

## *Deconstructing George W. Bush: A Critical Analysis of the 2002 State of the Union Address*

President George W. Bush's State of the Union address on January 29, 2002 was the first in many years to focus primarily on foreign policy. Despite widespread accolades in the media and strong bipartisan support in Congress, a careful examination of the language and assumptions in the address raise disturbing questions about the direction of U.S. foreign policy under the current administration. What follows are some excerpts consisting of the majority of the speech addressing foreign policy issues and interspersed with some critical commentary. This should not be interpreted as in any way minimizing the very real danger from terrorism, or the need for a decisive response, nor to imply that Bush administration policy regarding terrorism and other foreign policy issues has been totally negative. Yet the failure to recognize the misleading verbiage and to recognize the dangerous implications of such words—however eloquent and reassuring to a nation that has experienced such trauma in recent months—will not only make us less safe from the threat of terrorism, but will deprive Americans of our greatest defense and asset: our freedom to question and challenge government policies that are not in the best interests of our country and the world.

—Stephen Zunes

### *The annotated State of the Union Address:*

*"In four short months, our nation has comforted the victims;*

*And, tragically, created still more, including thousands of Afghan civilians.*

*. . . begun to rebuild New York;*

It would indeed be wonderful if the federal government were really beginning to rebuild New York and other decaying urban areas, where public health, mass transit, schools, housing, and basic infrastructure are notably inferior to those of other Western industrialized nations; this is largely the result of decades of excessive military spending and fiscal policies favoring the wealthy, trends being accelerated by the Bush administration. Unfortunately, the rebuilding of New York is largely limited to areas of the financial district in lower Manhattan near where the World Trade Center once stood.

*. . . rallied a great coalition;*

While most of the world can not help but come together in the face of the threat from terrorism, the coalition that President Bush claims to have rallied is hardly united over U.S. policies. Even our strongest allies, not to mention Islamic governments whose cooperation we need in tracking down and breaking up terrorist cells in their countries, have raised strong objections over the following U.S. actions: the use of excessive force in Afghanistan; the backing of autocratic regimes and occupation armies; the threats to attack other nations; the violation of the rights of captured fighters and of immigrants; the efforts to undermine international treaties—such as the creation of an international criminal court and those attempting to control small arms, biological weapons, and money laundering—which could be powerful tools against terrorists; and, the refusal to seriously address the political, social, and economic conditions which breed terrorism.

*... captured, arrested and rid the world of thousands of terrorists;*

While U.S. forces have indeed “captured, arrested, and rid the world” (the final piece a euphemism for killing) of thousands of people in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the number who could actually be considered terrorists, even by a very liberal definition, is probably only in the hundreds. Most of the others were Afghan soldiers and civilians, most of whom were neither terrorists nor supporters of terrorism.

*... destroyed Afghanistan's terrorist training camps;*

These so-called “terrorist camps,” unlike bases of conventional armies, are not very significant strategically, since they house few if any heavy weapons, sophisticated communications technologies, or other strategic assets that cannot be quickly made portable. Most of these camps were evacuated long before the bombing commenced and much of the weapons and ordinance was moved as well. In dealing with a decentralized network of terrorist cells, success cannot be adequately measured by the destruction of deserted “camps.” Ironically, a number of these camps were actually constructed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency during the 1980s.

*... saved a people from starvation;*

According to most development groups, the U.S.-led war greatly exacerbated the level of malnutrition in the country by creating enormous refugee flows at the onset of winter, preventing food convoys from entering the country, and disrupting herding and agriculture. With the reduction of

the air war in December, relief supplies are now getting in again. It remains to be seen if the factious coalition of warlords and others now in power will do a better job than the Taliban in insuring the basic food needs of the population are met. The much ballyhooed U.S. food drops were extremely small relative to the need and relative to the additional food shortages resulting from the U.S. air war.

*... and freed a country from brutal oppression.*

The overthrow of the Taliban, a regime initially coddled by the United States, was no doubt welcomed by most Afghans. However, there remain questions as to whether these theocratic extremists would have survived much longer anyway due to internal pressures, whether they could have been dispatched more efficiently than through ten weeks of heavy bombing, or whether the new regime—which includes some notorious warlords and militia leaders—will not themselves engage in further repression.

*“The American flag flies again over our embassy in Kabul...”*

The American flag had flown in Kabul under a number of repressive regimes in the past and the U.S. presence has contributed little to creating a more just and democratic Afghanistan.

*“Terrorists who once occupied Afghanistan now occupy cells at Guantanamo Bay.”*

Al-Qaeda terrorists found sanctuary in Afghanistan, but to say they “occupied” Afghanistan is a bit of an exaggeration. It may also be an exaggeration to call the outdoor cages in which prisoners are held

“cells.” Finally, U.S. control over Guantanamo Bay, which came as a result of a century-old treaty of dubious legality, is considered by many to be an occupation in itself.

*“And terrorist leaders who urged followers to sacrifice their lives are running for their own.”*

Unfortunately, few are probably running for their lives at this point, but are underground in other countries planning new attacks.

*“America and Afghanistan are now allies against terror. We will be partners in rebuilding that country...”*

Given the refusal of the United States to join the multinational peacekeeping force and the rather limited contributions to economic development thus far, this may be an overly optimistic assertion.

*“When I called our troops into action, I did so with complete confidence in their courage and skill.”*

Unfortunately, relatively few are trained in the kind of commando and paramilitary operations necessary for counterterrorism. Most are trained in conventional warfare, which tends to be a very blunt and not particularly effective means to fight terrorists.

*“And tonight, thanks to them, we are winning the war against terror.”*

For reasons too numerous to mention, this is difficult even to define, much less measure.

*“The men and women of our armed forces have delivered a message now clear to every enemy of the United States: Even 7,000 miles away, across oceans and continents, on mountaintops and in caves, you will not escape the justice of this nation.”*

If justice has any meaning—and is simply not a euphemism for revenge—it would include some form of due process, which has thus far been denied to those targeted in the war. It is also ironic, given that the Bush administration opposes the creation of international legal institutions, such as the international criminal court.

*“Our military has put the terror training camps of Afghanistan out of business, yet camps still exist in at least a dozen countries. A terrorist underworld—including groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and Jaish-i-Mohammed—operates in remote jungles and deserts and hides in the centers of large cities.”*

It is significant the President Bush only mentions Islamic groups by name. The most notorious terrorist groups in terms of lives lost are non-Muslim groups in Africa. The Tamil Tigers—made up of Sri Lankan Hindus—hold the world record for suicide bombings. In addition, there are the various right-wing Latin American terrorists, some of whom got their training in the United States, including at the infamous School of the Americas at Fort Benning, which many human rights activists consider to also be a “terror training camp.”

*“My hope is that all nations will heed our call and eliminate the terrorist parasites who threaten their countries and our own. Many nations are acting forcefully. But some governments will be timid in the face of terror. And make no mistake: If they do not act, America will.”*

This appears to be a threat against nations that refuse to “heed our call,” essentially giving the United States the unilateral right to define who is a terrorist. Furthermore,

there is nothing in international law that says that timidity is valid grounds for military intervention. Certainly, governments that harbor what are generally recognized as terrorists should be held accountable. Yet the vehicle for such accountability is the United Nations, not any single government.

*“Our second goal is to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction.”*

Apparently this does not preclude America or its friends and allies from threatening others with weapons of mass destruction—or from being an obstacle to efforts to strengthen existing international treaties like the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions.

*“Some of these regimes have been pretty quiet since Sept. 11. But we know their true nature. North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens.”*

The Bush administration has broken off disarmament talks with North Korea and scaled back food aid.

*“Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom.”*

The International Atomic Energy Agency and other monitoring bodies have strongly questioned the U.S. assertion of such an aggressive pursuit of weapons of mass destruction by the Iranian government. Similarly, there has been a major reduction in Iranian support for terrorist groups since the 1980s. The internal struggle by elected moderates against the largely unelected hardliners has

been greatly hampered by the U.S. refusal to support the moderates by ending the U.S. sanctions and military threats against the Iran.

*“Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax and nerve gas and nuclear weapons for over a decade.”*

American companies, with U.S. government support, exported the first anthrax strain to Iraq in the early 1980s and supplied key components for Iraq’s chemical and nuclear weapons program. Furthermore, all evidence indicates that Iraq’s chemical and nuclear weapons program was destroyed during the Gulf War and subsequent inspections regime and there is no clear evidence that it has since been resurrected.

*“This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens, leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children.”*

At the time of the Halabja massacre and other atrocities in the 1980s, where the Iraqis slaughtered thousands of Kurdish civilians with chemical weapons, the U.S. helped cover up for Saddam Hussein’s regime by refusing to acknowledge Iraqi responsibility. American officials began bringing this up only after the U.S. ended its appeasement of the Iraqi regime following its 1990 invasion of the pro-American emirate of Kuwait.

*“This is a regime that agreed to international inspections, then kicked out the inspectors.”*

The inspection regime was imposed by the United States following Iraq’s defeat in the 1991 Gulf War. Furthermore, the

UNSCOM inspectors were not kicked out, but were withdrawn under strong U.S. pressure in 1998. In response to a series of heavy air strikes against Iraq soon afterwards, the Iraqis decided not to allow them back in.

*“This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.*

More likely, it is another cynical—but effective—attempt by Saddam Hussein to provoke a confrontation with the United States to enhance his political standing at home and elsewhere in the Arab world.

*“States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.*

None of these states are among the most heavily armed countries in their regions, let alone the world. Similarly, unlike such U.S. allies as Morocco, Israel, and Turkey, none of these states currently occupies any neighboring country. It is particularly disturbing that Iran, in its significant if uneven steps toward greater political pluralism and rapprochement with the West, is linked with the hostile totalitarian regimes of Iraq and North Korea.

*“By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.*

The United States has consistently opposed calls for the creation of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction for both East Asia and the Middle East. The Bush administration is continuing the

U.S. policy of nuclear apartheid, where the United States may bring nuclear weapons into the region on its planes and ships and U.S. allies like Israel, Pakistan, and India are able to develop nuclear weapons, but other countries can not. While all three of these countries singled out by President Bush have been linked to terrorist groups in the past, none have ties to Al-Qaeda and there has been no evidence to support the contention that they would pass on weapons of mass destruction to individual terrorists.

*“We will work closely with our coalition to deny terrorists and their state sponsors the materials, technology, and expertise to make and deliver weapons of mass destruction.*

By far the best strategy would be to support calls for universal disarmament, so such materials and technology would not be available for anyone.

*“We will develop and deploy effective missile defenses to protect America and our allies from sudden attack.*

It is hard to imagine how a missile defense system could prevent a nuclear attack by terrorists.

*“The United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.*

A worthy goal, except that there is no evidence that these regimes have such weapons to threaten us with or are anywhere close to procuring them. There are far more real dangers to be concerned with facing America and the world already, including AIDS, environmental destruction, growing inequality, and other threats which were not even mentioned in the president’s address.

*“Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun. This campaign may not be finished on our watch, yet it must be and it will be waged on our watch. We cannot stop short. If we stopped now, leaving terror camps intact and terror states unchecked, our sense of security would be false and temporary.*

When does a “war on terror,” like the “war on drugs,” ever end, and at what costs? Similarly, what is the definition of “terror” and who defines it? It is doubtful that President Bush has in mind the right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia or the Jewish fundamentalist settlers in the West Bank who terrorize nearby villagers, not to mention the security forces of several American allies, which reputable human rights groups have accused of terrorizing whole populations.

*“It costs a lot to fight this war. We have spent more than a billion dollars a month, over 30 million dollars a day, and we must be prepared for future operations. Afghanistan proved that expensive precision weapons defeat the enemy and spare innocent lives, and we need more of them.*

While the proportion of civilian casualties relative to military targets struck in the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan was certainly an improvement from air campaigns of previous decades, there were still thousands of civilians killed, people just as innocent as those who died September 11. This call for still more weapons will likely mean more innocent people dying.

*“My budget includes the largest increase in defense spending in two decades, because while the price of freedom and security is high, it is never too high: whatever it costs to defend our country, we will pay it.*

A careful look at President Bush's proposed military budget shows that only a small percentage is geared toward counterterrorism. Far more is spent, for example, in building unnecessary and expensive weapons systems originally designed to counter Soviet weapons that no longer exist.

*"America will lead by defending liberty and justice, because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere. No nation owns these aspirations, and no nation is exempt from them. We have no intention of imposing our culture, but America will always stand firm for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, private property, free speech, equal justice, and religious tolerance."*

This from an administration which provides large-scale military, economic, and diplomatic support to the reactionary, misogynist, fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia, not to mention Israeli occupation forces in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip and Moroccan forces in occupied Western Sahara. Indeed, according to Amnesty International, the majority of recipients of arms transfers from the United States engage in a pattern of gross and systematic human rights violations. Regarding the denial of imposing culture, one only need

look at U.S. pressure at the World Trade Organization to eliminate safeguards protecting indigenous film industries and other cultural institutions from U.S.-based multinational corporations.

*"We seek a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror. In this moment of opportunity, a common danger is erasing old rivalries. America is working with Russia, China, and India in ways we never have before to achieve peace and prosperity."*

This includes quiet support for Russian repression in Chechnya, Chinese repression in Sinkiang Xinjiang and Tibet, and Indian repression in Kashmir.

*"In every region, free markets and free trade and free societies are proving their power to lift lives. Together with friends and allies from Europe to Asia, from Africa to Latin America, we will demonstrate that the forces of terror cannot stop the momentum of freedom."*

There is great irony in the U.S.-backed definition of promoting free trade and free markets, which gives unelected and unaccountable supra-national bodies like the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund power over democratically elected governments in individual nation-states, even to the degree of forcing these governments to rescind their own laws protecting consumers, labor, and the environ-

ment. Ironically, the increasing economic stratification and poverty resulting from structural adjustment programs and related externally imposed measures from these U.S.-dominated international financial institutions toward Islamic countries are some the factors encouraging the development of extremist anti-American organizations.

*"Our enemies send other people's children on missions of suicide and murder. They embrace tyranny and death as a cause and a creed. We stand for a different choice, made long ago, on the day of our founding. We affirm it again today. We choose freedom and the dignity of every life. Steadfast in our purpose, we now press on. We have known freedom's price; we have shown freedom's power, and in this great conflict, my fellow Americans, we will see freedom's victory."*

It will be very difficult for freedom to triumph if America's closest allies in the war include such regimes as the family dictatorship in Saudi Arabia, the medieval sultanate in Oman, the crypto-Communist autocracy in Uzbekistan, and the military dictatorship in Pakistan. Indeed, it has been U.S. backing of such regimes which has been partly responsible for the rise of anti-American extremism in those parts of the world.