

# Time for Bush to Walk the Talk

By Ronald Bruce St John | September 24, 2004

President Bush, in his January 2001 inaugural address, described the United States as “a place where personal responsibility is valued and respected,” pledging “to call for responsibility and try to live it as well.” Four years later, in his September 2004 speech accepting the Republican nomination for a second term, the president returned to this theme, telling Americans they would have a choice to make on election day “based on the records we have built.” That said, his acceptance speech was notable, not for what he included but for what he left out—the problems and missteps that have plagued the Bush administration’s foreign policy. It’s time for the president to speak “on the record,” accepting responsibility for his flawed policies and discussing what he would do differently, if anything, in a second term.

## Post 9/11 Policy

Immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, President Bush initiated a radical reorientation of U.S. foreign policy. He defined policy in the simplest terms: either you are with the United States or you are with the terrorists. He expanded his thinking beyond terrorism in the 2002 State of the Union address, including nuclear proliferation and weapons of mass destruction. He also identified an “axis of evil” (Iran, Iraq, and North Korea) as a special threat on the nuclear proliferation front.

Six months later, in a June 2002 address to West Point graduates, the president developed and began to relate the separate themes of American hegemony, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, preemptive action, and democracy in the Middle East. He argued that “new threats also require new thinking,” but “if we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.” On the contrary, “we must take the battle to the enemy” because “the only path to safety is the path of action.” Arguing it was time to be “forward-thinking and resolute,” he said Americans must “be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives.” He also introduced the thought that “the peoples of the

Islamic nations want and deserve the same freedoms and opportunities as people in every nation.”

Later in June 2002, President Bush offered a far-reaching moral vision for the Middle East with democracy as the core ingredient. While a Palestinian state could not “be created by terror,” he reasoned it could be built through reform centered on “new political and economic institutions based on democracy, market economics, and action against terrorism.” He then expanded this vision to the entire Arab/Muslim world. Describing dignity, freedom, and prosperity as universal hopes, the president characterized the moment as “both an opportunity and a test for all parties in the Middle East. An opportunity to lay the foundations for future peace. A test to show who is serious about peace and who is not.”

Looking back, there was not a hint of any of this when Bush campaigned for the presidency in 2000. On the contrary, candidate Bush scoffed at the notion of nation-building. And none of it showed up in any of his speeches in his first nine months in office or, as near as anyone can tell, in his private thinking. However, post 9/11 these themes, capsulated in the Bush Doctrine, increasingly constituted administration foreign policy. Therefore, it seems only right that Bush’s first term should be “based on the records we have built.”



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## Afghanistan and Iraq

When it comes to talking “on the record,” the president’s problem is that he has few positive achievements to discuss. Consequently, the administration has increasingly offered the American people a fantasy world, composed of how the White House would like things to be as opposed to how they are. The president’s September 2004 speech accepting the Republican nomination for a second term illustrates the point.

Regarding Afghanistan, the president said, “the government of a free Afghanistan is fighting terror,”

adding “more than three-quarters of al-Qaida’s key members and associates have been detained or killed.” He concluded, “America and the world are safer.” President Bush was correct to suggest some progress has been achieved in Afghanistan.

Kabul is relatively peaceful, schools have opened, and millions have registered for upcoming presidential elections. At the same time, the Taliban is far from destroyed, much of the country is in the hands of warlords, and European allies are increasingly reluctant to provide the monetary and troop resources required to extend Kabul’s writ into the countryside. Moreover, Afghanistan has become the world’s largest opium producer with production up some 36-fold since the days of the Taliban. And both Osama bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar remain at large.

The president characterized Iraq as a country with “a strong prime minister” and a national council where “national elections are scheduled for January.” There is little evidence to date that Ayad Allawi is a strong, effective prime minister. With over 1,000 American soldiers dead and many Iraqi cities a “no-go” zone for U.S. troops, there is even less evidence the security situation is improving. The national council appears on the surface to be an inclusive organization, but its cast of characters is similar to that which composed the Iraqi Governing Council.

As such, the national council represents an opportunity lost by the U.S.-backed interim government to offer rebellious groups a stake in the political process. Important postwar Iraqi constituencies are not represented, in particular opponents to a continued U.S. presence in the country.

The Bush administration continues to insist national elections will be held in January 2005.

Unfortunately, elections that meet an artificial deadline but lack legitimacy, instead of setting the stage for an American withdrawal, will likely be counterproductive. In a democracy, it is difficult to reach a consensus until all ethnic and religious groups are

involved in the political system. Without consensus, there is no single sovereign people, and therefore, no legitimacy for electoral results. To make matters worse, the bulk of the Iraqi voters unlikely to be able to participate in the elections are located in Sunni-dominated, opposition-controlled areas.

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## War on Terrorism and Democracy

Regarding Palestine, the president in his acceptance speech suggested the “advance of freedom” in Afghanistan and Iraq would “send a message of hope throughout a vital region. Palestinians will hear the message that democracy and reform are within their reach, and so is peace with our good friend Israel.” First of all, neither Afghanistan nor Iraq is likely to become a peaceful democracy any time soon. In addition, it is difficult to see how the current Israeli government’s iron-fisted approach in the West Bank and Gaza Strip will promote democracy and reform in or out of Palestine. Israel has quietly rejected the Middle East peace process, known as the “road map,” with the acknowledgment, if not the tacit consent, of the Bush administration. And Israel continues to support settlements in the West Bank.

On democracy, President Bush suggested “a vibrant, successful democracy [in Iraq] at the heart of the Middle East will discredit their [the terrorists] radical

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ideology of hate.” On the contrary, the Bush strategy in the war on terrorism has played into al-Qaida’s hands. Americans today live in anger, fear, and uncertainty, plagued by incessant terrorist warnings and repeated changes in the “terrorist alert” status. Three decades after Vietnam, U.S. soldiers are again dying in a war with no apparent end that was sold on false pretenses and creates far more enemies that it eliminates. In consequence, terrorists around the globe, to paraphrase the words of the late Chinese leader, Mao Zedong, “bloom like one hundred flowers.”

There was also no mention by the president in his acceptance speech of the rampant anti-Americanism his policies have provoked around the world. A recent poll of 35 countries conducted by GlobeSpan, a Canadian research company, in conjunction with the University of Maryland and research institutes in each country, indicates only one in five people outside the United States would vote to reelect the president. If a “global election” were held, President Bush’s opponent would win hands-down in 30 of the 35 countries with strong majorities in European states allied to the United States and pluralities in all nine Latin American countries surveyed. Only Nigeria, the Philippines, and Poland preferred Bush with India and Thailand closely divided.

Benign neglect characterizes the Bush administration’s policy in most other parts of the world. Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia did not merit a mention in the president’s speech. Focused entirely on al-Qaida and the war on terrorism, the adminis-

tration is not paying enough attention to other problems in the world that have little or nothing to do with terrorism but are still highly significant. In an acceptance speech celebrated by Bush loyalists as a blueprint for a second term, the president failed to mention either Iran or North Korea, the most serious threats to nuclear proliferation today.

### Walk the Talk

Before, during, and after the Republican National Convention, President Bush has provided the American people with an overly optimistic, “Pollyanna” view of the world. He has resorted to deceit, deception, and denial in lieu of engaging in a serious, useful debate. He owes the American people more than that; he owes them a frank discussion of his foreign policy record, warts and all. The 2004 presidential election is the most important one in the past half-century. American foreign policy is at a crucial crossroads in which we either continue with the failed policies of the past or move in new directions. The president in his acceptance speech tried to introduce a little humor. “Some folks look at me and see a certain swagger,” he said, “which in Texas is called ‘walking’.” When it comes to foreign policy, it is time for the president to begin walking, walking the talk.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2004. All rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Ronald Bruce St John, “Time for Bush to Walk the Talk,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, September 24, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/commentary/2004/0409bushwalk.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Ronald Bruce St John  
Editor: John Gershman, IRC  
Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

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