

President Bush's May 24 Speech on Iraq: A Critique

By Stephen Zunes | May 25, 2004

The most striking element of President George W. Bush's May 24th speech at the Army War College regarding the situation in Iraq was that it could come across as quite convincing as long as you agreed with the following assumptions:

- Only the continued U.S. military presence in Iraq would lead to “the rise of a free and self-governing Iraq.”
- Conversely, if the U.S. forces withdrew, either unilaterally or as part of a transfer to United Nations authority, the result would be a totalitarian government which would “embolden the terrorists, leading to more bombings, more beheadings and more murders of the innocent around the world.”

Such assumptions, however, are extremely dubious.

Most Iraqis and other observers argue that it is the ongoing presence of American forces which is driving the insurgency and radicalizing elements of the diverse resistance to the U.S. occupation.

The claim by President Bush in his speech that he “sent American troops to Iraq to defend our security, not to stay as an occupying power” would ring hollow to the millions of Iraqis who knew that their country was no threat to America's security and that—well over a year after the ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime—U.S. troops remain in charge.

Similarly, his claim that “Our agenda . . . is freedom and independence, security and prosperity for the Iraqi people” will not be seen as credible by a nation that has seen the U.S. occupation bring war, chaos, repression, record unemployment, and a breakdown of basic services.

While most Iraqis presumably prefer a system which promotes individual freedom, they—like most peoples who have a history of suffering under foreign rule—place an even higher priority on national freedom. As a result, by contrasting the goals of Iraqis fighting U.S. occupation forces and the U.S. occupa-

tion simply as “one of tyranny and murder, the other of liberty and life” is a false dichotomy.

Despite repeated assertions to the contrary, the United States will not “transfer full sovereignty to a government of Iraqi citizens” on June 30. It appears that the “sovereign Iraqi government” the Bush Administration claims will assume power on that date will lack many of the attributes generally associated with a sovereign state. For example, the United States, not the Iraqi government, will continue to control Iraq's security, including Iraqi police and military personnel. This interim Iraqi authority will not have the power to enact new legislation or overturn laws imposed during the U.S. occupation. In addition, given the chaos engulfing the country and the widespread non-cooperation with U.S. occupation forces, there are questions as to how much governing power the United States has to transfer anyway.

Furthermore, there is so much ill will toward the United States at this point that the legitimacy of virtually any Iraqi-led government that emerges, will—whether rightly or wrongly—be questioned.

Then, as has become typical of presidential addresses since the U.S. invasion, there is the rewriting of history:

For example, President Bush claimed, “Over the decades of Saddam's rule, Iraq's infrastructure was allowed to crumble.” In reality, most of the damage to the country's infrastructure was a direct result of the heavy U.S. bombing during the Gulf War in 1991, subsequently compounded by U.S.-led economic sanctions over the next dozen years, as well as additional bombings and the failure to prevent massive looting and vandalism immediately following the U.S. takeover last year.



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President Bush spoke of the lack of freedom and democracy in the Middle East as simply “a tragedy of history,” ignoring the role of the United States—which has long been the principal supporter and arms supplier of the region’s authoritarian regimes and occupation armies—in denying Middle Eastern peoples democracy and freedom.

His claim that “At every stage, the United States has gone to the United Nations” ignored the fact that the invasion and occupation of Iraq came in open defiance of the UN.

Despite growing evidence of the systematic abuse of Iraqi prisoners held by American occupation forces, President Bush dismissed it simply as a matter of some “disgraceful conduct by a few American troops” at just one facility.

President Bush boasted of the accomplishments of the Iraqi Governing Council, such as their approval of “a new law that opens the country to foreign investment for the first time in decades.” This ignores the fact that the council was appointed by U.S. occupation authorities and that the Iraqi people never had a say in its key decisions, such as selling off public assets to American multinational corporations with close ties to the Bush Administration.

His claim that U.S. forces are in Iraq to defeat “terrorism at the heart of its power” ignores the fact that terrorism by extremist groups inside Iraq was virtually non-existent until after the United States invaded and occupied the country.

Perhaps most misleading is President Bush’s assertion that the Iraqi resistance—consisting of more than a dozen separate groups with diverse tactics and ideology—are all simply “terrorists,” “foreign fighters,” and “Saddam loyalists.”

According to President Bush, “They seek the total control of every person in mind and soul; a harsh society in which women are voiceless and brutalized.

They seek bases of operation to train more killers and export more violence. They commit dramatic acts of murder to shock, frighten and demoralize civilized nations, hoping we will retreat from the world and give them free reign. They seek weapons of mass destruction to impose their will through blackmail and catastrophic attacks.”

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This is largely an effort to portray the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq not as an act of aggression—as most of the international community sees it—but as an act of self-defense. By extension, it seeks to portray those who oppose the ongoing U.S. occupation as supporters of totalitarianism and violence.

Interviews of Iraqi resistance fighters by the international media and social scientists, however, have shown no such grandiose designs. Their overriding concern is simply to rid their own country of a foreign occupation.

The rhetoric emanating from the Bush Administration bears a striking resemblance to similar efforts by the Johnson and Nixon administrations to portray the South Vietnamese guerrillas, primarily made up of nationalist peasants, as part of some grand unified communist conspiracy to take over the world. Interviews of these guerrillas similarly showed that they had no desire to conquer and occupy other countries, but to simply rid their own country of what they saw as a U.S. occupation. (They did not see the Saigon regime as a legitimate sovereign government, but as a hand-picked American creation, similar to how the Iraqis will likely see, at least initially, whatever government emerges in Baghdad.)

Unfortunately, despite polls showing a majority of the American public in opposition to U.S. policy in Iraq, the Democratic Party is choosing as its presidential nominee a supporter of the U.S. invasion and occupation. Senator John Kerry, like President Bush, has also made a series of misleading statements,

falsely claiming that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction” and, like President Bush, insists that a continued U.S. occupation is necessary to bring peace and security to the region.

As a result, outside of the insurgent Nader campaign, the election cycle will not likely provide the forum to challenge the lies and misleading statements coming from the White House.

This then requires that ordinary Americans must take the lead in challenging President Bush, Senator Kerry, and all those who have gotten us into this tragic mess, continue to mislead us, and refuse to get us out.

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