

Where is the Bush administration taking the American people?

By the WSWS Editorial Board
22 September 2001

One unmistakable message emerged from the speech delivered by President George W. Bush to a joint session of Congress on Thursday night: the United States is being propelled onto a course of global violence and domestic repression unprecedented in the nation's history.

In the name of a "war against terrorism," the Bush administration is demanding—and being granted—unspecified and unlimited powers to employ military force all over the world.

The siege-like setting for Bush's speech—with the Capitol ringed by troops and the sound of military helicopters seeping into the chamber—was in keeping with the administration's posture since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. The government has gone out of its way, not to reassure the American people, but rather to create an atmosphere of panic. It is encouraging a mood of hysteria combined with flag-waving chauvinism in order to stampede the public into accepting not only the unrestrained use of American military power, but also a far-reaching attack on basic democratic rights within the United States itself.

Hence the absence of Vice President Cheney and the announcement that he had been taken to an undisclosed secure venue. The administration wants the American people to believe that the immense power of the US military could not guarantee the safety of government leaders in the Capitol building. If Bush and company really believe this preposterous idea, then it must be said they have completely lost their heads. The more likely explanation is that they want to fortify their incessant claim that America is at war, and accustom the population to war-time measures and a government that carries out its major functions behind the backs of the public.

In his speech Bush employed apocalyptic terms to convince the American people that they must acquiesce in a global war of indefinite duration, against a host of as yet unnamed enemies, with no limit on the death and destruction to be meted out to people outside the US, or the toll in body bags containing the remains of American soldiers.

"Our response," he declared, "involves far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes. Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen." It would not be a short and decisive war against a single country, as in Iraq, he continued, or an air war with no US casualties, as in Yugoslavia. He called his war for the "defeat of the global terror network" a "task that does not end." Pointedly refusing to rule out the use of nuclear weapons, he added, "We will direct every resource at our command...and every necessary weapon of war."

Laying down a rationale to attack any nation deemed now or in the future to be an obstacle to the global ambitions of the United States, Bush declared, "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." Any nation that refuses to obey Washington's dictates "will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."

At the heart of the scenario presented by Bush was an anomaly that he made no attempt to explain. On the one hand he described the enemy as a "fringe" element of Islamic fundamentalists, amounting to some "thousands" of terrorists spread out among 60 countries. Yet this relative handful of loosely connected terrorist

groups posed a dire and direct threat to America and the entire "civilized world" of such dimensions that only the most massive and sustained use of military force would suffice to defeat it.

The immediate purpose of Bush's speech was to take the country into war against Afghanistan. Bush listed a set of demands he knew would mean political suicide for the Taliban regime, and which they could not meet even if they wanted to. He demanded that the Taliban deliver into American hands "all the leaders" of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, that they immediately close every al-Qaida installation, and that they give the US "full access to terrorist training camps."

In effect, the Bush administration is demanding that the Taliban regime accede to the transformation of Afghanistan into a military protectorate of the United States. This ultimatum, Bush declared, is "not open to negotiation or discussion." If the leaders of the regime do not surrender to US demands, Bush warned, they will share the terrorists' fate, i.e., they will be killed.

There was no formal demand for Osama bin Laden's extradition. Indeed, there is no convention under international law for what Bush demanded. Washington's demands have been formulated to provide a pretext for a war that had already been decided upon.

Bush charged bin Laden and his Taliban protectors with direct responsibility for the September 11 atrocities. These are, without question, reactionary forces who may very well have played a role, but Bush provided no evidence to back up his indictment. Even the *Wall Street Journal*, whose editorial pages have been clamoring for war not only against Afghanistan, but also against Iraq, acknowledged in a news article on September 19 that US officials have been unable to assemble sufficient evidence to prove their case against bin Laden.

"But by 21st-century Western standards of law and international relations," the *Journal* wrote, "how much actual evidence do investigators have of Mr. bin Laden's involvement? The answer so far—based on what can be gleaned from public statements and US officials willing to discuss the matter—is not enough."

Bush further sought to justify war on Afghanistan by pointing to the repressive and totalitarian character of the Taliban regime. But the Taliban regime is the direct product of earlier American policies, and its dictatorial methods of rule and religious intolerance are not all that different from the United States' closest allies in the Middle East, such as the oil sheikdoms in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Persian Gulf states.

As the Bush administration embarks upon war, it is giving little thought to the far-reaching and even incalculable consequences of its actions. Intervening in the most unstable region in the world, where a host of great powers vie for control of strategic resources and geo-political influence amidst the unspeakable poverty of hundreds of millions of people, the United States is embarked upon a course of action whose outcome may prove catastrophic for the entire planet.

It is worthwhile to compare the methods of the Bush administration to those employed by Kennedy in the Cuban missile crisis. That was certainly one of the greatest confrontations of the Cold War, in which the US government faced, from its standpoint, a clear military threat. At that time the American government went to the United Nations and presented detailed evidence with documents and photographs to make its case. It proceeded, moreover, with a degree of caution that stands in glaring contrast

to the actions of the Bush administration.

Today the US government makes the most sweeping claims, but presents no evidence, either to the world or to the American public, to back them up. The historical comparison demonstrates that the actions of the US government today are determined less by the magnitude of the threat than by the magnitude of the opportunities it perceives for turning a disaster into a pretext for implementing a far-reaching, but unstated, military, political and economic agenda.

This is confirmed by a *New York Times* report on a split within the Bush administration between those, led by Secretary of State Colin Powell, who want to proceed with a modicum of caution for fear of destabilizing the Middle East and other vast regions of the world, and those, led by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who see the September 11 tragedy as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to overthrow the regime in Iraq and establish a whole series of puppet governments. The aim of this faction is to implement, in rapid order, plans long on the drawing boards for tightening America's grip on the oil-rich Persian Gulf and Caspian basin and extending America's military presence across the Eurasian continent.

In his speech, Bush provided no explanation of the political and historical background to the September 11 disaster. With the complicity of the media, the administration is seeking to bury the fact that those whom it has singled out as the perpetrators of the terrorist atrocity were trained and financed by the United States. The Islamic fundamentalists excoriated by Bush, including bin Laden, got their start as CIA "assets" in Washington's covert campaign to oust Soviet-backed regimes in Afghanistan in the 1980s—an operation that was carried out while Bush the elder, formerly the CIA director, held the post of vice president under Ronald Reagan.

Only a few years ago the US tacitly endorsed the accession to power of its old Taliban allies. The Taliban thus became the latest in a long line of one-time American allies who ran afoul of the US and found themselves being denounced as war lords and modern-day Hitlers and targeted for destruction, a list that includes Manuel Noriega of Panama, Farrah Aidid of Somalia, Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia.

The media establishment is well aware of this history. Indeed, some twenty years ago CBS news anchor Dan Rather traveled to Afghanistan and posed for the TV cameras in Mujaheddin robes in order to build support for the Islamic fundamentalist forces.

This history is being suppressed because it demonstrates that those who are today leading the American people into war, with all of the disastrous consequences it will entail, are politically implicated in the tragedy that took the lives of thousands of Americans in New York and Washington.

The ominous implications for democratic rights of the war drive were underscored by Bush's announcement of a new Cabinet-level position, the Office of Homeland Security, to coordinate all domestic intelligence and security operations.

The operations of the CIA, previously limited by law to external targets, will now be coordinated under a top-level federal agency with those of the FBI and other police agencies to wire-tap and spy on people within the US. This alone constitutes a huge breach of civil liberties.

But it is only one part of a broader assault on democratic rights, which includes the indefinite detention of legal aliens, deportations without judicial review and a vast expansion of the government's

powers to tap phones and intercept electronic communications.

No section of the political establishment has questioned Bush's demand for a blank check to wage war abroad and crack down on civil liberties at home. At the very outset of the military crusade, both parties have disavowed all expressions of dissent.

The Democratic Party demonstrated its abandonment of any pretext of opposition by foregoing the traditional response of the minority party to a presidential address to Congress. Instead the Democratic Senate majority leader, Thomas Daschle, made a joint appearance with Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott, in which the latter summed up the state of American politics with the remark, "There is no opposition party."

The media, which universally lauded Bush's address, was silent on the contradiction between the democratic rhetoric that filled the Capitol and the de facto establishment of a one-party state. Nor did the pundits care to point out that Bush's explanation for the terrorists' hostility toward the United States—"They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government"—was given by a man who was installed in the White House by anti-democratic and illegitimate means.

It is both ironic and menacing that the launching of a war in the name of freedom is accompanied by the disintegration of the most elementary principles of democracy and the dismantling of basic constitutional safeguards. Bush's injunction, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists," is not only a formula for waging war and toppling governments overseas, it is a rallying cry for a McCarthyite witch-hunt against political dissent within the US.

The effective collapse of any opposition serves an additional political function. It means there can be no examination of the staggering security failures that made the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon possible.

The atmosphere of fear and panic allows the government to escape any accounting for what was, at the very least, a case of criminal negligence, and then turn around and insist that the people's security and well-being require that they accept the abrogation of their democratic rights.

Bush's speech was also significant for what it lacked. Reflecting the extremely privileged and narrow class interests he represents, Bush called for a bailout of the airline companies at taxpayer expense, but had nothing to say to the millions of workers, small businessmen and retirees whose livelihoods are threatened by the collapse of the stock market, the plunge in consumer spending and the mass layoffs that have followed the September 11 disaster. Neither Bush nor the Democrats are proposing any serious measures to provide for the families of air industry employees who are being thrown onto the street in colossal numbers. Nor are they proposing a safety net for shop owners in New York who have been wiped out by the destruction of an entire section of the city. As for small investors and retirees whose life savings and retirement nest eggs are being gutted, they can expect no help from Washington.

The terrible loss of life on September 11 was, in the final analysis, a product of the reckless, irresponsible and reactionary international policies pursued for decades by American governments that represent, not the American people, but rather a financial and corporate elite. Now this same elite is seizing on the tragic events in New York and Washington to drag the population—without democratic debate or discussion and in an environment characterized by hysteria and political intimidation—into a "war unlike any other" that can only produce new disasters and tragedies, both abroad and at home.