

# The 2005 Inaugural Speech: “Play it Again, George”

By Col. Daniel Smith (Ret.) | January 24, 2005

Admittedly, it doesn't have that certain “oomph” of Humphrey Bogart's line from “Casablanca”—probably because “George” is effectively two sounds (Ge-or-ge) whereas Bogie's “Sam” is short and punchy.

That certain “oomph” also was missing from President Bush's second inaugural speech on January 20. Or at least that was the consensus view of the pundits. Many were struck by the president's repeated use of “free” and its common derivatives (e.g., freedom). A fair number also remarked on the apparently new, open-ended commitment by the president to the mission of the U.S. to spread freedom and liberty throughout the globe, a mission that, in the 21st century, is now a vital national interest.

The absence of “punch” can be attributed to two causes: the rhetoric of the speech is old hat, and even the “commitment” is really nothing new. A brief look at two earlier Bush documents, the 2001 inaugural speech and the September 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States, illustrate how, even after four years in office and a costly and unsuccessful military adventure in Iraq, the administration seems not to have shifted either its thinking or how it expresses its policies.

While inaugural speeches may be more rhetoric than substantive, this is not always so. Conversely, the NSS publicly sets the administration's course for dealing with international military and diplomatic challenges and national concerns that might undermine prosperity and opportunity at home. When both converge on the same point, policy usually emerges. President Bush's introductory letter to the 2002 NSS employs the word “freedom” or its derivatives seven times in the first paragraph alone. And as Bush regards himself as a “plain-spoken man,” one can only conclude that concentrated repetition of an idea signals a determination to employ it as a kind of polar star.

As an example, consider “freedom.” In the 2001 speech, Bush used the term or derivations thereof six times. Eighteen months later, in his introductory letter to the NSS, he employed the word or its deriva-

tives seven times in just the first paragraph. By January 20, 2005, the count stood at 34. Similarly, “liberty” jumped from two references in 2001 to 16 in 2005. Both speeches stressed “responsibility” although in 2005 it is cast as the “ownership society,” which makes “every citizen an agent of his or her own destiny.” In both speeches, “public interest depends on private character,” and the wounded traveler to Jericho who will not be ignored (2001) becomes the neighbor who will be looked after by good men and women. And the “power ... who creates us in his image” (2001) can be discerned in all as we “bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth” (2005). Courage and character are lauded in both, as is reclaiming high standards in schools. “Reforming Social Security and Medicare” (2001) becomes “ownership of ... retirement savings and health insurance” (2005).

Many observers commented on what they interpreted as a willingness to confront tyranny of any kind on the premise that U.S. freedoms are and always will be imperiled until ideologies of hate no longer exist to “raise a mortal threat.” Yet this is essentially a restatement in more lofty language of the formal enunciation in the NSS of the administration's “preventive war” policy under which even a challenge to U.S. military dominance, let alone a postulated “threat” in the indeterminate future, justifies U.S. military action. And while “ending tyranny in our world ... is not primarily the task of arms,” in the 2005 speech the president wedded his version of a “vital national interest”—protecting the nation against “further attacks and emerging threats”—to a self-proclaimed, unrestricted and unmediated mission of spreading democracy throughout the world. What was different in the inaugural was the imagery of an “untamed fire” whose intensity will overpower the fires of tyranny. Only then, according to the presi-



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dent, will U.S. freedom be assured and the world made safe for democracy.

Unfortunately, “untamed fires,” whether literal or metaphorical, have a propensity to do the unexpected. Uncontrolled, they consume whatever they touch. (That is why, domestically, freedom must be tempered by liberty, which acts as a firebreak to prevent one person’s exercise of freedom from overpowering another’s.) Worse, because the result may not be apparent, undetected temperature variations in fires intended to purify and temper create unreliable instruments, both material (e.g., swords) and ideological (e.g., “vital national interests”).

What comes through in the 2005 inaugural is a sense that a second four-year Bush term will try to wield the same flawed “missionary” ideology of the first term. Its zeal may be concealed under new phraseology and its objectives have different names (e.g., Iran for Iraq). Formulating future commitments on ill-considered (or untempered) policy declarations, no matter how nuanced, all too easily creates unnecessary conflagrations that, in the end, might well burn down our own house of liberty and with it our freedoms.

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