

# The State Of George W. Bush

By [David Corn](#), [The Nation](#). Posted [February 4, 2005](#).

Whether speaking about the Iraq war, gay marriage or Social Security, in his State of the Union the president re-affirmed that he does not reside in a reality-based community.

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George W. Bush knows what to do with a bully pulpit. From the days of Thomas Jefferson to those of William Taft, the State of the Union was a written message delivered by presidents to Congress. Woodrow Wilson turned it into a speech. Subsequent presidents used the State of the Union as a high-profile opportunity to promote their political agendas.

Bush went beyond that this evening. He produced grand and effective political theater. In the middle of the address, he transformed the war in Iraq — which even after the historic election there arguably remains his largest liability — into a single, powerfully poignant moment. Exploiting the tradition of inviting symbolically significant guests to sit with the First Lady, Bush introduced the mother of a U.S. Marine killed in Fallujah and an Iraqi human rights advocate whose father had been assassinated by Saddam Hussein and who had voted in Sunday's election. With the House chamber awash with emotion, the two women hugged. Bush was near tears. Members of Congress — perhaps including those legislators who had dyed their index fingers purple for the event — were crying. In a nutshell, here was Bush's story of sacrifice, liberty and freedom. Sentiment — *sincere* sentiment — was in full synch with spin. The not-too-hidden partisan message: Match that, you naysayers. This was a triumph of political communication. And it was a reminder that despite the apparent difficulties Bush faces in his top-priority effort to partially privatize Social Security, he should hardly be counted out. This man does what it takes.

Bush's approval ratings have been low, but in the aftermath of the Iraqi elections, he approached this speech as a conquering hero — a vindicated hero. There was, of course, no mention of Iraq's (nonexistent) weapons of mass destruction. No recognition that America's standing in the world has fallen to an all-time low. No acknowledgment that the administration

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had failed to plan adequately for the post-invasion period. Bush has not a bashful bone. For him, the Iraqi election was a signal (from God?): full steam ahead. He did not shy away from the freedom-is-our-mission rhetoric of his inaugural speech, which was widely criticized for being cynically unrealistic. Bush declared, "America will stand with the allies of freedom to support democratic movements in the Middle East and beyond, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." And he named names, calling upon Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two autocracies long supported by Washington, to move toward democracy. Certainly, he — or Condoleezza Rice — might be on the phone tomorrow to Cairo and Riyadh, explaining that Bush does not expect immediate action. Nevertheless, such words probably will provide encouragement to democracy activists in those countries and in others. These people, though, should keep in mind that Bush's father — who clearly is no role model for his son — egged on the Shiites in Iraq at the end of the Gulf War and then did not come to their rescue when they were slaughtered.

Bush also showed he has not lost his appetite for regime change and muscle-flexing. He warned Iran to abandon any pursuit of nuclear weapons, vowing that America will stand with Iranians who seek liberty. He placed Syria in the crosshairs. There was no reference to the "axis of evil," but Bush did move Syria ahead of North Korea in the you-better-worry-next category.

This president does not back down. Perhaps that's why he won in November. He repeated his assertion that Iraq "is a vital front in the war on terror, which is why the terrorists have chosen to make a stand there. Our men and women in uniform are fighting terrorists in Iraq, so we do not have to face them here at home." U.S. forces in Iraq, according to the U.S. military, are mostly fighting Baathists who had no intention of attacking the United States "at home" prior to the invasion. But Bush sticks to his talking points. And he again pledged to stay in Iraq for as long as necessary, while maintaining "we will increasingly focus our efforts on helping prepare more capable Iraqi security forces." Without referring directly to his critics, he dismissed calls for establishing any exit plan with language that was noble: "We will not set an artificial timetable for leaving Iraq, because that would embolden the terrorists and make them believe they can wait us out. We are in Iraq to achieve a result: A country that is democratic, representative of all its people, at peace with its neighbors, and able to defend itself. And when that result is achieved, our men and women serving in Iraq will return home with the honor they have earned."

Bush did not denounce his opponents; he cut back on the references to God. But he invoked FDR and the power of the American dream, comparing his project in Iraq to the abolition of slavery, the liberation of Europe and the defeat of imperial communism. He was riding high on the high road.

On domestic matters, the speech was mostly predictable. He praised his tax cuts and his record on job creation. (The United States has added 2.3 million new jobs in the past year, he said, without disclosing that the economy needs to create about 2 million jobs a year to keep up with population growth.) He claimed his forthcoming budget would lead to cutting the deficit in half by 2009 — even though budget analysts have said he is relying upon phony numbers and false assumptions. He said he would increase the size of Pell grants for college students. (He promised to do so last year and did not.) He assailed "junk lawsuits" and asserted that the nation's economic performance was being "held back" by asbestos lawsuits. (Asbestos lawsuits? Who knew that was the

problem?) When he made a vague reference to medical savings accounts, Republicans in the chambers applauded more loudly than when he called for a community health center in every poor county. Bush vowed to revive his defeated energy program and called for tax reform — without stating what changes he'd like to see in the tax code.

There were surprises. Throwing red meat to the red-staters, he made a rather big deal of gay marriage, noting he supports a constitutional amendment "to protect the institution of marriage" (note that he didn't say "to ban gay marriage") for "the good of ... children." This was a political correction, for Bush had recently peeved social conservatives by saying there was no need to push the anti-gay amendment since there were not enough votes for the measure in the Senate. And while Bush referred to the "culture of life" and decried activist judges, he said nothing directly about abortion. Can we then presume then he believes gay marriage is a more urgent matter than a practice his supporters compare to mass murder? Bush also addressed the issue of capital punishment: not by calling for more executions but by advocating more extensive use of DNA evidence to prevent wrongful convictions and proposing more funding to train defense attorneys who handle capital cases. (Too bad he didn't do that when he was governor of Texas.) He said that Laura Bush would head an initiative to keep young men out of gangs. There was no mention of the mission to Mars that Bush announced in his last State of the Union speech.

No doubt, the most anticipated part of his speech was his pitch for messing with Social Security. Bush has dramatically improved his rhetorical case for change. He made it appear he was open to many ideas, and he slyly referred to previous proposals for reform that had come from Democrats. He noted that using current payroll taxes for private retirement accounts for younger workers was not a fix for Social Security but an effort to give those under the age of 55 "a better deal." He did not use the word "crisis," but he did deploy his melodramatic and misleading argument for reform. This created the most interesting political moment of the night. As Bush remarked, "By the year 2042, the entire system would be exhausted and bankrupt," Democratic legislators shouted, "No, no ... ." (The Congressional Budget Office has said that come 2052 the Social Security system will only be able to pay about three-quarters of the scheduled benefits. This is a problem; it is not bankruptcy.) As Bush continued in this vein, the Democrats kept up the protest: "No, no, no ... ." It was reminiscent of question time in the British Parliament.

Bush, as could be expected, skated past the difficult questions: how he would pay \$2 trillion to cover the shift to private accounts and how much benefits would be cut for workers under the age of 55. He cannot paper over the harsh realities of such a plan. But Democrats ought to be worried. Polling numbers and media coverage of the Social Security fight have given them reason to hope that Bush cannot pull this off. (The day before the speech, CNN's Lou Dobbs exclaimed, "How in the world do you rationalize private accounts, a \$2 trillion addition in the ten-year projection across the federal government? None of it makes a lick of sense right now, let's just be honest. There's no crisis, there is no way in the world that this government responsibly could undertake \$2 trillion in further debt, and seniors don't want anyone messing with their Social Security.") But Bush demonstrated he is still improving his Social Security shtick.

Bush's speech was a success — for him, that is, not the Union. After all, the State of Bush is just fine. He clearly loves being a crusader for freedom. He has

learned how to project passion and what might actually be conviction. (If he doesn't read the newspapers, maybe he doesn't know his Social Security numbers are off.) Sure, close to half of the voters out there are not going to be charmed or persuaded by Bush, however he performs. And much of his rhetoric can be punctured by facts. But he displayed few, if any, political vulnerabilities. Last Election Day offered plenty of reasons for Democrats to worry. This speech provides additional cause for them to fret.

Which brings us to the Democratic response. It was middling at best, perhaps awful. Sen. Harry Reid, the minority leader, tried mighty hard to adopt the language of values. He took the folksy route, reminding viewers he had grown up in a small town in Nevada among hard-rock miners. He referred to a 10-year-old boy who recently told Reid that when he grows up he wants to be a senator. This, Reid noted, was evidence that no one has to tell the children of America to dream big dreams. Reid covered all the bases, critiquing Bush's economic policies and pointing out the flaws and dangers of partially privatizing Social Security. But he was not much of a match for a president riding the wave of self-proclaimed victory in Iraq.

Still, Reid fared better than House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi. She proved that she can read a TelePrompTer without blinking or changing her facial expression. Reid went for the down-home approach. Pelosi was a Stepford Democrat. She expressed no emotion. She did not modulate her speech. She looked like she was reading words written by someone else, not sharing convictions that burn in her soul. Handling the national security portion of the Democratic response, she served up all the usual — and correct — criticisms of Bush. But she scored no points. In this arena, delivery counts as much as — no, make that more than — substance. On Iraq, she repeated the Kerry plan: accelerate training of Iraqi security forces, rev up the reconstruction, and intensify regional diplomacy. The goal, she said, is a "much smaller American presence" by the next election, which is scheduled for the end of the year. But it was hard to imagine her swaying anyone who wasn't already a Bush-basher. Pelosi looked like she had to be there. Bush looked like he was relishing the moment. Such a difference matters much.

Hours before Bush spoke, I received an e-mail for the House Republican Study Committee, a group of conservative members of the House of Representatives. The headline: "House Conservatives React to State of the Union Address." Before Bush had uttered a single word, the conservatives were already praising his speech. "I was encouraged by the president's remarks regarding our need to decrease dependence on foreign sources of oil," declared Rep. Joe Barton of Texas. "As President Bush made clear tonight, freedom is a priceless right," Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart of Florida exclaimed. "Whether it is in the form of joyous new voters in Afghanistan and Iraq or in the form of financial freedom here at home through responsible Social Security reform and tax reform, freedom must be promoted and defended." Rep. Phil Gingrey of Georgia also had a boffo review of Bush's address: "President Bush really made the case for bipartisan support on a lot of these issues." Good thing these Republicans are independent thinkers. The e-mail was embargoed until 9:01 p.m. EST, a minute after Bush was scheduled to start speaking.

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