

Ending Tyranny: The History of an Idea

by

John Lewis Gaddis

Yale University

Presidential administrations tend not to be remembered in the same way in the same way they were regarded while in office. Proximity, it seems, breeds weariness, disappointment, and often contempt. Distance – if by that we mean the cooling of passions that comes with retirement, together with proximity to the presidents that have followed and to the mistakes *they* have made – tends to foster reconsideration, nostalgia, and even respect. That’s how the presidential libraries of even the least remarkable presidents stay in business.

George W. Bush, whatever else one might say about him, has been a most remarkable president: historians will be debating his legacy for decades to come. If past patterns hold, though, their conclusions may not in all respects correspond to the views of contemporary critics. Consider how little is now remembered, for example, of President Clinton’s impeachment, only the second one in American history. Or how Reagan’s reputation has shifted from that of a movie-star lightweight to that of a grand strategic heavyweight. Or how Eisenhower was once believed – no longer – to be incapable of articulating an intelligible sentence, to say nothing of a coherent thought.¹

Then there were all the administrations that ended, because of their unpopularity, before they were constitutionally required to: those of the first President Bush, as well as Carter, Ford, Nixon, Johnson, and especially Truman, who was down to a 26% approval rating at the time he left office but has long been remembered for having presided over a golden age – even a kind of genesis, Dean Acheson suggested, when he titled his memoir *Present at the Creation*.² Nor is this gap between contemporary and historical reputations absent from earlier periods in American history: look, for example, at those of Woodrow Wilson, Abraham Lincoln, John Quincy Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and even George Washington himself.

If past patterns hold, then, President Bush's reputation will in the future rise. What's less clear now is what the basis for such a reassessment might be, but here's a suggestion. Presidential revisionism often begins with something that's hard to explain – something that shatters a widely-held stereotype. How, for instance, could a Missouri politician like Truman who never went to college get along so well with a Yale-educated dandy like Acheson? How could Eisenhower, who spoke so poorly, write so well? How could Reagan, the proto-typical hawk, want to abolish nuclear weapons? Solving these puzzles led historians to challenge the conventional wisdom about these presidents, with results that showed that their contemporary critics hadn't known them very well.

So is there anything that might shift today's widely-held impressions of President Bush? I can only speak for myself here, but something I did not expect was the discovery

that he reads more history and talks with more historians than any of his predecessors since at least John F. Kennedy. The president has surprised me more than once with comments on my own books soon after they've come out, and the list of other surprised historians is growing. I've found myself improvising excuses to him, face-to-face in the Oval Office, as to why I hadn't read the latest book on Lincoln, or on – as Bush refers to him – the “first George W.” I've even assigned a Lincoln biography in a Yale undergraduate seminar upon his recommendation. The students loved it.

“Well, so Bush reads history,” one might reasonably say at this point. “What does he actually do with it?” That's a fair question, and I doubt that anybody will be able to answer it until the memoirs get written, the oral histories get recorded, and the archives open up. But I can say this much on the basis of direct observation: that President Bush is interested – as no other occupant of the White House has been for quite a long time – in the ways in which studying the past can provide guidance for the future.

I.

That brings me to the subject of presidential “doctrines.” Most recent presidents have wanted to have one they could call their own, because doctrines so often determine how presidents are remembered and reassessed. Why else, were it not for his doctrine, would most of us today recall anything at all about James Monroe?

But there are doctrines and there are doctrines. Some, like those of Monroe and Truman, shape the policies of succeeding administrations for decades to come – in Monroe’s case, for well over a century, in Truman’s for almost half a century until the Cold War came to an end. Other doctrines get forgotten as soon as the administration that proclaimed them has left office, sometimes even before it has. Who today, apart from historians, remembers the doctrines of Hoover, Eisenhower, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, or Clinton? These presidential pronouncements seemed important at the time, but now serve chiefly as identification questions with which professors can torment their students on mid-term and final history examinations.

What accounts for the difference? What made the doctrines of Monroe and Truman memorable and the others not? I think it has to do with three things: those doctrines drew upon a long history, they related that history to a current crisis, and by doing so they set a course that the nation could feasibly navigate well into the future.

The Monroe Doctrine drew upon a long American tradition – extending well back into the 18th century – of associating liberty, prosperity, and security with continental expansion.³ Its principal author, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, related that history to the crisis caused by the apparent intention of European monarchs – Great Britain excepted – to reestablish their colonies in the western hemisphere after Napoleon’s defeat. The course Adams set was that the “new world” was henceforth to be off limits to further European colonization. Its feasibility lay in the fact that the British, who had the world’s greatest navy, tacitly agreed with that policy and were willing to

enforce it. The Monroe Doctrine was unilateral, as presidential doctrines must be. But it was based upon a realistic calculation of power within the international system, as all doctrines should be.

The Truman Doctrine drew upon an equally long American tradition – reinforced by involvement in two 20th century world wars – of opposing the domination of Europe by a single hostile power. Its principal author, Under Secretary of State Acheson, related that history to the crisis caused by the outcome of World War II, which left the Soviet Union in control of half of Europe. The course he set was the strategy of containment: the idea that the United States – working this time explicitly with its allies – could prevent any further expansion of Soviet influence without resorting to war or appeasement. Its feasibility lay in George F. Kennan’s great insight that the Stalinist system and the international communist movement carried within themselves the seeds of their own destruction, so that time was on the side of the West if it could hold the line.⁴ The Truman Doctrine, like the Monroe Doctrine, was unilateral; but it too was based upon a realistic calculation of power within the international system.

Neither of these doctrines, it’s important to note, promised immediate results. Both looked beyond the crises that gave rise to them – even beyond the administrations that proclaimed them – to say, in effect: “here’s where we’ve been as a nation, and in the light of that here’s where we should seek to go.” They functioned as navigational beacons, providing the guidance necessary for the course corrections all ships of state must from time to time make.

II.

So what does all this have to do with George W. Bush? Well, first of all, it seems safe to assume that he knows this history. It's also clear that he's not been, to use one of the categories of presidential scholar James David Barber, a "passive-negative" chief executive.⁵ So you would expect such an activist historically-minded president to want to leave behind a doctrine.

There's been a lot of confusion, though, as to just what the Bush Doctrine might be. Is it preemption? Is it unilateralism? Is it building "coalitions of the willing" to confront an "Axis of Evil"? Is it a rejection of the principles of containment and deterrence that won the Cold War? Is it a repudiation of the values for which the United States has traditionally stood? Is it a strategy of putting out fires by pouring gasoline on them which deserves to be tossed into "the trash can of history"? I've taken all of these definitions from the first 31 pages of a single new book, by my friend the Yale political scientist Ian Shapiro.⁶

Historians, when they see a single thing described in so many ways, are inclined to go back to the source: what has President Bush himself said the Bush Doctrine is? To answer that question, I would look first for a statement delivered in a suitably august

setting. Then I would look for one that's clearly labeled as a *policy*, not a description of procedures or practices. And finally, I would look for historical echoes.

The speech that best fits these criteria, I think, is the one President Bush made from the steps of the Capitol on January 20, 2005. As a student of Lincoln, the term "second inaugural address" would have carried a special meaning for him. That was the moment to distill lessons from a past extending far back beyond his own, to apply them to a current crisis, and to project them into a future that neither he nor anyone else could now foresee – while attempting to compress all of this within a single memorable sentence. And indeed Bush did announce that: "it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."⁷

The response, one has to say, was mixed. Peggy Noonan, who wrote some of Reagan's best speeches, described this one as "somewhere between dreamy and disturbing."⁸ George Will grumbled that "the attractiveness of the goal [is not] an excuse for ignoring the difficulties and moral ambiguities involved in its pursuit."⁹ But the editors of the *New York Times* unexpectedly liked the speech, observing that "[o]nce in a long while, a newly sworn-in president . . . says something that people will repeat long after he has moved into history. Mr. Bush's speech did not seem in danger of becoming immortal, but its universal intent suited the day."¹⁰

So if this was the Bush Doctrine, and if the *Times* was right about it being remembered long after Bush has left office, then the president *may* have proclaimed a doctrine that could play a role in the 21st century comparable to that played by the Monroe Doctrine in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and by the Truman Doctrine during the Cold War. Only time, and historians not yet born, will tell. Even that possibility, though, should cause the Bush Doctrine to get more careful scrutiny than it has so far received. That's what I'd like to try to give it in the remainder of this essay.

III.

The first observation I want to make echoes an old Yankee – or perhaps Irish, Polish, Jewish, or Chinese – proverb: “if that’s where you want to go, I wouldn’t start from here.” If the goal is “ending tyranny in our world,” then encouraging “the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture” may not be the best way to achieve it.¹¹

This may sound unsettling, given the extent to which the United States made promoting democracy its most fundamental foreign policy objective through most of the 20th century. From Woodrow Wilson through the presidencies of Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Carter, Reagan, Clinton, and now Bush, this is what the nation stood for. Nor is it easy to argue with the results. By the strict standards of Freedom House, the number

of democracies in the world quintupled between 1950 and 2000.¹² No country did more than the United States to bring that about.¹³

But democracies don't always ensure freedom from tyranny. As a distinguished political analyst noted a long time ago: "[D]emocracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."¹⁴ That analyst was James Madison, writing *The Federalist* Number 10 – the co-founder, along with Thomas Jefferson, of what we have long since known as the Democratic Party.

Now obviously Madison in 1787 had less experience than we do with democratic governance. For him and the other Founders – steeped as they were in a far better classical education than most of us have today – the cautionary examples were those of Periclean Athens, which blundered into and then lost the Peloponnesian War, and the Roman Republic, which sank so deeply into corruption and violence that its citizens welcomed the benign authoritarianism of Caesar Augustus.¹⁵

It's not just ancient precedents, though, that ought to give us pause: so too should the subsequent history of the American Republic. By the middle of the 19th century more people probably had the right to vote in the United States than anywhere else in the world. That didn't prevent a third of the country from using that right to defend slavery, or all of it from blundering into one of the bloodiest of civil wars.

Nor was democracy a reliable safeguard against 20th century tyranny. World War I, which laid so much of the groundwork for it, began with widespread public enthusiasm. A free election brought Adolf Hitler to power in Germany in 1933, and he retained the support of most Germans well into the war he started.¹⁶ A persistent American fear throughout the Cold War was that much of the rest of the world might voluntarily choose communism:¹⁷ that led to enlightened counter-measures like the Marshall Plan, but also to unsavory alliances with anti-communist dictators. And the post-Cold War collapse of Yugoslavia together with the events in Rwanda evoked an even more disturbing vision: that people could hate one another to such an extent that ethnic cleansing, even genocide itself, might have democratic roots.¹⁸

Today it seems clear that the people of Russia, if they could re-elect their increasingly authoritarian leader, would overwhelmingly do so: there is in that country, as there was in ancient Rome, a backlash against democratic excesses. China over the past three decades has made greater progress toward prosperity than at any point in its long history, but this has not come through democratic procedures. Elections have at last been held in the Middle East, but the results have empowered Ahmadinejad in Iran, Hamas in the Palestinian territories, and – despite the courage with which Iraqis risked their lives to vote in three successive elections in 2005 – a government in Baghdad that barely functions, despite the full military support of the United States and its coalition allies.

So if ending tyranny is what you want to accomplish, promoting democracy in and of itself may not be the best way to go about it. Something more seems to be required.

IV.

No one has explained more clearly what that is than Fareed Zakaria in his 2003 book *The Future of Freedom*. Democracy, he acknowledges, is a worthy objective, but certain things have to come first: personal security, political stability, economic sustainability, the rule of law, the sanctity of contracts, the existence of a working constitutional structure. You can't just topple a tyrant, hold an election, and expect a democracy to emerge.¹⁹ So how did the idea ever get started that democracy could sprout where it had no roots?

The story begins, I think, with the end of the Cold War, which neither historians nor theorists of international relations had anticipated. The two groups responded, however, rather differently. The historians, for whom surprises in history are not surprising, were content for the most part to postpone their explanations until the documents had opened. The theorists, however, were left scrambling: one of the purposes of theory, after all, is to predict the future, and the theories they had built over the past several decades had failed to allow for the possibility that the Cold War might

end.²⁰ New theories were urgently needed, and the ones that emerged focused on certain hitherto neglected characteristics of democracy.

One of these was its universal appeal, a claim best made in Francis Fukuyama's 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama pointed out that democracy, over the past two centuries, had advanced steadily across regions, cultures, and ethnicities, so that the end of the Cold War was really the culmination of that much longer process. It was in that sense, he maintained, that history itself – previously understood in terms of clashing political systems – was coming to an end: democracy had prevailed. Fukuyama was a neo-conservative, but his argument meshed well with one coming from the liberal side of the political spectrum: this was “democratic peace” theory, which asserted that democracies tend not to fight one another. It seemed to follow, then, that the proliferation of democracies throughout so much of the world should make it a more peaceful place.²¹

What, though, were the implications for American foreign policy? The liberals, who were influential within the Clinton administration, were content simply to let democracy triumph: if this was an inevitable outcome, why should the United States exert itself to bring it about? The neo-conservatives, however, objected to this passivity, calling for more aggressive action to speed up the process. In this sense the liberals were like the Mensheviks in 1917: Marx had shown that the forces of history were going to overthrow capitalism, so not just wait for that to occur? The neo-conservatives, in contrast, were like the Bolsheviks: they wanted to jump-start the engine of history.²²

Let me be clear here. I'm not saying that the American intellectuals of the late 20th century resemble in all respects their earlier Russian counterparts. I am saying, though, that like the Russian revolutionaries, the American liberals and neo-conservatives of the 1990s thought that they knew, from the trajectory of the recent past, what the future was going to bring. They operated with all the self-confidence that comes from turning a historical trend into a theoretical proposition. And like most people in history who have sought to eliminate surprises from it, they were in for yet another surprise.

V.

It came, of course, on September 11, 2001. By the end of that morning, it was not at all clear that democracy was the wave of the future: how could it be when the actions of so few had done such damage to so many? How many more such attacks would it take for democratic institutions in the United States to buckle, and if that happened what prospects would there be for democracy elsewhere? Democracy – or so it seemed by the end of that traumatic day – was facing its gravest crisis in half a century.

The Bush administration until that point had embraced neither the liberal nor the neo-conservative viewpoint, but now it had to act. It wound up tilting toward neo-conservatism, not because of some pre-conceived conspiracy, as many of its critics have claimed, but rather because of an unexpected military victory. In pursuit of the

perpetrators of 9/11, it invaded Afghanistan and it did so successfully, a feat that had eluded would-be conquerors of that country since Alexander the Great. It's easy to forget now what an astonishing development this was – all the more so because nobody had planned it ahead of time.

Suddenly, it seemed, there might be the opportunity to speed up history – the Taliban had collapsed, after all, with only a slight push. So the Bush administration began to talk, well before it invaded Iraq, of waging a war against terrorism by democratizing the Middle East, the one part of the world where democracy had not yet taken root. Toppling a few more tyrants might be all that it would take to get this process going.²³

This was not the only reason for starting a war against Saddam Hussein in March, 2003, but it was one of the assumptions that made that operation seem feasible. Not for the first time, the illusion took hold that the next war would resemble the last one. Certainly the belief that democratic instincts lay hidden within Iraqi culture, only waiting to be let out, accounted in large part for the administration's failure to plan the occupation: for its belief that it could shatter the status quo there, as it had in Afghanistan, and that the pieces would automatically rearrange themselves in pleasing patterns.²⁴

By the time President Bush was reelected in November, 2004, it was clear that this had not happened. The costs of the war in Iraq, for the Iraqi people and for their

liberators who had become their occupiers, had turned out to be much greater than expected, and the Bush administration had no clear sense of what to do. But American presidential elections are rarely decided entirely on issues of foreign and military policy, and on the more sensitive issue of national security, the president could fairly point out that there had been no more terrorist attacks on American soil, a not insignificant achievement. It also helped him that the Democrats were, as usual, the Democrats.

That was the context, then, in which Bush got to make his second inaugural address, and to proclaim a doctrine. It was meant to respond to an immediate crisis, which was the failure of his policy in Iraq. But it also addressed a crisis within the realm of ideas: was the 20th century idea of promoting democracy the appropriate long-term objective for the United States in the 21st century? The answer, as Bush formulated it, went back to the 19th, even the 18th century.

VI.

The call to end tyranny seemed new in 2005 only because it was old – considerably older, in fact, than the goal of making the world safe for democracy. The Declaration of Independence did, to be sure, make the radical claim that “all men are *created* equal.” But as anyone who has read all of that document knows, it is chiefly about liberation from tyranny, the improbable tyrant being George III, against whom

Jefferson marshaled a list of offenses “scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy [of] the head of a civilized nation.”²⁵

When Alexander Hamilton, in the first paragraph of the first essay of *The Federalist*, set out to explain what the Constitution of 1787 was all about, he put it this way: “to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.”²⁶ By “reflection and choice,” Hamilton didn’t mean democracy as we understand that term: he was even more skeptical of that form of government than his collaborator Madison. But Hamilton did mean freedom from tyranny. For what was tyranny, in an age of inherited monarchies, if not rule by the alignment of accident with force?

The Founding Fathers saw themselves as having seized a beachhead for liberty in a world run by tyrants. But as Robert Kagan has recently emphasized, they also saw that that beachhead would have to expand if it was to be secure. That meant, in due course, dominating the North American continent, so that liberty could align itself with power. But it also meant propagating the first international revolutionary ideology: one that called, in a more distant future, for the overthrow of tyranny throughout the world.²⁷

America “goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy,” John Quincy Adams famously proclaimed on the 4th of July, 1821, in a speech that’s been quoted ever since to justify noninterference by the United States in the affairs of other nations. The speech is

rarely read in its entirety, however, so it's frequently forgotten that Adams also challenged "every individual among the sceptered lords of mankind" to follow the example of the American Revolution and overthrow their oppressors: '*Go thou and do likewise!*'"²⁸

And what if tyrants resisted – even home-grown tyrants? Adams as early as 1819 was demanding "the extirpation of slavery from this whole continent," even if this required a war that disrupted the Union: "for so glorious would be its final issue, that, as God shall judge me, I dare not say that it is not to be desired."²⁹ It was one thing to impose a particular system by force, which is what the tyranny that was slavery had done: no one, in Adams's view, could justifiably defend that. It was quite another thing to force an end to the tyranny that was slavery: in his willingness to support that possibility, Adams anticipated by some four decades the views of an even more extreme foe of tyranny, Abraham Lincoln.

Recent Lincoln scholarship has stressed that he never lost sight of the *global* issues that were at stake in the American Civil War. The Declaration of Independence, Lincoln insisted in a speech delivered in the hall in which that document had been signed, had not been merely a justification for separating the American colonies from Great Britain: its purpose had also been "to provide hope to the world for all future time. It . . . gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance."³⁰

Not necessarily that all should live under democracies. Not even that equality for all should be guaranteed. But rather that all should have *an equal chance*. Even if providing them with this chance should require the use of force on such a scale that, as Lincoln would say in his second inaugural address, “every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.”³¹

The objective of ending tyranny, therefore, is as deeply rooted in American history as it is possible to imagine. President Bush in a time of crisis for the future of democratization did what President Lincoln did in a much greater crisis for the future of the Union: he looked back for guidance to the Founders. That’s one good reason for thinking that the “end of tyranny” idea may extend beyond the end of the Bush administration, and well into those that will follow.

VII.

But what about feasibility, the other test I mentioned for assessing the durability of presidential doctrines? Why should the goal of ending tyranny be any more realistic than that of spreading democracy? Isn’t it the fate of all who think they know what’s best for the world to find that the world doesn’t share their vision, fears their arrogance, and will sooner or later frustrate their ambitions?

Precisely so, but here's where there's a difference between these two objectives. Spreading democracy suggests knowing the answer to how people should live their lives. Ending tyranny suggests freeing them to find their own answers. The great Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin best explained this distinction a half a century ago in his great essay on "Two Concepts of Liberty."

Positive liberty, as Berlin defined it, begins with the idea that you know what's best with such certainty that you seek to impose that view on others, at first through persuasion, and then if that doesn't work by example, and then if that doesn't succeed by coercion. What gives you this certainty is the belief that you've figured out how history works: you've developed a theory that provides a single sweeping solution for a world full of problems.

That's not so dangerous if all you're doing is driving a taxicab, from which your customers can exit at the next stop light. It's more so if you're in a position to shape the minds of others, whether through teaching, writing, or rabble-rousing. And it can be deadly if you're running a powerful state, for the greatest tyrannies of the modern age originated with leaders who insisted on a "one size fits all" ideology. Whether it was Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, or Pol Pot, they all began by promising liberty – as long as they got to decide what it was and how to get it. They believed themselves entitled, as Berlin put it, "to coerce men in the name of some goal . . . which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue. . . . I know what they truly need better than they know it themselves."³²

Negative liberty, in Berlin's formulation, makes no such claims. Instead it maintains "absolute barriers to the imposition of one man's will on another. The freedom of a society, or a class or a group, is measured by the strength of these barriers, and [by] the number and importance of the paths which they keep open for their members." The idea behind negative liberty, in short, is to restrain authority. The idea behind positive liberty is to concentrate it. These are, Berlin concludes, "two profoundly divergent and irreconcilable attitudes to the ends of life."³³

What's clearer now than it was in 1958, when Berlin wrote this essay, is that negative liberty commands more support, which is to say (to put it in Clausewitzian terms) that it generates less "friction," than the claim of one to know what is best for all. The totalitarian tyrannies of the 20th century collapsed because their single solutions promised liberty but failed to provide it. Democracies survived and spread because they allowed experimenting with multiple solutions. Not all of these worked, to be sure, but enough did to give government by "reflection and choice" a far better track record, by the beginning of the 21st century, than rule by "accident and force."

VIII.

Here, though, is where history played a nasty trick. The end of the Cold War left the United States in a position of dominance unrivaled since the days of the Roman

empire. Maintaining humility, under such circumstances, would have taxed the self-discipline of a saint – and the Americans, like the Romans, have never been particularly saintly. So all at once their efforts to promote democracy, which had come across during the Cold War as constraining the power of dictators, now looked like an effort to concentrate power in their own hands.

When Wilson spoke of making the world safe for democracy in 1917, that form of government was in peril. But when Clinton spoke of the United States as “the world’s indispensable nation” in his second inaugural address in 1997,³⁴ there were no obvious dangers on the horizon: what was the basis, then, for American indispensability? And after threats did unexpectedly arise, on September 11, 2001, a wounded nation that was still the most powerful nation began insisting that its future security required the expansion of democracy everywhere. No wonder this frightened people elsewhere, even those also frightened by terrorism.

President Bush reflected this “one size fits all” mentality when he called for “the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture.” That sounded very much like knowing what was best for the world. But then he added: “with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” That sounded like liberating people so that they could decide what was best for them: it was language of which the Founding Fathers, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and Isaiah Berlin might all have approved. So the president managed to compress, into a single sentence, the concepts of *both* positive and negative liberty.

This may have been a triumph for succinct speech-writing, but it was not one for philosophical coherence. Promoting democracy, for the reasons I've mentioned, offers no guarantee of ending tyranny. Telling people simultaneously that we know best and that they know best is likely to confuse them as well as us. But what if we were to read the president's sentence as a political rather than a philosophical statement: as a way of respecting the recent past while shifting priorities for the future? A presidential speech, after all, cannot simply dismiss what has gone before, even as it suggests where we should now be going.

If the Bush Doctrine was meant in that sense – if ending tyranny is now to be the objective of the United States in world affairs – then this would amount to a course correction away from the 20th century idea of promoting democracy as a solution for all the world's problems, and back toward an older concept of seeking to liberate people so they can solve their own problems. It could be a navigational beacon for the future that reflects more accurately where we started and who we've been.

IX.

But it could also have been simply a speech, and nothing more. Fortunately, though, it's not just the presidents who give them who determine the significance of presidential speeches. How such speeches are remembered is at least as important, and

how they are later used is even more so. That places a responsibility upon those whose task it is to remember, and those who will have the authority in the future to act.

Whatever the Bush administration's own intentions, I think the Bush second inaugural *should* be regarded as a navigational beacon: as providing the basis for an overdue course correction. My reasons go back to another idea Isaiah Berlin developed in his 1958 essay, which is that there is no such thing as a single good thing. There are multiple good things, and it isn't always possible to have them all at the same time.³⁵

Democracy is clearly a good thing. But so too is freedom from anarchy, which is why states five centuries ago – none of them as yet democracies – first began organizing themselves. So too is personal security, which is why, even in democracies, we allow the state to use force when necessary to maintain order. So too is predictability in one's dealings with others, which is why democracies have laws enforced by judges who act independently of popular sentiment. So too is economic sustainability: democracy can hardly flourish when people are hungry.³⁶

The United States, as a mature democracy, has the luxury of enjoying all of these good things at the same time, but this was not always so. As Zakaria points out, democracy established itself in this country only after these other safeguards had been put in place, and it took even longer for this to happen in Great Britain, the country that invented representative government.³⁷ Democracy did spread widely in the 20th century, but that was only because the British and later the Americans wielded their power in such

a way as to secure its prerequisites, not least by fighting and winning three world wars, two hot and one cold.

Since the Cold War ended, the United States has neglected these prerequisites. There was no clearer demonstration of this than those three Iraqi elections of 2005, in which the citizens of that country risked their lives to go out and vote. That was, in one sense, moving and reassuring: a victory for democracy, you might say. But it was, in another sense, a defeat for democracy, because people should not *have* to risk their lives to go out and vote. The fact that they did have to do this reflected a failure on the part of the United States, after invading Iraq, to lay the foundations for democracy that that will surely be necessary to ensure its survival there. It's as if we'd tried to rebuild one of Saddam Hussein's palaces without first securing its footings: the façade was impressive, but the cracks soon began to appear.

Nor has this error been confined to Iraq. We seem puzzled that democracy is not taking hold, to the extent that we hoped it would, elsewhere in the Middle East, as well as in Russia, China, Africa, and Latin America: the democratic tide that began rising with the end of the Cold War now appears to have crested and perhaps to be receding. But was it ever likely that democracy would root itself in those parts of the world where people fear anarchy more than they do authority? Where the struggle to survive is a more urgent priority than securing the right to vote? Where the immense power of the United States gives rise to greater uneasiness than it does reassurance?

That's why I think a return to our roots is called for. Promoting democracy without its necessary prerequisites can only breed disappointment abroad and disillusionment at home: it suggests that *we* think we know better than other people do what is best for them – and it then too often confirms that we do not. But only tyrants are apt to defend tyranny: a focus on ending it could move us beyond distracting debates over where democracy can be transplanted and how long this might take, allowing concentration instead upon the single greatest prerequisite for democracy, which is *freedom from fear*. It is from this that all the other freedoms flow.

This, then, should be our standard: to respect the ways in which people elsewhere define their fears, not to impose our own fears upon them. That may mean working with authoritarian regimes when there is more to fear than their authoritarianism – when the trajectory is toward making democracy possible, even if it's still a long way off. But it also requires rallying resistance to regimes – and to terrorist movements – whose course lies in the opposite direction: toward making themselves the source of all fears, rather than the safeguard against them. Tyranny is being *enslaved to fear*, and it will be quite enough, for the next few decades at least, to concentrate on emancipation.

If, therefore, we Americans can adjust our compass heading – if we can make ending tyranny once again our priority, as it was throughout most of our history – then I think we'd have some prospect of getting back on the path that all great nations who wish to sustain their greatness must ultimately follow: that of wielding power without

arrogance – by which I mean resisting the illusion that our strength has in all respects made us wise.

NOTES

¹See especially, on Eisenhower and Reagan, Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), and John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York: Norton, 2007).

²Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1969). For Truman's unpopularity, see Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 583.

³See Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006), especially pp. 12, 16.

⁴I have discussed the Truman Doctrine and the idea of containment more fully in *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 18-52.

⁵See James David Barber, *Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 4th edition (New York: Prentice Hall, 1992).

⁶Ian Shapiro, *Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy Against Global Terror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 1-31.

⁷The speech is available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html>.

⁸Peggy Noonan, "Way Too Much God," *Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2005.

⁹George Will, "The New Math: 28 + 35 = 43," *Newsweek*, January 31, 2005.

¹⁰“The Inaugural Speech,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2005.

¹¹Tod Lindberg makes a similar argument in “Dissident in Chief,” *The Weekly Standard*, 12(June 18, 2007), p. 21.

¹²*Democracy’s Century: A Survey of Global Political Change in the 20th Century* (New York: Freedom House, 1999).

¹³See Tony Smith, *America’s Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁴*The Federalist*, No. 10 (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), p. 58.

¹⁵Anthony Everitt, *Augustus: The Life of Rome’s First Emperor* (New York: Random House, 2006), pp. 210-11. See also Trevor Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), pp. 122, 127; and Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 282, 284.

¹⁶See Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945: Nemesis* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), pp. 698-99.

¹⁷John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 83-98.

¹⁸Samantha Power, “A Problem from Hell”: *America in the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), discusses these cases fully.

¹⁹Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: Norton, 2003).

²⁰For more on this, see John Lewis Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, 17(Winter, 1992/93), 5-58.

²¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). See also Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²² For a useful history of these debates by a now repentant neo-conservative, see Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), especially pp. 12-65; also, more stridently, Tony Smith, *A Pact With the Devil: Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

²³I have summarized the administration's thinking at greater length in *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 80-91.

²⁴See John Lewis Gaddis, "Grand Strategy in the Second Term," *Foreign Affairs*, 84(January/ February, 2005), pp. 14-15.

²⁵Jeremy Black, *America's Last King* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 224-27.

²⁶*The Federalist*, No. 1, p. 3.

²⁷Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006), especially pp. 4, 16, 37-38, 43-46.

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 162-63. I have also benefited from reading papers on the Adams speech by my Yale students Charles Edel and Jake Velker.

²⁹Quoted in Kagan, *Dangerous Nation.*, p. 181.

³⁰Quoted in Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), p. 310. See also Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, pp. 262-64, and Richard J. Cawardine, *Lincoln* (London: Pearson, 2003), pp. 23, 65, 69-70, 78, 165, 216.

³¹Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/presiden/inaug/lincoln2.htm>.

³²Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, edited by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998), p. 204.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 237.

³⁴*Public Papers of the Presidents: William J. Clinton, 1997* (Washington: Government Printing Office), p. 44.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 238-39. See also pp. 323-25.

³⁶For the inclusion of these standards in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, see Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations* (New York: Random House, 2006), pp. 179-80.

³⁷Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*, pp. 48-51.