

Foreign perspectives: Discomfort with the Bush response to 9/11

by [David Little](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

If non-Americans attending the recent World Economic Forum in New York had been polled concerning their attitudes toward the foreign policies of the Bush administration, the president would not have received anywhere near the overwhelming endorsement Americans have given him since September 11. In plenary panels, and even more in small sessions and private conversations, foreign sentiment ran strongly against American policies. It was therefore unfortunate that neither the president nor a larger number of his administration saw fit to attend. Such engagement would have provided urgently needed evidence that declarations by the American government in favor of collaboration and cooperation in the campaign against terrorism are more than empty rhetoric.

President Bush, in his State of the Union message delivered on January 29, just two days before the forum began, employed the word “coalition” four times, and spoke three times of “our allies” or “friends and allies.” Yet, aside from vague and fleeting allusions to “easing old tensions” with Russia, China and India, to the power of “free markets, free trade and free societies,” and to the task of rebuilding Afghanistan, he devoted no attention to outlining the specific international commitments and responsibilities the U.S. is willing to undertake.

And he made no mention at all of the United Nations or of international human rights and humanitarian law. As a consequence, the president’s references to “the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law, limits on the power of the state; respect for women; private property; free speech; equal justice; and religious tolerance,” and to the ideal of defending liberty and justice for everyone everywhere, fell flat. They had no connection to the hard-won international legal instruments and mechanisms that give these values whatever concrete practical meaning and applicability they have in the world today.

The State of the Union address was focused almost exclusively on what the U.S. stands for and what it intends of its own accord to do. Describing the American reaction to the events of September 11, the president stated, “It was as if our entire country looked into a mirror and saw our better selves. We were reminded that we are citizens, with obligations to each other, to our country, to our history.” The words are not unfitting so far as they go, but they don’t go far enough. They say nothing about duties beyond American borders, or about a more inclusive, common history that Americans share with “our friends and allies.”

The same objection applies when the president proceeded to speak of a “new ethic and a new creed” for America, which he summarized with the words, “Let’s roll.” What he appeared to mean is a new emphasis on American generosity, including “extending American compassion throughout the world,” that is to become a central feature of American leadership. Again, what is missing is any reassurance that the U.S. is equally committed to pursuing its goals within a framework of international obligation and cooperation.

The president’s reference to North Korea, Iran and Iraq as an “axis of evil” provoked the most strenuous criticism at the WEF. Besides objecting to the term—which compares the current struggle to the one against the fascist states of the World War II era—many participants complained about the unilateralism of the claim. Without reservation or restraint, President Bush appeared perfectly comfortable declaring for all the world, and without a hint of consultation, what the agenda for the campaign against terrorism shall be. The “coalition” and “our friends and allies” can now fall into line. For many at the World Economic Forum, that approach appears to be at the heart of President Bush’s vision of world leadership.