

Bush's choice: messianism or pragmatism?

By Anatol Lieven,
Created 2005-02-22 00:00

President Bush has opened his second presidential term with a sustained rhetorical effort to use the language of “freedom” as a way of reuniting the west under American leadership. His inaugural address at the start of his second presidential term on 20 January 2005 [1] ostensibly made the spread of freedom and democracy the heart of America’s political strategy in the “war on terror”. His State of the Union speech [2] on 2 February continued the theme:

“The attack on freedom in our world has reaffirmed our confidence in freedom’s power to change the world. We are all part of a great venture: to extend the promise of freedom in our country, to renew the values that sustain our liberty, and to spread the peace that freedom brings.”

On the eve of his 21-24 February visit to Europe, his weekly radio talk declared [3]:

“America and Europe are the pillars of the Free World...Leaders on both sides of the Atlantic understand that the hopes for peace in the world depend on the continued unity of free nations.”

Now, in the major speech [4] of his European tour – at Concert Noble, Brussels – President Bush has underlined the ideological importance of the theme of freedom to his political mission:

“This strategy is not American strategy, or European strategy, or Western strategy. Spreading liberty for the sake of peace is the cause of all mankind. This approach not only reduces a danger to free peoples; it honors the dignity of all peoples, by placing human rights and human freedom at the center of our agenda. And our alliance has the ability, and the duty, to tip the balance of history in favor of freedom.”

Democracy is America

One can indeed get a certain distance with this line in Europe. After all, the European countries are themselves committed in principle to spreading democracy in the world, and this is at the core of the European Union’s own expansion. Tony Blair has echoed [4] much of Bush’s language. The legacy of Communist rule and its overthrow means that east-central European elites have an instinctive tendency to pay tribute to language like Bush’s. Western European governments have aligned themselves with Bush’s “Greater Middle East Initiative [4]” (proposed in February 2004) that aims to bring progress to the region – albeit partly in order to modify the arrogance of the United States approach. A disparate collection of western European intellectuals, including Timothy Garton Ash [5] in Britain and Bernard-Henri Levy [6] in France, have also sought to put cooperation in spreading freedom and democracy at the heart of a new transatlantic partnership and of strategy in the Muslim world.

Also by Anatol Lieven [7] in **openDemocracy**:

“Missionaries and marines: Bush, Blair and democratisation” (September [2002](#) [7])

“America right or wrong” (September [2004](#) [7])

“Israel and the American antithesis” (October [2004](#) [7])

“Israel, the United States, and truth” (October [2004](#) [7])

If you find these articles valuable, please consider [subscribing](#) [7] to **openDemocracy** for just £25/\$40/€40. You’ll gain access to easy-to-read PDF versions of all our material.

Within the US, on the other hand, Bush’s approach has drawn considerable criticism, from old-style conservative realists as well as from voices on the left. In a pair of excoriating articles for [Newsweek](#) [8], Fareed Zakaria and Andrew Moravcsik draw attention to the [yawning gulf](#) [9] between the views of most Americans and large majorities of non-Americans about the benevolence of their country’s role in the contemporary world.

All the same, a speech like Bush’s inaugural address could only have been delivered in the United States. Blair may have said many of the same things, but he has accompanied them with proposals for concrete, verifiable action in key areas of world concern: climate change, mass misery and state collapse in parts of the global south and a real peace settlement between Israelis and Palestinians. The same tends to be true of European Union [rhetoric](#) [10] about spreading democracy.

Only in the US could “democracy” and “freedom” as such be advanced by a government not just as part of a non-military strategy but as *the* entire strategy and even as a way of avoiding doing some of the other things that Blair has called for. And above all, only in the US could a national leader identify the spread of democracy, and indeed ideal democracy itself, so absolutely with his own country and its power in the world. There is a nobility about this sentiment; but as [Fareed Zakaria](#) [11] and [Andrew Moravcsik](#) [12] argue, there is also a profoundly dangerous solipsism and arrogance.

A messianic vision

Indeed, much of the language about democratisation in America is not really about democratisation at all. It is about America itself, the nature of one powerful strand of American nationalism, and how the Bush administration has used that nationalism to strengthen its own position at home. Because of the power of this nationalism and the “American Creed” on which it is based (as I have called it in my [book](#) [13] *America Right or Wrong: an anatomy of American nationalism*), the rhetoric of spreading democracy and freedom has been all too successful in wrong-footing the Democratic party and in winning over some of their intellectual supporters to what is in effect a position of support for the [neo-conservative agenda](#) [13].

Unfortunately, however, much of this rhetoric is completely irrelevant, in the short-to-medium term, to many of the challenges facing the middle east, and to the needs of the struggle against [al-Qaida](#) [14]. Worse still, this whole democratisation strategy is being used, in some quarters at least, as a grand diversionary strategy to distract attention from what the US should be doing in other fields – but isn’t.

The acknowledged influence of Israeli hardliner [Natan Sharansky](#) [15] on Bush’s “strategy” of democratisation should make it clear to everyone that, however noble its ideological and historical roots, American messianism – today, as in the Vietnam era – can take forms which are not only misguided but actively malignant. The contrast between Sharansky’s own professed

desire for Palestinian democracy and his utter contempt for the lives, property, wellbeing and indeed democratically-expressed views of the Palestinian people is evident: it was expressed most recently in his decision in 2004, as minister for Jerusalem, to allow Israeli authorities to confiscate Palestinian land by administrative decree.

Bush's reliance on Sharansky (whose book *The Case for Democracy* [16] was one of the intellectual props of his inaugural speech), and the deep unwillingness even of the American liberal media to criticise the former Soviet dissident, demonstrate one facet of the Orwellian nature of the present US approach to democratisation and the war on terror. Not only is its language of democratisation accompanied by de facto support for a range of savagely authoritarian regimes, and its talk of the rule of law accompanied by *Abu Ghraib* [16] and *Guantánamo Bay* [16]; but key aspects of US strategy are based on an absolute and open contempt for the opinions of the great majority of ordinary Arabs and Muslims – in other words, the very people to whom the US administration professes to want to bring democracy!

This glaring contradiction is the product of an inevitable *clash* [16] between American idealism and American *Realpolitik*. However, its roots also lie in a central feature of the messianic tradition in American civic nationalism. As reflected in the attitudes and behaviour of the Bush administration, the widespread American belief in America not as a democracy among others but as the very summit and model of democracy encourages contempt for the opinions of the rest of humanity – even when expressed by majorities in fellow democracies. The creation of a notion of “democracy” as a pure absolute discourages real study of all the *conditions* [17] which are in fact needed for democracy to flourish.

In our “American power & the world” *debate* [17], leading **openDemocracy** writers examine the United States as an empire, its geopolitical strategy, the “war on terror”, and the nature of ideas like “the free world” and “anti-Americanism”.

Among the featured authors are Mary Kaldor, Robert Hunter Wade, Philip Bobbitt, Tom Nairn, Stephen Howe, Fred Halliday, Dominic Hilton, Ann Pettifor, and Todd Gitlin.

This in turn encourages a belief that, in the words of the US general in Vietnam in Stanley Kubrick's film *Full Metal Jacket* [18], “inside every gook there is an American waiting to get out”; in other words, that if you can get rid of a few Communist, Ba'athist or Iranian “bad guys”, populations naturally will both adopt American-style democracy and capitalism and side with America geopolitically. And finally, the immense power in the American national discourse of words like “democracy” and “freedom” can lead to them being used in a way described acutely by WH Auden during the *cold war* [19]:

“More deadly than the Idle Word is the use of words as Black Magic...For millions of people today, words like Communism, Capitalism, Imperialism, Peace, Freedom and Democracy have ceased to be words the meaning of which can be inquired into and discussed, and have become right or wrong noises to which the response is as involuntary as a knee reflex.”

I have myself frequently *observed* [20] how difficult it can be in the US to mount an argument that appears to criticise the universal, eternal and inevitable value of democracy, or to suggest that “freedom”, far from being a natural absolute, has always been a complex, contingent, changing and contested *term* [21]. In other words, these terms can be used, whether consciously or unconsciously, to shut down real debate.

The power of the Creed

The reason for this distinctive aspect of the United States lies in the nature of American civic nationalism. This nationalism, and much of the US national identity itself, is based on the American Creed: belief in the values of democracy, the law, free speech and the US constitution [22]; and less formally, in social and economic individualism, in America as the supreme exemplar of democracy and successful modernity, and in American benevolence, innocence, goodness and inevitable triumph.

Many great American thinkers from across the political spectrum have remarked on the power of this Creed. In the words of Richard Hofstadter [23]: “it has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one.” A century earlier, Ralph Waldo Emerson [24] described adherence to American governing principles as a form of religious conversion. In this sense, it bears a certain comparison to the role that Communism was supposed to play in the Soviet Union – with the crucial difference that the values of the American Creed have been both much more positive and much more successful historically. The strength of this Creed dates back even further than the foundation of the American colonies and 17th-century visions of America as the “city on a hill [25]” to 16th-century English and Scottish Protestant beliefs in their countries as the “new Israel”.

The power of the Creed also stems from its immense importance in holding together the huge and immensely varied American nation, and giving it the ability constantly to assimilate vast numbers of new immigrants from hugely diverse backgrounds. Belief in the principles of the Creed is perhaps the only thing (other than the English language) that the gays of San Francisco and the fundamentalist Baptists of Texas have in common.

The consequences of this for American messianism are obvious. In her great study of the American involvement in Vietnam, Fire in the Lake [26], Frances FitzGerald wrote: “Americans see history as a straight line and themselves standing at the cutting edge of it as representatives for all mankind”.

For most of American history, this has been a “passive” messianism, which takes the form of a belief (in which I largely share, by the way) in the supreme importance of America’s democratic example in the world, but does not support outside interventions. As such, it is entirely compatible with American isolationism [27]. However, at particular moments, when the US has been attacked or threatened, or feels forced to make some massive overseas commitment, this messianism can take an active form.

Anatol Lieven’s argument about how the different strands of American national identity coexist and compete is developed in his book *America Right or Wrong: an anatomy of American nationalism* (Harper Collins, 2004 [28])

There is an element of tragedy in all this. For the values of the American Creed are indeed great ones, of inestimable value to mankind. The United States’ sense of a mission to humanity is in part a noble and inspiring one. And throughout modern history, the US has in fact acted both as a beacon for the rest of the world and as the last refuge and defender of democracy. US leadership in the 20th-century struggle against Nazism and Soviet Communism was essential to preserving democratic civilisation in the world. This past record ought to be able to provide the basis for the continuation of the idea of a west united under American leadership.

Today, however, the tragic flaws in this American sense of national mission are acting to wreck this hope. The national arrogance that is so closely linked to the sense of national mission is undermining still further American willingness to listen to key allies, even among the western democracies, let alone in the Muslim world. This arrogance is fed by the alliance with Israel – symbolised by Bush’s reliance [29] on Natan Sharansky – which in turn reinforces the sense of

a pure democratic America and Israel surrounded by a world full of hostile, tyrannical, anti-semitic aliens.

Historically, US messianism has always been at war with US pragmatism. In the end pragmatism has usually won. This was true in Vietnam, but only after a devastating war involving two million Vietnamese killed (and 58,000 Americans), enormous environmental degradation, and a cycle of destruction across southeast Asia. As Captain Willard declares in Francis Ford Coppola's film [30] *Apocalypse Now*: "I wanted a mission, and for my sins they gave me one. It was a real choice mission. And when it was over, I'd never want another." My fear is that as in Vietnam, the return to pragmatism may come only after the United States has inflicted a whole series of disasters on itself and the world.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-americanpower/article_2348.jsp

Links:

- [1] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html> target=_blank
- [2] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html> target=_blank
- [3] http://kcal9.com/politics/politicsnational_story_050085235.html target=_blank
- [4] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050221.html> target=_blank
- [5] <http://www.freeworldweb.net/thebook.html> target=_blank
- [6] <http://www.melvillehousebooks.com/warEvil.html> target=_blank
- [7] http://www.carnegieendowment.org/experts/index.cfm?fa=expert_view&expert_id=42 target=_blank
- [8] <http://www.fareedzakaria.com/articles/newsweek/013105.html> target=_blank
- [9] <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6857387/site/newsweek/> target=_blank
- [10] <http://news.ft.com/cms/s/e7a270cc-809b-11d9-bed2-0000e2511c8.html> target=_blank
- [11] <http://www.fareedzakaria.com/books/> target=_blank
- [12] <http://www.princeton.edu/~amoravcs/> target=_blank
- [13] <http://www.us.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Politics/ComparativePolitics/Nationalism/?view=usa&ci=0195168402> target=_blank
- [14] <http://www.palgrave-usa.com/Catalog/product.aspx?isbn=1850433968> target=_blank
- [15] <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/sharansky.html> target=_blank
- [16] <http://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/publicaffairsbooks-cgi-bin/display?book=1586482610> target=_blank
- [17] <http://www.pupress.princeton.edu/titles/7493.html> target=_blank
- [18] http://kubrickfilms.warnerbros.com/video_detail/fmj/ target=_blank
- [19] <http://www.thenewpress.com/books/cultcold.htm> target=_blank
- [20] <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people4/Lieven/lieven-con0.html> target=_blank
- [21] <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0129-20.htm> target=_blank
- [22] <http://www.us.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Law/ConstitutionalLaw/?ci=0195158407&view=usa> target=_blank
- [23] http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah_042000_hofstadterri.htm target=_blank
- [24] <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ihis/poet/emerson.html> target=_blank
- [25] http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/news/opeds/2002/city_hill_euchner_bg_090402.htm target=_blank
- [26] <http://www.twbookmark.com/books/71/0316159190/> target=_blank
- [27] http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah_046200_isolationism.htm target=_blank
- [28] <http://www.harpercollins.co.uk/books/default.aspx?id=28071&subject=biography> target=_blank

[29] <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/543168.html> target=_blank

[30] http://www.thingsasian.com/goto_article/article.2795.html target=_blank



Copyright © Anatol Lieven, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.