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USA

What the White House Has in Store

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The imperial investiture of George W. Bush was celebrated with corporate-financed balls through the night. Half a world away in Iraq, the empire burned, and bodies from the Indian Ocean tsunami continued to be retrieved from the surf and the muck of shattered villages from Aceh to Sri Lanka to India to Somalia. The cost of the coronation, a few tens of millions of dollars (but who's counting?), could have paid for a warning system to save the lives of many of the 250-300,000 victims.

To understand these realities, and the social relations behind them, is to comprehend why capitalism absolutely has got to go. That's true regardless of which particular political party or bought-and-paid-for clique happens to be in charge of administering it at any given time.

But there are some specific features of the Bush Two regime that deserve analysis as it launches its second term. Bush's inaugural address was remarkable for pure dishonesty: a celebration of spreading something called "freedom" throughout the world, in which the word "Iraq" was never mentioned.

[https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/Bush_inauguration2.jpg]

The Iraq adventure, as the Bush gang knew very well, was by now a war which the great majority of the U.S. public heartily wish had never happened, and which the American people want to end yesterday if not sooner. It was a different story, of course, by the time of the February 2 State of the Empire address. In the afterglow of the Iraq election, nicely timed three days earlier, there was plenty to say about the democratic blessings the war has bestowed upon the grateful Iraqi people.

Schlockfest

What a heroic demonstration it was. Lawmakers bravely dipping their fingers in symbolic purple ink. A Marine's parents presenting their dead son's dog tags to an actual Iraqi voter (a woman active in Republican party politics, whose father according to some accounts died in an abortive anti-Saddam coup attempt encouraged and then abandoned by the CIA).

Administrations of earlier decades might have been embarrassed to stage such a shlockfest (even Leni Reifenstahl probably would have been ashamed to film this Triumph of the Shill). But credit Bush and his handlers with one thing: They cannot be shamed by anything, not mythical WMDs, not Abu Ghraib, not 100,000 dead Iraqis or 1400 dead and over 10,000 seriously wounded U.S. soldiers and top officers' admissions that the insurgency is growing, or the depletion of the National Guard and open descriptions of the military reserves as a "broken force."

Nothing embarrasses these guys. Alberto Gonzalez as Attorney- General, a man whose license to practice law (forget holding public office) should be revoked over the torture memos? Donald Rumsfeld on TV telling us he'd offered to resign over Abu Ghraib, a story he ought to be telling to a war crimes tribunal?

An administration that won't allow military coffins to be filmed coming off the ships "would they be squeamish about exploiting a dead serviceman to promote the new Iraqi democracy? Are you kidding? What's New? But there's more, of course: Bush Two is concerned not only with freedom throughout the rest of the world, but equally with building an Ownership Society at home. If the former means endless war, the latter means a future of permanent

stress and insecurity for working Americans, beginning with the death-by-privatization of social security.

This is only the leading edge of a budget full of brutalities. The deficit projections (\$390 billion for fiscal year 2006) are fictional, as they don't include costs of the Iraq and Afghan wars, or last year's Medicaid bill, or missile defense, or permanent tax cuts for the rich. But what's there is clear enough: military spending for FY 2006 (not counting the aforementioned really existing wars) topping \$419 billion, a 4.8% increase on FY 2005 and 41% since 2001 for the world's only superpower; savage cuts for everything else.

Federal funding for vocational, anti-drug and literacy programs: gone. Health and Human Services: down one percent. Housing and urban development: down 11.2 percent. Labor Department: down four percent. Food stamps: cut by \$1.1 billion. That will cut 300,000 people from the food stamp program. (For numerous details see "BushBudget, All Guns, No Butter," www.laborresearch.org/story2.php/375).

The fact that Bush's attack on social security is based on the most fantastic lies should not, by now, surprise anyone. But this fraud by now has been demonstrated exhaustively not only in the radical but the mainstream press. It's not news; nor is the fact that the Bush gang invents crises that don't exist (Iraqi WMDs) and pretends that actual crises aren't for real (catastrophic climate change).

Attack on working class

The frontal assault on the well-being of working class America continues a three-decade trend. Since the early 1970s, capital has been engaged in a near-permanent "employers' offensive." Sometimes this has been carried out by stealth, by chipping away at the more vulnerable layers of the population, or by gradual methods. There were also dramatic moments, as when Ronald Reagan in 1981 seized the opportunity to crush the air traffic controllers' union PATCO, with its relatively well-paid and mostly white membership.

This greatly accelerated the use of strikebreaking by "permanent replacement workers," the imposition of concessionary contracts, and increasingly vicious methods to prevent union organizing. We saw the tragic culmination of this process in the bitter 1990s defeats in the Illinois "war zone" and the Detroit newspaper strike.

By various methods, this offensive has successfully prevented real wages from rising since 1973 even as productivity greatly increased, restoring the global competitive position of U.S. capital. Slowly but surely, former secure and well-paid layers were transferred to the ranks of the working poor and insecure. Workers' power and rights on the job were generally eroded but sometimes outright smashed; the plagues of Wal-Mart and non-union trucking weakened the bargaining strength of key retail and transport unions; an increasingly reactionary labor law climate deprived individual workers of protection from arbitrary discipline even as it made every strike a war for union survival.

This downward spiral has proceeded apace under Democratic and Republican administrations, generally faster with Republicans in power. But while almost all sectors of working people were hit, those who have suffered the most were the lower paid, poorly organized workers, disproportionately drawn from people of color and immigrant communities.

Up to now, for example, probably the most shocking assault on entitlements was the wholesale dismantling of welfare, in a bipartisan operation by the Clinton presidency and the Republican Congress. Here above all it was the poor and vulnerable, the insecure and underemployed, over whose bodies corporate America walked on Bill Clinton's "bridge to the 21st century." Social security is different.

Here is the first full-scale open assault on a universal ("middle class," in American lingo) entitlement, formerly untouchable precisely because everyone benefits from it. If social security can be "reformed," that is to say, bled to death to enrich Wall Street brokerages via privatization, then everything is up for grabs. The right wing will have made giant steps toward their utopian society, in which each individual's survival depends on screwing others. Social security is under attack not because it is a failed program or in crisis, but because it is a success: Social security has dramatically reduced old-age extreme poverty. Privatize it, and old-age extreme poverty will return just as surely as child malnutrition, which was largely wiped out in America by the food stamp program, has come back with the demise of welfare.

The rest of the Bush program is cut from the same cloth. Take care of your own old age, or die in poverty; provide your own health insurance, or choose between death and bankruptcy if you get sick; don't expect compensation for asbestos exposure on the job. That's if you work for a living; for the wealthy and their retinue it's No corporate lobbyist, military contractor or right-wing talk pundit Left Behind — an inaugural ball that never ends.

The Opposition and Resistance

When Bush stated that in 2018 Social Security starts paying out more than it takes in — some imminent crisis, as if there weren't a huge savings built in just for the purpose! — some of the Democrats actually booed, a marked departure from the bleating normally heard from that quarter. Make no mistake:

The Democratic party's rhetorical defense of Social Security remains to be tested and may well crumble under pressure. But the fact that the Democrats have noticed the popular anger and fear over Social Security indicates how deep the outrage really is. Social security privatization, in fact, can be defeated — and with this, a big part of the right-wing offensive against civil rights and reproductive freedom can also be blunted — but only if powerful movements are mounted that don't put any trust in the Democrats. True, the Democrats may have also belatedly noticed that they could have won the election by actually opposing Bush's wretched war.

An unprecedented number of Senators voted against confirming the appointments of "Torture Boy" Gonzalez and Condoleezza Rice. The election of Howard Dean to head the Democratic National Committee by no means signals a "move to the left," but may indicate some understanding that simply following the Republicans rightward will lead to political extinction. Edward Kennedy explicitly likened the Iraq war to Vietnam, a previously taboo topic, and called for expedited withdrawal. (John Kerry immediately dissociated himself from this stance and insisted U.S. troops must remain, confirming once and for all that he is incapable of learning anything from recent experience, but has forgotten everything he knew thirty years ago.)

While the Democrats try to figure out whether they want to be an opposition or return to their accustomed mode of fetch, roll over and play dead, the antiwar movement needs to rebuild itself and become a force of real resistance. The March 19-20 antiwar actions — especially, in our view, the East Coast mobilization in Fayetteville, North Carolina and march on Fort Bragg — are a vital beginning.

Only a movement of antiwar resistance that gives voice to the resentment of tens of millions of Americans against the hideous waste of life and resources in this war, and the lies on which it was based from the beginning, can force any Congressional debate on ending it. Even more: The administration's overt threats against Syria, and barely-concealed U.S.-Israeli plans to bomb Iran, require the most rapid possible reconstruction of the international antiwar movement. Unless the people of America and the world are back in the streets, even those European governments who realize that launching a still wider war would be insane will not openly challenge Bush again.

Iraq Election

After the Iraq Election To accomplish this, the movement must focus like a laser beam on the demand "Bring the Troops Home Now!" This is all the more true in the wake of the January 30 Iraq election. Undoubtedly this election's relative success provides a short-term boost for the Bush regime, but this must be kept in perspective. This direct national election for a Constitutional assembly was decidedly not what the occupiers initially envisioned.

It was imposed on them, first and foremost, because the Shia leadership rejected the U.S. scheme: indirect elections, a Constitution to be dictated by U.S. authorities to carefully selected Iraqis, political parties organized under U.S. oversight, assuring that the fundamental issues (like privatizing Iraqi oil, health care and everything else) would be decided on the American model. Once forced to accept a national election, naturally the occupiers took credit for it. But it is up to the Iraqi people to decide the meaning of this election and the legitimacy of the bodies arising from it.

Clearly there were millions who saw the vote as a giant step toward empowering their communities and getting foreign troops out of their country, while millions of others felt it was a fraud. The distant third-place showing by the slate of the U.S.-appointed prime minister Allawi suggests what Iraqi voters think of the occupation. Be all that as it may, the crucial point for the antiwar movement must be that elections held under conditions of occupation do not legitimize the occupation.

Here is the Bush gang's latest lie: Iraqis voting for their representatives proves that "we liberated Iraq" after all. The fact is that this war for oil and empire remains a crime against humanity as it was from the beginning. Among both Iraqis and Americans, the main reason this election is seen as a success is the belief that it will lead in short order to getting U.S. troops out of the Iraqi quagmire. Both there and here, those hopes will be quickly disappointed and the crisis will return with full force. That reality — and the presence in the United States of real grassroots resistance, not just the tame Democratic opposition — is what's required to blow up the Bush Two agenda.