

Friend Abroad, Enemy at Home

Tag: George Bush is Freedom's biggest supporter abroad, but he is actively eroding our freedoms here at home.

 Michael Coblenz

On his recent European trip, President George Bush took every opportunity to praise liberty, democracy and 'freedom.' He frequently mentioned that the United States and most European nations share common traditions of democracy and freedom. Bush even lectured Russian President Vladimir Putin on freedom and democracy. (And no doubt Putin needs a good talking to.)

In a joint news conference with the Russian leader on February 24, Bush said that in his discussions with Putin, he "reaffirmed my belief that it is democracy and freedom that bring true security and prosperity in every land." He then set out some of the values shared by free and democratic nations. "Democracies always reflect a country's customs and culture and I know that," Bush said. "Yet democracies have certain things in common. They have a rule of law and protection of minorities, a free press and a viable political opposition."

One could certainly suggest that there are more than these four values that underlie democracy, things like free and fair elections, or religious tolerance (among others), but for the moment let's agree that Bush has listed four fundamentally important aspects of a democracy. In his statement, Bush suggested that Putin and Russia, need to do more to respect, promote and protect these values (and Bush is undoubtedly right). But what is Bush's record on those aspects of democracy?

The Rule of Law

The rule of law incorporates many different things. Most people understand the importance of due process for accused criminals, but respect for the rule of law also includes respect for the process of making laws in the legislature, respect for those who interpret the laws, as well as respect for the civil justice system. Bush's record in all of these areas is spotty at best.

In criminal law, the government should ensure that criminal defendants are afforded due process and that they should be held based only on legitimate charges. But Bush has pushed laws that deny both. Aspects of the Patriot Act make a mockery of due process. Prisoners (both foreigners and American citizens) have been held indefinitely, and without charge, in direct violation of the age old legal principle of habeus corpus. When British colonists in the Americas felt that they were being abused by the monarch they set out a declaration of their grievances. One of these so called Intolerable acts stated that the King of England created laws, "For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended Offences." Today it is called 'extraordinary rendition,' a favorite tactic for interrogating prisoners beyond the jurisdiction of the American courts, and beyond the Rule of Law.

But criminal laws are only one aspect of the rule of law. The ability of individuals to resolve their grievances in court is a cherished 'freedom' that dates back to the Magna Charta. The Seventh Amendment to the Constitution guarantees the right to trial by jury in civil cases, yet nowhere is Bush more actively seeking to erode the rule of law than in civil litigation. Tort reform, medical malpractice reform, class action reform: all of these erode the rights of citizens to resolve their grievances in court.

Protection of minorities

To his credit, Bush seems uninterested in race. Except for opposition to affirmative action, Bush's record in this area seems unremarkable. One could quibble and say that his high level minority appointments are mere window dressing, but Bush has actively promoted minorities, as long as they are either extremely conservative, or personally loyal. (Think of Condoleezza Rice and Alberto Gonzalez.) Bush seems to view people primarily through his political biases, and doesn't seem much concerned with the color of their skin.

I should mention, however, that this might actually not be the case. A new report from The Memory Hole (on-line at <http://www.thememoryhole.org/usccr/purged.htm>) has found that the U.S. Civil Rights Commission recently purged its web site of reports critical of the Bush Administration's civil rights record.

Apparently governmental accountability isn't an important aspect of a democracy.

Viable political opposition

Bush seeks to marginalize his political opponents at every turn. As but one example are his frequent references to bipartisanship. Most people understand bipartisanship to mean a desire to find common ground that is acceptable to both political parties. For Bush, bipartisanship means that the Democrats should get on board his ship, not that he should find common ground with them.

Bush has made no effort to work with the political opposition. Traditionally Presidents have met regularly with leaders of the political opposition, but Bush has had fewer meetings than any President in recent history. Bush has also encouraged Congressional Republicans to freeze Democrats out of the legislative process as much as possible. He is currently working with Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist to try to eliminate the filibuster for judicial nominees, which is the last tool the Democrats have to prevent being steam rolled by Republicans. Bush claims that this is necessary because Democrats have unfairly used the parliamentary procedure to block his 'mainstream' judicial appointees. But the fact is that Bush has had more judges successfully confirmed than the previous three Presidents, and only the most extreme may face the filibuster.

Freedom of the press

The Bush Administration has done more to control the news and sideline the press than any Presidential Administration since Nixon. Bush has had fewer press conferences than any modern President, and while he occasionally has publicized 'chats' with individual reporters, it is almost exclusively with such openly partisan 'news' outlets as Fox News or the Wall Street Journal. He apparently only wants a press that feels free to praise him.

And when the ostensibly free press isn't sufficiently praiseworthy, the Bush Administration turns to the paid press. The Bush Administration paid conservative columnists Armstrong Williams, Maggie Gallagher and Michael McManus to write favorable articles to help promote its programs. It also produced fake news stories to sell its policies.

Bush' first press secretary, Ari Fleisher, famously warned the press after 9-11 that they "need to watch what they say." How free is a press that is supposed to watch what it says?

The contempt for the press in the Bush administration is palpable. Andrew Card, the White House Chief of Staff, told the New Yorker in a Jan. 20, 2004, article that the press doesn't "represent the public any more than other people do. In our democracy, the people who represent the public stood for election. I don't believe you have a check-and-balance function."

Freedom on the march abroad

I'm glad that Bush is promoting freedom around the world. I find current events in the Middle East amazing, and admit that much of this is due to Bush's actions. The Iraqi election was an historic event, and seems to have shaken something loose in the region. The Palestinians had a free election, and may be on the road to the establishment of their own nation. Lebanon is trying to throw off years of Syrian control, and the Syrians are grudgingly pulling back troops. President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt is saying that he will allow some level of free elections. Even the Saudis are making tentative steps towards democracy, saying they might let women vote. Democracy is making small, tenuous steps in the Middle East, and I believe that this will greatly improve things in the region. (My main concern is that reactionaries and religious extremists will violently oppose these steps.)

Bush certainly should be credited for much of this. But the irony is that while he is expanding freedom and democracy abroad, he is curtailing it at home. Despite the current low regard throughout the world for the current Administration, the United States is the beacon for these

freedom movements. It is widely considered a model of democracy. But how much longer will it be a beacon, and how good of a model, if Bush continues to erode our freedoms?