

Scoring the State of the Union

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The president's State of the Union address always presents a promising spectacle: the grand chamber in the Capitol building, the annual gathering of the leaders of the separate powers of government, the well-choreographed display of the best bipartisan good manners. This time the president lived up to the promise.

Gone was the irrepressible frat-boy smirk. In its place, punctuating his sentences and accenting his silences, was a mellow smile heavy with conviction and concern.

The president began and ended with the war on terror. His message was that our cause is just, our achievement since September 11 — liberating Afghanistan from tyrannical Taliban rule and destroying the al Qaeda terrorists camps that the Taliban harbored — monumental, and our work-fighting terrorism around the world and opposing states such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea that continue to harbor it — only just begun.

He called for the same unity and resolve in facing the challenges at home that we had displayed in fighting the enemy abroad. We must increase spending on defense and homeland security. We must extend unemployment benefits and health-care coverage. We must create new jobs. We must improve our children's education. We must stimulate the economy. We must hold our corporations to the highest standards. We must protect workers 401(k) and pension plans.

In all this, the president spoke as a conservative Republican, a "proud member" of his party. But his speech also reflected a refined understanding of the public good. Government — limited but nevertheless government — for this conservative Republican was part of the solution. Building on President Clinton's AmeriCorps, President Bush introduced the new USA Freedom Corps, whose aim is to harness the spirit of public service in the American people for homeland security, for rebuilding broken communities in the United States, and for offering assistance to the needy abroad.

In particular, the president emphasized the importance of encouraging "development and education and opportunity in the Islamic world." This is good politics: Poverty, ignorance, and hopelessness are breeding grounds for violence. And sound principle: Liberty and justice as our nation understands them are good for people everywhere. And in the execution, fraught with uncertainty and risk.

Today it will be business as usual. Last night the president forcefully reminded us that it is a crucial part of our nation's business to honor the promise of "freedom and the dignity of every life."