

Bush in Buffalo: Lie to shining lie

I ALWAYS waiver on the subject of George W. Bush's intelligence. The 'dumb as a doorknob' impression always pops up when I look at the devastating results of his policies – with the most recent blunders being endless war and a tanked economy. But then there's the question, maybe, just maybe, these are his goals. Endless war means an endless war presidency with a perpetual star-spangled backdrop to divert attention away from a draconian domestic agenda. Economic collapse means belt tightening, as in eliminating all the programs the radical wing of the Republican party has been jonesing to do away with since the Reagan days.

George Bush's visit to Buffalo last week gave me the opportunity to witness up-close a skilled communicator playing a hand-picked audience like a piano. The result was a cuddly sort of fascism, with every one of the 500 or so police officers, firefighters and district attorneys that the Bush camp invited to attend, feeling as if they just had a personal sit down with the president. In reality, however, they didn't.

The "Presidential Visit to Buffalo" turned out to be nothing more than a well packaged performance delivered to a docile audience, too blinded by the glare of the presidency to realize that nothing was being said – not by the president, and certainly not by the attendees, who were never given an opportunity to ask questions nor offer comments to the man whose policies have put them all in harm's way. Make no mistake about it – this performance in no way resembled the "conversation" described by pro-Bush partisans in the media.

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Most alarming was the myopic focus on the performance at the cost of any realistic examination of the substance of Bush's talk. Granted, he said nothing new. There was no news peg, and no reason to pay attention to his discourse. And yes, bystanders lining the presidential route waiting to catch a glimpse of the most reviled man in the world, turned out to be more interesting than Bush himself. But still, the media has a responsibility to call a sitting president on his lies or errant statements wherever he makes them, no matter how repetitive they may be.

Liberties expire - not the Patriot Act

Where the media fell short with their lack of contextual reporting, however, the American Civil Liberties Union stepped up to the plate, deconstructing Bush's Buffalo speech, lie by tired old lie. Here are a few of the highpoints.

Bush explained, "By the way, the reason I bring up the Patriot Act, it's set to expire next year. I'm starting a campaign to make it clear to members of Congress that it shouldn't expire. It shouldn't expire for the security of our country."

Judging by the applause he got for this line, you'd think it was feeding time in the seal pool. But it certainly isn't time for the Patriot Act to expire. No. We're gonna be living with this baby for some time to come. Only ten percent of this draconian bill is set to sunset, and not for another 19 months. What Bush is actually campaigning for is the passage of an enhanced more Draconian bill, dubbed "Son of Patriot Act" by civil libertarians.

Bush falsely told his audience that the Patriot Act, now "set to expire," changed the law to allow roving wiretaps, which he claims were previously only available for chasing down drug lords, but not terrorists. The ACLU points out that this just isn't true. Such wiretaps were available for terrorist and other investigations prior to 9-11. The Patriot Act removed the judicial requirement to show probable cause to a judge before getting a warrant for such a wiretap. Such orders can now be issued in secret parallel "courts." Hence, what Bush was really touting was the evisceration of judicial review.

Oh, what a jokester

The epoch of Bush's performance surrounded his joke-pocked complaint about how, before the Patriot Act, "one part of the FBI couldn't tell the other part of the FBI vital information because of the law. And the CIA and the FBI couldn't talk." This is where Bush's humor campaign got bogged down with exhausting repetitions of tired lines about how ridiculous it was that the FBI and CIA were not allowed to talk. In case the concept was too difficult for his audience to grasp, Bush gave examples of them passing colleagues in the hall and not being allowed to talk. How ridiculous that those traitorous "against us" Democrats

would have saddled our anti-terror investigations with such nonsense. Again, however, this just isn't true. The ACLU points out that while minor barriers kept information about pending criminal investigations confidential, they did not prevent agencies from sharing information about terrorist investigations or potential leads for terror cases. Testimony before the 9-11 Commission shows that indeed these agencies were communicating with each other sharing information about potential terrorist attacks, including plans to use jetliners as missiles. And they were sharing this information with the Bush White House. Hello? How can such trash go unchallenged in our press?

This is also where the first Bushism popped up, as W explained that intelligence agencies should be able to share information with "any FBI." Hopefully North Korea, for example, doesn't have one.

Bush also alleged that a whole category of search warrants, commonly known as "Sneak and Peak" warrants, could be used against street gangs, but not against terrorists. This also just isn't true. Law enforcement personnel regularly secured such warrants for terror investigations before 9-11. What the Patriot Act did was strip away judicial oversight, making such warrants easier to obtain – even when used for non-terror-related investigations. It's this potential application of Patriot Act provisions to allow the privacy of ordinary citizens to be invasively violated that the ACLU has found quite troubling.

It's important to point out here that there is no record of any terrorism investigation being critically bogged down by the necessity of judicial review. But there is evidence that such investigations were bogged down or even killed by the Bush White House – a point no one in the local media found relevant enough to make.

Fixing potholes in hell

Then there were the technically true but patently false statements, such as Bush's allegation that the UN Security Council thought Saddam was a threat. While they might have thought him a threat at one time, they certainly didn't see him as a major threat after their weapons inspectors gave his regime a clean bill of health. In other words, they didn't see him as a threat when the US invaded.

And there were the jokes – and I use the term loosely since none of them were really funny. It was more or less 700 Club style chit chat with polite subdued audience chuckles right on cue as Bush would pause and arrogantly smile. Sometimes his humor was downright upsetting, as when he joked about "getting" Lackawanna suspects overseas. While one suspect was arrested abroad, a second was summarily executed by a US missile to his car, without the benefit of trial or conviction. That's not funny. It's scary.

There were also Orwellian moments, such as when Bush told the crowd that "The

Patriot Act defends our liberty.” And there were moments of honesty, such as when Bush chided local officials for not filling potholes, explaining that the function of local government is restricted to filling potholes, collecting garbage and providing police and fire services. Forget social services – the Federal government has. And forget education, culture, parks, environmental protection, regional planning, housing code enforcement, water delivery, sewage treatment, consumer protection and so on. For the Bush radicals, government is to be reduced to building roads, locking up the poor, subsidizing corporations and funding the military – a vision that Bush’s former Treasury Secretary, Paul O’Neil prematurely let out of the bag.

Our pointless local media

Bush’s visit also allowed for lots of local political theatre. Buffalo Mayor Anthony Masiello, to his credit, officially boycotted the event, upset about unfulfilled promises Bush has made to America’s cities. A local cast of media dingbats chastised the Mayor, if only because they would have traded their own Bon Jovi tickets for a chance to fawn at the emperor’s feet. I always said that I suspected Tony’s heart was in the right place.

At the other end of the political spectrum was Erie County District Attorney Frank Clark, who camped out blocking part of the entrance aisle, seemingly setting up his own receiving line, as if all this glitter was for him.

Clarke, though he was a bit more animated, was typical for this crowd. They were hand picked political partisans open to the Bush message. Unlike Masiello, they all acquiesced to be the window dressing for what predictably unfolded looking like a Leni Riefenstahl production. Bush stood in front of a banner plastered with repetitive imprints of the words “protection,” “enforcement,” and “prevention.” Almost the entire crowd, with a few notable exceptions such as an elderly war hero and the family of a serviceman, both invited to be singled out as photo meat, were on the public payroll when they attended the event. Hence, what we ultimately had was a crowd at a radical political event cheering on their hero while simultaneously drawing off of the public payroll.

This is another point the local media missed. And there’s a bigger point as well. Bush is a reactionary radical whose beliefs are the antithesis of our shared American values. He mocks our very sense of decency. We Buffalonians overwhelmingly voted against him. There are no Fortune 500 companies here to benefit in his redistribution of our national wealth. We are “we the people” and his policies are both hurting us domestically and shaming us abroad. When he brings his tax financed dog and pony show to our town to use us as a backdrop in his campaign to eradicate our rights, our local media shouldn’t give him a free ride.