

Rhetoric and Reality Clash in Inaugural Address

By Stephen Zunes | January 24, 2005

President Bush's second inaugural address has received widespread praise for its recognition of the imperative of advancing human freedom worldwide, not just for its own sake, but for America's own national interest.

Unfortunately, this ignores the fact that the United States has long been the number one military, diplomatic, and economic backer of the world's most repressive regimes in the world, a pattern that has only been strengthened under the Bush administration.

Correctly recognizing the roots of terrorism, President Bush noted that "as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny—prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder—violence will gather, and multiply in destructive power, and cross the most defended borders, and raise a mortal threat." For much of the second half of his first term, he has emphasized that—as a necessary means of curbing the threat of terrorism—the United States must push for reform and democratization of the autocratic governments of Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, and the Palestine Authority.

It is important to note, however, that none of the 9/11 hijackers came from those countries. Instead, they came from U.S.-backed dictatorships like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates, which continue to receive billions of dollars worth of U.S. military equipment annually. Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Tunisia, and Morocco are also among the autocratic regimes in the Islamic world that continue to receive unconditional support from the United States.

A look at the six family dictatorships of the Persian Gulf region propped up by American arms and advisers underscores the irony that the nation founded in one of the first republican revolutions against monarchical rule is now the primary supporter of the world's few remaining absolute monarchies.

It is presumably no coincidence that the only autocratic regimes that the Bush administration has pressed for reform have been those which have tradi-

tionally opposed American hegemonic goals in the region.

In addition, while Israel serves as an exemplary democracy for its Jewish citizens, the right-wing government of Ariel Sharon has engaged in a pattern of gross and systematic human rights violations in its occupied Palestinian territories, practices made possible in large part through billions of dollars worth of unconditional military and economic assistance sent annually courtesy of the American taxpayer.

If U.S. policy is indeed so contrary to the promotion of freedom and liberty, why has this become such a focal point of the Bush administration at the start of its second term?

Perhaps it is a means of diverting attention from the administration's disastrous policies toward Iraq. Though claims that Saddam Hussein still possessed "weapons of mass destruction" and had operational links with al-Qaida have been proven false, no one can deny the repressive nature of his regime or the Iraqi people's right to live freely. Unfortunately, American forces have been responsible for far more civilian deaths in the nearly two years since the U.S. occupation began than during the final two years of Saddam's regime.

It may also be a means of silencing opposition. If, for example, the American public can actually be made to believe that the primary purpose of U.S. foreign policy under President Bush is to promote democracy, critics of Bush administration policy can therefore be depicted as not supporting democracy. Indeed, in the only reference President Bush made to critics of his policies in his inaugural address, he blithely dismissed them as those who have "questioned the global appeal of liberty."

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President Bush promised that “All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors.” If this is actually the case, President Bush must immediately make it clear to all governments that oppress their own people or those under their military occupation: unless and until you respect human rights, including the right to choose your own government, the United States will immediately cease all economic and security assistance, withdraw American advisers to your police and military, block all transfers of American armaments and other implements of repression, and encourage other countries to do the same.

Unfortunately, there are currently no signs that President Bush is prepared to do this or that either party in Congress is willing to pressure him to do so.

Unless or until that time comes, President Bush's noble words at his inauguration can only be seen as self-serving hypocrisy of the worst kind.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2005. All rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Stephen Zunes, “Rhetoric and Reality Clash in Inaugural Address,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, January 24, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.presentdanger.org/commentary/2005/0501inaug2.html>

Production Information:

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