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Iraq's missing weapons—Bush and the media share an inside joke

By Bill Van Auken
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President George W. Bush was the star performer at the 60th annual Radio and Television Correspondents' Association dinner held in Washington, DC Thursday night.

Bush spent ten minutes doing a standup comic routine for the assembled officials and members of the media elite. The running gag centered on a slide show presentation of pictures of the US president in awkward poses—peering under a table, leaning to look out a window, etc.

To appreciative laughter and applause from the poodles of the Washington press corps, Bush accompanied the pictures with a narration that consisted of: “Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be somewhere...Nope, no weapons over there... Maybe under here.”

Such banter between the powerful and those who cover them in the media generally consists of inside jokes, and this was no exception. Just over a year ago, the Bush administration launched its unprovoked war against Iraq, claiming it was an act of self-defense against a supposedly imminent danger posed by a vast stockpile of “weapons of mass destruction” in the hands of Saddam Hussein.

The inside joke is that this was a bald-faced lie, and everyone at the black-tie media affair where Bush put on his routine knew it.

On March 19, 2003, Bush announced his war in a televised address to the American people, declaring: “Our nation enters this conflict reluctantly, yet

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our purpose is sure. The people of the United States and our friends and allies will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder.”

One year later, it is universally acknowledged that there were no such weapons in Iraq. Whatever such arms the Saddam Hussein regime once obtained—in large measure thanks to the support of Washington and London—had been destroyed more than a decade earlier. The administration’s allegations of a Saddam Hussein-Al Qaeda connection were likewise exposed as spurious.

The administration had come to power—as an increasing number of ex-Bush aides are now admitting—with the intention of conquering Iraq and its vast oil reserves, and set about finding a pretext for carrying out a war of aggression.

The media willingly obliged by parroting the government’s charges and floating one false story after another, many of them based on the self-serving fabrications of Iraqi exiles. No serious attempt was made by any of the major media outlets to subject the administration’s claims about Iraqi WMD to critical scrutiny. Instead, both broadcast news and the print media functioned as semi-official organs of war propaganda.

That is why the tuxedoed correspondents and media personalities present for Bush’s performance could so easily share in the laughter.

The Democratic Party was also in on the joke from the outset. Leading Democratic politicians—including the party’s current presidential nominee, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts—assured with their votes that the administration received authorization for launching its war. Now Kerry claims he was “misled” and he had truly believed that the likes of Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld would only choose war as a “last resort.” That perhaps is the greatest joke of all.

He and other Democrats have happily joined in the debate about “intelligence failures,” when they all were well aware the administration was lying and had decided to invade Iraq for reasons that had nothing to do with WMD.

Bush’s humor—according to numerous accounts of those who have endured him up close and personal—is not known to be good-natured. The president is a bully and a sadist. There is generally someone who feels the string of serving as the butt of his jokes.

At whose expense did he deliver his “funny” remarks about WMD?

The candidates are legion. There is first and foremost the people of Iraq. The phony US claims about weapons stockpiles were used to justify US aggression not just by the current administration, but its Democratic predecessor as well. They served as the principal pretext for maintaining a decade-long economic embargo that UN aid officials described as “genocidal.” The denial of essential food, medicines and supplies to maintain Iraq’s infrastructure is estimated to have cost 1 million lives, over half of them children.

Over the past year, the US war and occupation have killed and maimed tens of thousands more Iraqis and left the country in ruins.

Nearly 600 US soldiers have been killed in this war, while thousands more have returned from Iraq with grievous wounds, hundreds having lost arms, legs or eyes, while others have suffered brain injuries or severe psychological trauma. It seems doubtful that the families of these slain and wounded soldiers would find the president’s jokes all that amusing.

The day before Bush performed his comedy routine in Washington, Jill Kiehl attended a memorial service at a cemetery in Center Point, Texas, a town about 35 miles northwest of San Antonio. She was there with her ten-month-old son, Nathaniel, who was born seven weeks after his father, James Kiehl, was killed in Iraq. The 22-year-old soldier was one of the 11 members of the 507th Maintenance Company who lost their lives in an ambush after their convoy took a wrong turn in the southern Iraq city of Nassiriya. The incident was the bloodiest in the initial invasion and is largely remembered for the capture and then recovery of Jessica Lynch.

“The evidence that’s starting to come out now feels like he (Bush) was misleading us,” Kiehl told reporters as she stood by her husband’s grave. “It’s almost as though he had things fixed so it would look like he needed to go to war.”

Describing herself as “bitter” about Bush’s decision to declare war on Iraq, she added: “It’s upsetting that he (Bush) would have lied to America to get what he wanted. In a way, it’s like he used people. That’s how I feel. I think the reasons for going over there were bogus and misleading.”

The vast majority of Americans would not have found Bush’s “comedy” routine entertaining. It took a special, fawning audience composed of those in the media who served as collaborators in the mass deception used to drag the

American people into war.

For American working people who live well outside the incestuous loop of government officials and media figures represented at the Washington dinner, the launching of an illegal war on the basis of lies is a matter of deadly seriousness, and, in not a few cases, personal tragedy.

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