

For Domestic Consumption Only

Monday 31 January 2005

<http://www.interventionmag.com/cms/...>

For Domestic Consumption Only Bush May Have Thought He Was Speaking To The Aspirations Of The Oppressed Around The World, But Because Of His Ignorance Of The World He Certainly Missed His Mark Michael Coblenz January 30, 2005

President Bush's gave a wonderful speech at his inauguration last week. It was full of beautiful rhetoric, lofty ideas, and deft connections between our founding principles and our current struggles. But it was so completely unlike anything that has come out of Bush's mouth in the last four years as to be disorienting. And with his somewhat flat reading, it was a bit like watching one of those old automaton Presidents at Disneyland. The disconnect was heightened when, just a few days later, the Administration was forced to 'correct' the inaugural address. Certainly this is the first time in history that an inaugural address was corrected.

But the real beauty of the speech was how, in a single rhetorical stroke, Bush trashed the dominant approach of the Republican party of the last fifty years, and replaced cold rationalism with religious fervor. The Wilsonian ideal of the United States spreading democracy has long been derided by Republicans as hopelessly naïve, but Bush changed the word from democracy to freedom, proclaimed it a gift from God to mankind, and the Republicans fell into line.

A great deal has already been written about whether or not Bush's statements regarding ending tyranny mark a reversal of his administration's policies towards Pakistan and dozens of other tyrannical allies. This scrutiny led to an amusing round of retractions, corrections, and explanations, and makes one wonder if other aspects of Bush policy will be similarly scrutinized in the future.

The inaugural address seems to be the first step in Bush's grandiose plan to secure his legacy. In Seymour Hersh's recent article in the New Yorker describing how the Bush Administration is contemplating a possible attack on Iran, a former high level intelligence official said that the Bush Administration considers Iran just another front in the war on terror. Said the unnamed former official "We've declared war and the bad guys, wherever they are, are the enemy. This is the last hurrah - we've got four years, and want to come out of this saying we won the war on terrorism."

If Bush wins the war on terrorism (and we should all honestly hope that he does) he will go down in history as a truly great visionary and perhaps one of the greatest Presidents of the modern era. The problem, as his speech shows, is that Bush and his Administration have a scary ignorance of the rest of the world. It will, unfortunately, be difficult to win a fight against an enemy and an ideology that you don't remotely understand.

Bush began his speech, not surprisingly, by reminding us (indirectly) of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. He called it "a day of fire," and said that such terrorism comes from a world that simmers in "resentment and tyranny." He then explained what the U.S. could do:

There is only one force of history that can break the reign of hatred and resentment and expose the pretensions of tyrants and reward the hopes of the decent and tolerant, and that is the force of human freedom. 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

This certainly rings true in many American's ears. We are a nation that loves the idea of freedom and liberty. The problem, though, is that this doesn't necessarily ring true in other's ears. How does the call for freedom sound in a society that is structured on duty to family and kin, and not structured on individual liberty? When we say liberty we think of voting or buying property, or choosing your own career, but many cultures don't view it quite that way. They see "liberty" and "freedom" as destabilizing forces. Take, as one example, women's rights. It is an idea so firmly ingrained in western societies that even the most deeply conservative Republican doesn't believe and wouldn't seriously suggest that women shouldn't have the right to vote, or drive, or work outside the home. But, in most Middle Eastern countries, giving women these rights would be seriously destabilizing. Now in the abstract, in the long run, and from a Westerner's perspective, opening these societies might be a good thing, but is it worth creating a potentially dangerous situation.

Bush, and many Americans, forget that it took nearly five hundred years for the concepts of "liberty" and "freedom" to fully develop in the west. And those were often extraordinarily violent years. The religious freedom that Luther demanded in 1517 led to four hundred years of religious wars. The expansion of individual liberties was gained almost exclusively through violent civil wars. In our zeal to bring "freedom" and "liberty" to repressive countries, we should remember the turmoil of our own struggles to achieve freedom and liberty. Bush also tied his call for the expansion of liberty with America's own historic desire for liberty. He said:

America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the maker of heaven and earth ... 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.

With this one phrase Bush has neatly tied together our founding principles with our current national struggle. He has also added a uniquely Christian gloss, but in doing so, misstates the basis of our founding principles. The Declaration of Independence says that men "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." There is a difference between that phrase, and Bush's reinterpretation of it. The role of religion in government was debated during the nation's founding, and the founders purposefully separated "church" and "state." The only mention of religion in the original (unamended) Constitution is Article 6, Section 3, which prohibits a "religious test" for government office holders. Modern Christians (like Bush) conveniently ignore this, and claim that religion (and in particular Christianity) was so pervasive that there was no need to mention God, Christ, or religion in the Constitution. This ignores the vigorous debate during the ratification process in the states. Many prominent Christians decried the lack of reference or deference to a deity in the Constitution, but despite their arguments, the Constitution was ratified.

We should not be surprised that Bush doesn't understand the history of the nations he is seeking to change. He doesn't even understand the history of his own country.