

President Bush's Foreign Policy Discussion in the 2005 State of the Union Address—A Critical Assessment

By Stephen Zunes | February 2005

The foreign policy segments of President George W. Bush's state of the Union address spoke to values and concerns that resonate with the majority of Americans from across the political spectrum. Unfortunately, much of what was said during his speech was quite misleading.

Below are excerpts from the February 2 State of the Union address, followed by a short critical analysis.

"There are still regimes seeking weapons of mass destruction—but no longer without attention and without consequences."

The world has long paid attention to regimes that seek weapons of mass destruction. That is why the international community developed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological and Toxic Weapons, along with their enforcement bodies, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency and Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Indeed, not only does there not seem to have been any more attention or additional threat of consequences to regimes seeking weapons of mass destruction as a result of the Bush administration's actions, but the administration has tried repeatedly to discredit and undermine the authority of these enforcement bodies.

Iraq had eliminated its chemical weapons and its chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons programs over ten years ago and had allowed unfettered inspections by United Nations officials to resume, yet the United States invaded anyway. By contrast, North Korea restarted its nuclear program and has continued to bar inspectors, but it has not been invaded. The message from U.S. policymakers appears to be that the most serious consequences will result if you

stop seeking weapons of mass destruction and allow in UN inspectors.

"In Iraq, 28 countries have troops on the ground, the United Nations and the European Union provided technical assistance for the elections, and NATO is leading a mission to help train Iraqi officers."

The vast majority of these "troops" are not combat troops and most of these contingents consist of well under fifty participants. The UN and EU role in the elections, along with the NATO training programs, has been somewhat more tangible, but nevertheless limited and have taken place primarily outside of Iraq. America's "coalition" partners continue to dwindle. Iraq continues to be an overwhelmingly American operation, with only the British providing substantial assistance.

"In the long term, the peace we seek will only be achieved by eliminating the conditions that feed radicalism and ideologies of murder. If whole regions of the world remain in despair and grow in hatred, they will be the recruiting grounds for terror, and that terror will stalk America and other free nations for decades. The only force powerful enough to stop the rise of tyranny and terror, and replace hatred with hope, is the force of human freedom.... And we have declared our own intention: America will stand with the allies of freedom to support democratic movements in the Middle East and beyond, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world..."



“Our aim is to build and preserve a community of free and independent nations, with governments that answer to their citizens, and reflect their own cultures. And because democracies respect their own people and their neighbors, the advance of freedom will lead to peace.”

President Bush is certainly correct regarding the correlation between autocratic governance and the rise of extremism. However, the United States has long been the primary backer of repressive governments in the Middle East and, under President Bush, military and security ties with these dictatorships has increased. It is important to note that sixteen of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers came from Saudi Arabia, whose family dictatorship has received tens of billions of dollars worth of military hardware and security assistance from the United States since President Bush came to office. The man believed to be the lead 9/11 hijacker, Mohammed Atta, is Egyptian, whose autocratic Mubarak regime receives more than two billion dollars worth of taxpayer-provided military and economic aid annually. None of the hijackers or any prominent al-Qaida leader has come from Iran, Syria, Palestine, Taliban Afghanistan, or Saddam’s Iraq, the countries that President Bush most commonly cites as needing greater freedom in order to support American security interests.

If President Bush was serious about promoting freedom, he would call for an immediate cessation of arms transfers and any forms of security assistance to Middle Eastern governments which do not “respect their own people and their neighbors.” He has not done so, however.

To cite just one example, there have been few greater allies of freedom than Egypt’s Saad El-Din Ibrahim and his Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, and its journal *Civil Society*. Among the Center’s activities was monitoring elections and workshops and civic education. Unfortunately, in 2001, Egyptian authorities arrested Saladin and twenty-seven associates, shut down the Ibn Khaldun Center, and banned their journal. Despite this, U.S. aid has continued to flow to Mubarak’s corrupt dictatorship.

Finally, democracies do not necessarily respect their neighbors. Israel is an exemplary democracy (at least for its Jewish citizens), but it has maintained an oftentimes repressive occupation of its Palestinian neighbors since 1967, including widespread and ongoing violations of international humanitarian law.

“The beginnings of reform and democracy in the Palestinian territories are now showing the power of freedom to break old patterns of violence and failure. . . . Secretary of State Rice . . . will discuss with [Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas] how we and our friends can help the Palestinian people end terror and build the institutions of a peaceful, independent democratic state.”

Pro-democracy activists in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including the harshest critics of the corrupt and autocratic rule of the late Yasir Arafat, have long argued that the greatest obstacle to the creation of peaceful, independent and democratic Palestinian state is the Israeli occupation. President Bush has not demanded that Israel end its military occupation, which continues to deny the Palestinians their freedom and which has resulted in the terrorist backlash.

“To promote this democracy, I will ask Congress for \$350 million to support Palestinian political, economic, and security reforms. The goal of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace, is within reach—and America will help them achieve that goal.”

First of all, the \$350 million figure hardly covers the damage inflicted upon Palestinian society and infrastructure by Israel in recent years, including the U.S.-backed military offensive during the spring of 2002. That figure is also less than one-tenth of what the administration sends annually to the far more prosperous government of Israel, much of which goes to support the occupation and colonization of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which is the major impediment to peace.

While Bush is the first president to so explicitly call for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, there are serious questions as to what kind of “state” he has in mind. He has refused to endorse the Geneva Initiative, the model peace agreement signed in December 2003 by leading Israeli and Palestinian moderates which calls for the withdrawal of Israeli occupation forces and colonists from lands seized in 1967 (with minor and reciprocal border adjustments), a shared co-capital in Jerusalem, strict security guarantees for Israel, and no mass return of Palestinian refugees into Israel. Instead, President Bush has endorsed the Sharon Plan, which—while calling for the withdrawal of Israel’s illegal settlements from the occupied Gaza Strip—allows Israel to annex the vast majority of its illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank and surrounding Palestinian lands, leaving the Palestinians with only a series of small non-contiguous cantons surrounded by Israel. Israel would control the air space, water resources, and the movement of people and goods within the archipelago of Palestinian territory as well as between this Palestinian territory and neighboring Egypt and Jordan. In short, the “Palestinian state” that Bush envisions appears to bear a far closer resemblance to the infamous Bantustans of apartheid South Africa than a viable independent country.

“To promote peace and stability in the broader Middle East, we must confront regimes that continue to... pursue weapons of mass murder.”

The Bush administration has refused to confront Israel regarding its arsenal of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, even though Israel is required through UN Security Council resolution 487 to place its nuclear program under the trusteeship of the International Atomic Energy Agency. It has refused to confront Pakistan and India in their refusal to disarm as well, despite UN Security Council resolution 1172 requiring these nations to get rid of their nuclear weapons; in fact, the Bush administration dropped sanctions imposed under President Clinton against these two countries. The Bush administration has also failed to confront

Egypt, despite its maintaining an arsenal of chemical and biological weapons.

The Bush administration’s attitude appears to be that it is only willing to confront Middle Eastern countries which “pursue weapons of mass murder” if they are not strategic allies. Indeed, the Bush administration has rejected calls by such diverse countries as Jordan, Syria, Iran, and Egypt for the establishment of a WMD-free zone for the entire Middle East, instead opting for a kind of WMD apartheid where the United States alone has the authority to say which countries can develop these dangerous weapons and which ones cannot. Even putting aside the legal and moral concerns of such double standards, they simply will not work; any attempt to impose a regime of haves and have-nots from the outside will only encourage the have-nots to try even harder to become one of the haves.

“Syria still allows its territory, and parts of Lebanon, to be used by terrorists who seek to destroy every chance of peace in the region. ... We expect the Syrian government to end all support for terror and open the door to freedom.”

Syria—like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states—indeed must open its door to freedom, both for its own people as well as for the people of Lebanon, over whose government Syria exercises considerable influence. However, the State Department has acknowledged that Syria has not directly engaged in terrorist operations for more than twenty years.

The Hizbullah movement in Lebanon, which has received limited Syrian support, is now a legal political party with representation in the Lebanese parliament. It appears that its armed wing has not engaged in any acts of international terrorism for more than a decade and it has restricted its attacks against Israeli occupation forces in southern Lebanon and disputed border regions of Syria. Some tiny leftist groups composed of radical Palestinian exiles remain in Syria, but they are largely defunct at this point and are no longer much of a threat. Hamas has a political office in Damascus, as it does in a number of Arab capitals,

but its military operations have come almost exclusively from within the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip and West Bank. In short, Syria is at most a very minor actor in international terrorism and has been an active ally against al-Qaida.

In addition, for well over a decade, the Syrian government has pledged strict security guarantees and even full diplomatic relations with Israel in exchange for Israel returning Syrian land conquered in the 1967 war. A series of UN Security Council resolutions have called on Israel to rescind its annexation of the Golan region, end its ongoing colonization and—in return for security guarantees like those offered by the Damascus government—return the territory to Syria. However, the U.S.-backed Sharon government of Israel has thus far refused to even consider living up to its international obligations. Syria has repeatedly called for a resumption of peace negotiations with Israel, which came tantalizingly close to a final settlement in early 2000 under the more moderate Labor government of Ehud Barak, but the hard-line Sharon has refused the offer.

While much positive can be said about Israel's democratic institutions and traditions and much negative can be said about the autocratic Assad regime in Syria, the fact remains that it is Israel, not Syria, which is primarily responsible for the failure of the peace process between these two nations.

“Today, Iran [is]... pursuing nuclear weapons while depriving its people of the freedom they seek and deserve. We are working with European allies to make clear to the Iranian regime that it must give up its uranium enrichment program and any plutonium reprocessing, and end its support for terror. And to the Iranian people, I say tonight: As you stand for your own liberty, America stands with you.”

Just as he did with Iraq, despite his inability to provide credible evidence to support his assertion, President Bush is now insisting that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. Though Iran's potential to develop nuclear weapons is far greater than that of Iraq during the final decade of Saddam Hussein's rule

and certainly cannot be ruled out, the Islamic Republic's nuclear program—which began with U.S. support under the Shah's regime—appears to be restricted to the development of nuclear energy, which (despite its environmental risks and other concerns) is perfectly legal under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Unfortunately, the United States has not been working with the Europeans in their thus far successful efforts to prevent Iran from further developing its nuclear program. In fact, the Bush administration has been rather hostile to the efforts of both the Europeans and the International Atomic Energy Agency for its strategy of negotiations, insisting instead on strict sanctions and threatening possible military action.

The past year or so has seen serious setbacks in the gradual political opening Iran had been experiencing over the past decade. However, the Bush administration's concerns for the Iranian people's struggle for liberty should not be taken seriously. It is important to remember that Iran was once free and democratic back in the early 1950s. This bold democratic experiment was cut short, however, when the CIA overthrew the constitutional government of Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 and replaced him with the tyrannical Shah who—with active U.S. support of his brutal SAVAK secret police—largely succeeded in subsequent years to wipe out the democratic opposition. Unable to get inside the mosques enough to eliminate the Islamist opposition, when a popular revolt finally ousted him in 1979, the country became dominated by hard-line clerics. The United States has never apologized for its illegal coup against Mossadegh and its quarter century of support for the Shah's repression.

It should also be noted that leading Iranian democrats have defended their country's nuclear program and have argued that support of their efforts by the Bush administration hurts their credibility and opens them up to further repression.

“Our generational commitment to the advance of freedom, especially in the Middle East, is now being tested and honored in Iraq. That country is a vital front in the war on terror, which is why the terrorists have chosen to make a stand there.”

Extremist Islamic groups have coalesced in Iraq today for the same reason they came together in Afghanistan during the 1980s: to support a popular resistance movement in a Muslim society that had been invaded and occupied by a foreign power which sought to impose its system upon them. Most Iraqis, like most Afghans, want to be free from the violence imposed upon them by both terrorists and foreign occupation policies and to determine their own future free from outside influence.

“Our men and women in uniform are fighting terrorists in Iraq, so we do not have to face them here at home.”

This is simply a retread of the rationalization so often given during the 1960s and early 1970s as to why U.S. forces could not leave Vietnam: “If we don’t fight them over there, we will have to fight them here.” Nearly thirty years after the communists completed their takeover of South Vietnam, however, the Vietnamese have yet to attack the United States. In fact, they are becoming increasingly valuable trading partners. Vietnamese stopped killing Americans when American forces got out of their country and stopped killing them. So, presumably, would the Iraqis.

“And the victory of freedom in Iraq will strengthen a new ally in the war on terror, inspire democratic reformers from Damascus to Tehran, bring more hope and progress to a troubled region, and thereby lift a terrible threat from the lives of our children and grandchildren.”

It is noteworthy that reformers in Syria and Iran have been quite critical of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, arguing that it has actually provoked the rise of extremist elements in the Middle East and strengthened the repressive regimes in

Damascus and Tehran which rationalize for their tightening control due to security concerns along their border with Iraq. Research by leading think tanks—as well as the Pentagon, State Department, and the CIA—indicate that U.S. intervention in Iraq has actually increased the risks from terrorism through heightened anti-American sentiment and has contributed to the instability of the region by strengthening the appeal of these extremist groups.

“We will succeed because the Iraqi people value their own liberty—as they showed the world last Sunday....”

“Americans recognize that spirit of liberty, because we share it. In any nation, casting your vote is an act of civic responsibility; for millions of Iraqis, it was also an act of personal courage, and they have earned the respect of us all...”

“We will succeed in Iraq because Iraqis are determined to fight for their own freedom, and to write their own history.”

Despite the many problems and limitations of the January 30 Iraqi election, it was indeed a remarkable testament of the Iraqi people’s desire for self-determination and for accountable government.

However, little credit should be given to President Bush. It should be remembered that the Bush administration, during most of the first year of the U.S. occupation, strongly opposed holding direct elections. Initially, the United States supported the installation of Ahmed Chalabi or some other compliant exile as leader of Iraq. Then, U.S. officials tried to keep their viceroy Paul Bremer in power indefinitely. Next, the Bush administration pushed for a caucus system where appointees of American appointees would choose the new government. It was only after Ayatollah Sistani brought hundreds of thousands of Shiites out onto the streets in January 2004 demanding direct elections that President Bush did give in, but—instead of going ahead with the poll in May as proposed—he postponed it until the following January after the security situation had deteriorated so badly that most of the large and important Sunni

Arab minority was unable or unwilling to participate. Furthermore, the insurgency has now reached the point where it appears that the new government will be largely dependent on the ongoing presence of American troops for their survival.

In addition, there are still serious questions as to whether the United States will even allow the Iraqi people to fully exercise their freedom and write their own history. Prior to his departure, Bremer established a series of Transitional Administrative Laws, which included the privatization of much of the country's public assets, unrestricted foreign investment and repatriation of profits, and other controversial economic measures that are almost impossible for the new government to overturn. U.S. citizens in Iraq continue to enjoy extraterritorial rights, meaning they cannot be prosecuted in Iraq for any crime, no matter how serious. U.S. forces can move and attack at will anywhere in the country without the government's assent. Americans have a major presence in virtually every Iraqi government ministry and largely control their budgets. U.S. appointees with terms lasting through 2009 are in charge of "control commissions" which oversee fiscal policy, the media, and other important regulatory areas. U.S. appointees also dominate the judiciary, which has the power to overturn government laws.

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