

Bush's State of the Union speech highlights crisis of US ruling elite

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President George W. Bush's sixth State of the Union address was delivered Wednesday in an atmosphere of crisis and demoralization gripping not only his own Republican administration, but the entire American political establishment.

The media made much of Bush having for the first time to address a Democratic-led Congress, but the prevailing mood was not so much political confrontation as general bewilderment and apprehension, with the two parties confronting a military and political debacle in Iraq in which they are both fully implicated.

A president who, as multiple polls released this week have underscored, is the most despised occupant of the White House since Richard Nixon at the height of the Watergate crisis, was treated to repeated standing ovations led by the new "Madam Speaker" of the House of Representatives, Democratic Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi.

However, the applause, backslapping and bathos that have become the norm for this annual political ritual could not mask the fact that the US political establishment is torn by deep divisions and bitter recriminations, with some of the sharpest opposition to Bush's policies coming not from the newly empowered Democrats, but from members of his own party.

There is a general recognition not only that the American colonial war in Iraq has failed, but that the six years of the Bush administration have produced a colossal decline in the world position of US imperialism.

The "new way forward" spelled out by Bush in his speech less than two weeks ago has provoked mounting fears that the military escalation in Iraq, combined with threats against Iran and Syria, will only deepen the disaster. Yet the reaction of Congress resembles the paralysis of passengers facing an impending train wreck: They know what is coming but can do nothing to avert it.

Fear of the consequences of Bush's escalation is combined with even greater dread over the implications of US imperialism being dealt a decisive defeat in Iraq.

The general perplexity and desperation were reflected in the elements of unreality and absurdity in Bush's speech. The "commander in chief" failed to even mention the war in Iraq—which everyone knew was the overriding issue facing the nation—until he was more than three-fifths through his remarks.

The most salient feature of the present "state of the union" is the unprecedented decision of a US president to escalate a war that was overwhelmingly rejected by the people in

elections held just three months earlier. Yet this brazenly anti-democratic defiance of public opinion was never addressed.

Instead, Bush began his speech with a series of reactionary proposals on domestic issues. “Our job is to make life better for our fellow Americans, and help them to build a future of hope and opportunity—and this is the business before us tonight,” he proclaimed.

In fact, the “business” that night, as throughout the year, was upholding the interests of the banks and corporations that control both major parties, and Bush’s proposals all reflected this focus. They amounted to a series of coded messages to the major profit-making sectors—the energy conglomerates, the healthcare monopolies, agribusiness and Wall Street—that Bush would push new initiatives to boost their profits.

Thus, the president vowed to “balance the federal budget... without raising taxes,” that is, to defend his massive tax breaks for the rich while continuing to slash what remains of social programs for working people. He demanded that the government “take on the challenge of entitlements,” i.e., that it get down to the business of gutting Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

Bush promoted a thoroughly regressive plan ostensibly to aid the 47 million Americans who have no health insurance. His cure, however, was worse than the disease. It would turn health care benefits offered by employers into taxable income, meaning a further cut in income for some 30 million Americans. It would also introduce a universal tax deduction to encourage people to opt out of these plans, undermining health care coverage for some 160 million people.

Turning to the question of immigration, Bush vowed to advance legislation aimed at instituting a new version of the “bracero” program, guaranteeing agribusiness a reliable supply of oppressed, low-wage workers, while denying immigrants basic rights.

The president raised a series of proposals supposedly aimed at ending US dependence on foreign oil. All of these measures have been crafted to uphold the interests of energy conglomerates like Exxon Mobil and the Big Three automakers.

When he finally turned to Iraq, it was via the usual route of falsely casting the war of aggression long planned by Washington as a response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and as the key front in the “global war on terror.”

That millions of Americans have long since rejected the claim that the invasion of Iraq was a reaction to the 9/11 attacks found no reflection on the floor of the Congress.

Led by Pelosi, Democrats rose repeatedly in standing ovations for the so-called war on terror and those who are waging it. They stood and applauded for Bush when he declared that Washington’s mission was to “help men and women in the Middle East to build free societies and share in the rights of all humanity.” This despite the fact that US policy has killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and turned their country into a nightmare of death and destruction, while American imperialism continues to base its regional power on a Zionist regime that oppresses the Palestinians and on Arab despots who suppress their own people.

The perplexity of the Democrats found its consummate expression when they were brought to their feet with the following passage from Bush:

"We went into this largely united—in our assumptions, and in our convictions. And whatever you voted for, you did not vote for failure. Our country is pursuing a new strategy in Iraq—and I ask you to give it a chance to work. And I ask you to support our troops in the field—and those on the way."

Here Bush's speechwriters earned their pay. The passage made clear that the Democrats in Congress were Bush's partners in crime, voting the White House a blank check to wage a war of aggression against Iraq. It also spelled out that Democrats and Republicans alike reflected the consensus position within America's ruling elite that military force must be used to assert the interests of US capitalism worldwide, most decisively by seizing control of world energy supplies.

Failure of this strategy has, from the standpoint of the political establishment, vast and catastrophic consequences for US imperialist interests worldwide. That is why, under the cynical slogan of "support our troops," the Democrats will continue to fund the war.

The political bankruptcy of the ostensible Democratic opposition to Bush's war policy was underscored in the party's official response, delivered by freshman Democratic Senator Jim Webb from Virginia, himself a Vietnam veteran and former Republican secretary of the navy.

After describing the war as "mismanaged," Webb stumbled over his prepared remarks in a revealing way. "The majority of the nation no longer supports this war," he began, and then corrected himself to say, "no longer supports the way this war is being fought; nor does the military."

The reality is that the overwhelming majority does indeed oppose the war. According to a poll released by NBC and the *Wall Street Journal* on the eve of the speech, 65 percent want all US troops out of Iraq by the end of the year. But the Democrats are committed to its continuation.

As Webb continued, "We need a new direction. Not one step back from the war against international terrorism. Not a precipitous withdrawal that ignores the possibility of further chaos."

All the Democratic talk of "redeploying" US troops is merely an alternative strategy for continuing the occupation and the war against the Iraqi people, relying less on US combat infantry units and more on Iraqi surrogates backed by American "advisors," rapid deployment forces and air power.

The much vaunted nonbinding Senate resolution opposing Bush's "surge" states in its first sentence, "...the United States strategy and presence on the ground in Iraq can only be sustained with the support of the American people and bipartisan support from Congress." It continues by declaring, "...maximizing our chances of success in Iraq should be our goal, and the best chances of success requires a change in current strategy."

Bush's speech amounted to a pleading appeal for this "bipartisan" support—for the Democrats and wavering members of his own party to give his intensified assault on the Iraqi people a chance. While the Democrats, as well as much of the Republican Party, fear the potentially disastrous consequences of this new tactic, they counterpose only another means of continuing the war.

The State of the Union address and the Democratic response have underscored the

impossibility of waging a genuine struggle to end the war in Iraq outside of the fight to mobilize working people independently of and in opposition to both the Democratic and Republican parties, and the corporate ruling elite whose interests they serve.

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