

A Second Look at the Second Inaugural

Gene Marshall January 2005

I am going to examine some of the exact words in George W. Bush's second inaugural address. I will inquire about hidden meanings and about seriousness in carrying out these highly idealistic assertions.

GWB: For a half century, America defended our own freedom by standing watch on distant borders. After the shipwreck of communism came years of relative quiet, years of repose, years of sabbatical - and then there came a day of fire.

This is a colorful restatement of history. Putting it in more plain speech, Bush is claiming that we were at a loss for a national mission after the cold war ended, but with the events of 9/11 we are justified in returning to a war footing.

GWB: We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.

But what exactly does Bush mean by "liberty" and by "freedom." As we watch the Bush administration in action, we get the impression that liberty means liberty for U.S. based corporations rather than the liberty of other nations to determine their own form of government and their own policies in relation to the United States. Venezuela is an interesting example. Haiti is another. Our willingness to interfere in the internal affairs of these nations is ongoing and quite contrary to their liberty, unless you mean "liberty" for those factions within these countries who are willing to do the bidding of corporate America. So let's listen to the Bush idealism in that light (Here are words more accurately reflective of his real policy):

We are led, by events and common sense to one conclusion: The survival of liberty for our U.S. corporations increasingly depends on the success of corporation liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of corporation liberty in all the world.

GWB: Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.

In ways that seem to escape adequate notice, this administration thinks itself "fit to be a master" and free to treat many nations as children if not slaves. For example, it remains to be seen if this administration will tolerate an Iraqi government that opposes U.S. policies.

GWB: So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.

Except in a bad Western movie, tyranny is never finally ended. So this policy is certainly a reach, especially for a president who in his pre-9/11 campaigning claimed that he was opposed to nation building. Should we be grateful that he is committing conservatives to internationalism or be fearful of a permanent war footing? What does ending tyranny mean beyond ousting weakened dictators? Is ending tyranny in every nation and culture a real policy? Does such a policy apply to nations like Russian and China, or does it only apply to nations that we can push around? Can we trust this administration to decide what is a democratic movement and what is tyranny? And is our own nation democratic by definition and never one of the tyrants.?

GWB: Freedom, by its nature, must be chosen, and defended by citizens, and sustained by the rule of law and the protection of minorities. And when the soul of a nation finally speaks, the institutions that arise may reflect customs and traditions very different from our own. America will not impose our own style of government on the unwilling. Our goal instead is to help others find their own voice, attain their own freedom, and make their own way.

Surely, some of the citizens of Haiti and Venezuela must wonder when the U.S. intends to start enacting such ideals. Other nations also have some strong memories that do not jibe with this pious talk. Shall we call to mind Chile, Nicaragua, and El Salvador? This list is much longer. Some would put Vietnam on this list. And many Cubans will surely smile at the notion that "America will not impose our own style of government on the unwilling."

GWB: America's influence is not unlimited, but fortunately for the oppressed, America's influence is considerable, and we will use it confidently in freedom's cause.

It will seem to many, including me, that this administration is too confident in its analysis of who are the oppressed and what freedom's cause actually is.

GWB: America will not pretend that jailed dissidents prefer their chains, or that women welcome humiliation and servitude, or that any human being aspires to live at the mercy of bullies.

Do we intend to apply this promise to the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay? In this instance the U.S. government is quite clearly the bully, and our justifications for it are spurious.

GWB: We will encourage reform in other governments by making clear that success in our relations will require the decent treatment of their own people.

Do we actually intend to insist on such standards in our dealings with Russia and China or even Saudi Arabia? Or are we actually more concerned about securing nuclear stockpiles in Russia, getting rid of nuclear weapons in Korea, maintaining abundant trade with China, and keeping the oil flowing from Saudi Arabia? Furthermore, is our own government entirely decent in its treatment of its own citizens? Bush's grand ideals are only a small step from grand hypocrisy.

GWB: Liberty will come to those who love it. Today, America speaks anew to the peoples of the world: All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you.

The U.S. government has not always kept such promises. Dick Cheney in earlier times opposed both Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. The list of oppressed people we have ignored is very long. The encouragement that might be found in this fresh promise from George Bush the second is blurred by a skeptical world's widespread mistrust in the sort of "liberty" Bush has in mind.

GWB: The rulers of outlaw regimes can know that we still believe as Abraham Lincoln did: "Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under the rule of a just God, cannot long retain it."

If the United States were found to be an outlaw regime, would Bush apply Lincoln's words to us? This administration has been almost fanatic in its efforts to exempt the U.S. from all accountability.

GWB: The leaders of governments with long habits of control need to know: To serve your people you must learn to trust them.

Do the vast numbers of people in the U.S. who have opposed and still oppose the Iraqi war feel trusted? Do we even feel listened to? Or do we feel stampeded into doing and supporting something that we have felt and still feel was poorly considered? I for one do not feel trusted by this administration.

GWB: And all the allies of the United States can know: we honor your friendship, we rely on your counsel, and we depend on your help.

Does this apply to Germany and France? Or only to those who follow our lead? The extent to which this administration has been willing to "go it alone" and ignore the counsel of other nations is extreme.

GWB: America has need of idealism and courage, because we have essential work at home - the unfinished work of American freedom. In a world moving toward liberty, we are determined to show the meaning and promise of liberty.

In America's ideal of freedom, citizens find the dignity and security of economic independence, instead of laboring on the edge of subsistence. This is the broader definition of liberty that motivated the Homestead Act, the Social Security Act, and the G.I. Bill of Rights. And now we will extend this vision by reforming great institutions to serve the needs of our time.

Unless you count the flawed Medicare Bill, no liberating Acts have been proposed by this administration. And the so-called "reform" proposed for Social Security is seen by many as a first step toward phasing out this safety net and/or turning its wealth over to stock market vagaries. And rather than passing some new GI Bill, our returning veterans are being shortchanged. Some VA hospitals are being phased out and all are seriously underfunded. Indeed, financing for all those "laboring on the edge of subsistence" has been reduced.

GWB: By making every citizen an agent of his or her own destiny, we will give our fellow Americans greater freedom from want and fear, and make our society more prosperous and just and equal.

The phrase "making every citizen an agent of his or her own destiny" needs to be translated. It actually means in the Bush context, "ending the safety nets that provide the down and out with the provisions necessary to get up and going." And this promise to "make our society more prosperous and just and equal" is a cruel joke in the mouth of a president who has so thoroughly pampered the wealthy.

GWB: And our country must abandon all the habits of racism, because we cannot carry the message of freedom and the baggage of bigotry at the same time.

This is surely the most beautiful sentence in the whole speech. But again troubling questions surround this beauty. What programs for African American opportunity has this administration proposed? And does this burdensome baggage of bigotry apply to our habits of bigotry toward gay and lesbian members of our population?

GWB: We go forward with complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom. Not because history runs on the wheels of inevitability; it is human choices that move events. Not because we consider ourselves a chosen nation; God moves and chooses as He wills. We have confidence because freedom is the permanent hope of mankind, the hunger in dark places, the longing of the soul.

Much less confidence would be appropriate in this case. What does Bush expect this triumph of freedom to actually look like? He certainly expects it to glorify himself and his views of governance. But if true freedom were indeed to triumph, citizens of this nation might be surprised, more than we can even imagine. The prophet Amos speaking to the over confidence of his day spoke words in this vein: "What will the day of the Lord (Is that not the day of freedom?) mean to you? It will be darkness not light, It will be as when a man runs from a lion and a bear meets him, or turns into a house and leans his hand on the wall and a snake bites him." Bush expects no surprises for our nation. He is not actually proposing freedom for all people, but rather the imposition of a particular view of freedom that Bush has in mind.

GWB: Renewed in our strength - tested, but not weary - we are ready for the greatest achievements in the history of freedom.

This is an allusion to completing the battle in Iraq and perhaps other places. But Iraq may not become the great achievement Bush is expecting. And if this administration attacks Iran or encourages Israel to do so, all our Middle Eastern "achievements" may turn very sour indeed.

GWB: May God bless you, and may He watch over the United States of America.

Here are my predictions for the blessings that the United States of America is most likely to receive from the God of History:

(1) We will be forced to leave Iraq with our tail between our legs. That is, all our hidden aims to have maximum influence over this oil-rich region will have to be surrendered in order to finally bring our soldiers home. When that time comes, even some of our most vigorous hawks will ask if this war was indeed a waste of billions of dollars and thousands of lives.

(2) Because we have bet on corralling oil supplies rather than launching crash programs in energy conservation and replacing fossil fuel sources, the rising prices of oil and natural gas will chop in half about half of our economy.

(3) Our devastatingly huge national debt will continue to grow to the point where our lenders in Japan, China, and the European Union will move their investments elsewhere collapsing our economy still further and forcing us to shut down two-thirds of the Pentagon in order to provide relief for our starving citizens.

Yes, that sounds somewhat like the day of the Lord that Amos was talking about. Perhaps we can escape from such consequences, provided that we find the most relevant ways to "let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Otherwise, these grim prospects are likely outcomes of our present situation and our current ways of dealing with it.

Whether or not these exact outcomes take place, the likelihood of them reveals what is wrong with George W. Bush's second inaugural address. It assumes that this administration of this singular nation knows what course God will bless, knows what to do, knows how to make history work out well. This confidence is a delusion.