

# Bush and the Liberal Tradition

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What kind of conservatism is embodied in the new doctrine proclaimed by President George W. Bush in his November 6 speech in Washington to honor the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy?

This new doctrine insists that “freedom has a momentum” and that it will “not be halted.” It proclaims that we are in the midst of a “great democratic movement”; since the early 1970s the number of democracies in the world has tripled, growing from about 40 to around 120.

It attributes this bracing progress to the “military and moral commitments” made to the countries of Europe and Asia over the last half century by the United States, itself a democracy and the world’s most influential nation, as well as to the increasingly well-established proposition that “over time, free nations grow stronger, and dictatorships grow weaker.” It recognizes that millions still live under oppression around the globe—in Cuba, in Burma, in North Korea, in Zimbabwe, in China—while taking special notice of the Arab Middle East, both because democracy there seems scarcely to have taken root and because of the region’s “great strategic importance.” It declares that the main obstacle to the happiness, peace, and prosperity of the region, as to all regions, is authoritarian government.

And it identifies the principles that should guide democratic reform: limited, representative government; the rule of law; multiple political parties and a free press; the protection of individual liberty; market-based economies that reward initiative; and government investment in the health and education of citizens. This new doctrine is in large measure, as many have observed, an old doctrine, a return to, and bold reaffirmation of, the legacy of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan who, in prosecuting the final decade of the Cold War, championed the superiority of the moral and political ideas for which the United States and Britain stood.

But it would be a great mistake to see the Bush doctrine as conservative in a simple, partisan sense. For what the president has given voice to are convictions central to the liberal tradition. Freedom is not just good for Americans or for the British. It is good for all people everywhere because it reflects a universal aspiration, a permanent inclination of the human heart. Although the forms of government for securing individual rights will vary, as will the choices individuals and peoples make about how to take advantage of the blessings of freedom, no individual wishes to be imprisoned, tortured, or enslaved. Individuals should not be forced to be free, but free nations may be compelled to use force to counter the threat posed by governments that subjugate their own people and threaten the liberties of other nations.

These convictions are nurtured by the tradition of John Locke, who maintained that all men and all women are by nature free and equal; the tradition of the authors of *The Federalist*, who believed that the experiment under way in America was relevant to all mankind because all mankind had interest in discovering whether government based on the consent of the governed and devoted to protecting the rights of individuals was possible; and the tradition of John Stuart Mill, who identified the “permanent interests of man as a progressive being” with the spread of liberty in a manner consistent with the principles of liberty.

The provenance of the president’s doctrine, of course, does not shield his account of the challenges ahead from criticism. Although he insisted that “the success of freedom is not determined by some dialectic of history,” and indeed one of his chief purposes was to justify a vigorous role for the United States in promoting democracy abroad, his speech seriously underplayed the dependence of free government on cultural foundations. Few doubt that Islam is compatible with self-government and that tribalism does not diminish the desire of individuals to be free from arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, torture, and execution. But habits of democracy and an understanding of how political institutions function must be acquired without being imposed. The complicated and indispensable work of education for self-government in the Arab Middle East has scarcely begun.

In addition, in one important respect the president has misconceived the relation between the promotion of democracy and America’s national security interests. Although he has said that the desperate opposition to coalition forces in Iraq is in part driven by terrorists who hate freedom, democratic reform may still be more costly than he has acknowledged. As James Kurth has argued in an extraordinary article in the spring 2003 issue of the *National Interest*, “Migration and the Dynamics of Empire,” the promotion of democracy in the Middle East will likely in the short term inflame the threat of Islamic terror around the world by confirming in the minds of the fanatics the accusation that America is an imperial power bent on subjecting the world, and now directly the Arab world, to its will.

But these flaws in the president’s account of our situation are remediable. Recognizing and correcting them are fully consistent with the core of the Bush doctrine, so startling to partisans of the Left and the Right, that conserving liberal democracy in America today depends on promoting it abroad.

This essay appeared in the *Jerusalem Post* on November 13, 2003. New from the Hoover Press is *Never a Matter of Indifference: Sustaining Virtue in a Free Republic*, edited by Peter Berkowitz. To order, call 800.935.2882.