

President Bush's UN Speech:

Idealistic Rhetoric Disguises Sinister Policies

By Stephen Zunes | September 22, 2004

Commentators in the mainstream media seem genuinely perplexed over the polite but notably unenthusiastic reception given to President George W. Bush's September 21 address before the United Nations General Assembly. Why wasn't a speech that emphasized such high ideals as democracy, the rule of law, and the threat of terrorism better received?

The answer may be found through a critical examination of the assumptions underlying the idealistic rhetoric of the U.S. president's message. Below are a number of examples:

"We know that dictators are quick to choose aggression, while free nations strive to resolve differences in peace. We know that oppressive governments support terror, while free governments fight the terrorists in their midst."

Notwithstanding the clear moral preference of democracy over dictatorship, this formula fails to withstand closer scrutiny. There are many dictators in the past and present—as nasty as they may have been toward their own people—who have not engaged in acts of aggression against other nations and have not supported terrorists. Furthermore, the United States—one of the world's oldest democracies—has demonstrated through its invasion of Iraq, as well as its earlier invasions of Panama, Grenada, and other countries, that it can certainly be "quick to choose aggression." Similarly, the decision by the Bush administration a few weeks ago to allow into the country a group of right-wing Cuban exiles who had been implicated in a series of attacks against civilian targets—including an attempt to set off a series of explosions in a crowded auditorium at a Panamanian university in 1998, and the blowing up of an airliner in Barbados in 1976—as well as the active U.S. support for the Contra terrorists who attacked civilian targets in Nicaragua during the 1980s—demonstrate that democracies do indeed allow "terrorists in their midst."

"We're determined to prevent proliferation, and to enforce the demands of the world [demanding that nations] fully comply with all Security Council resolutions."

In reality, U.S. policy is not nearly as categorical as this statement implies. For example, since 1998, India and Pakistan have been in violation of UN Security Council resolution 1172, which calls upon these governments to cease their development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Since 1981, Israel has stood in violation of UN Security Council resolution 487, which calls upon that government to place its nuclear facilities under the trusteeship of the International Atomic Energy Agency. The United States has repeatedly blocked the United Nations from enforcing those resolutions, even as it insisted that Iraqi noncompliance with similar resolutions required that the UN authorize an invasion of that country and the overthrow of its government. It appears that the Bush administration, like preceding Republican and Democratic administrations, is only concerned with UN resolutions regarding nonproliferation if the target of the resolution is a government they don't like. Such double standards make a mockery of law-based efforts toward non-proliferation, however, and will likely encourage, rather than discourage, regimes to develop weapons of mass destruction.

"The Russian children [in Beslan] did nothing to deserve such awful suffering, and fright, and death. The people of Madrid and Jerusalem and Istanbul and Baghdad have done nothing to deserve sudden and random murder. These acts



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violate the standards of justice in all cultures, and the principles of all religions. All civilized nations are in this struggle together, and all must fight the murderers.”

All true. Yet the numbers of innocent civilians killed in recent years by American forces in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as by U.S.-armed Israeli forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and by U.S.-armed Turkish forces in Kurdistan have far surpassed those killed by all Middle Eastern terrorist groups combined. While a case can certainly be made that the killings of civilians by the United States and its allies was, in most cases, not as wanton as the killings in these terrorist attacks, the callous disregard for civilian lives in many of these military operations did constitute clear violations of international humanitarian law.

“The dictator [Saddam Hussein] agreed in 1991, as a condition of a cease-fire, to fully comply with all Security Council resolutions—then ignored more than a decade of those resolutions. Finally, the Security Council promised serious consequences for his defiance. And the commitments we make must have meaning. When we say ‘serious consequences,’ for the sake of peace, there must be serious consequences. And so a coalition of nations enforced the just demands of the world.”

First of all, the majority of member states that voted in favor of UN Security Council 1441—which warned of “serious consequences” for continued Iraqi non-compliance—explicitly stated that this was not an authorization for the use of force and that a subsequent resolution would be needed. The two times in its history that the UN Security Council has authorized the use of military force to enforce its resolution—in response to the North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950 and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990—such authorization was quite explicit.

Secondly, if one were to accept President Bush’s interpretation of “serious consequences” as simply another term for a foreign invasion of a sovereign nation, it is downright Orwellian to claim that such

“serious consequences” must be inflicted “for the sake of peace.”

Finally, at the time the United States launched its invasion of Iraq, the Iraqi government had allowed United Nations inspectors back in with unfettered access to wherever they wanted to go whenever they wanted to, and they were in the process of confirming the fact that Iraq had indeed dismantled, destroyed, or otherwise rendered inoperable its proscribed weapons, delivery systems, and WMD programs. Therefore, the U.S.-led invasion did not “enforce the just demands of the world” since the demands were already being enforced without the use of military force.

“More than 10 million Afghan citizens—over 4 million of them women—are now registered to vote in next month’s presidential election. To any who still would question whether Muslim societies can be democratic societies, the Afghan people are giving their answer.”

Currently in Afghanistan, vote-buying, intimidation, and the enormously disproportionate resources allocated to pro-government candidates raise serious questions as to how democratic these upcoming elections will be. Currently, there are more Afghan males registered to vote than there are eligible Afghan male voters; duplicate voting cards are commonplace and can be sold on the open market. The regime, which lacks solid control of much of the country outside the capital of Kabul, was largely hand-picked by the United States. The ongoing violence and chaos in the country, along with extremely high rates of illiteracy, raise serious questions as to whether the Western-style election the United States is trying to set up will have any credibility among the Afghans themselves.

No one should question whether Muslim societies can be democratic societies. However, Afghanistan under U.S. domination is no more a model of a democratic society than Afghanistan under Soviet domination 20 years ago was a model of a socialist society.

“A democratic Iraq has ruthless enemies, because terrorists know the stakes in that country. They

know that a free Iraq in the heart of the Middle East will be a decisive blow against their ambitions for that region.”

This assumes that the armed resistance in Iraq is not because a Western power invaded and occupied their country, failed to provide basic services and security, sold off key sectors of their economy to foreigners, and installed a puppet regime, but simply because its members don't want democracy. It also fails to explain why when other Middle Eastern states have taken even further steps toward democracy than Iraq, there has not been this kind of terror. Indeed, the opposite is true: For example, there was virtually no terrorism when Algeria democratized its political system in the late 1980s, but then saw an enormous rise in terrorism after a military coup short-circuited its democratic experiment at the end of 1991.

“Coalition forces now serving in Iraq are confronting the terrorists and foreign fighters, so peaceful nations around the world will never have to face them within our own borders.”

First of all, well over 90% of the fighting is by U.S. forces, hardly a “coalition.”

Secondly, there are indeed terrorists among the dozen or more opposition groups in Iraq, but the majority of the armed opposition has been targeting U.S. occupation forces, not civilians, and therefore should not be considered terrorists. Similarly, there are foreign fighters among them, but most credible sources put the percentage of foreigners in the various resistance groups—terrorist and otherwise—at well under 5%.

Thirdly, this idea that if the United States withdrew, these terrorists would suddenly leave Iraq and start attacking the United States and other countries is specious. This is simply a retread of the rationalization used during the Vietnam War that “if we don't fight them over there, we'll have to fight them here.” Despite the U.S. withdrawal and the Communist victory nearly 30 years ago, the Vietnamese have yet to attack the United States. The Vietnamese stopped killing Americans when American forces got out of Vietnam. One can similarly assume that the Iraqis will stop killing Americans when American forces get out of Iraq.

“For too long, many nations, including my own, tolerated, even excused, oppression in the Middle East in the name of stability. Oppression became common, but stability never arrived. We must take a different approach. We must help the reformers of the Middle East as they work for freedom, and strive to build a community of peaceful, democratic nations.”

These are noble words, but the reality of U.S. policy is very different: Under the Bush administration, U.S. military aid, police training, and financial assistance to Middle Eastern governments that engage in patterns of gross and systematic human rights violations has dramatically increased. Since the Bush administration came to office, thousands of reformers have been jailed, tortured, and murdered by governments supported by the United States.

“This commitment to democratic reform is essential to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Peace will not be achieved by Palestinian rulers who intimidate opposition, tolerate corruption, and maintain ties to terrorist groups. The long-suffering Palestinian people deserve better. They deserve true leaders capable of creating and governing a free and peaceful Palestinian state.”

This statement assumes that if Palestinian President Yasir Arafat and the Palestinian Authority cleaned up their act, Israel would allow the creation of a viable Palestinian state, which is the key requisite for peace. In reality, the right-wing Israeli government of Ariel Sharon, with the support of the United States, has embarked upon a plan to annex nearly half of the occupied territories and divide up the remainder into small, non-contiguous cantons surrounded by Israel, where the Israelis would control the borders, the air-space, the ports, and the water resources. This will clearly make the establishment of a viable Palestinian state impossible, whatever the nature of the Palestinian leadership. Israel—again, with U.S. support—has also rejected consideration of withdrawal from occupied Syrian territory, despite promises by the Damascus government of strict security guarantees.

It is important to remember that Kuwait's rulers during the early 1990s also intimidated opposition, tolerated corruption, and maintained ties to terrorist groups. That did not stop the United States, along with the rest of the international community, from demanding that Iraq end its occupation of that country. There are no such U.S. demands, however, that Israel end its occupation.

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