

## **A Mis-statement of the Union Address**

**By Stephen Zunes | February 1, 2006**

This essay evaluates some of the key claims made by President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address of January 31, 2006.

*"In this decisive year, you and I will make choices that determine both the future and the character of our country. We will choose to act confidently in pursuing the enemies of freedom—or retreat from our duties in the hope of an easier life. We will choose to build our prosperity by leading the world economy—or shut ourselves off from trade and opportunity. In a complex and challenging time, the road of isolationism and protectionism may seem broad and inviting—yet it ends in danger and decline. The only way to protect our people ... the only way to secure the peace ... the only way to control our destiny is by our leadership—so the United States of America will continue to lead."*

This is an extraordinarily simplistic formulation of a series of complex issues facing the United States and the world. Opposing a foreign policy that includes the invasion of sovereign nations on the far side of the globe and prosecuting bloody counter-insurgency wars is not a call to "retreat from our duties." Opposing neoliberal international economic policies that favor powerful multinational corporations at the expense of American jobs, labor rights, consumer protection, and a healthy environment is not a call to "shut ourselves off from trade and opportunity." Challenging such dangerous policies of the Bush administration is not advocating "isolationism and protectionism."

More fundamentally, the pursuit of a foreign policy based upon reckless unilateralism and militarism—which has alienated our country from the vast

majority of the international community—is not the same as "leadership."

### **Terrorism, Authoritarianism, and Freedom**

*"On September 11th, 2001, we found that problems originating in a failed and oppressive state 7,000 miles away could bring murder and destruction to our country."*

Actually, the "problems" that led to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States did not originate in Afghanistan. Sixteen of the nineteen hijackers were from the oppressive, U.S.-backed dictatorship of Saudi Arabia and others were from the oppressive, U.S.-backed dictatorships in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Most of them had received more "training" in flight schools in the United States than they ever did in Afghanistan and the terrorist cells from which the 9/11 hijackers emerged did not coalesce in "failed and oppressive states," but in Germany and the United States. Furthermore, the rise of the Taliban and the chaos that did take place in the "failed and oppressive state" of Afghanistan came about in part as a result of the \$5 billion of aid the U.S. government sent to radical Islamic militias in that country during the 1980s.

*"Dictatorships shelter terrorists, feed resentment and radicalism, and seek weapons of mass destruction. Democracies replace resentment with hope, respect the rights of their citizens and their neighbors, and join the fight against terror."*

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Again, this is an incredibly simplistic formulation: The United States is a democracy, but it has sheltered Cuban and Nicaraguan terrorists implicated in attacks that have killed scores of civilians. Similarly, the United States—along with such democracies as Great Britain, France, India, and Israel—have pursued and possess nuclear weapons. Furthermore, a number of democratic nations have failed to respect the rights of their citizens and their neighbors. For example, Israel has invaded and occupied its neighbors and India has engaged in serious human rights abuses against its citizens in Kashmir, the Punjab, and its eastern states.

Conversely, there are scores of dictatorships that do not shelter terrorists or seek weapons of mass destruction.

*“Far from being a hopeless dream, the advance of freedom is the great story of our time. In 1945, there were about two dozen lonely democracies on Earth. Today, there are 122.”*

First of all, this impressive figure ignores the fact that there were only about 60 independent countries in the world in 1945; there are nearly 200 today. So, while there has been five-fold increase in the total number of democratic governments, if one measures in terms of overall percentage, it is an increase of barely 50%.

More significantly, in those intervening years, the United States helped facilitate the overthrow of democratically elected governments in Guatemala, Iran, Chile, and several other countries and actively supported dictatorial regimes that suppressed popular movements for freedom in scores of others.

As a result, the advance of freedom is an important and laudable achievement, yet it has in large part taken place despite of, rather than because of, U.S. foreign policy.

*“We are writing a new chapter in the history of self-government, with ... men and women from Lebanon to Egypt debating the rights of individuals and the necessity of freedom.”*

Despite longstanding domination by Syria, men and women in the Republic of Lebanon have been openly debating individual rights and the necessity of freedom for decades, long before the Bush administration assumed office. The Lebanese people significantly advanced their freedom when they finally forced Syrian troops out of their country through a massive nonviolent uprising they initiated on their own. Though supportive of the Syrian withdrawal, it is important to remember that the United States backed Syria's decision to send its troops into Lebanon back in 1976 as well as its consolidation of power in 1990. The United States also backed Israel's 1978 and 1982 invasions and its 22-year occupation of the southern part of that country, also raising questions as to the sincerity of professed U.S. support for Lebanese freedom.

Meanwhile, Egypt is still under the grip of the U.S.-backed Mubarak dictatorship, which has beaten, arrested, jailed, and tortured hundreds of pro-democracy activists while enjoying its status as the second-largest recipient of U.S. military and economic aid. Egyptians may indeed debate “the rights of individuals and necessity of freedom,” but they do so at their own jeopardy.

*“At the start of 2006, more than half the people of our world live in democratic nations. And we do not forget the other half—in places like Syria, Burma, Zimbabwe, North Korea, and Iran—because the demands of justice, and the peace of this world, require their freedom as well.”*

It is revealing that the only governments President Bush bothered to mention by name are among the

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minority of autocratic regimes that are not supported by the United States. By contrast, he notably failed to mention Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Oman, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Brunei, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Cameroon, Chad, or scores of other dictatorial regimes that have received billions of dollars worth of police and military assistance from the United States since President Bush came to office.

*“Terrorists like bin Laden ... aim to seize power in Iraq, and use it as a safe haven to launch attacks against America and the world.”*

First of all, the al-Qaida is a decentralized network of underground terrorist cells which has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to launch terrorist attacks around the world without controlling any country.

Secondly, Salafi Sunni extremists of the likes of Osama bin Laden make up only a small minority of the armed Iraqi resistance, so it's hard to conceive how they would be able to seize power even in the unlikely event of an insurgent victory.

Finally, it is important to remember that outside of a tiny enclave in the northeastern corner of the autonomous Kurdish region outside of Saddam Hussein's control, Islamist terrorists had no active presence in Iraq until *after* the United States invaded in 2003. As a result, whatever threat may actually exist of such Salafi Sunni extremists taking over Iraq is a direct consequence of Bush administration policy.

*“If we were to leave these vicious attackers alone, they would not leave us alone. They would simply move the battlefield to our own shores.”*

Despite similar claims during the Vietnam War that “if we don't fight them over there we'll have to fight them here,” the Vietnamese fighting U.S.

forces did not move the battlefield to America once U.S. troops got out of their country. The Afghans fighting Soviet forces did not move the battlefield to Russia when the Soviets got out of their country. Similarly, the Iraqis fighting U.S. forces will not move the battlefield to America once we get out of their country. It is the ongoing occupation of Iraq by U.S. forces, the bombing and shelling of Iraqi cities, the torture of Iraqi detainees, and the chaos and destruction inflicted upon that ancient land as a result of the U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation that is prompting the insurgency. The U.S. war in Iraq is creating terrorists faster than we can kill them.

### On Iraq

*“There is no peace in retreat. And there is no honor in retreat.”*

There is no peace or honor in violating the United Nations Charter, the Fourth Geneva Convention, and other international legal principles by invading a sovereign nation on the far side of the world and torturing and killing its people.

*“And we are on the offensive in Iraq, with a clear plan for victory.”*

In reality, U.S. forces are increasingly relegated to defensive positions. The much hyped “plan for victory” put forward by the administration at the end of last year has since been revealed to have been written not by military commanders or strategic planners, but by a public relations firm.

*“First, we are helping Iraqis build an inclusive government, so that old resentments will be eased, and the insurgency marginalized.”*

Virtually all accounts of what is really happening in Iraq indicate the following: The government that is

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emerging, like the outgoing regime, will likely be dominated by Iranian-backed Shiite fundamentalists who have engaged in widespread human rights abuses against the country's Sunni minority. Ethnic tensions have increased dramatically since the U.S. invasion and are getting worse. And the insurgency is growing.

*“Second, we are continuing reconstruction efforts, and helping the Iraqi government to fight corruption and build a modern economy, so all Iraqis can experience the benefits of freedom.”*

The Bush administration has essentially largely eliminated additional funding for reconstruction and diverted much of what was originally allocated for security. Corruption is endemic and the economy has largely collapsed. Millions of Iraqis lack freedom from fear or freedom from want, making it difficult to appreciate the post-Saddam right to elect their own government. The “modern economy” imposed in the early months of the U.S. occupation has included the massive privatization of public enterprises, allowing unlimited foreign ownership and repatriation of profits, a 15% flat tax, and scores of other measures restructuring the economy on neoliberal lines, which has proven decidedly unpopular with the Iraqi people, currently suffering from record unemployment and poverty.

*“At the same time, our coalition has been relentless in shutting off terrorist infiltration, clearing out insurgent strongholds, and turning over territory to Iraqi security forces. I am confident in our plan for victory ... Fellow citizens, we are in this fight to win, and we are winning.”*

Infiltration by foreign terrorists was virtually nonexistent in Iraq in the years immediately preceding the American conquest, but—as a result of the

U.S. invasion—it has become a serious problem and has increased every year since. Similarly, areas of Iraq controlled by insurgents have grown each year since the U.S. forces took over that country. Few Iraqi units can be trusted to maintain control over much territory without an active U.S. presence alongside them. Furthermore, virtually every published independent strategic analysis as well as leaked documents from a number of U.S. military and intelligence sources reveal that the United States is *not* winning the war.

*“The road of victory is the road that will take our troops home. As we make progress on the ground, and Iraqi forces increasingly take the lead, we should be able to further decrease our troop levels—but those decisions will be made by our military commanders, not by politicians in Washington, DC.”*

The Bush administration has repeatedly overruled advice from military commanders regarding Iraq since the early planning stages for the invasion. The decision to invade Iraq and place American forces in an extremely vulnerable urban guerrilla warfare situation could have only been made by politicians—few American commanders would support such a foolish decision on their own—but they were the pro-war politicians, not the anti-war politicians to whom President Bush refers. The growing numbers of Democratic members of Congress who have belatedly called for a withdrawal of U.S. forces have done so in large part not out of their own initiative, but in response to the demands of their constituents who elected them to office and to whom they are accountable.

The Bush administration has also repeatedly exaggerated the state of readiness of the Iraqi armed forces. As a result, there are serious questions as to whether a military victory is evening possible.

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*“Our coalition has learned from experience in Iraq. We have adjusted our military tactics and changed our approach to reconstruction.”*

The Bush administration, despite its earlier promises, has essentially given up on serious reconstruction efforts. And, while U.S. forces have improved their tactics as a result of nearly three years of fighting, so have the insurgents. And there is not much of a coalition to speak of at this point. The British are the only foreign forces remaining in the “coalition” that are still engaged in active combat operations.

*“Yet there is a difference between responsible criticism that aims for success, and defeatism that refuses to acknowledge anything but failure. Hindsight alone is not wisdom. And second-guessing is not a strategy.”*

Recognizing that the war is probably unwinnable is not defeatism. It is realism. Aiming for an unachievable military “success” is not responsible. It is a folly of tragic proportions. And insisting the Bush administration be held accountable for the lies, the negligence, and the tragic blunders which have resulted from this ongoing tragedy is a patriotic duty.

*“A sudden withdrawal of our forces from Iraq would abandon our Iraqi allies to death and prison ... put men like bin Laden and Zarqawi in charge of a strategic country ... and show that a pledge from America means little. Members of Congress, however we feel about the decisions and debates of the past, our Nation has only one option: We must keep our word, defeat our enemies, and stand behind the American military in its vital mission.”*

First of all, Iraqis are already experiencing death and prison as the war and repression continue.

Secondly, after fighting to rid American and British foreigners from their soil, it’s hard to imagine the highly nationalistic and predominantly Shiite Iraqis would tolerate being ruled by a Saudi or Jordanian Sunni extremist.

Thirdly, the strength of such terrorists is growing as long as the United States continues to prosecute its bloody counter-insurgency war in the heart of the Islamic world. Most significantly, the United States has already broken perhaps its most solemn pledge: The United Nations Charter, which resulted from a global awareness that the tragic events of World War II would not be repeated and the writing of which was heavily influenced by Americans, mandates that no nation can engage in an aggressive war. The use of force is recognized as legitimate only if explicitly authorized by the UN Security Council as a last resort to ensure collective security or in self-defense against an armed attack. When the United States signed and ratified the UN Charter in 1945, it made a pledge to the world that it would never engage in anything like the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Similarly, according to Article VI of the U.S. Constitution, treaties signed and ratified by the United States are Supreme Law. When President Bush launched the invasion and when members of Congress authorized the invasion, they chose to pursue a policy in direct contravention of the treaty obligations of the United States, thereby violating their oath of office in which they pledged to uphold and defend the Constitution.

*“Ultimately, the only way to defeat the terrorists is to defeat their dark vision of hatred and fear by offering the hopeful alternative of political freedom and peaceful change. So the United States of America supports democratic reform across the broader Middle East.”*

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The United States remains the number one supplier of armaments and police training in the world, most of which goes to governments which engage in a pattern of gross and systematic human rights violations. U.S. military aid to the Middle East is six times U.S. economic aid. In addition, U.S. arms sales to that region surpass that of consumer goods, high technology, and agriculture as the number one commercial export. If President Bush were serious about promoting political freedom and peaceful change, he would end U.S. support of repressive governments and stop fueling the deadly arms trade.

### Democracy in the Middle East

*“The great people of Egypt have voted in a multi-party presidential election—and now their government should open paths of peaceful opposition that will reduce the appeal of radicalism.”*

This “multi-party presidential election” barred the largest opposition party from participating, effectively banned independent candidates, and refused to allow for international election monitors. It could not even remotely be considered a free and fair election. While President Bush’s call for the Mubarak regime to “open paths of peaceful opposition” are good words, he has refused to back them up with action, categorically rejecting calls by human rights activists to condition U.S. military and economic aid to the Egyptian government ending its human rights abuses.

*“The Palestinian people have voted in elections—now the leaders of Hamas must recognize Israel, disarm, reject terrorism, and work for lasting peace.”*

While such demands are valid, it is noteworthy that President Bush says nothing about ending Israel’s ongoing occupation and illegal colonization

of the West Bank, which has resulted in the dramatic growth of that radical Islamist movement.

*“Saudi Arabia has taken the first steps of reform—now it can offer its people a better future by pressing forward with those efforts.”*

These “first steps”—some male-only elections for a minority of seats on some local legislative councils—are quite meager. By almost any measure, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remains a family dictatorship whose Islamic fundamentalist rule and lack of accountable government is significantly worse than even that of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

*“The Iranian government is defying the world with its nuclear ambitions—and the nations of the world must not permit the Iranian regime to gain nuclear weapons. America will continue to rally the world to confront these threats.”*

It is significant that President Bush chooses to make an issue over Iran’s nuclear program, which is years away from producing nuclear weapons, while making no mention of Israel, which has refused to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, already possesses nuclear weapons, and continues to defy the world through its violation of UN Security Council resolution 487, which calls on that country to place its nuclear program under the trusteeship of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Nor does President Bush mention India and Pakistan, which have also refused to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, already possess nuclear weapons, and continue to defy UN Security Council resolution 1172, which calls on those countries to eliminate their nuclear programs altogether. Indeed, President Bush has sent billions of dollars worth of highly sophisticated weapons to Israel, has agreed to sell nuclear-capable jet fighters

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to Pakistan, and has signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with India.

*“And tonight, let me speak directly to the citizens of Iran: America respects you, and we respect your country. We respect your right to choose your own future and win your own freedom. And our Nation hopes one day to be the closest of friends with a free and democratic Iran.”*

If this is really the case, why did the United States overthrow Iran’s last democratic government, that of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh? If the United States really respects the rights of the Iranian people to choose their own future, why did successive U.S. administrations support the tyrannical regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi, installed by the United States following Mossadegh’s ouster, whose dreaded CIA-trained SAVAK secret police tortured and murdered thousands of dissidents, thereby spawning the Islamist revolution that has since come to power?

### Counter-Terrorism and Civil Liberties

*“It is said that prior to the attacks of September 11th, our government failed to connect the dots of the conspiracy. We now know that two of the hijackers in the United States placed telephone calls to al-Qaida operatives overseas. But we did not know about their plans until it was too late. So to prevent another attack—based on authority given to me by the Constitution and by statute—I have authorized a terrorist surveillance program to aggressively pursue the international communications of suspected al-Qaida operatives and affiliates to and from America. Previous presidents have used the same constitutional authority I have—and Federal courts have approved the use of that authority. This terrorist surveillance program has helped prevent terrorist attacks. It remains essential to the security of America. If there are people inside our*

*country who are talking with al-Qaida, we want to know about it—because we will not sit back and wait to be hit again.”*

First of all, there is nothing under the existing 1978 Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which requires court approval before or immediately after the executive branch orders electronic surveillance, that prevented the Bush administration from monitoring the overseas phone calls to al-Qaida operatives prior to 9/11.

Secondly, there is nothing in the U.S. Constitution which gives the president the authority to order wiretaps without judicial or Congressional approval.

Thirdly, Congress never granted statutory authority for President Bush to engage in warrantless wiretaps.

Fourthly, previous presidents who have ordered wiretapping have generally done so only with court approval. When President Richard Nixon was discovered to have ordered warrantless wiretaps, it was incorporated in the articles of impeachment that drove him from office.

Most importantly, President Bush has failed to present any evidence whatsoever that warrantless wiretaps have “helped prevent terrorist attacks” or that it is somehow “essential to the security of America.” The choice is not one of either violating the civil liberties of Americans or “sitting back and waiting to be hit again.”

*“Our own generation is in a long war against a determined enemy—a war that will be fought by Presidents of both parties, who will need steady bipartisan support from the Congress. And tonight I ask for yours. Together, let us protect our country, support the*

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*men and women who defend us, and lead this world toward freedom.”*

Unfortunately, President Bush’s foreign policy agenda has for the most part been embraced by a bipartisan majority of Congress. The Congressional Democratic leadership joined President Bush in deceiving the American public about non-existent Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction,” authorized the invasion of Iraq, and continues to support funding the war. They have also supported his policy of threatening war against Iran by backing other regimes which violate human rights and develop nuclear weapons. Similarly, they have defended President Bush’s support for Israel’s occupation and colonization of the Palestinian West Bank and they have helped the Bush administration undermine international law and discredit the United Nations.

Such policies do not protect America, however, since such policies only increase anti-Americanism and the appeal of extremist ideologies and terrorist groups. They do not support the men and women of the armed forces, who are taken from their homes and families to fight in a bloody and fruitless counter-insurgency war in a faraway land. And they do not lead the world toward freedom, since such policies include the backing of dictatorial regimes and occupation armies.

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