

Bush's press conference: the questions not asked, the answers not given

By Patrick Martin
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Ignorance and indifference were the hallmarks of President Bush's March 13 press conference. The president's own careless attitude to the proceedings seemed matched by the perfunctory approach of his questioners.

The assembled reporters failed to react even to the most transparent evasions, and took Bush's non sequiturs for good coin. Both sides seemed to be going through the motions—Bush with his ever-present smirk, the journalists with their obsequious demeanor and snickering response to the president's sarcastic asides.

The questions from the press focused largely on Middle East policy and the recent revelation that the Pentagon is reviewing and expanding the options for using nuclear weapons. But no one so much as suggested that the decision to send the US envoy, General Anthony Zinni, back to Israel highlighted Washington's culpability in the military outrages committed by Ariel Sharon, who was given a green light to escalate his war against the Palestinians by the previous withdrawal of Zinni, accompanied by pointed American denunciations of Yassir Arafat.

Nor did any reporter challenge Bush's disingenuous claims that the Nuclear Posture Review—dramatically lowering the bar for the use of nuclear weapons and specifically targeting seven countries for possible nuclear attack—was simply a defensive measure aimed at deterring others from using “weapons of mass destruction.”

No less significant than the questions asked was the silence on a range of controversial issues. The reporters were mute on some of the most important political events of the past six months. Amazingly, the words “Afghanistan” and “Enron” were never uttered by the media stalwarts, while Bush himself referred to the war in Central Asia only in response to a question on the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden.

This despite the fact that recent days had seen major

developments on both fronts: the most intensive ground combat since the US began bombing Afghanistan last October, with the first significant American casualties, and the revelation that Secretary of the Army Thomas White, an Enron executive before he joined the Bush administration, retained his stock options in the company until last month.

Nor was Bush asked about new reports condemning the US treatment of Afghan POWs being held at Guantanamo Bay, including a highly critical resolution from the Organization of American States, usually a rubber stamp for US foreign policy.

Other important issues were ignored. Bush was not asked about his decision to impose huge tariffs on imported steel, an action that has inflamed relations between the United States and Europe and stands in obvious conflict with his professed belief in free trade principles.

Bush was not asked about new budget projections showing the federal surplus has been entirely wiped out by last year's tax cut for the wealthy, the recession, and the cost of the “war on terrorism.”

No reporter raised the March 5 primary election in California, where his chosen candidate for the Republican gubernatorial nomination was roundly defeated.

Most significantly, Bush was not asked about his decision to establish a “shadow government” after the September 11 terrorist attacks—a decision only revealed March 1 in the *Washington Post*. The entire American media, the supposed “watchdog” of democracy, displayed its tacit support for Bush's behind-the-scenes planning for dictatorial rule.

Bush devoted his opening statement to his nomination of Charles Pickering to the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, suggesting that the Democrats in Congress were undermining the authority of the executive branch and weakening the judiciary by leaving the position vacant.

No reporter asked him to square this posture of defense of constitutional principles and the separation of powers with the White House policy on the “shadow government,” which provides for a secret regime in fortified bunkers consisting exclusively of executive branch officials, with no provision for the legislative or judicial branches—a policy that was undertaken without even notifying the leadership of Congress. Or his denial of the request by the General Accounting Office, a congressional agency, for a list of participants in the closed-door meetings held by Vice President Dick Cheney’s energy task force last spring. Or his opposition to Congress’s request that his Director of Homeland Defense, Tom Ridge, appear before a congressional committee to explain the administration’s request for tens of billions of dollars in security outlays.

The questions that the reporters did ask seemed to disappear into the void, as Bush made unresponsive comments, only vaguely related to the subject at hand, and was never called to order or challenged in follow-up questions.

He was asked whether he agreed with the statement of United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan characterizing the Israeli posture as an “illegal occupation of Palestinian lands.” Bush replied with a few platitudes about his desire for peace, and mildly criticized the actions of the Sharon government, but ignored the specific question.

The US president threatened Iraq with nuclear attack, using the same words—“we’ve got all options on the table”—to describe both the review of nuclear weapons policy and his attitude towards the government of Saddam Hussein. But no reporter picked up on the repetition, or asked Bush directly whether the United States was planning to use nuclear weapons as part of the impending attack on Iraq.

Bush refused to give any specifics about where US troops might next be on the move, or whether the “war on terrorism” would be extended to countries whose governments opposed US intervention. He dismissed one such question as a “cleverly worded hypothetical,” as though any inquiry into future US actions was illegitimate.

At one point he reiterated his position that the military, not elected civilian authorities, should decide where and how the US wages war, saying the main lesson of Vietnam was that “politics” should not be allowed to interfere with the prerogatives of the military brass. Such statements not only reflect ignorance of the US

Constitution and hostility to core democratic principles, but amount to a presidential green light to the most bellicose and reckless sections of the military to do as they please.

As the press conference wore on, Bush’s responses became more and more disjointed, his body language and expression more simian, his words more simplistic. Finally, he descended to sophomoric jokes and calling reporters by pet names, which seemed to please the journalists no end.

In his final response, Bush made a comment indicating his own place in the deliberations of his administration. Asked about US support for a UN resolution that had just passed the Security Council, calling for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, Bush replied, “I don’t know the timing. All I know is the things start showing up on my desk—desk or radar screen, same thing. About 24 hours ago.”

The presidential press conference has long been a staple of American politics. The president of the United States, the proverbial “most powerful man in the world,” answers questions on the most important policy issues of the day, posed to him by a press corps that in theory adopts a critical or even adversarial stance.

Like much else in American political life, this picture has long been at odds with reality. The steady shift to the right in official political circles and in the corporate-controlled media puts the most fundamental issues off limits in any encounter between president and press. Both share a common ideological framework: the defense of the profit system and the interests of the American ruling elite against all opponents, both domestic and foreign.

With the installation of George W. Bush, the presidential press conference has undergone a further debasement. The intellectual horizons of the current occupant of the White House are so limited, to say nothing of his inability to articulate a coherent thought, as to make even superficial examination of issues impossible. A degraded and corrupted press plays along with the sham.

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