement was leveled against Chamberlain and the French premier Edouard Daladier, for bowing to Hitler’s threats to invade Czechoslovakia during negotiations held in Munich in September 1938 and pressuring Prague into ceding its border districts to Germany. The action set the stage for the Nazi takeover of the entire country just a few months later and the subsequent invasion of Poland and conquest of most of Europe.

Can anyone seriously suggest that Iran—much less the Palestinian Hamas or Lebanese Hezbollah movements—are on the brink of overrunning the Middle East with some modern-day equivalent of the blitzkrieg? On the contrary, it is Washington that is building up its military forces on the borders of Iran and openly debating the possibility of staging yet another unprovoked war in the Persian Gulf.

Invocations of Chamberlain at Munich have been the stock and trade of American foreign policy for more than six decades, used again and again to portray America as threatened by aggressors in order to justify US imperialism’s own acts of military aggression. It is no different this time.

While all historical analogies are necessarily limited and flawed, if one were searching for a contemporary equivalent of “appeasement,” a better starting point would be an examination of those powers that facilitated Bush’s own war of aggression against Iraq, or for that matter, the Israeli siege of Lebanon two years ago. Domestically, one could arguably attach the label of “appeasers” to the Democrats who voted to authorize Bush’s war, though the full partnership that the so-called opposition party has established with the administration in repeatedly funding the war goes well beyond the meaning of the term.

The Democratic Party and the Obama campaign showed little interest in exploring such historical issues. Rather, they pounced on Bush’s remarks as an opportunity to further their central campaign theme for the general election: a victory for McCain will be the equivalent of a third term for Bush.

With Bush’s popular approval ratings having plummeted lower than those set by Richard Nixon when the former president felt compelled to assure the American people that he was “not a crook,” there was a distinct sense that the Obama camp welcomed the president’s intervention in the 2008 campaign.

“George Bush knows that I have never supported engagement with terrorists, and the extraordinary politicization of foreign policy and the politics of fear do nothing to secure the American people or our stalwart ally Israel,” Obama responded to Bush’s remarks.

Speaking to reporters in South Dakota Friday, he added: "I believe there is no separation between John McCain and George Bush when it comes to our Middle East policy and I think their policy has failed. I will make that case as strongly as I can to the American people. I trust the American people to trust their own eyes and to see what the results have been."

A number of the denunciations of Bush's speech made by Obama supporters took as their starting point the hoary American tradition that political partisanship supposedly "stops at the water's edge." In the case of Israel, however, a credible argument can be made that the shoreline has become more than a bit indistinct, given the massive US subsidies to the Zionist state, the virtually unconditional support Washington has provided for Israeli foreign policy and military aggression and the direct influence that the Israeli lobby in the US exerts upon both political parties.

Bush's Knesset speech and the heated Democratic response only underscores that Israel—tied in with terror fear-mongering—will be a major issue in the 2008 election. Substantial sections of the policy establishment and financial elite have backed Obama's campaign precisely because they see the junior senator from Illinois as an ideal vehicle for effecting limited yet significant tactical changes in American foreign policy, including in relation to the current uncritical approach to Israel.

On the other side, those who have supported the Bush administration are viscerally opposed to any such change in course and are seeking—as was made evident in Bush's repeated biblical references in his speeches in Israel—to mobilize elements of the Christian right behind them on the basis of support for Israel.

The foreign policy objectives of the Obama camp enjoy widespread support among the ruling elites in Europe, as evidenced by a May 16 editorial in the *Financial Times* of London weighing in on the Knesset speech controversy.

"Rather like Mr. Bush, the Republican standard-bearer prefers black and white to shades of grey," the *Financial Times* said of McCain. "Encouraged by the unrepentant neo-conservatives in his circle of advisers, he seems willing to join in Mr. Bush's arch, if implicit, tarring of Mr. Obama as an appeaser for suggesting engagement with US enemies such as Iran. Mr. Obama is, of course, right: any residual success in Iraq will have to involve engaging its neighbours, including Iran, whose regional power the Bush policies have done so much to enhance."

The newspaper concluded: "To continue the policies of the Bush years would be a disaster for the US and therefore for the world. Mr. Obama may lack Mr. McCain's experience but he is right that it is time to turn the page on failure."

Among the more significant responses to the outcry over Bush's Knesset speech came from the right-wing *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, who published a highly sympathetic piece Friday based on an interview with Obama.

"The debate we're going to be having with John McCain is how do we understand the blend of military action to diplomatic action that we are going to undertake," the Democratic candidate told Brooks. "I constantly reject this notion that any hint of strategies involving diplomacy are somehow soft or indicate surrender or means that you are not going to crack down on terrorism. Those are the terms of debate that have led to blunder after blunder."

He went on to stress that his thinking was in sync with that of the top brass in the military. "The generals are light-years ahead of the civilians," he said. "They are trying to get the job done rather than

look tough."

Obama, Brooks writes, said he would "in some ways ... be tougher than the Bush administration," including in relation to North Korea and in seeking to arm Lebanese government forces for a confrontation with Hezbollah.

The candidate concluded by saying: "This is not an argument between Democrats and Republicans. It's an argument between ideology and foreign policy realism. I have enormous sympathy for the foreign policy of George H.W. Bush. I don't have a lot of complaints about their handling of Desert Storm."

An unmistakable aspect of the affair was the near total eclipse of Hillary Clinton. The New York senator, who has vowed to stay in the race for the Democratic nomination, was reduced to commenting from the sidelines that Bush's remarks were "offensive and outrageous." The White House, McCain and Obama's own campaign are evidently proceeding on the understanding that the contest within the Democratic Party is decided and Clinton's defeat is a foregone conclusion.

One of the more peculiar contributions to the political squabble touched off by Bush's remarks in the Knesset came from McCain. Responding to Obama's invocation of Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy as US presidents who negotiated with America's "enemies"—the former Soviet Union and China—McCain rushed to assert a different legacy for the Republican icon, Reagan.

"I believe that it's not an accident that our hostages came home from Iran," he said. "When President Reagan was inaugurated as president of the United States, he didn't sit down in face to face negotiations with the religious extremists in Tehran. He made it very clear that those hostages were coming home."

In reality there is ample evidence that envoys of the Reagan presidential campaign sat down with Iran's Khomeini regime before the inauguration in negotiations aimed at preventing the release of the hostages being held in the US Embassy in Teheran until after the 1980 election, thus forestalling any "October surprise" that would have benefited Democratic incumbent President Jimmy Carter. The ties continued under the Reagan administration, with the covert shipment of US arms to Iran in exchange for the release of US hostages in Lebanon.

The operation was a component of the so-called Iran-Contra affair, which included the illegal shipment of arms to the CIA-trained contra mercenaries attacking Nicaragua, as well as plans for the imposition of martial law—drafted for the classified Operation Rex '84 exercise—in the US in the event of a direct US military intervention in Central America.

It is a measure of the narrow parameters of the debate between the two big business parties that Obama is promising a return to the foreign policy of Bush senior and both candidates are vying for the corrupt and criminal legacy of the Reagan administration.



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