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THEY SAID IT

“The goal of the free world must no longer be stated in the negative....The goal of the free world must instead be stated in the affirmative. We must go on the offensive with a forward strategy for freedom....[W]e must foster the hope of liberty throughout the world and work for the day when the peoples of every land can enjoy the blessings of liberty and the right to self-government.”

--Ronald Reagan, remarks at a dinner marking the 10th anniversary of the Heritage Foundation, October 3, 1983.

THE MADNESS OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT?

I was, I'll concede, caught off guard by the storm that followed President Bush's inaugural speech last Thursday. Maybe I'm too cynical, or maybe I've been in Washington too long, but Tom Ridge's succession of cryptic warnings and security upgrades and downgrades notwithstanding, I truly didn't expect anything too terribly gripping. I was wrong.

President Bush's speech was, to say the very least, provocative. More provocative perhaps than even the "Axis of Evil" speech delivered three years ago this month. With his call to arms against "tyranny" and his declaration that "America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one," the President sparked a discussion, the nature and intensity of which have likely not been witnessed over an inaugural address since William Henry Harrison delivered one that was over two hours long on a bitter cold and windy day with no coat on, and died soon after from pneumonia.

It almost goes without saying that most of the serious discussion of the speech has taken place among various factions within the President's own party. The Democrats' opinions on the address have been largely inconsequential, for, as I noted last week, they tend to react to anything and everything the President says or does with blind, partisan rancor, which necessarily dilutes their relevance. And so it was with the inaugural address. Of all the Democratic/liberal commentators, only two that I read, *Slate's* Chris Suellentrop and former Clinton chief Speechwriter David Kusnet, had anything even remotely pertinent to

say about the speech.

But on the right, the discussion has been intense and intriguing, with the President's usual right-wing critics finding support in their denigration of the address from a handful of new, influential, and somewhat surprising allies. Both the attacks on and the defenses of the President and his address have been serious, earnest, and generally well thought out. The questions this internecine GOP squabble raises are not only fascinating, particularly in light of Mark's "Madness of Crowds" piece last week, but are vitally important, as they hint at the problems the President may be having with his own base and what those problems portend regarding the chances of success or failure in his second term.

The vast preponderance of criticism leveled against President Bush and his speechwriters has focused on the conception of idealism contained in the address and the presumed ramifications of that specific conception. This is, of course, hardly the first time the President has heard such criticism, particularly from his right.

Pat Buchanan and the crowd at his *American Conservative* magazine, Bob Novak, and a handful of other "paleo-cons" have long been concerned that President Bush's response to 9/11 has been too idealistic, too focused on "nation building," and too concerned with spreading American values among people who are unwilling or unable to accept and internalize them.

What makes this current spate of criticism different is that many of those leveling charges of "idealistic overreach" against the President are unexpected critics, none of whom have sided with the paleo-cons before in this debate, and some of whom have even been vocally and persistently on the President's side of the issue.

Most prominent among Thursday's converts to the "overreach" camp were former Reagan speechwriters

Peggy Noonan and Peter Robinson, former George W. Bush speechwriter David Frum, and conservative icon William F. Buckley. With the exception of Frum, the essential complaint from this new brood of critics was that Bush had crossed the line, had pushed his passion for freedom and liberty too far, and had set his sites on unachievable and therefore potentially disastrous ends. As Noonan put it:

The president's speech seemed rather heavenish. It was a God-drenched speech. This president, who has been accused of giving too much attention to religious imagery and religious thought, has not let the criticism enter him. God was invoked relentlessly. "The Author of Liberty." "God moves and chooses as He wills. We have confidence because freedom is the permanent hope of mankind . . . the longing of the soul."

It seemed a document produced by a White House on a mission. The United States, the speech said, has put the world on notice: Good governments that are just to their people are our friends, and those that are not are, essentially, not. We know the way: democracy. The president told every nondemocratic government in the world to shape up. "Success in our relations [with other governments] will require the decent treatment of their own people." . . .

Ending tyranny in the world? Well that's an ambition, and if you're going to have an ambition it might as well be a big one. But this declaration, which is not wrong by any means, seemed to me to land somewhere between dreamy and disturbing. Tyranny is a very bad thing and quite wicked, but one doesn't expect we're going to eradicate it any time soon. Again, this is not heaven, it's earth . . .

This is – how else to put it? – over the top. It is the kind of sentence that makes

you wonder if this White House did not, in the preparation period, have a case of what I have called in the past “mission inebriation.” A sense that there are few legitimate boundaries to the desires born in the goodness of their good hearts.

One wonders if they shouldn’t ease up, calm down, breathe deep, get more securely grounded. The most moving speeches summon us to the cause of what is actually possible. Perfection in the life of man on earth is not.

Now, if all of this sounds a little familiar, there’s a reason. The criticism leveled against President Bush late in the week by Noonan, Robinson, et al, was very similar to the criticism leveled by Mark against modern American society early in the week. It should come as no surprise that one of the critics of Bush’s speech, the eminent William F. Buckley, is, like Mark, a fan of Eric Voegelin and his criticism of the modern liberal “dream world,” on which Mark leaned heavily in developing his new, unified theory of modern American neuroses in last week’s piece.

Peggy Noonan’s criticism that the President’s ambitions “seemed to me to land somewhere between dreamy and disturbing” clearly evokes Voegelin’s dream world and the “gap between intended and real effect” which Mark cited last week. Peter Robinson’s criticism that Bush’s speech was “a thoroughgoing exaltation of the state,” clearly echoes Mark’s assertion that modern Americans collectively believe “that the myriad physical and mental contagions that have plagued mankind since Pandora released them from her famous box are remnants of an older age, that those of us who are fortunate enough to be living today would not have to tolerate any of them if the government were doing its job.” And most obviously, Pat Buchanan’s criticism that President Bush’s declared intention to proselytize liberty throughout the world makes him “Woodrow Wilson on amphetamines,” brings to mind Mark’s declaration that “no individual of note, not even Christ, seems ever to have said or even implied that peace on earth is possible prior to

the eschaton. That is at least until Woodrow Wilson appeared on the scene....”

But while I think there is little question that Mark is right about the madness of modern America, I think that President Bush’s critics may have engaged in a little overreach of their own when they tried to apply the same critique to President Bush and to his inaugural address. Yes, President Bush is, in many ways, an idealist, particularly on foreign policy. And yes, he articulated his idealism in rather grandiose terms last week. But I think it is more than a bit of a stretch from that to conclude that Bush suffers from the madness of dream world expectations; that he is the heir to Woodrow Wilson, traipsing around the world, making it safe for democracy; that he sees himself as the means by which to imminentize the eschaton, to borrow for a moment Voegelin’s most famous phrase.

For starters, President Bush’s idealism, unlike Wilson’s, is tempered by realism. The President may sound hopelessly, romantically idealistic when he declares that “The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands,” and that “The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.” But it becomes obvious that that idealism is anything but hopeless and romantic when it is immediately mitigated by the declaration that “this is not primarily the task of arms, though we will defend ourselves and our friends by force of arms when necessary.”

All of this is to say that President Bush understands, as he said at the outset of his address, that his “most solemn duty is to protect this nation and its people against further attacks and emerging threats,” and that his idealism is merely a means to that end. Or as Jonah Goldberg put it:

George W. Bush grounds his doctrine in the soil of American self-interest . . .

[President Bush] has the priorities in the right order. We fight tyranny because it is

in our interest to do so. We are morally justified in our task because the fight against tyranny is a noble cause.

Secondly, it is important to note that George Bush came to the White House with the expressed intention of cutting taxes a bit, “restoring dignity” to the office of President, and little else. His desire to change the world and fight tyranny is the product of external circumstances to which he had no choice but to respond. Contrast this with Wilson, who wanted to remake the world with Utopian ends, long before World War I and America’s “foreign entanglements” prompted the League of Nations and the Kellogg-Briand Pact.

It is easy to forget that Woodrow Wilson, an academic and onetime president of Princeton, is considered the father of American Public Administration and long before he was president was touting the potential of administrative “sciences” to radically improve the human condition. Unlike the brilliant and oft-maligned Max Weber, whose work on bureaucracy and administration was purely descriptive, Wilson’s was, in fact, prescriptive, advocating “the eminently practical science of administration” to remake society. In other words, Wilson had a proclivity for Utopian/Millenarian undertakings that both preceded and transcended his presidential foreign policy. George Bush does not.

Finally, it seems to me at least that some of the critics of President Bush’s speech have lost touch with their political roots, forgetting – only temporarily perhaps – what it is they did, whom it was they worked for, and how it was that they contributed to similar expressions of American idealism.

While the Pat Buchanans of the world call Bush and his inaugural rhetoric Wilsonian, I can’t help but think that a more apt adjective is Reaganesque. It is no mere coincidence that Bush and his speech writers have been profoundly influenced by Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Natan Sharansky, two men to whom President Reagan’s words on America’s mission and dedication to liberty – penned by none other than Peter Robinson

and Peggy Noonan – provided tremendous hope and encouragement.

It may be, as Robinson contends, that Reagan, like all previous Cold War presidents, sought more “to change the world by our example rather than by force,” but to suggest that President Bush wants to rely exclusively on force, disregarding example altogether, is, I believe, a misreading of the President’s address (which Robinson himself eventually conceded). Bush’s rhetoric may not have been perfectly Reaganesque, but as President he faces a radically different threat that requires radically different defenses and at least modestly different rhetoric. But that does not mean that his rhetoric is not perfectly in keeping with the spirit expressed by Reagan, as well as Kennedy, Roosevelt, and Lincoln before him.

So the question we are left with, given that the case against Bush’s inaugural rhetoric appears suspect at best, is why his new critics, most of whom have been ardent supporters in the past, would feel it necessary to condemn his address in such a strident and public a manner.

Some participants in this debate have argued that the critics have allied themselves with the paleo-cons, opposing the activist foreign policy necessary to fight the war on terror. Others have charged that they are, in at least a couple of cases, pettily upset that they had no hand in the address. All such suggestions are, in my estimation, way off the mark. Generally speaking, the President’s new critics are unquestionably decent and honorable people, stalwart conservatives, and supporters not just of the President, but of the war on terror as well.

It is far more likely, in my opinion, that Noonan, Robinson, Buckley, et al have grown more than just a bit worried about the course of events over the last few months and used the occasion of the inaugural address to give vent to that concern. It is possible, to my thinking likely, that these critics are concerned not about the course or ultimate goal of the war on terror, but about the administration’s willingness and ability to continue making the public case for the

war. And since they saw the inaugural address as prime opportunity to make the case in a concrete and specific way, they were disappointed that the President chose instead to focus on abstract idealism.

To this end, David Frum's critique of the President's speech is perhaps the most valuable of all, as it focuses less on the nature of the rhetoric and more on its mechanics. Frum, you may recall, has unique insight into this subject, having written speeches for President Bush and, indeed, having penned the celebrated "axis of evil" line. On Friday, Frum detailed his concerns thusly:

Yesterday's Inaugural address was a fine and tough 14-minute speech that was allowed to bloat to 20 minutes. Twenty minutes is not excessively long for a speech – even a speech delivered outdoors in January – if there is twenty minutes' worth of content. But it's dangerous for anyone to keep talking when he has nothing more to say, and that is especially true for a president . . .

The high fat content in this second Bush inaugural suggests to me that something is going seriously wrong in this second Bush White House. The deep problem is not that there were seven extra minutes – ultimately, who cares about that? The deep problem is that nobody spoke up to excise those seven minutes – not even the normally deeply time-conscious president. To my mind, the failure to edit this speech is an indication of a broader gathering attenuation of purpose and discipline at the highest levels of the government.

Couple this with Frum's comment from earlier in the week that "George W. Bush has a serious communications problem – and it may be getting worse" and the criticism leveled against the President's inaugural address begins to make a little more sense. Clearly Frum, and I suspect the others as well, are worried that the President is going to lose this war not on the battlefield and not by advocating lofty,

idealistic goals, but by failing, in a concrete manner, on a day-to-day basis, to make the case for the war to the American people.

This is a concern Mark and I share and one about which we have both written numerous times in the past. And while we dispute the contention that the President's inaugural was the obligatory venue in which to make the case to the public and that anything short of that constitutes failure, we empathize with the worried critics and agree that great effort must be expended to keep the public onboard.

Along these lines, we think it at least mildly comforting that in response to the conservative criticism of the President's address, the White House sent out a host of aides and even the President's father to calm some of the fears and mollify some of the critics. This type of public relations effort has been sorely missing over the last few months and would, if repeated, go a long way toward reinvigorating public support for the war on terror and its primary battleground, the war in Iraq. If future efforts could be better coordinated and proactive rather than reactive, all the better.

The bottom line on all of this is that the President's inaugural speech was fine. It was sensibly idealistic and, criticism to the contrary notwithstanding, did not represent a great departure from precedent and a flight into Millenarian madness. It could, perhaps, have been a little less abstract and otherworldly, but that's merely a matter of preference.

Time will, of course, tell if President Bush and his aides learn the right lessons from the criticism of the inaugural address, and we can only hope they do.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS ON THE SPEECH.

I, like Steve, was fascinated with the controversy that President Bush's Panglossian inaugural address stirred up among Republican cognoscenti last week. The President has been saying this kind of stuff routinely ever since shortly after September 11, 2001, and it is, as Steve noted, both interesting and instructive that so many conservatives and erstwhile Bush fans suddenly became so upset by it.

His father may have lacked the "vision thing," as his critics claimed, but anyone who has been paying attention for the past three years should have known by last week that the son has it coming out of his pores. Yet, the whole thing was so surprising to so many that even the Bible thumping, flowery-rhetoric-loving Peggy Noonan grew almost wobbly, to borrow a term from Maggie Thatcher, when she focused on it for the first time in her post-inaugural column, which was entitled "Way Too Much God."

Now as regular readers know, I have long shared many of the concerns that Ms. Noonan and other critics of the President's speech expressed last week about the President's oft-stated dream of helping the "Author of liberty" succeed in achieving the "eventual triumph of freedom."

Time and again I have said in these pages that I would be much more comfortable if he couched the war against Islamic terrorism in the ancient and temporal terms of confronting an enemy before he can do damage rather than in the grandiose language of world redemption. I put it this way over two and a half years ago in an article dated June 17, 2002 entitled "More Unintended Consequences."

But what makes this situation even scarier, in my opinion, is the flowery Wilsonian language that is slowly but ever so surely creeping into presidential statements of policy governing this war, a language that is, I believe, a precise prescription for disastrous unintended consequences . . .

This is not Vietnam. Americans have no need for the fabrication of some sort of

grand global purpose or moral crusade to provide an incentive to fight this war. September 11 was purpose enough. The goal of this war should be simply to hunt the enemy down and kill him; destroy his hideouts, whether they be caves in Afghanistan, palaces in Saudi Arabia, or entire countries like Iran and Iraq; and then go home . . . Opposing evil, supporting good, promoting the concept of absolute moral truth, and eradicating brutality against women, innocent civilians, and lawless regimes are all noble causes that should be pursued by the United States, diligently, humbly, and with prudence, at all times, during war or peace.

But, as history demonstrates, such pursuits can lead to serious trouble when mixed with war and justified, whether directly or indirectly, by the contention that America has some historic world redemptive destiny that it must fulfill on behalf of mankind. This leads to the sin of pride and confuses the roles, as St. Augustine so beautifully pointed out, of the City of God and the City of Man.

But this week, I will leave the philosophical question of idealism vs. realism to others (including Steve in the preceding article), except to stress, once again, that my own criticism of this kind of rhetoric is that it can draw the nation into disastrous foreign policy errors if it isn't strongly tempered by a realistic view of the possible and the practical, or to employ more philosophical terms, by prudence and humility.

With this in mind, I generally applaud the collective response from Ms. Noonan and other conservatives with similar reservations about the President's speech because it strongly indicates that good, philosophically well-grounded people on the GOP side of the political aisle are finally monitoring his idealism closely and willing to speak up loudly and publicly if they believe it is intruding on prudent policy.

Contrary to some of Bush's critics on the left, however, I have no concern whatsoever that such talk will not go down well with the leaders of other nations, such as Canada, China, Russia, any of the Islamic states, and many of those in Old Europe. If these nations object to public assertions of U.S. moral support for democratic movements within totalitarian states, then they can counter it by voicing their support for the stability of tyrannies worldwide.

In any case, it is good for Americans to know how its friends and allies stand on this point, particularly if President Bush's "worldview" is, as the *Washington Post* recently stated, "dramatically at odds with that in many parts of Europe and the Middle East." It should come as no surprise, of course, that tyrannical regimes, in the Middle East and elsewhere, would disagree with Bush's "worldview" that freedom is desirable. But one can't help but wonder what it is about tyrannies that inspires the maternal, protective instincts of the people in "many parts of Europe."

With all of this in mind, I would close by maintaining that, contrary to what some of Bush's critics have been implying, the trouble that the President and Condi Rice are sure to face over the next few years in rallying global support for the President's efforts in the war against Islamic terrorists will not stem from his rhetorical style or his philosophical idealism. It is not that simple.

The French and the Germans, for example, are not antagonistic toward President Bush because they are offended by either his style or his idealism. Rhetorical flourishes in support of grand global ambitions do not bother them. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find two other nations in the history of the world whose citizens are so prone to swoon over gaudily wrapped political abstractions, even, one might add, some of the most destructive that have been known to mankind.

The fact is that both nations are antagonistic toward President Bush and his foreign policy principles

because these principles threaten their economic and social welfare. Both nations have a record of close financial ties and personal friendship with some of the sleaziest and murderous regimes in the Middle East, including those running Iran and Syria, which are actively involved in attempting to restore the vicious Baathist regime to power in Iraq.

Both nations are weak militarily and economically, and their societies are decaying before their very eyes, victims not of the high ideals of individual freedom but of the false ideals of socialism and the endemic corruption that accompanies such ideologies.

Indeed, one of the distinguishing features of these and other nations of "Old Europe" is the fact that their populations are so steeped in spiritual ennui that they are not reproducing themselves as rapidly as they are dying, which means they will become increasingly dependent on a population of Arab immigrants who neither like them nor respect their history or their culture.

The Canadians too make much of Bush's style and rhetoric. Yet it is important for Americans to understand, even if the Canadians do not, that the real problem they have with Bush isn't how he says things, but what he says.

According to *The Washington Post*, while in Canada recently, Bush "did confront" Prime Minister Paul Martin with "the sort of language that sets Canadians on edge." *Mon dieu*, wondered I, what kind of language sets Canadians on edge? Did he curse, employ an ethnic slur, or say something that was grossly outside the bounds of the rules of political correctness?

Well, it turns out that the distinguishing offensive characteristic of the language he used was something called candor. "He leaned across the table and said, 'I'm not taking this position, but some future president is gong to say, 'Why are we paying to defend Canada?'" To make matters worse, according to the Post, "the next day Bush gave a speech in Halifax that "to the Canadians sounded as tough

and uncompromising as ever.” Meaning he honored them with the truth as he saw it, thus giving them an opportunity to formulate and present their views from an informed position as to his.

As for Comrade Putin and the Communist Chinese leadership, what could be more conducive to a productive association based on *realpolitik* than honesty on the part of the United States as to which policies are appreciated by it and which are considered loathsome? If this makes the Russian and Chinese leaders uncomfortable, then they should know that their policies of murder and oppression are equally discomfoting to Americans.

Can America continue to have productive and reasonably friendly relations with these and other

nations of the world whose policies toward their own citizens are not in keeping those that are honored and respected by the United States as articulated by President Bush? Of course. *Will* America continue to have productive and reasonably friendly relations with these and other nations of the world whose policies toward their own citizens are not in keeping those that are honored and respected by the United States as articulated by President Bush? Of course. Should American presidents watch what they say in public for fear of angering tyrants and their friends? Of course not. *Adieu.*

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