**Not a laughing matter**

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Tuesday, May 24, 2022

Everyone has by now heard about the latest gaffe by former United States president and unconvicted war criminal George W Bush, father of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and other fantastically bloody escapades.

In a recent speech at his very own George W Bush Presidential Centre in Dallas, Texas, Bush condemned the “absence of checks and balances” in Vladimir Putin’s Russia, which had enabled “one man to launch a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion of Iraq”.

Quickly realising his not-really-mistake, Bush corrected himself: “I mean, of Ukraine” – but added slightly under his breath: “Iraq, too, anyway”. The spectacle elicited gleeful laughter from the audience, as did Bush’s subsequent attribution of the Iraq-Ukraine mix-up to his age: ‘Seventy-five’.

Granted, the linguistically challenged ex-head of state has long made people chuckle with his so-called ‘Bushisms’, which have over the years included the following peculiar utterances: “I know how hard it is for you to put food on your family”; “I know the human being and fish can coexist peacefully”; “They misunderestimated me”; and “Rarely is the question asked: Is our children learning?”

But the effective annihilation of a nation is hardly a laughing matter. Ditto for the reduction to a split-second “Iraq, too, anyway” of hundreds of thousands of deaths, countless massacres of Iraqi civilians, the forcible displacement of millions of people, and the saturation of the country with toxic and radioactive munitions that continue to cause congenital birth defects, cancer, and all manner of other maladies nearly two decades after the launch of the “wholly unjustified and brutal invasion”.

One can imagine the horror that would ensue were a nonwhite non-Westerner to crack a joke about, say, the September 11 attacks, or some other event paling in comparison – in terms of human and material destruction – to the war on Iraq. Bush and his audience, on the other hand, are by virtue of imperial entitlement permitted to snicker at a reference to the mass slaughter of nonwhite non-Westerners as though it were merely an instance of self-deprecating humour on the part of the former imperial commander-in-chief.

Of course, this is not the first time Bush has unintentionally said something deeply revealing about his own belligerence. There was that time in 2006, for example, when he remarked in an interview with CBS Evening News: “You know, one of the hardest parts of my job is to connect Iraq to the war on terror”.

Nor, it so happens, is it the first time that he has joked about the whole premise of the Iraq war. Back in 2004, during the annual cringe-fest known as the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, Bush narrated a slide show featuring a picture of him looking under furniture in the Oval Office: “Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be here somewhere”, he quipped to applause and laughter.

This, mind you, was just one year after the launch of a war that was supposedly meant to save the world from the apocalyptic threat of Iraq’s alleged WMD arsenal. In an April 2004 dispatch for The Nation, titled Laughing With Bush, David Corn – then the magazine’s Washington editor – called out the president for his Correspondents’ Dinner “performance” and the attendees for their ingratiating response.

In front of an “audience of people who supposedly spend their days pursuing the truth”, Corn wrote, “Bush joked about misstatements (if not lies) he had used to persuade (if not hornswoggle) the American people and the media”.

In other words, the entire situation was itself a joke – albeit not at all funny.

The Correspondents’ Dinner has also played host to other bouts of presidential humour-that-wasn’t – including in 2010 when then-president Barack Obama undertook to announce that members of the Jonas Brothers band were in attendance at the venue and that his daughters Sasha and Malia were “huge fans”.

Obama continued: “But boys, don’t get any ideas. I have two words for you: Predator drones. You will never see it coming”. After pausing to allow for laughter and applause, the president received even more giggles with the line: “You think I’m joking”.

Never mind that US military drones were then, as now, notoriously associated with the indiscriminate killing of civilians in various foreign lands. In the end, these presidential punchlines achieve the sort of barbarity disguised as banality that reflexively tickles America’s funny bone.

Excerpted: ‘George W Bush is not funny’. Courtesy: Aljazeera.com