

README

The Limits of Eloquence

Did Bush mean a word of his speech about democracy?

By Michael Kinsley

America's proper role in promoting democracy and freedom in the world was a big issue in the 2000 presidential election. One of the candidates was a Wilsonian idealist, arguing that the prestige and even the military strength of the United States should be used to remake other governments in our image. The other candidate was contemptuous of this woolly-minded notion, saying American blood and treasure should be spent only in humanitarian emergencies or to protect our own narrowly defined self-interest.

The idealist won the election, in the opinion of many. But the skeptic took office. And then, guess what! The skeptic became a woolly-minded idealist! Democracy's a funny thing.

President Bush's recent speech committing the United States to a "forward strategy of freedom," declaring that "the advance of freedom is . . . the calling of our country," and that "freedom is worth fighting for, dying for, and standing for" (an odd anticlimax, by the way) is being heralded as eloquent. Which it is. Some of the finest eloquence that money can buy. A beautiful endorsement of an activist foreign policy that goes beyond protecting our interests to advancing our values.

The eloquence would be more impressive if there were any reason to suppose that Bush thinks words have meaning. One test of meaning is the future: what the words lead to. As even some admirers of the speech point out, the details of this "forward strategy of freedom" are missing, except for pursuing our current military adventure in Iraq—which was sold to the country on totally non-Wilsonian grounds. But meaning can also be tested by looking at the past. Eloquence is just a hooker if it will serve as a short-term no-commitments release for any idea that comes along.

In 2000, Bush said that the Clinton-Gore administration had been reckless in over-committing the United States, and the military in particular, to exercises in "nation-building." By that he meant trying to establish institutions of democratic government and civil society. The intervention in Somalia, for example, begun by Bush's father, "started off as a humanitarian mission and it changed into a nation-building mission and that's where the mission went wrong." Just as with his current nearly opposite philosophy, Bush stated the principle in the categorical terms of someone who has adopted it and checked it off his list without diving for subtleties. Preventing starvation: good. Overthrowing the occasional dictator: well, OK. Nation-building: bad. "Maybe I'm missing something here. I mean, we're going to have kind of a nation-building corps from America? Absolutely not. It needs to be in our vital interest, the mission needs to be clear, and the exit strategy obvious. I'm not so sure the role of the United States is to go around the world and say this is the way it's got to be. I think the United States must be humble . . . in how we treat nations that are figuring out how to chart their own course."

One way to show your respect for democracy is to state your beliefs when running for office and then apply those same beliefs when you're elected. Democracy becomes pointless if there is no connection between the policies that citizens think they are voting for and the policies they get. In this case we actually do seem to have the policies that a majority of voters thought they were supporting. But we cannot count on election theft and broken promises to cancel each other out every time.

Nevertheless, it can be quite noble for a politician to change his or her mind. It can demonstrate courage, integrity, open-mindedness. Has Bush changed his mind on

America's role in the world? Or is it all just words—was there no mind to change?

One simple test of a change of mind is whether it is acknowledged and explained. In his eloquent speech this month, Bush made a gutsy reference to “sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East.” This was taken as a near-explicit criticism of his own father, among others. But there is every reason to suppose that our current Bush also supported this approach for most of those 60 years, including his entire adult life until a few months ago when Iraq started going bad. What caused the scales to fall from his eyes?

A man who sincerely has changed his mind about something important ought to hold his new views with less certainty and express them with a bit of rhetorical humility. There should be room for doubt. How can your current beliefs be so transcendently correct if you yourself recently believed something very different? How can critics of what you say now be so obviously wrong if you yourself used to be one of them? But Bush is cocksure that active, sometimes military, promotion of American values in the world is a good idea, just as he was, or appeared to be, cocksure of the opposite not long ago.

If you've really been thinking about a Big Question recently, you ought to be taking recent evidence into account. But Bush's eloquent speech is stuck in 1989. In Europe and Asia and “every region of the world, the advance of freedom leads to peace,” he declared. We used to think like that, before Bosnia and Kosovo. These episodes taught us that free people will sometimes vote for bloodshed that the previous government was able to suppress. This doesn't undo the case for democracy and freedom, but it complicates that case. Acknowledging and addressing such complications is another way to demonstrate that your change of mind is sincere.

And what should you do if you are a supporter of a politician who changes his mind on one of the fundamental questions of democratic government? George W. Bush's powers of persuasion are apparently so spectacular, at least to some, that almost all the pro-Bush voices in Washington and the media have remained pro-Bush even when “pro-Bush” means the opposite of what it did five minutes ago. The Comintern at the height of its powers, in the 1930s, couldn't have engineered a more impressive U-turn. If places like Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page had been as enthusiastic about nation-building back in 2000 as they are now, Al Gore might be president today.

Wait a minute. Maybe he is.