

Montrealers Deliver a Fiery Message to Bush: You Are Persona Non Grata

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They threw shoes – so many shoes that hotel staff had to roll out a laundry bin onto the street to pick them all up, and even then, the bin could barely contain them all.

They chanted: “Bush: Assassin! Terroriste! Criminel!” and then, at the appropriate command, hurled more shoes toward the heavily guarded entrance of the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, where George W. Bush was scheduled to speak.

They waved signs: “Don’t Duck!” and “1.3 Million Dead Because of Bush” and “Bread Not Bombs for the Children of Iraq.” Some of the signs and chants were directed equally at Bush’s father. “You are a murderer too!”

And toward the end, they burned George W. Bush in effigy.

My friend Robin Lloyd and I were watching most of this noontime spectacle on October 22nd from inside the hotel, where we managed to gain entry flashing our press passes. Lloyd is a member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the publisher of *Toward Freedom Magazine* (now on-line at [TowardFreedom.com](#)) which has continued a tradition begun by her father of chronicling Third World resistance to colonialism and now, imperialism. She agreed to accompany me to Montreal to witness what I expected to be a lively example of a growing world wide movement aimed at holding George W. Bush and his top advisors accountable for torture and other high crimes and misdemeanors during his eight-year administration. If we were lucky, we would also witness our former president deliver his speech about “Eight Momentous Years.” He was addressing a well-heeled crowd invited by the Montreal Chamber of Commerce.

While we were waiting for Bush to show up, the hotel staff rolled the shoe-laden laundry bin back indoors, prompting me to pick one off the top of the pile as a souvenir. Minutes later, a security guard approached me and politely advised me that I’d better conceal the shoe in my purse. “I don’t think it would go over well if you were seen with a shoe at this time,” he said.

How very civil of him, I mused. Even the white-helmeted Montreal police outside acted with restraint, in marked contrast to the Darth Vader-like robocops who greeted demonstrators outside the recent G-20 meetings in Pittsburgh with tear gas, clubs and sound screams.

Still, it was an eerie sensation to be standing in a carpeted, well heated hotel (appropriately honoring monarchy) and watching shivering, mostly young protestors mouthing their chants outside, chants which were barely audible. Perhaps the hotel had been built with some kind of special plate glass to insulate guests from the din of everyday life. Robin and I figured

that Bush had been ushered in through the back door, because we never saw him. His speech was by invitation only. Even the press had to be invited. The price of admission: \$400. About a 1,000 people showed up. Bush reportedly charges up to \$150,000 for each appearance.

Deprived of seeing the former president, the protestors outside seemed satisfied that they had delivered a message to him through their signs, which said: You are a War Criminal. And because you are, you are Persona Non Grata in Montreal.

The day before, they ran a full- page ad in the daily *Le Devoir* endorsed by 48 groups and 440 individuals. It read in part:

“We denounce the invitation from Montreal’s business circles to George W. Bush, whose policies were in violation of international law and led to such suffering worldwide. The ‘eight momentous years’ of Bush in the White House were first and foremost those of two wars of aggression and occupation which continue today, for whom the populations of Iraq and Afghanistan tragically continue paying the price of massive bombings of cities, of ‘collateral’ massacres of villagers, of carnage and destruction, for rape and other sexual violence, of torture and arbitrary detention.”

Their ad ended with a warning to fellow citizens “about the dangers that this ultra-conservative mind set continues to represent, with its sole concern for the big powers.”

Bush’s tour of Canadian cities, which the protestors dubbed “The Hypocrisy Tour,” has been designed to promote his upcoming autobiography and rehabilitate his tarnished image as president. Even his father, Bush 41, has been smarting from the criticism of his son. Bush père recently criticized MSNBC hosts Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow for their sometimes edgy coverage of Bush Jr., calling them “sick puppies.”

“The way they treat my son and anyone who’s opposed to their point of view is just horrible,” Mr. Bush said. “When our son was president they just hammered him mercilessly and I think obscenely a lot of the time and now it’s moved to a new president.”

Russ Baker, the author of the Bush biography *Family of Secrets*, sees it differently, pointing out that if anyone can be criticized for vicious name-calling, it’s Bush Sr. Here was the man “who employed the political assassin Lee Atwater (look up Willie Horton) and gave Karl Rove his first job.” Besides, Baker adds, “it is hard to recall criticism of H.W.’s son that was wildly inaccurate, truly out of bounds, or not reflective of the awful reality of W.’s presidency.”

I asked one of the protestors about the Quebec government’s attitude toward Bush Jr. when he was in power. “Before the invasion of Iraq,” the young man explained, “government officials sided more with us because we had powerful demonstrations against the war all over the world. When we failed to stop the war, they became more cautious. The United States is very powerful both politically and economically, and many of our elected representatives did not want to go up against the US. And now we have Bush trying to slip under the radar screen in an effort to repair his image.”

“Are you satisfied with the turnout?” I asked. Some three hundred people had shown up.

“It’s not bad considering it’s on a weekday,” he replied. “What you see here are the most dedicated people, the people who are not going to give up in wanting to hold Bush

accountable.”

I'd heard similar comments in the U.S. about the size of demonstrations being down, because people wanted to give President Obama the benefit of the doubt regarding the continuation of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But now, almost a year into Obama's administration, patience is waning. Meanwhile, the very committed have been at it all along. Wearing orange jumpsuits and black hoods, demonstrators haven't been protesting outside federal buildings in Washington and other major cities, demanding accountability for the crimes committed by those at the very top of the Bush administration. Their only problem: few Americans know about their protests, because the national press has ignored them.

In Montreal, there was good regional coverage, even though the news did not make it over the border into the U.S. The Montreal Gazette ran a large picture of Bush being burned in effigy under the headline “Shoes Fly as George W. Bush Speaks in Montreal.”

Le Devoir described Bush as being “charming” to his audience, “telling jokes and winking at his Canadian hosts, all the while affirming that he had no regrets for decisions taken during his two terms in office, such as launching his country into a war in Iraq.”

The Gazette quoted Bush telling his audience “I am confident that I made decisions based on principle, that I made calls as best I could, and I did not sell my soul.”

Nonetheless, millions of Americans have indicated through polls that they want the former President prosecuted for his crimes, be they a murderous illegal war in Iraq, torture, or warrant-less spying on Americans. And if the demonstration in Montreal is any indication, those thoughts are shared beyond our borders. The sentiment underlying these protests is always the same: If we don't hold these leaders accountable now for crimes they committed while in office, they and their successors will continue to commit them in the future. If we believe in the principle that no one, not even the President, is above the law, then it's time we join with the “very committed” in the accountability movement and start acting on that principle.

Charlotte Dennett is the author of the forthcoming book, [*The People v Bush: One Lawyer's Campaign to Bring the President to Justice and the National Grass Roots Movement She's Encountered Along the Way*](#), to be published by Chelsea Green in January

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