

Bush's second inauguration

America's day of shame

By David Walsh
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In yesterday's inaugural address, George W. Bush gave notice to the world that American imperialism intends to press forward with its drive for world domination. The US president issued a call to arms, a *jihad*, making clear that no country or government will be permitted to stand in America's path.

With this speech, Bush and those elements in the ruling elite for whom he speaks set out to dispel any illusions that either the disaster in Iraq or mass international opposition to Washington's militarism will deter his new administration from pursuing its reactionary goals.

True to form, Bush delivered a series of disconnected assertions, lies and banalities. He made no coherent argument, but repeated certain key phrases over and over again, centering on the God-given mandate of the US to intervene anywhere in the world to advance the cause of "freedom." In a 20-minute speech, the president uttered the words "free" or "freedom" 34 times, and the word "liberty" another 12 times.

The absurd repetition of "freedom" is unlikely to deceive anyone, certainly not victims and opponents of his first administration's crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and the rest of this government stand waist deep in blood and filth, responsible for the killing of more than 100,000 Iraqis and the death and maiming of thousands of American soldiers.

The US government and military have spelled out what sort of "freedom" they have in mind for the Iraqi people and the rest of the world in Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib and Fallujah: repression, torture, military occupation, the destruction of entire cities. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan also promised to "liberate" the populations of Europe and Asia.

The reactionary, fantastical substance of Bush's speech cannot be separated from its setting. The freedom that Bush continually invoked to justify militarism and war was conspicuously absent at the inauguration. Virtual martial law had been imposed in the nation's capital. Thousands of protesters were kept out of sight by an army of police.

At one point, while Bush was reaffirming his dedication to the cause of liberty, a policeman could be seen demanding that a banner be taken down. Toward the end of speech the television cameras showed protesters, who had apparently dared to boo Bush's remarks, being taken into custody.

The master of ceremonies at the inauguration, Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi, had been forced to resign in disgrace as Senate majority leader in 2002 following his praise for the 1948 presidential campaign of Strom Thurmond, who ran as the candidate of the States' Rights Party on a segregationist program. One news commentator spoke of the particularly strong "Mississippi influence" in the inaugural events.

The noxious power of the Christian right could be felt throughout. Prayers, religious hymns and praise to God abounded.

Bush's address was yet another opportunity to instill a mood of fear and anxiety in the US population. He spoke of "whole regions of the world [that] simmer in resentment and tyranny," presumably referring, in particular, to the Middle East. By a crude sleight of hand Bush transformed these regions—which simmer with resentment toward Washington for supporting tyrannical regimes in the area and invading Iraq—into a "mortal threat" to the American people.

A central theme was that, after 9/11, America's divine mission to spread "freedom" throughout the world coincided with US national security. Or, to strip the argument of bombast and state the message more bluntly, the American people had either to kill, or be killed.

Bush observed that after the "shipwreck of communism" had come a number of years of peace and tranquility, which were suddenly disrupted by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—what he called, in quasi-Biblical terms, "the day of fire." Now we understand, he claimed, that the "best hope for peace in the world is the expansion of freedom in all the world."

The events to which Bush referred are internally connected, but not in the manner he suggested. The collapse of Stalinism in the USSR and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s set the stage for the current eruption of US aggression. The end of the Soviet Union provided the opportunity, as far as the American ruling elite was concerned, for the United States to overcome its decline in economic dominance through the use of military might. The Bush administration is the congealed expression of this new policy, for whose implementation the events of September 11 merely provided the pretext.

In keeping with the delusional character of the Bush administration's imperial project, the inaugural speech had an undertone of panic, even dementia. This government relentlessly and deliberately seeks to sow fear and hysteria, but within in its own mentality there is a streak of desperation and paranoia. The American ruling elite believes it has only a brief window of opportunity to push back the forces that threaten to engulf it.

"Ending tyranny in our world," Bush declared, was now "the calling of our time." This should be taken as an ominous warning. The invasion of Iraq was only a prologue.

Much of the media commentary dismissed Bush's speech as inaugural rhetoric, with no implications for policy. This is profoundly mistaken. There are striking parallels between the conduct of the Bush administration and the increasing derangement of German foreign policy in the late 1930s, as the economic situation facing German imperialism grew ever more desperate.

The objective background to Bush's call to arms lies in US capitalism's massive budget and trade deficits, the steep decline of the US dollar, and an economic structure that is becoming increasingly impossible to sustain. Taking him at his word, and understanding that "the expansion of freedom" is a code phrase for aggression, Bush yesterday outlined a program of unrestrained militarism all over the world.

Preparations for war against Iran have already been exposed, by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker*. This week, in an opening statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during her confirmation hearing, Bush's nominee for secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, listed those countries at the top of the hit list for US aggression. Rice cited as "outposts of tyranny" North Korea, Iran, Cuba, Belarus, Zimbabwe and Burma. She went on to issue threats against Venezuela and Syria. The Bush administration is proposing a policy of subversion and military intervention that extends to the continents of South America, Europe, Asia and Africa.

The president did not admit in his inaugural address of any restrictions on the right of the US to topple governments and invade their territories. There was not so much as lip service to the sovereignty of nations, the role of the United Nations, the authority of treaties, the requirements of international law.

He warned America's allies that "division among free nations [i.e., opposition to Washington's dictates] is a primary goal of freedom's enemies."

Bush addressed himself "to the peoples of the world," pledging to liberate them from "oppression." But the people of the world, in their overwhelming majority, have already seen through him. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, "By most accounts President Bush is almost universally disliked, even reviled, around the world. ... Mr. Bush may be the least-liked American leader in history." The Program on International Policy Attitudes reported last fall that "just one in five people surveyed around the world [in 32 countries] support the re-election of President Bush."

According to a Zogby poll taken in mid-2004, the percentage of Arabs—the supposed beneficiaries of America's democratic crusade in the Middle East—with a favorable opinion toward the US had dropped dramatically in nearly every country surveyed. For example, 98 percent of Egyptians polled expressed a negative view of the US. Another survey concluded that a majority of people in Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey, along with France and Germany, believe Washington is conducting its "global war on terror" to seize control of Middle East oil and dominate the world.

Nor does Bush possess any mandate in the US for his policies of unending war and reaction. After narrowly winning an election through hysteria over war and terrorism, and by exploiting the political confusion of the population and the impotence of the Democratic Party, Bush has registered the worst popularity rating for a reelected president embarking on his second term in the last half-century. A solid and growing majority believe the invasion of Iraq was a mistake. Nor is there mass support for radically tampering with Social Security or the tax code.

When Bush turned to the situation in the US and addressed his "fellow citizens," the speech lost whatever shreds of coherence it had up to then evinced. At times, one had no idea what he was talking about. Bush made only a passing reference to the bitter divisions in the country, and not one concrete reference to the poverty, deteriorating living conditions and oppressive indebtedness that afflict wide layers of the population.

He spoke about the idealism of "a few Americans," that is, those involved in spying, invading and occupying other countries. He urged young people to draw inspiration from the "duty and allegiance in the determined faces of our soldiers." The US has need, Bush went on, of idealism and courage to finish "the work of American freedom," a task which he left undefined.

He did make oblique reference to privatizing social security and called for the building of an "ownership society"—in other words, a society in which the wealth of the elite is untouchable, while the rest of the population is left to fend for itself.

Bush, who presided over the execution of 152 people while governor of Texas, and whose streak of personal sadism is well known, extolled the virtues of "mercy" and having "a heart for the weak."

He concluded: "America, in this young century, proclaims liberty throughout all the world, and to all the inhabitants thereof."

The world's inhabitants, beware!

After all that has happened in the past four years, the spectacle of George W. Bush taking the oath of office for a second time was a deeply shameful event in US history. A stench of criminality hangs about this administration—and the entire US political and media establishment. Those cheering Bush did so for a reason: he appeals to the most reactionary and ignorant sections of the population.

The US ruling elite, which has no rational or progressive solutions to the contradictions of American capitalism, is tobogganing with its eyes closed toward catastrophe, with the moral and intellectual cipher George W. Bush at its helm.

The great hostility toward Bush and his administration's policies in the American population needs to find a genuine political voice. No illusions should be entertained in the Democrats, whose present and former leaders, including Senator John Kerry, were in obedient attendance yesterday at the inauguration. The immense and latent opposition to Bush has to be unified and directed against the foundations of the entire socio-economic status quo.

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