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Bush's assertion of executive power: The logic of presidential-military dictatorship

By Joe Kay
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At President Bush's July 11 press conference a significant exchange took place that has received very little media attention. Edwin Chen, who writes for Bloomberg.com, asked Bush, "How hard is it for you to conduct the war without popular support? Do you ever have trouble balancing between doing what you think is the right thing and following the will of the majority of the public, which is the essence of democracy?"

Bush's response was to emphasize the role of the military as a counterweight to public opinion. He outlined a concept of presidential power that upholds the military as a critical "constituency" rising above, and placed in opposition to, the American people. On this basis, Bush sought to justify a policy that has been clearly repudiated by the general population—not only in opinion polls, but also in the November 2006 midterm elections.

Bush began by attributing public opposition to the war to concerns that the US cannot succeed. "I can fully understand why people are tired of the war," he said. "The question they have is, can we win it? And, of course, I'm concerned about whether or not the American people are in this fight."

This was an attempt to dismiss and delegitimize the widespread opposition to the militarism, aggression and wanton destruction of human life that define not only the war in Iraq, but US foreign policy more broadly. There are millions of Americans who hate the war not because it has been mismanaged and may not "succeed," but because it is a barbaric and criminal enterprise.

He then declared that the occupation of Iraq will continue regardless, and

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attempted to defend this policy by appealing to the military as against the general population. “If our troops thought that I was taking a poll to decide how to conduct this war, they would be very concerned about the mission,” he said. “If our troops said, well, here we are in combat, and we’ve got a commander-in-chief who is running a focus group—in other words, politics is more important to him than our safety and/or our strategy—that would dispirit our troops.”

To underline the point, Bush then declared that there are “a lot of constituencies in this fight.” In the list that followed, the American people figured as only one constituency. A strategy of withdrawing troops “may sound simple, and it may affect polls,” Bush said, “but it would have long-term, serious security consequences for the United States.”

He continued with the assertion that “sometimes you just have to make the decisions based on what you think is right. My most important job is to help secure this country, and therefore the decisions in Iraq are all aimed at helping do that job.”

Plainly put, this means that the “security” interests of the US take precedence over the will of the American people, which Bush disparagingly and contemptuously equates with a “focus group.”

When Bush speaks about the security interests of the US, he is not speaking about the safety and well being of the American people. He is speaking of the geo-strategic interests of the American ruling elite, which considers the establishment of a hegemonic position in the oil-rich Middle East to be central to those interests.

Moreover, every would-be dictator claims that his authoritarian measures are taken to ensure national security. Everything else must be sacrificed, including democratic rights. This is the basic line that has been utilized by the government since 9/11 to lay siege to constitutionally protected democratic rights, in the name of the “war on terror.”

Having thus dealt with the “constituency” of the American people, which he acknowledged was broadly opposed to his war policy, Bush moved on to that constituency on which he would rely to continue the policy. “A second constituency is the military,” he said, adding, “I’m pretty confident our military do not want their commander-in-chief making political decisions about their future.”

The “third constituency” Bush cited was “military families,” in regard to

whom he said, "I don't think they want their commander-in-chief making decisions based upon popularity."

Thus, Bush advanced a conception that defines the "military" as a separate constituency which is more important than the American people as a whole.

When Bush speaks of the military, he is not referring to ordinary soldiers or their families, who are seen as little more than cannon fodder by the ruling establishment. In fact, US soldiers are generally no more supportive of the war in Iraq than the American population as a whole.

It is worth recalling one of the central grievances against King George III set down by the leaders of the American Revolution in the Declaration of Independence: "He has affected to render the military independent of and superior to the civil power." Indeed, in the political and constitutional debates that ensued, figures such as Thomas Jefferson issued strong warnings of the dangers of a standing army, declaring that a permanent military presence that would pose a constant danger to the democratic rights of the American people.

Bush's invocation of the military as a force to be invoked *against* the will of the American people was quite deliberate, and it should be taken very seriously. He made essentially the same argument at several other points in the course of the press conference.

He insisted, for example, that it was not possible to "let the Gallup poll or whatever polls there are decide the fate of the country." After refusing to rule out the possibility of a further troop escalation, he said, "I just ask the American people to understand that the commander-in-chief must rely upon the wisdom and judgment of the military thinkers and planners."

The content of this statement is a threat that the president will use his control over the military to impose the policies of the faction of the ruling elite that the administration represents—potentially including a further escalation of the war or its spread to other countries such as Iran—in the face of whatever popular opposition may arise.

Bush is explicit in declaring as a fundamental principle that politicians cannot be allowed to determine military policy—only generals can. This argument is as absurd as it is reactionary. First, Bush himself is a politician, and the top generals in charge of the military have been selected to carry out administration policy. Bush has repeatedly replaced or dismissed military officials when they came into conflict with certain aspects of administration

policy.

Second, the argument overturns the basic principle of civilian control of the military. According to Bush, the president is “their [that is, the military’s] commander-in-chief,” in the sense that he must do what the military wants. If the president determines, therefore, that the military does not want to obey the results of an election, then there is nothing that can be done.

It is remarkable, though not surprising, that Bush’s statements elicited hardly a word of opposition from the Democratic Party or the media. The major newspapers did not report this portion of the press conference, and no prominent politician denounced the extraordinary attack on basic constitutional principles embodied in Bush’s remarks.

The silence of the political establishment in the face of the Bush administration’s appeals to the military as an independent force in American politics is hardly new. In fact, Bush came to power in 2000 based upon a stolen election in which the counting of invalid military ballots played an important role. Democratic Party candidate Al Gore responded at the time by saying he could not become president without the support of the military.

Since that time, the military has played an ever more prominent role in American political life. The Bush administration has asserted the right to hold US citizens and non-citizens in military custody indefinitely and without charges. It has created the Northern Command (Northcom), which, for the first time, coordinates military actions within the United States.

The administration has systematically sought to expand the power of the military to intervene in domestic affairs. In the National Defense Authorization Act passed last year to provide military funding, the administration had a section inserted that amends the Posse Comitatus Act to allow for the domestic use of the military in case of natural disaster, terrorist attack, or “other conditions in which the president determines that domestic violence has occurred to the extent that state officials cannot maintain public order.”

Top Bush administration officials only rarely speak before civilian audiences. Almost every major speech given by Bush or Cheney is before a military audience.

The silence of the nominal political opposition to these dangers is all the more remarkable given the fact that the threat is directed not only against public opinion, but also against the administration’s critics within the

political establishment. There are escalating policy differences within the ruling elite, and support for the administration is hemorrhaging within Congress itself. No faction in the official debate in Washington opposes the war, but there are deep divisions over the policy required to uphold the interests of American imperialism.

All of the factions within the political establishment, whatever their tactical differences, are, in fact, united in their fear of the “constituency” of American public opinion. Under these conditions, the threat of a more open turn toward presidential-military dictatorship is very real.

If an election can have no effect on policy, and the power of the military is raised as a counterweight to any attempt to shift government policy, what alternative presents itself to the population? Here it is worth citing another passage from the Declaration of Independence:

“Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these [the rights of the population], it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness... [W]hen a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.”

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