

Bush on 9/11: Annotated

By Stephen Zunes | September 13, 2006

Despite promises from the White House that the address to the nation on the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy would be non-political, President George W. Bush devoted much the speech to defending his unrelated policy on Iraq.

Below are some annotated excerpts from President Bush's speech:

"[T]he regime of Saddam Hussein was a clear threat. My administration, the Congress, and the United Nations saw the threat—and after 9/11, Saddam's regime posed a risk that the world could not afford to take."

Saddam Hussein's stockpiles of banned weapons had been destroyed and his biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons program had been completely dismantled long before 9/11. His armed forces were just a fraction of their original size, and a strict international arms embargo had made rearmament impossible. In 2002, the United Nations correctly insisted that UN arms inspectors be allowed to return to verify that Iraq had indeed disarmed. When Saddam Hussein consented and the inspectors were allowed unimpeded access inside the country, the UN Security Council recognized that Iraq was no longer a threat and thus did not authorize the use of military force as the Bush administration demanded.

"The world is safer because Saddam Hussein is no longer in power."

Though one of the world's worse tyrants, Saddam Hussein's ability to do harm to other nations had been severely limited as a result of

the UN-imposed disarmament regime, military sanctions, and imposed limitations on military movements within the country. Today, however, the extraordinary violence, instability, civil conflict, foreign intervention, and possible breakup of the country threaten to destabilize the entire region. In addition, a new generation of radical foreign jihadists, which has come to Iraq to fight the U.S. occupation, is now getting invaluable training that could be used later against other countries.

"Al-Qaida and other extremists from across the world have come to Iraq to stop the rise of a free society in the heart of the Middle East."

According to extensive interviews with captured insurgents in Iraq, their motivation appears to be the same as what motivated extremists who came to Afghanistan in the 1980s: to fight what they see as a Western neo-colonial conquest of an Islamic nation. Furthermore, Freedom House and other groups that monitor levels of freedom rank at least a half dozen Middle Eastern countries as having greater freedom than Iraq. So if the goal of al-Qaida and other extremists was really to stop the rise of free societies in the Middle East, they would presumably be fighting in those countries instead.



“We’re training Iraqi troops so they can defend their nation. We’re helping Iraq’s unity government grow in strength and serve its people. We will not leave until this work is done.”

By all accounts, despite three and a half years of training Iraqi troops and supporting the Iraqi government, the United States appears to have made little progress in creating a functioning government in Iraq or an armed forces capable of defending it. During the 1980s, the Soviets provided extensive military training and government support for the Afghan regime. Prior to that, the United States provided extensive military training and government support to the South Vietnamese regime. What ultimately mattered, however, was that the people of those countries did not see these foreign-installed regimes as legitimate, and as a result, were not willing to fight and die to defend them. This appears to be what is happening in Iraq. As a result, the United States will be in Iraq for a long, long time.

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“Whatever mistakes have been made in Iraq, the worst mistake would be to think that if we pulled out, the terrorists would leave us alone.”

They will not leave us alone. They will follow us.”

This assertion is simply a retreat of the long-discredited line used to justify the U.S. war in Vietnam: “If we don’t fight them over there, we will have to fight them here.” Despite this often-repeated phrase by both Republicans and Democrats in the White House, Capitol Hill, and the mainstream media during the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, not once in the more than three decades since the National Liberation Front marched into Saigon has the United States had to fight the Vietnamese or any other communists in our country. The Vietnamese stopped killing Americans when our troops left Vietnam. Presumably, Iraqis would do the same once we got out of their country.

“The safety of America depends on the outcome of the battle in the streets of Baghdad . . . If we yield Iraq to men like bin Laden, our enemies will be emboldened; they will gain a new safe haven; they will use Iraq’s resources to fuel their extremist movement.”

There are dozens of different armed militias battling U.S. forces. Supporters of Osama bin Laden represent only a tiny percentage of the insurgency. Even if the U.S.-backed Iraqi government falls, supporters of al-Qaida could in no way end up in control of that country. Their ideology and tactics are opposed not only by the vast majority of Iraqis but by the majority of the insurgents as well. The safety of America is threatened by a continuation of the U.S. occupation and the bloody counter-insurgency war that is fueling anti-American extremism throughout the Middle East and beyond.

“We are now in the early hours of this struggle between tyranny and freedom. Amid the violence, some question whether the people of the Middle East want their freedom ... For 60 years, these doubts guided our policies in the Middle East. And then, on a bright September morning, it became clear that the calm we saw in the Middle East was only a mirage. Years of pursuing stability to promote peace had left us with neither. So we changed our policies, and committed America’s influence in the world to advancing freedom and democracy as the great alternatives to repression and radicalism. With our help, the people of the Middle East are now stepping forward to claim their freedom ... By standing with democratic leaders and reformers, by giving voice to the hopes of decent men and women, we’re offering a path away from radicalism.”

There is no question that people in the Middle East want freedom; for President Bush to imply that those who disagree with his policies feel otherwise is incredibly misleading. Despite a shift in rhetoric, however, U.S. policy regarding freedom and democracy in the Middle East has not changed. Under President Bush, U.S. security assistance and arms transfers to autocratic regimes in the greater Middle East has actually increased. The United States still provides unconditional military and police support for the brutal Islamic fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia and other family dictatorships of the Persian Gulf. U.S. taxpayers continue to give billions of dollars annually to prop up the Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt. It was from these countries that the 9/11 hijackers, the al-Qaida leadership, and the terrorist organization’s financial support

came, not from Iraq and Afghanistan, whose despotic governments were overthrown by U.S. forces, nor from Syria or Iran, whose repressive governments are now the focus of U.S. threats.

From Pakistan to Azerbaijan to Tunisia to Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, the Bush administration has provided aid and comfort to the forces of repression.

By contrast, soon after the people of Lebanon and Palestine voted in free elections, the Bush administration backed brutal military assaults against those countries by the government of Israel.

In addition, in the two years after 9/11, President Bush provided over a billion dollars of aid to the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan—which has massacred hundreds of pro-democracy activists—and will shortly be welcoming the corrupt dictator Nursultan Nazarbayev of neighboring Kazakhstan to his summer home in Maine. From Pakistan to Azerbaijan to Tunisia to Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, the Bush administration has provided aid and comfort to the forces of repression. By contrast, soon after the people of Lebanon and Palestine voted in free elections, the Bush administration backed brutal military

assaults against those countries by the government of Israel. And, rather than being a model for democracy, the U.S. backed government in Iraq and militias of its ruling parties have engaged in widespread extra-judicial killings, torture, ethnic cleansing, and other gross and systematic human rights abuses.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Stephen Zunes, "Bush on 9/11: Annotated" (Silver City, NM and Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, September 13, 2006).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/3503>

Production Information:

Writer: Stephen Zunes

Editor: John Feffer, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

