

Bush cites faith, sets agenda: Ambitious goals, troubling language

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In the 12 days between his second inaugural speech, replete with religious references, and his State of the Union address, delivered in more secular tones, President George W. Bush enjoyed what appeared to be a moment of success in his administration's effort to spread democracy in the Middle East.

The Iraqi national elections January 30 had a larger-than-expected turnout, despite some violence from Iraqi insurgents. During Bush's address to a joint session of Congress February 2, onlookers cheered the prolonged embrace between an Iraqi voter and the mother of a U.S. soldier killed in combat.

The moment was a historical rarity. Not since President William McKinley in 1901 has a Republican president started a second term with a majority of the popular vote and strong GOP majorities in the Senate and House. Republican neoconservatives and Religious Right activists hope to reach their respective long-term goals.

Bush has often couched his presidency in religious terms, thereby stirring up his theologically conservative constituency but also drawing resistance from liberal-to-moderate Christian leaders.

Some of the latter press for a timetable for a U.S. exit from Iraq, pointing to estimates of 100,000 Iraqi deaths and more than 1,400 U.S. troops killed. "The presence of U.S. occupation forces has been—and will continue to be—a flashpoint for violence," said Peter Lems of the American Friends Service Committee, commenting on what he call Bush's "rosy picture" of Iraqi democracy and freedom in his February 2 speech.

One of the president's most ambitious goals is reform of Social Security retirement programs, but shouts of "No, no" from some Democratic lawmakers were heard when Bush said the system faces bankruptcy. Many elected officials in both parties remain skeptical about the nation's ability to stem the ever-rising federal deficit, a

gap driven in part by escalating military costs and no commensurate rise in tax income.

The president's new term featured traditional religious events, including a formal prayer service at the Washington National Cathedral and the annual National Prayer Breakfast, held this year on February 3.

At the breakfast, Bush praised churches, synagogues and mosques for their response to the devastating tsunamis in South Asia that left at least 158,000 dead in late December. "People of faith have no corner on compassion," Bush said. "But people of faith need compassion if they are to be true to their most cherished beliefs."

Bush's brief remarks to clergy, diplomats and lawmakers, including his 2004 election opponent Senator John Kerry, featured the religious rhetoric that has become commonplace in his administration.

By contrast, in his State of the Union address delivered just ten hours before, the president used more measured language and relatively few words to repeat his backing for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. He also vowed to help build "a culture of life" against abortion and embryonic stem cell research.

"I will work with Congress to ensure that human embryos are not created for experimentation or grown for body parts, and that human life is never bought and sold as a commodity," he said.

The president also made a passing reference to his "faith-based initiative," stalled in Congress, that would allow religious groups to compete for federal funding for social service programs. "Our government will continue to support faith-based and community groups that bring hope to harsh places," he said.

As noted by the Washington-based Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, commentators on the Bush presidency are divided on whether the former Texas governor, a United Methodist with an evangelical perspective, overuses religious language.

Supporters of Bush note that expressions of faith have been part of inaugural addresses since the founding of the nation. George Washington, in the first such address in 1789, mentioned the deity eight times—once more than Bush did this

year. Yet “Way Too Much God” was the headline for an article by former GOP speech writer Peggy Noonan in the January 21 *Wall Street Journal*.

Earlier last month, Bush was quoted in an interview with editors and reporters at the conservative *Washington Times* as saying he did not understand “how you can be president without a relationship with the Lord.” Among those troubled by the statement was David Saperstein, director of the Washington-based Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

“Such an assertion violates the spirit of the Constitution’s ban on religious tests for political office,” said Saperstein, whose center called on the president to speak in ways that would “prevent Americans from misunderstanding his remarks.”

Bush had prefaced his comment to the *Times*, published January 12, by saying the president’s job is to protect freedom to worship in America. And indeed, in his inaugural address the next week, Bush spoke of a nation sustained “by the truths of Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount, the words of the Qur’an and the varied faiths of our people.”