

They Always Bash Bush First

 [washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/they-always-bash-bush-first](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/they-always-bash-bush-first)

by Peter Berkowitz

February 7, 2005



Standard



LOCAL CRITICS HAVE FOUND IN President Bush's second inaugural address an excellent opportunity to remonstrate, revile, and ridicule the president. Only they've had to rewrite the speech to do it.

On Friday, January 21, the day after Inauguration Day, John F. Harris published an "analysis" on the front page of the *Washington Post* which set the stage by citing unnamed authorities who maintained that the president had spoken in absolute and inflexible terms: "The immediate question, presidential scholars and foreign policy experts say, is . . . What to make of such idealistic and uncompromising language from an incumbent president? If taken at face value, Bush's words would imply nearly limitless obligations to confront all manner of autocrats around the planet, even in cases in which anti-democratic governments in the Middle East and elsewhere support U.S. interests."

So, Bush is too much of an idealist. Or not. *Post* columnist E.J. Dionne, in a piece four days later entitled " . . . Oh, Never Mind," wondered whether he ought to apologize to his readers for having initially taken the president's "promise of an expansive campaign on behalf of democracy too seriously." Dionne was incensed by what administration officials were saying about the speech. On Saturday, January 22, the *Washington Post* had reported that Bush advisers were insisting that the president's speech was "carefully written not to tie him to any inflexible or unrealistic application of his goal of ending tyranny." And, Dionne noted indignantly, on the same day, the *New York Times* had quoted an administration official who contended that while the president's rhetoric was "bold," this "did not imply that the United States would impose its views on other countries or overlook their particular social and political problems." For Dionne, these statements were shameful falsifications: "Barely 24

hours after the last marching band paraded past the White House, the president's lieutenants were out there spinning that all those lovely words didn't mean quite as much as they seemed to have meant."

Some, Dionne noted, would take solace in the president's Friday repudiation of his Thursday pronouncements: "Bush's Freedom Shuffle--he's an idealist on Thursday and a realist on Friday--may come as a relief to the many foreign policy specialists allergic to grand visions." But there was no relief for Dionne: "The Freedom Shuffle is a terrible mistake for Bush, because the greatest barrier to Bush's success in his second term is the intense cynicism he has inspired about his motives."

In the *Post's* Style section on the same day, staff writer Hanna Rosin had great fun with the supposed presidential mess that administration officials were scurrying to clean up. She mocked Bush spokesmen for saying that the president's speech represented an elaboration of his policies rather than a break with them. And she made light of the suggestion that the president meant to say the struggle for freedom is a "generational struggle," one that must proceed in different ways and at varying pace in different countries. Such after-the-fact revisionism was tantamount, according to Rosin, to Churchill declaring a day later that, "Okay, so not quite an Iron Curtain I meant more like pewter." Or to Martin Luther King Jr. letting it be known that, "Well, it wasn't really a dream. More like a daydream."

The trouble for Rosin's effort to parody Bush as confused and feckless is that administration officials had not changed the president's message. Instead, in the face of efforts to put ridiculous words in the president's mouth, they had accurately restated the leading themes of his inaugural address.

It was on Thursday, from the great podium at the Capitol looking out onto the mall and toward the Washington Monument, the National World War II Memorial, and the Lincoln Memorial, and addressing the nation as a whole, that the president himself declared, "The great objective of ending tyranny is the concentrated work of generations." And, again, it was the president who affirmed the need to respect the diversity of nations, explaining that "when the soul of a nation finally speaks, the institutions that arise may reflect customs and traditions very different from our own." And it was the president who brought out the continuity in his policy by linking the determination to expand freedom in the world to "the durable wisdom of our Constitution," to our "deep commitments," and to the "day of fire" which compelled us to rethink the relation between our "vital interests and our deepest beliefs."

The trouble for Dionne's sarcastic description of Bush as "an idealist on Thursday and a realist on Friday" is that Bush and his team blended idealism and realism on both days. Just as administration officials indicated, in his inaugural address the president idealistically--and correctly--asserted that "from the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the

image of the Maker of heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave." And yet, as the president also realistically explained, since "freedom, by its nature, must be chosen and defended by citizens, and sustained by the rule of law and the protection of minorities," the limited goal of the United States must be "to help others find their own voice, attain their own freedom, and make their own way." Indeed, the president made clear, in a memorable formulation, that in a post-9/11 world, the strategic imperative and the moral imperative have converged: "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands."

The trouble for Harris's imputation to the president of an uncompromising obligation to immediately and everywhere confront all autocrats, whether friend or foe, is that while the president expressed an unyielding conviction in the goodness of the goal of human freedom, he also acknowledged the need for flexibility in pursuing it: "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 the world." Seek and support, not coerce or compel. Indeed, as the president observed, promoting freedom is "not primarily the task of arms."

To be sure, the president's breathtaking defense of liberty raises plenty of questions. For example, how will the reconstruction of Iraq play out and affect our efforts to defend freedom? What kinds of concrete pressures are we equipped and willing to bring to bear on hostile regimes such as Iran and North Korea; on the rising giant China; and on autocratic allies such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt? And is the president's evangelical liberalism a departure from American traditions, or has it fallen to Bush to make explicit and defend the evangelical tendency within our liberalism?

But instead of pursuing these important matters, the locals have been busy condemning the president for distancing himself from the implications of a speech he never gave. At the end of his January 25 column, E.J. Dionne admonished the president: "You can spin a lot of things. Freedom shouldn't be one of them." The spin doctors here, however, are Dionne and his colleagues. They have placed fanning the flames of Bush hatred ahead of cooperating in the development of ideas for the arduous and multifaceted task of spreading liberty abroad. But aren't liberals supposed to put freedom first?

Peter Berkowitz teaches at George Mason University School of Law and is a fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution.