

**EDWARD S.
HERMAN:** The
farce of the
Bush pursuit
of democracy
abroad – while
undermining
it at home



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The Bush rationale for the invasion-occupation of Iraq was the threat to U.S. national security posed by Saddam Hussein's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction and ties to Al Qaeda. Saddam's brutal rule was sometimes mentioned in the course of pre-invasion demonization, but liberation and democratization were barely detectable as second or third order objectives. In fact, Bush administration aims in the attack on Iraq were even acknowledged to be independent of Saddam rule: The document *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, written in September 2000 by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a neoconservative think tank closely affiliated with Bush officials-to-be, indicates that the Bush team had in mind taking military control of the Gulf region whether or not Saddam Hussein was in power. It says "while the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein."

The liberation and democratization objectives were brought to the fore only after it was definitively established, and could not be hidden from public view, that the primary objectives had rested on lies, and were war-marketing claims advanced by a group determined to attack and whose "intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy." With the collapse of those claims something more

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was needed, in retrospect and to justify a continuing occupation and restructuring of Iraqi society. Liberation and democratization filled the bill nicely, noble objectives whose alleged pursuit could cover over less noble ends such as seizing assets, establishing bases, and working toward longer term political control.

But if a group that had lied its way into an aggression-occupation subsequently shifted objectives, with the Leader now claiming a new vision and aim to democratize the world, minimal honesty and intelligence would seem to demand scepticism and a careful search for real motives and objectives. To a remarkable degree the mainstream media and intellectuals eschewed any such critical examination and took the new objectives at face value. If this is so, than “all the news fit to print” is not dictated by any quest for truth but by the demands of service to the state.

It took some remarkable evasions and the swallowing of some eminently challengeable official claims to perform this state propaganda service. Truly independent media would have carefully examined whether the democracy objective was consistent with the broad aims and interests sought by the Bush administration; whether in the light of those broader aims and interests alternative objectives might be identified that were being pursued under cover of “democratization”; whether the new objective was consistent with observable Bush policy across the board or was only applied selectively; and whether the Bush conception of democratization might be designed to yield a nominal democracy lacking in substance, with an “Arab facade” as the British used to call their forms employed in Iraq in earlier years.

With very minor exceptions neither the mainstream media nor liberal intellectuals and the “cruise missile left” have raised such questions. They adhere closely to a de facto party line, based almost entirely on the Bush claim to be working for democracy as his prime objective, along with the supposedly supportive evidence of the U.S organization of the January 30, 2005 national election in Iraq, plus the work of the U.S. government and its allies in places like Yugoslavia, Georgia and the Ukraine.

A first problem with taking Bush’s proclamation of the democracy objective at face value is the well-established fact that he works in close coordination with Karl Rove and Frank Luntz, who have built a tradition of recommending saying

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what will resonate and sell irrespective of truth.

A second is that every leader who attacks another country claims a noble objective, so common sense and honesty tells us we must discount such claims to virtually zero; and in Bush's case this need is reinforced by the fact that the noble objective came forth as a fall-back position.

A third problem is the evidence that the Bush team aimed to further project power in the Persian Gulf region rather than advance democracy, as noted in the quote above from the PNAC report of 2000. Substantive democracy might limit that power, whereas a conquered state with an "Arab façade" would meet that objective well – if it could not only be put in place but also maintained in power. The mainstream media have carefully avoided citing the PNAC (and other similar documents) and spelling out the objectives clearly stated there for a prospective invasion-occupation, or considering their consistency with the democracy objective. They have not discussed the concept and history of the phrase "Arab façade."

A fourth problem is the consistency of the democracy aim with the record and broader interests of the Bush administration. Those interests are mainly business interests, and we can see how a war in Iraq and perpetual war against "terrorism" might serve those interests in enlarging areas of economic domination, including oil resources, increasing arms business for the military-industrial complex, and providing lucrative contracts for Halliburton, Bechtel et al. to build bases abroad and rebuild in areas devastated by bombs. It also serves those interests by creating a patriotic and distracted moral environment under whose cover regressive economic policies can be carried out. "Democracy" would appear to have no place in servicing these ends and interests, except for providing a formula that will resonate with the public and obscure real aims.

Bush has claimed that his wars aim at protecting the U.S. citizenry, but the exposed lies on Saddam's WMD show that the Iraq invasion-occupation had nothing to do with U.S. security, and it is now the view of knowledgeable observers (including the CIA) that that invasion-occupation, along with the carte blanche support of ethnic cleansing in Palestine, are major sources of whatever security threat U.S. citizens face. As this blowback effect was probably recognized

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by the Bush team, increased insecurity was very likely part of the Bush plan and serves his program well in justifying further arms and violence.

A fifth problem is the selectivity of application of the Bush vision. The Bush team has found no problem with authoritarian rule in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgistan, Pakistan, and post-Aristide Haiti, and it pushes aggressively for democratization only in countries whose governments it opposes for reasons that have nothing to do with democracy. The administration is deeply concerned about the supposed democratic deficiencies of , whose democratic credentials greatly surpass those of the states mentioned above, and arguably even of the United States itself, where today the majority have no political party of consequence representing their interests. If the application of the push for democracy is highly selective, this suggests that it is not a major end but an instrument serving other ends.

A sixth problem is that Bush's notion of "democracy" is almost surely Orwellian, eschewing anything like a genuine rule of the people. A major feature of nominal democracies today, and perhaps even more so those in the Third World and in military or economic dependent status, is the huge gap between their quasi-ruling elites and the general populace. In this neoliberal world these leaders regularly betray their campaign promises and the public interest as a result of the pressure of financial obligation and threat and structural necessity. Only a Chavez, with large oil revenues and under coup and destabilization threat by the Godfather, can take the route of serving the national majority. Those under the financial gun, from Lula in Brazil to Tadic in Serbia, can operate only within narrow boundaries.

Those in occupied countries, like the elected government of Iraq, are in an even more severely dependent position, with the occupying army serving as the pacifying arm of the elected leaders, and its political representatives still the de facto rulers of the state establishing policy, controlling the media, paying the wages of government workers and contractors, building bases, and training security forces to fight the insurgency. With reference to Lebanon, Bush stated that France, as well as the United States "said loud and clear to Syria, you get your troops and your secret services out of Lebanon so that good democracy has a chance to flour-

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ish.” The U.S. occupation of Iraq is far more extensive, intrusive and violent than that of Syria in Lebanon, but the patriotic double standard applies here and is unchallenged in the U.S. mainstream: we have good intentions and our troops and secret services in an occupied country do not threaten “good democracy.” But this is strictly a triumph of ideology.

A final problem with Bush’s democracy quest abroad is that democracy has been eroding at home and the Bush administration has significantly accelerated that erosion.

The Patriot Act and its successor have seriously weakened constitutional protections of the rights of individuals; the stuffing of the courts with amenable rightwing judges has threatened the independence of the judiciary and constitutional rights; corrupt election practices, the force of money, and the exploitation of fear threaten a one-party state, the breakdown of the checks and balances system, and unconstrained executive power. Is it plausible that the man managing this process of democracy erosion at home is devoting large resources to its pursuit abroad? The issue is not addressed in the propaganda system.

The Bush team gets away with all this because the propaganda system works so well at this juncture. The media are increasingly commercial and concentrated, and now have a powerful rightwing sector that makes no bones about serving as an instrument of Bush propaganda. That rightwing sector also operates with an open patriotic ardor that puts competitive pressure on the rest of the media to display their own belief in “my country, right or wrong,” and the rightwingers also attack the laggards with a flak that helps keeps them close to the party line. The easy route pursued in the mainstream is press release journalism, asking no critical questions, and allowing lies to flourish, to be challenged if at all too late to affect reality. (A classic New York Times editorial, published five years after the paper had swallowed a lie on the Soviet Union’s shooting down of Korean airliner 007 that gave the Reagan administration a propaganda windfall, was entitled “The Lie That Was Not Shot Down” [Jan. 18, 1988].)

Most of the liberal intelligentsia stay within the national consensus, which quickly forms in support of whatever venture abroad their leaders have undertaken. They want to be loved, to be publishable in the New York Times, and to be influential in guiding the Democrats in quest of power. They also have a visceral

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hostility to the left, partly no doubt out of guilt for their own abandonment of principle in favor of “pragmatism,” partly because left analyses show them to be on shaky ground in terms of both fact and morality. The result is that the liberals make the drastic assumption that even the Bush team’s motives are benign: thus George Packer says that the Bush team has “an almost theological conviction that American power is by nature good and what follows in its wake will be freedom and democracy” (“War and Ideas,” *New Yorker*, July 5, 2005). Packer shows what a harsh liberal critic he is by challenging this alleged theological conviction, but note the unargued and apologetic assumption about the Bush team’s democratic beliefs.

Packer goes on to say what he has said elsewhere, that “For better or for worse, it’s a fight in which America continues to have an obligation as well as an interest.” But America committed a blatant aggression in Iraq that violated the UN Charter and that the world majority opposed, and even Blair’s Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has acknowledged the obvious fact that the U.S. invasion and mode of fighting has fed and stimulated the insurgency. Is there no obligation to obey international law? If the U.S. pacification keeps producing more insurgents in a feedback process, what is the limit in death and destruction that Packer will tolerate? What does Packer mean by interest”? Does he assume that Bush strives for democracy or could his interest be more material?

Packer undoubtedly means interest in pursuing that theological conviction that we will bring freedom and democracy. That is of course the premise of that masterpiece of aggression-occupation apologetics in the *New York Times* by Michael Ignatieff (“Who Are Americans To Think That Freedom Is Their To Spread?” , June 28, 2005).



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