

Freedom and Interdependence

President Bush's second inaugural address was widely lauded as one of the better political speeches in recent times. It established freedom as the keystone of American foreign and domestic policy, and put forward the closest thing to political vision we have seen in a long time.

Many of the president's critics were quick to point out the rather glaring contradictions between the vision and reality. These are indeed worth noting. But given the widespread agreement on the principle of freedom, it is also worth reflecting on what its positive ethical requirements would be for public policy in this time of new national and state legislatures.

One of the most remarkable features of the speech was the idea that the survival of freedom in America depends on the success of freedom in other countries. This idea recalls one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most notable statements, that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." This kind of sentiment recognizes a fundamental truth more often associated with progressive political thinking, namely, the truth of interdependence. It asserts that I cannot truly have the goods of liberty unless others share them as well. "Liberty for all," the president said, "does not mean independence from one another."

Taking President Bush at his word, what would such interdependence look like, internationally? Americans will likely remain divided over war as an effective means to promote freedom and justice abroad. We would be obligated, however, to give up our habit of supporting regimes that violate human rights. Past American support for Saddam Hussein and the Shah of Iran, for example, play a large role in the mess we are in today.

We also would have an obligation to support efforts to overcome poverty and conditions of oppression that make people vulnerable to extremist causes. It is worth noting, therefore, that foreign aid from the United States places last among the twenty-two developed nations as a percentage of gross domestic product.

The president also recognized what he called the unfinished work of freedom at home. His first example is the goal of individual economic independence and freedom from subsistence labor. Currently, more than 5 percent of Montana's workforce labors full-time, only to remain below the poverty level. We should therefore applaud the legislature's efforts to raise the minimum wage. It is ironic, however, that the president cited Social Security as a cornerstone of America's concern for economic liberty. This highly successful program—grounded on the very idea of interdependence—is now targeted for dismantling in the name of individual ownership.

Individual freedom also depends on other conditions, such as health care, education, and a clean environment. Yet today, 43 million Americans have no health insurance. Many more are trapped in jobs only because they cannot afford to lose the benefits that come with those jobs. And those who have health insurance are paying

higher premiums because they ultimately subsidize the more expensive urgent care that hospitals must give to those without. That federal and state governments do not guarantee health care for all citizens is a moral scandal that should no longer be tolerated. It is contrary to the ideal of freedom.

The goal of greater freedom also motivates the “No Child Left Behind” initiative in education. Who can be free without the capacities—fostered by education—to take full advantage of one’s opportunities? Yet the program remains significantly underfunded, with 48 education programs cut in the newly proposed federal budget. The budget also substantially cuts funding for the Environmental Protection Agency.

To be sure, meeting obligations to promote freedom at home and abroad does not necessarily require government programs. But individuals or the free market cannot adequately guarantee many of the conditions of freedom and justice. If that were the case, we wouldn’t need public schools, an Environmental Protection Agency, or thirty-plus years of debate on how to provide health care for millions of uninsured.

There is ultimately a tension, therefore, between the interdependence that links my freedom with yours, and the ideal of the ownership society—the other theme touted in the president’s speech. One cannot have individual ownership of goods like health care and social security because they are not commodities. Like freedom, they cannot simply be bought. Recognizing this fact, we can conclude that people are less likely to have a stake in the country and the global community if we stress ownership, rather than interdependence.

The idea that we all have a stake in the freedom of other nations and other people at home is powerful political rhetoric. It is even true. As such, it can provide a basis for some degree of political unity. But the idea also has profound implications. If only our political representatives can act on behalf of freedom’s common causes, without the obstruction of petty partisanship, we all will be freer indeed.

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