

## **Bush's Liberty Song Echoes Vietnam Tune**

When U.S. President George W. Bush strode into the Capitol to give his State of the Union address last night, his supporters waved their darkened fingers at him in celebration of his triumph at the Iraqi polls.

But was that purple ink or did Congress stir the purple Kool-Aid with its collective fingers? And are Americans expected to drink it, the way so many swallowed the administration's lies about weapons of mass destruction that the media reheated and served up?

"We will succeed in Iraq because Iraqis are determined to fight for their own freedom, and to write their own history," said Bush, in a speech that, by my count, included seven mentions of the word liberty, eight droppings of democracy and 28 counts of free or freedom.

Bush talked of a now "free and sovereign Iraq" — although that probably comes as a surprise to the overwhelming majority of Iraqis who want the U.S. occupiers, who are building permanent bases there, out.

But still the Iraqis came out, courageously, to vote. No question: Dancing in the streets sure beats dying in them.

Not that many anchors on U.S. TV made that observation during last Sunday's election in Iraq — or since.

The turnout was the thing.

By the time all the votes are counted — no thanks to all those international monitors, most of whom were outside the country — it could sink well below the much-vaunted 72 per cent that was making Fox News anchors walking Viagra ads on Sunday. It's already dropped to 57 per cent. At that rate, we can expect the final number to slip by on a news crawl just as Michael Jackson beams up to the Mother Ship.

The election was the perfect halftime show between Bush's inauguration last month and last night's speech.

Liberty is now the message track. Americans are getting shoved aboard the freedom train by the White House slogan department and its megaphones in the media. Fear is like, so 2004.

But liberty from what? Doesn't it come with independence?

These questions were too weighty for the networks as they showed countless Iraqis giving the purple finger to the insurgents — and to the U.S. occupiers.

Countless because there was no census to determine exactly how many people were eligible to vote. As for those registered, they were recognized only by their U.N. oil-for-food ration cards issued under the Saddam regime. Ironic considering that the people who condemn that program as corrupt are the very same people praising voter registration based on it.

But didn't the Iraqis, at least those within camera range, look happy?

We didn't see voters beyond walking distance of the barricaded hotels where the big U.S. news guns were holed up. We had to imagine how joyously they must have danced in the happy campgrounds around the flattened Falluja or in the Abu Ghraib S&M club.

Don't get me wrong: It's heartening to see laughing faces in Baghdad.

But we've seen this before, in April 2003, when the statue of Saddam was toppled. Had the cameras pulled back then for a wide shot, more people would have understood that the image was not quite as pictured.

There was no scratching below the surface then, or this week.

Little about the election conformed to any recognized standards for open and democratic votes. What the Iraqis got instead was all put into place, directly or indirectly, by the people who invaded their country, caused their infrastructure to be destroyed and plundered their national wealth.

None of the candidates who made the approved lists can undo the damage done by U.S. proconsul Paul Bremer before he slipped out of Baghdad. He locked in all kinds of goodies for American corporations.

Some examples? The complete privatization of Iraq's 200 state-owned enterprises and 100 per cent foreign ownership. Iraqis are not entitled to any of the contracts to rebuild their own country, while U.S. multinationals, such as Halliburton, formerly headed by Vice-President Dick Cheney, can take the money and run. Yet another order drops tariffs and surcharges, destroying local businesses. How do you say "Welcome to Wal-Mart" in Arabic?

This week, an old *New York Times* story was making the left-lib Internet rounds. Dated Sept. 4, 1967, it's headed, "U.S. Encouraged by Vietnam Vote: Officials Cite 83% Turnout Despite Vietcong Terror."

It reads, "United States officials were surprised and heartened today at the size of turnout in South Vietnam's presidential election despite a Vietcong terrorist campaign to disrupt the voting. According to reports from Saigon, 83 per cent of the 5.85 million registered voters cast their ballots yesterday. Many of them risked reprisals threatened by the Vietcong. A successful election has long been seen as the keystone in President Johnson's policy of encouraging the growth of constitutional processes in South Vietnam ... The purpose of the voting was to give legitimacy to the Saigon Government ..."

We all know how that movie ended.

Stay tuned for the rerun.

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