

## Loaded With Dynamite

According to his most fervent supporters, George W. Bush's Second Inaugural Address has already taken its place among the great speeches of modern American politics. Whether history confirms that verdict remains to be seen.

For the present, it is not the quality of the oratory but the implications for U.S. policy that deserve attention. On that score, the outlook is far from encouraging. For embedded in the speech like an IED buried alongside an Iraqi highway is the following assertion: "America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one." At first glance, the sentiment could hardly appear more benign: Protective of their own freedoms, Americans will support freedom for others. Who could find fault with that? On closer examination, however, the perniciousness of this new Bush Doctrine becomes evident.

If President Bush intended, on January 20, merely to offer up frothy bromides suitable for a state occasion, we could disregard his conflation of American interests and values just as we ignore his claimed insights into the will of God. But those closest to the President caution against doing so. Mr. Bush, they emphasize, means what he says—albeit selectively. The project that he has outlined is not of a moment; it is the work of generations. In this context, the President's melding of American interests and values takes on alarming connotations. It becomes a prescription for permissiveness without responsibility.

This new Bush Doctrine builds on and broadens the already existing Bush Doctrine of preventive war. In the realm of policy, it asserts unconditional freedom of action justified by the ostensible demands of freedom. When the United States punishes, occupies, or destroys, she does so for reasons far removed from the sordid, self-interested purposes animating other nations. Since, by definition, according to President Bush, America acts on behalf of liberty, such actions are necessarily above suspicion or reproach. Those entertaining a contrary view, questioning whether American motives really differ all that much from those of great powers in ages past, are either cynics or soreheads. As a consequence, U.S. officials

can rightly disregard their criticism.

Take Iraq. Charges that oil or hegemony figured in the administration's decision to invade are beneath notice, according to the President's defenders: From the outset, under the terms of the new Bush Doctrine, the aim was liberation, neither more nor less. Evidence of colossal incompetence or misjudgment—for example, the nonexistence of the fear-some arsenal that had ostensibly made Saddam Hussein such a dire threat—gets shrugged off: Of what significance are a few honest errors, given the overall grandeur of the enterprise? As to egregious misconduct such as that which occurred at Abu Ghraib, the new Bush Doctrine insists on seeing such regrettable lapses in context: The actions of a few in no way sully the high-minded efforts of the many. In this way, Bush's insistence on explaining America's purpose as "ending tyranny in our world" frees him from accountability and confers on future U.S. policymakers limitless prerogatives reinforced by unassailable moral authority.

On the other hand, even as the new Bush Doctrine empowers, it imposes no specific obligations, at least none that are evident in the text of the President's speech. The melding of interests and beliefs permits but does not impel action. President Bush and his successors will respond to the plight of the oppressed as they see fit. Indeed, they may choose not to respond at all. This is the new doctrine's unstated corollary: In her capacity as agent of liberation, the United States picks and chooses.

Again, the Bush administration's own policies show how this corollary plays out in practice. The administration that describes Saddam's removal as a moral imperative demonstrates considerably less urgency in dealing with the dictators

making life miserable in Zimbabwe or Burma. Whereas alleviating the suffering of the Iraqi people demanded direct military action, when it comes to the suffering of the Sudanese people, patient diplomacy suffices. That American values should compel the United States to forego the benefits of trading with authoritarian China or of snuggling up to Pakistan's military dictator is, of course, out of the question.

In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson included in his famous Fourteen Points the principle of "self-determination," inviting ethnic groups to demand the reconfiguration of the international order to accommodate their unrequited aspirations. At the time, Wilson's secretary of state Robert Lansing described the principle as "simply loaded with dynamite" and certain to promote not freedom but chaos. "What a calamity that the phrase was ever uttered!" Lansing wrote with considerable prescience. "What misery it will cause!"

Lansing's premonition bears recalling today. If Americans heedlessly endorse George W. Bush's radical proposal, the United States may once again inflict upon herself and others great misery. Justifying anything while requiring nothing, removing constraints without imposing responsibilities, the new Bush Doctrine promises not the triumph of liberty around the world. It will, instead, cement America's growing image as a rogue superpower.

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**PRESIDENT GEORGE BUSH** has encouraged Arabs and Israelis to “lay down the past.” “Territorial compromise is essential for peace,” he said. “We seek peace, real peace. And by real peace I mean treaties.” Israelis praised President Bush for promising not to railroad them into any agreements, while the Palestinians believed he showed support for their hopes for some form of self-government. The aim of the talks was for all sides to resolve their rival territorial claims.

The president in question was George H.W. Bush. The above news item, from the BBC archives (October 30, 1991), described an early round of talks in Madrid “to resolve rival territorial claims.” A very similar news item could have referred to Oslo in 1993; or to Camp David and Taba in 2000-01; or to Aqaba in 2003. Most recently, President George W. Bush echoed his father’s words of 14 years ago when he declared on his European tour in February that “peace is now within reach” after decades of false starts, and that “our greatest opportunity, and our immediate goal, is peace in the Middle East.”

The magnitude of that opportunity, as measured in the balance of favorable and detrimental elements in the political equation, theoretically looks encouraging. The received wisdom claims that four factors favor peace now more than at any other time in half a decade. Yasser Arafat is gone, removing both a major cause of Palestinian corruption and incoherence and the reason for Israel’s refusal to accept direct talks. Mahmoud Abbas’s victory in the Palestinian election last January on a platform of a nonviolent quest for peace supposedly indicated that “the street” in Ramallah, Jenin, Hebron, and Gaza is tired of an *intifada* that has not yielded political results, while bringing crushing economic hardship to ordinary Palestinians. The new, centrist coalition in Israel that includes Labor is said to reflect a parallel realization west of the green line that the Jewish state cannot sustain an open-ended *status quo*. The international environment is deemed favorable, with both Europe and America apparently keen to heal the legacy of discord over Iraq by cooperating in a new push for peace in the Holy Land.

All key local players are making all the right noises. “The calm which will prevail in our lands starting from today is the

beginning of a new era,” Mr. Abbas declared at a summit meeting with the Israeli prime minister in Sharm el-Sheikh in February. Mr. Sharon replied by saying that an opportunity existed “to disengage from the path of blood and start on a new path.”

As for the “immediacy” of Mr. Bush’s goal to achieve peace in the Middle East, which is implicitly defined in terms of Washington’s commitment to the role of an evenhanded broker, the fact that he is now in his second term supposedly means that he can take risks he could not afford as a first-term president hoping to get reelected. To put it bluntly, since evenhandedness means being less pro-Israeli, Mr. Bush can afford to give it a try because he need not fear what the friends of Israel will do to his campaign three years hence. His father tried evenhandedness in Madrid in 1991, and the friends of Israel responded the following year by going out of their way to ensure Bill Clinton’s victory. Clinton, for his part, made a serious push for peace toward the end of his second term, when he was motivated by “legacy” and unconcerned with the electoral calculus.

There is less than meets the eye on all counts. America and Europe will “cooperate” in the quest for peace for as long as they agree on what needs to be done. The limits of that cooperation will become obvious as soon as Israel refuses to move the security fence to the green line, or to dismantle most West Bank settlements, or to share sovereignty over East Jerusalem. Far from being encouraged by Mr. Bush’s declaration of support for a Palestinian state with “contiguous territory” in the West Bank, the Europeans warned that his words reflect his intention to let Israel keep control of at least some parts of “Judea and Samaria.”

Mr. Bush may not care about reelection, but the neoconservative influence on his team is as strong as ever. That influence is driven by ideology, ethnic loyalty and cultural affinity, not by the electoral calculus—or by any other “rational” consideration, such as the well-being and security of the American people. Whether we are in the first or second term is immaterial to the PNAC team in Washington and to their “Christian Zionist” cannon fodder in the heartland.

The Israeli national-unity government,

which supposedly has become more “dovish” with the inclusion of Labor, decided by a vote of 20 to 1 on February 20 to continue building the security fence—mostly inside the West Bank. The new route of the Wall will effectively annex seven percent of the West Bank, including four southern suburbs of Jerusalem with 10,000 Arab inhabitants. It will also incorporate the large Jewish settlement blocs of Ma’ale Adumim and Gush Etzion to Jerusalem’s east and northeast, with more than 100,000 settlers. This vote shows that Mr. Sharon’s vision of the eventual boundary between Israel and the putative Palestinian state is no longer his alone: It is the common position of Israel’s political mainstream.

Mr. Abbas’s election victory was less impressive than it looks, because his more militant rivals did not take part. Marwan Barghouti, the intransigent Fatah activist serving five life sentences in Israel for murder, decided not to oppose Abbas after much wavering. Had he run and won, we would have gloom all round instead of the current optimism. Hamas, too, decided not to field candidates this time. If and when it does, it can count on the support of a quarter of the electorate, perhaps more. The hard-liners will keep a close watch on Abbas, whose maneuvering space is strictly curtailed. No deal short of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, evacuation of most (if not all) Jewish settlements, shared sovereignty over East Jerusalem, and a generous compensation package for the 1947-48 refugees and their heirs will do. If Abbas tries to settle for less, he will be removed—and probably killed.

On none of those key issues are we any closer to an agreement today than we were five, or ten, or thirty years ago. And on none of those issues is Washington more likely to exercise a beneficial influence today than at any of those times. The best it could do—if it cannot be an impartial broker—is to share with Europe the burden and blame and cost of being involved in an unpleasant part of the world with which we have been too obsessed for too long.

—Srdja Trifkovic

**THE MICHAEL JACKSON** trial is underway, and the media is licking its chops