

A Fire in their Minds: Christian Realism and Democracy Promotion

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ABSTRACT

George W. Bush assumed office in 2001 intending to focus on domestic and economic issues, but terrorist attacks changed the course of his presidency. In tandem with the War on Terrorism Bush developed a larger philosophical framework for understanding that dangerous world, America 's ideals, and his role as president at this historical juncture. Part of that framework was the Freedom Agenda, best elucidated in his Second Inaugural Address in January 2005,¹ [1] a commitment to supporting and promoting democracy worldwide. Moreover, unlike much of Bush's foreign policy platform, it is likely that the Obama Administration will carry on promoting what the new president has called "sustainable democracy."

As both Bush and Obama claim a robust personal Christian faith, and particularly Obama cites approvingly the approach of Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian realism for political analysis, that is the lens for which this paper will evaluate the philosophical claims of the Freedom Agenda, U.S. activities to promote democracy, and suggest what a twenty-first century U.S. democracy promotion program might look like that is consistent with Christian realism.

¹ [1] George W. Bush, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 2005.

A FIRE IN THEIR MINDS: CHRISTIAN REALISM AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

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George W. Bush assumed office in 2001 intending to focus on domestic and economic issues, but terrorist attacks on the financial and political capitals of the U.S. changed the course of his presidency. Bush reacted strongly and pragmatically to punish those responsible for the September 11 attacks as well as disrupt future assaults by engaging a wider range of targets in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and across the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Early in his presidency Bush developed a larger philosophical framework for understanding that dangerous world, America 's ideals, and his role as president at this historical juncture. Part of that framework was the Freedom Agenda, first described in a speech in 2002 and in that year's National Security Strategy, but best elucidated in his Second Inaugural Address in January 2005.² [2] Reflecting not only America 's past (e.g. World War II and the Marshall Plan) but its recent liberation of Afghanistan and Iraq and the optimistic environment of 2005 (the Color Revolutions, the nascent "Arab Spring"), Bush declared,

◆because we have acted in the great liberating tradition of this nation, tens of millions have achieved their freedom. And as hope kindles hope, millions more will find it. By our efforts we have lit a fire as well; a fire in the minds of men. It warms those who feel its power. It burns those who fight its progress. And one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of our world.

² [2] George W. Bush, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 2005.

The Bush Administration went on not only to outline a broad, interagency Freedom Agenda that included democracy promotion, economic development, free trade, and humanitarian assistance, but also inextricably linked it to the broader Bush [security] Doctrine and established it in legislation (the Advance Democracy Act of 2007) and executive order (National Security Presidential Directive-58).

Bush, the man, and his Doctrine (particularly the notions of preventive/preemptive war, unilateralism, and American exceptionalism) have been the subject of intense debate for the past eight years from nearly every partisan and philosophical perspective, with one exception. The philosophical and executive content of the Freedom Agenda, which one former State Department official calls the "ideological component of the war [on terrorism],"^{3 [3]} has been largely neglected. Moreover, the newly elected Obama Administration has made its disdain for both the man and his foreign policies clear, except perhaps in one area: democracy promotion. Hence, it is valuable to revisit the philosophical framework of Bush's democratization agenda as well as its policies as many of those structures remain in place in the early Obama era.

As both Bush and Obama claim a robust personal Christian faith, and particularly Obama cites approvingly the approach of Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian realism for political analysis, that is the lens which this paper will use for its analysis. Following an introduction to Christian realism, the essay will present and evaluate the philosophical claims of the Freedom Agenda, recent U.S. activities to promote democracy, and suggest what elements of a twenty-first century U.S. democracy promotion program are consistent with Christian realism.

^{3 [3]} Kim R. Holmes, "Ensuring a Legacy: Solidifying the Bush Doctrine" in *The National Interest* (Jan/Feb 2007), p. 25.

Christian Realism as a Critical Lens

There are many ways to evaluate the Bush Administration's Freedom Agenda and wider set of foreign policies as well as general U.S. democracy promotion activities, from the work of USAID for the past half-century to the quarter-century old National Endowment for Democracy, as well as recent rhetoric on sustainable democracy by President Obama. By far, the majority of recent debate has been about the *means* of advancing democracy, not its *ends*, much less its philosophical *foundations*. For example, Wittes and Yerkes are among many who argue that linking democracy promotion to the war in Iraq harmed Bush's Freedom Agenda worldwide.⁴ [4] Larry Diamond, a foremost scholar of democracy and a thought leader for Paul Bremer's Coalitional Provisional Authority, recently critiqued the Bush Administration as "pretentious, unilateral, and impulsive," but recently wrote in a progressive journal, "As we disengage from Iraq, we must find ways to renew the freedom agenda if we are going to serve our long-term security interests in the region."⁵ [5] Thomas Carothers, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, does not dispute that democracy promotion must continue into future administrations, but he demands a "decontamination" of U.S. foreign policy from George W. Bush's policies (e.g. Guantanamo and the detention of enemy combatants) and a "repositioning" and "recalibration" of democracy promotion.⁶ [6]

4 [4] Wittes and Yerkes, 2007.

5 [5] Larry Diamond, "Pursue a New Freedom Agenda" in *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, Issue #6, Fall 2007. Available at www.democracyjournal.org/ID6557.

6 [6] See Carothers, 2007 and Thomas Carothers, "The Backlash Against Democracy Promotion" in *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2006). To be fair, Carothers recognized that the Bush Administration had a particularly hard path in front of it in advancing the Freedom Agenda: it did so in the aftermath of 9/11, it took the Agenda to the area least favorable to democracy in the world (the Middle East), it was hampered by a reluctance within the entrenched American bureaucracy and senior officials in the

In contrast to these approaches, this essay will utilize the framework of Christian realism to evaluate the philosophical underpinnings, activities, and future of contemporary American democracy promotion efforts. Classical Christian realism is an interdisciplinary school of thought associated with a group of public intellectuals from roughly the 1930s-1960s, including Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield, international relations scholar Martin Wight, political scientists Ernest Lefever and Kenneth W. Thompson, and ethicists/theologians such as John C. Bennett, Paul Ramsey, and most famously Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr's voice was so pervasive that he ended up on the cover of *Time* magazine, met with presidents, advised the State Department, and was a best-selling author.

The influence continues today: all three of the final 2008 presidential contenders cited Niebuhr as influential on their thinking-- Clinton acknowledged Niebuhr in an interview, McCain devoted a full chapter in a book to Niebuhr, and Obama spoke at length about Niebuhr and Christian realism to a columnist. This testimony suggests the enduring relevance of the Christian realist approach, an approach which continues to inform the work of thinkers such as Jean Bethke Elshtain, Keith Pavlischek, Eric Patterson, Joseph Loconte, and others.

What is Christian Realism?

What is Christian realism? Reflecting on the work of Niebuhr and his contemporaries, Roger E. Shinn explains, "both words in that phrase are important:"

Administration itself to move forward on the Agenda, and the U.S. has competing imperatives such as rooting out terrorists and access to oil.

The ethic was Christian in its serious appropriation of Biblical motifs and classical doctrines: the uniqueness of Biblical revelation, the sinfulness of man and society, the judging and redeeming activity of God, the faith in justification by a divine grace that produces works worthy of repentance, the distinctive quality of Christian love. It was realistic in its criticism of naive idealism or utopianism and its confrontation with the brute facts and power struggles of the contemporary world. This Christian realism, at least at its best, was not an artificial combination of two unrelated motifs. It was realistic in its appropriation of Christian faith, and it was Christian--often recovering orthodox traditions neglected in the modern church--in its realism. It was alert both to the Word of God and to the latest news from European and Asiatic battlefronts, and it constantly sought the relation between the good news of the gospel and the daily news of the world.⁷ [7]

In short, classical Christian realism was a perspective committed to understanding and involvement in politics based on a realistic standpoint. What made the Christian realists feel that their perspective on human nature and political phenomena was "realistic" was not pessimism but faith in the Biblical doctrines of sin and the Fall.

Roger Epp calls the rise of mid-twentieth century Christian realism the "Augustinian Moment" in international politics.⁸ [8] By "Augustinian" Epp is specifically referring to the doctrinal foundation of Christian realism that emanates from Augustine's political treatise *The City of God*.⁹ [9] Epp argues that

7 [7] Roger L. Shinn, "Theological Ethics: Retrospect and Prospect" in *Theology and Church in times of change: Essays in Honor of John Coleman Bennett*, Edward LeRoy Long, Jr. and Robert T. Handy, eds. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982).

8 [8] See Roger Epp, "The 'Augustinian Moment' in International Politics: Niebuhr, Butterfield, Wight and the Reclaiming of a Tradition," International Politics Research Paper, no. 10 (Department of International Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1991).

9 [9] Certainly, many Christian realists express their intellectual debt to Augustine. For instance, Niebuhr wrote, "[Augustine] proves himself a more reliable guide than any known thinker. A generation which finds its communities imperiled and in decay might well take counsel of Augustine in solving its perplexities." Likewise, Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield, reflecting on the deepening Cold War and the atomic age, stated, "we in this part of the world find ourselves in the midst of the very kind of catastrophic history that Augustine viewed when

Niebuhr and other classical Christian realists "reclaimed" Augustine's understanding of political life in four ways. First, the Christian realists parallel Augustine's view of human nature. Augustine saw humankind as God's penultimate creation--made in God's very image with tremendous creative potential but marred by Adam's sin. Because Christian realists tended to emphasize sin and evil in stark contrast to the religious and secular liberals of their day, they were often wrongly stereotyped as cynics or pessimists. Second, like Augustine classical Christian realists saw history as meaningful, linear, and moving toward an ultimate fulfillment. As Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield wrote, "the ultimate faith is the belief that all things will have a final reconciliation--a final share in the redemptive purpose of Christ."¹⁰ [10] A third Augustinian theme is the Christian realist emphasis on order in political life. Augustine's conception of "concord" and his application of it to Rome in the context of barbarian attacks on the empire provided the essential justification for law and government. Rome provided the benefits of commerce, education, and communication despite also being responsive for evil such as slavery and war. Augustine did not apologize for Rome's wrongs, but made it clear that they were lesser evils when the alternative was social disorder and political chaos. Finally, Christian realists appropriate from Augustine the notion of *caritas*,

writing his seminal *The City of God* in the fifth century." Even secular Niebuhrians agreed that Augustine was valuable. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. quipped, "Whatever you say about Augustine, at least he would not have been much surprised by the outcome of the Russian Revolution." More recently, Jean Bethke Elshtain, writes that "classic Augustinian thinking" can help us come to grips with the terrorism associated with September 11 and al Qaeda terrorism training videos captured in Afghanistan: "Augustinians are painfully aware of the temptation to smash, destroy, damage, and humiliate. Such temptations may be struggled against, capitulated to, or even extolled as a form of strength and the path to victory. Violence unleashed when what Augustine called the *libido dominandi*, or lust to dominate, is unchecked, is violence that knows no limits. For these references, see Eric Patterson, ed. *Christianity and Power Politics Today* (New York : Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008): 8.

10 [10] Butterfield Papers, Box 92 , "Christianity," typescript for Christmas number of Methodist Recorder, 3.

"the love of God and Neighbors as the proper motivation of the will transformed by grace."¹¹ [11] This "law of love" is the ultimate standard for individual conduct.

¹¹ [11] Epp, 5.

Applying the City of God to the Earthly City

Christian realism rejects the modernist idea that Biblical revelation and judgment is inappropriate for contemporary society. Instead, the Christian realism finds in the New Testament a call for action in dealing with contemporary social and political situations. Most classical Christian realists were political liberals and sympathetic to the Social Gospel's call for social justice. Nevertheless, Christian realists tend to be critical of idealism that is unwilling to deal with the realities of political power and face the judgmental portions of Christ's message.

Christian realism emphasizes the universality of sin: no individual and no collective is free from guilt of pride and sin. Unlike idealists who can not differentiate between temporary political projects because all fell short of the law of love, Christian realism argues that distinctions can be made between lesser and greater evils. This was the position of various classical Christian realists toward Nazi aggression in the 1940s. Germany was not evil incarnate nor the British Empire free from its own problems, but the tyranny of National Socialism was certainly more evil than the foibles of the Western powers and therefore demanded a forceful response.¹² [12]

Thus, one finds in the writings of the Christian realists frequent allusions to the tension between individual responsibility and the law of love. In fact, an ethic of responsibility is a key fifth pillar for understanding the Augustinian roots of Christian realism. On the one hand, Christians are citizens of the world and therefore must use the tools of the world (e.g. politics, force) to act, to participate, and to fight

¹² [12] See for example Reinhold Niebuhr's "Europe's Catastrophe and the Christian Faith" (London: Nisbet and Co., 1940); "To Prevent the Triumph of Intolerable Tyranny," *The Christian Century* (18 December 1940): 1578-1580; "Our Responsibility in 1942," *Christianity and Crisis* vol. 2, no. 2 (12 January 1942): 1-2. Also, see John C. Bennett's "The Churches and the War," *Christianity and Crisis* vol. 2, no. 15 (2 November 1942): 29-31; "American Christians and the War," *The Student World* vol. 36, no. 1 (1943): 81-89.

against injustice. On the other hand, Christians must humbly recognize that every behavior falls short of the ideal of the law of love and is therefore censured by the ideal. The individual Christian should act while not neglecting repentance for his or her own pride and evil.

In general, classical Christian realism relied heavily on Augustine's distinction between the City of God and the City of Earth and was unsparing in its attacks on those, such as pacifists and Social Gospel liberals, who confused the realities of the temporal political order and its justice with the eternal city and its ideals. The City of God was founded on the law of love and was an ideal that cannot be realized in this world. In contrast, we live in the earthly city, and must work within its limitations to achieve "approximate" conditions of order and justice. In sum, Christian realists enjoin everyone to keep in mind the ideals of Christ's eternal kingdom but to work within the constraints of the present imperfect world.

Christian realists recognize the tension in collective life between the need for order and the law of love. Augustine discussed the tension between the demands of the law of love and the behavior of representatives of the state, who, acting on the state's behalf, might violate the law of love. For example, the soldier serving in Rome 's legions would have to kill at times to protect political order. Augustine condoned such behavior on behalf of the state, arguing that there could be no ultimate resolution of the tension between social order and ultimate moral ideals in the earthly city and that the state and its representatives were obligated to act to preserve the political order. Niebuhr agreed: "order precedes justice in the strategy of government."¹³ [13]

Christian realism has another concern about morality and social life: although individual behavior may be guided at times by ethical concerns, this is generally not the case for collectives. Indeed, groups generally behave based on self-interest and Niebuhr argued that groups amplify the self-interest of their

¹³ [13] Qtd. in Epp, 123.

members. Consequently, one finds in the writings of Niebuhr and Bennett criticism of the moralist rhetoric of foreign policies that claims ethical purposes but actually obfuscates self-interested motives.¹⁴ [14] Moreover, classical Christian realists such as Butterfield were especially chary of marrying religion or ideology to nationalism, both because it made political concessions impossible and because it bordered on idolatry.¹⁵ [15]

Finally, classical Christian realists were strident in their calls for political action to resist tyranny abroad and promote justice everywhere. Niebuhr and his contemporaries argued for the value of democracy, proposed an international body such as the United Nations, warned of complaisance toward the Nazis and later the Communists, advocated containment, argued over nuclear deterrence, and urged the United States to assume a global leadership role. Nevertheless, they did not find in ethical systems, religious tradition, or in the Scripture concrete policy proposals. Indeed, Christian realists such as John C. Bennett and Butterfield routinely claimed that the insights of the social sciences were both useful and necessary to dealing with the problems of politics and economics.¹⁶ [16] In short, classical Christian realism had no delimited policy platform or any specific political formula. Instead, Christian realism called

14 [14] For example, see Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952) and John C. Bennett, "The Self-Defeating Attitudes of America's Reactionaries," *Christianity and Crisis* vol. 10, no. 4 (15 May 1950).

15 [15] Butterfield's concern about ideologically-driven foreign policy can be seen in *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century: A Christian View* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960). Also see Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Anatomy of American Nationalism," *New Republic* (28 February 1955): 16-17.

16 [16] For instance, see Butterfield's *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century: A Christian View* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960); and Bennett's *Christian Realism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952).

for individuals to work from an ethical worldview in a spirit of humility, recognizing that one's efforts might be in vain, but that one has a responsibility to try.

In sum, classical Christian realism was a practical, flexible, and ethical response to the liberal idealism of the day. Christian realists tended to prioritize a language of "power," "responsibility," and "order" in their discussions of political phenomena. In a time of upheaval and uncertainty characterized by the rise of fascism and Communism, the second World War, atomic weapons, and the Cold War, the prophetic voice of Christian realism was heeded not only by those in positions of power but also by many in the mass public. And it is a perspective that remains useful today in a contemporary era of upheaval and uncertainty caused by violent political theologies, the specter of WMDs, and the global economic meltdown.

The Freedom Agenda and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Foreign Policy

The United States has long made its republican ideology of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness part and parcel of its foreign policy, from a belief in Manifest Destiny to the democratic expansions of the last sixty years. As one scholar observed, "advancing freedom is an expression of the United States' most sacred ideals" and has an "established parentage" of American executives, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton.¹⁷ [17] It includes a cluster of policies that combine democratization with economic development, free trade, Cold War containment, and other policies resulting in agencies and programs such as the Marshall

¹⁷ [17] Jennifer Windsor, "Advancing the Freedom Agenda: Time for a Recalibration?" in *The Washington Quarterly* 29:3 (Summer 2006), p. 32.

Plan; support for democratic governance in post-war Europe, Japan , and South Korea , support for global human rights, and the creation of the Peace Corps, USAID, and the National Endowment for Democracy.

George W. Bush embraced America 's "responsibility" to support democracy, inaugurating a political program known as the "Freedom Agenda" which was strongly rooted in his worldview and American ideals. President Bush defined it broadly in his Second Inaugural Address, "it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."¹⁸ [18] Nearly identical language was in the Advance Democracy Act of 2007:

It is the policy of the United States to promote freedom and democracy in foreign countries as a fundamental component of the United States foreign policy♦to affirm fundamental freedoms and international recognized human rights♦to condemn offenses against those freedoms and rights as a fundamental component of United States foreign policy♦to protect and promote such fundamental freedoms and rights, including the freedoms of association, of expression, of the press, and of religion, and the right to own private property; to commit to the long-term challenge of promoting universal democracy♦to support♦free, fair, and open elections, ♦to strengthen cooperation with other democratic countries♦

This language and its accompanying policies are rooted in a set of moral assumptions about humanity and politics.

Bush operated from the presupposition that international politics is not merely a chess match of material interests and prestige. Rather, he firmly believed that *politics have moral content*. Certainly Bush

¹⁸ [18] Bush, Second Inaugural, 2005.

drew from his own personal faith as well as the ideas of the Founders in articulating the Freedom Agenda.

In his commencement address to Army cadets at West Point in 2002, Bush asserted,

Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. Different circumstances require different methods, but not different moralities. Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place. Targeting innocent civilians for murder is always and everywhere wrong. Brutality against women is always and everywhere wrong. There can be no neutrality between justice and cruelty, between the innocent and the guilty. We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name. By confronting evil and lawless regimes, we do not create a problem, we reveal a problem. And we will lead the world in opposing it.¹⁹ [19]

In addition to adducing the moral nature of politics, the Freedom Agenda assumes *the inherent moral worth of every individual human being* and the *right of that individual to live in conditions of freedom*. Bush approvingly cited the Declaration of Independence's assertion that all people are created equal and endowed by a Creator with rights:

From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave.²⁰ [20]

¹⁹ [19] Bush, Commencement Address at the U.S. Military Academy (West Point), June, 2002.

²⁰ [20] Bush, Second Inaugural, 2005.

Moreover, Bush asserted that the intrinsic *desire for freedom is universal*--that this is the lesson of history and that it crosses boundaries of geography, race, class, and religion. He told the West Point cadets, "When it comes to the common rights and needs of men and women, there is no clash of civilizations. The requirements of freedom apply fully to Africa and Latin America and the entire Islamic world."²¹ [21] Moreover, if the desire for freedom is universal and if it is an ethical imperative, then *those who are free have a moral obligation to help others* who aspire to it: "it is the responsibility of those who enjoy the blessings of liberty to help those who are struggling to establish their [own] free societies."²² [22]

The Administration has also been clear in elucidating the characteristics of the free society, such as *human and civil rights and civil liberties*. Freedom is "sustained by the rule of law" which protects women and minorities.²³ [23] In Prague the President averred,

We appreciate that free societies take shape at different speeds in different places. One virtue of democracy is that it reflects local history and traditions. Yet there are fundamental elements that all democracies share--freedom of speech, religion, press, and assembly; rule of law enforced by independent courts; private property rights; and political parties that compete in free and fair elections. These rights and institutions are the foundation of human dignity♦²⁴ [24]

²¹ [21] Bush, West Point , 2002.

²² [22] Bush, Prague , 2007.

²³ [23] Bush, Second Inaugural, 2005.

²⁴ [24] Bush, Prague , 2007.

Bush believed that *history is on the side of freedom*, and this confidence infuses the Freedom Agenda: "Freedom is the dream and the right of every person in every nation in every age."²⁵ [25] This was not historical determinism, but rather the President's belief in the inherent desire for human liberty and his determination to spur it forward during his presidency. As he said in the Second Inaugural Address,

We go forward with complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom. Not because history runs on the wheels of inevitability; it is human choices that move events. Not because we consider ourselves a chosen nation; God moves and chooses as He wills. We have confidence because freedom is the permanent hope of mankind, the hunger in dark places, the longing of the soul. When our Founders declared a new order of the ages; when soldiers died in wave upon wave for a union based on liberty; when citizens marched in peaceful outrage under the banner "Freedom Now" - they were acting on an ancient hope that is meant to be fulfilled. History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty.²⁶ [26]

Finally, the Freedom Agenda does not relegate human rights, democracy promotion, religious freedom advocacy, or free trade to inferior status among U.S. foreign policy priorities. President Bush said in Prague, "Advancing freedom is more than a moral imperative--it is the only realistic way to protect our people in the long run."²⁷ [27] As historian John Lewis Gaddis argued, this is the innovation of the Bush Doctrine--that the Freedom Agenda is central to the strategic vision of U.S. foreign policy, and thus its elements are enshrined not only in presidential rhetoric, but in key policy documents such as the

²⁵ [25] Ibid.

²⁶ [26] Bush, Second Inaugural, 2005.

²⁷ [27] Bush, Prague, 2007.

National Security Strategies of 2002 and 2006.²⁸ [28] President Bush identified *advancing human freedom as a vital interest* of U.S. foreign policy:

America 's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.²⁹ [29]

In short, for President Bush the Freedom Agenda was not a tertiary policy priority; it was an integral part of his foreign policy, a key element of the Bush Doctrine, and was repeatedly called one of America 's "vital interests." The language and worldview of the Freedom Agenda directly descended from the Declaration of Independence, and repeatedly Bush underscored the philosophical foundation of the Agenda: the moral nature of politics, the worth of the individual, humanity's right to and desire for freedom, the responsibility of free societies to help those who are oppressed, and an optimism that the general trend of history is toward greater freedom for all. The next question is whether the Freedom Agenda was mere rhetoric, or was it implemented as foreign policy?

More than Words: the Bush Administration's Evidence

²⁸ [28] John Lewis Gaddis, "A Grand Strategy" in *Foreign Policy* (November/December 2002).

²⁹ [29] Bush, Second Inaugural, 2005.

The first and obvious critique that Christian realism, or any thoughtful observer, could make is whether the talk of promoting democracy was simply rhetoric. The Bush Administration, ever vigilant about performance measurement, provided a series of public speeches and fact sheets in which it trumpeted its activities under the Freedom Agenda. What specifically did the Administration do to advance the cause of freedom? In its early fact sheets, the Administration focused specifically on democracy promotion and human rights initiatives, such as the following:

- ◆ *Increased funds for democracy building.* Doubled the federal budget for democracy programs, such as support for good governance, human rights and election monitoring, and funding for civil society, political parties, and independent media. For example the FY2009 budget requested \$1.72 billion for such activities, as compared to \$650 million in FY 2001.
- ◆ *Publicly recognized champions of democracy.* The President personally met with over 100 activists and dissidents from dozens of "unfree" countries and directed U.S. ambassadors to seek and meet such activists in their postings. This included not only dissidents from autocratic regimes like Burma and Belarus , but also individuals from China , Pakistan , Russia , and even Spain . Also, initiated legal funds and awards to recognize individuals, from the new Human Rights Defenders Fund to the Secretary of State's Freedom Defenders Award and Diplomacy for Freedom Award.
- ◆ *Engaged in multilateral democracy promotion.* Proposed and supported the UN Democracy Fund, launched an annual Roundtable on Democracy at the UN General Assembly, and supported the G-8's Partnership for Progress and a Common Future for countries in the "Broader Middle East and North Africa" (BMENA).
- ◆ *Pressed "valued partners" like Egypt and Saudi Arabia to transition to free political systems.* President Bush and his secretaries of state met privately with foreign leaders and urged them to open their political systems to real competition as well as respect civil liberties and human rights.³⁰ [30]

30 [30] White House Press Office Fact Sheet: "Advancing Freedom," 2007.

Later, the Administration broadened its reporting on the Freedom Agenda to include a broader array of initiatives that were integrated with democracy promotion, such as rational foreign aid, free trade, and humanitarian assistance. Specific examples include the following:

- ◆ *Smartened foreign aid strategies to focus on good governance, such as through the Millennium Challenge Accounts.* The Millennium Challenge Corporation provided \$6.5 billion to 18 countries who met stringent accountability criteria and committed via a compact to accountability (Millennium Challenge Corporation, 2008).
- ◆ *Promoted free trade.* The Administration strongly advocated the Doha Round, implemented 11 new bilateral free trade agreements, and pressed for others (e.g. Colombia).
- ◆ *Supported vital humanitarian aid.* The President's signature program was the AIDS program (Presidents Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief-PEPFAR), but the Administration also had initiatives on malaria, river blindness, and hookworm as well as spent \$1.8 million on food aid in 2007-2008 alone.³¹ [31]

Finally, many things are not mentioned in the fact sheets, such as support for democratic transitions and/or consolidation around the globe, including the liberation of Afghanistan and Iraq , support for a two-state solution in the Middle East , and the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). Writing about MEPI, Wittes and Yerkes demonstrate that Administration has profoundly increased its attention and financial resources to promoting democracy in the broader Middle East, by consistent cultivation of this forum as well as supporting the G-8's Broader Middle East and North Africa effort (BMENA).³² [32]

31 [31] White House Press Office Fact Sheet: "Advancing the Freedom Agenda," 2008.

32 [32] For a thoughtful description and discussion of MEPI, see Tamara Cofman Wittes and Sarah E. Yerkes (2007).

To this point the evidence suggests that not only did Bush argue for a Freedom Agenda, but that some action was taken by his Administration. But was this activity really any different than his predecessor? Certainly President Clinton and Secretary of State Albright talked about the importance of democracy in some of their speeches, so was there a difference in the kinds or level of activity?

Many of the activities described above, such as MEPI, BMENA, and the MCC were new to the Bush Administration. But every Administration has its new initiatives, so it is perhaps better to look at specific funding for democracy promotion activities. As described below, the Bush Administration pushed for increased democracy funds and legislation, and perhaps the most important place where a qualitative change can be seen was in spending on the State Department's Human Rights and Democracy Fund. In FY 1998 that fund was \$7.82 million; it was over \$126 million in FY 2006. In FY 2007 the Department's bureau responsible for democracy activities received over \$200 million for Iraq programs and over \$115 million for its other democracy programming.³³ [33] Moreover, last year's Freedom House report, *A Legacy of Freedom*, analyzed the Bush Administration's budget request for democracy programming in FY 2009. The report noted that the Administration's request for \$1.719 billion for "democracy development" was a twenty percent increase over the previous year.

Of course, much of this would not have been possible without support from Congress. Elsewhere I have written extensively about Congress' important Advance Democracy Act (signed by the President in late 2007),³⁴ [34] but in summary, Senators John McCain (R) and Joe Lieberman (D) introduced the "Advance Democracy Act of 2005" just six weeks after President Bush's Second Inaugural. The bill was

33 [33] This data from the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor is now archived at www.allgov.org.

34 [34] See Eric Patterson and Jonathan Amaral, "Presidential Leadership and Democracy Promotion" in *Public Integrity* (Fall, 2009).

simultaneously presented in the House of Representatives by Tom Lantos (D) and Frank Wolfe (R). Although the legislation did not proceed far in the 109th Congress, a modified form was approved by Congress in the summer of 2007. The Advance Democracy Act was profound in declaring freedom and democracy as "fundamental components" of U.S. foreign policy, and for providing real tools for promoting democracy such as a sizable new financial investment, additional staff, and clear directives to U.S. missions. All of this was in a text presented to Capitol Hill less than two months after the President's Second Inaugural Address, clearly putting a large part of the Congress squarely in the President's camp on this issue. This was a clear victory for the Administration and added valuable resources to implementation of the Freedom Agenda.

Moreover, in order to institutionalize the Freedom Agenda, Bush signed a new classified national security presidential directive (NSPD-58) in July 2008 that reinforced the obligations of various government agencies to promote democracy. In short, the executive branch under George W. Bush not only articulated traditional themes of "democracy" and "freedom" but instituted various foreign policy inputs from free trade agreements to meetings with activists to public diplomacy initiatives.

Analysis: Christian Realism, the Bush Administration, and Democracy Promotion

Thus far two portraits have been painted. The first is a school of thought called Christian realism that believes in the possibilities and limitations of fallen human nature and human institutions; privileges notions of order, power, and security in political analysis; champions responsibility in politics; is ethically sensitive based on *caritas* and can make serious moral distinctions in political life; and retains a certain humility and self-reflection in policy advocacy and practice realizing the centrality of self-interest not only in the decisions of others, but of one's own government as well.

The second portrait is a philosophical framework and policy approach to promoting democracy worldwide associated with the Bush Administration but also deeply rooted in the American tradition. Bush's Freedom Agenda assumed the moral content of politics and the moral worth of individuals resulting in a policy prescription to promote equality and freedom worldwide through overt efforts at democratization, economic development, and "smart" foreign aid. The president's style, confidence, and parallel War on Terror against Islamist terrorists in Afghanistan and against Saddam Hussein's totalitarian regime associated the Freedom Agenda with more than the themes of the Declaration of Independence or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights--it tied America 's security fundamentals to a "forward" strategy of democratization.

One scholar has evaluated the Bush Doctrine from a Christian realist perspective. Amstutz defines the Bush Doctrine as having four parts: the belief that American unipolarity is conducive to peace and will contribute to a positive world order; the need for multilateralism to advance peace and security, but a willingness to act unilaterally when necessary; that the U.S. must be willing to use pre-emptive and

preventive force to confront terrorist groups and rogue states holding weapons of mass destruction (WMD); the need for the United States to champion human rights and help foster political democracy. Amstutz's excellent analysis is helpful in that he draws similarities on the issues of power and morality between the work of ethicist Niebuhr and leader Bush, including the support both give (although in different degrees) to notions of freedom and democracy. Nonetheless, Amstutz suggests that Niebuhr would have faulted the Bush Administration with hubristic confidence in global social engineering, excessive optimism in the inevitability of historical change (global democratization), excessive moralism, and excessive self-confidence. Some of these themes will return later in this paper.³⁵ [35]

Christian realism undoubtedly supports the advance of human rights, civil liberties, the rule of law, and representative governance--all features associated with democracy. It does so because it values all humanity as God's children, and thus emphasizes a balance of political order, freedom, and equality without suggesting that a specific system (e.g. American presidentialism, Britain 's constitutional monarchy, Indian parliamentary system) is the blueprint for everyone everywhere. Democracy in its varied contemporary forms happens to be the system that we currently have that seems to be more commensurate with human dignity and freedom than its competitors, but it is merely a city of man--it is not the City of God .

Because Christian realism believes in the responsibility of the powerful and the moral nature of politics, leaders have a responsibility to promote justice and freedom at home and encourage it abroad in some fashion. Christian realism, however, offers a prophetic and critical edge to this analysis. It would

35 [35] Mark Amstutz, "Niebuhr's Christian Realism and the Bush Doctrine," chap. 6 in Eric Patterson, ed. *Christianity and Power Politics Today* (New York : Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008).

criticize an Administration who orated about democracy but did little to tangibly support it either at home or in its foreign policies.

However, Christian realism would also point out that support for democracy may be righteous in championing human rights and the rule of law, but for Americans it also is self-interested in its association with free trade and international integration into the Western system. Moreover, Christian realism is "realistic," or perhaps better "conservative," in its approach to change, particularly with regard to collectives and cultures. In this world it is extremely difficult to effect changes of values and societal mores, hence the Wilsonian optimism Niebuhr once embraced but later abandoned is analogous to the confidence President Bush exuded that "the fire in the minds of men" would inexorably lead to free political systems. History is much more a story of advances and reverses with multiple themes at play.

One of those themes, one particularly neglected in the rhetoric and activities of the Freedom Agenda, is power. Power, in some form, is important to all realist analyses. Those governments most resistant to democracy promotion--in the Middle East and Africa as well as China and Russia --are ones where social and structural imbalances of power reinforce the privilege of elites. Often these domestic power structures are subtlety woven into the fabric of international relations in such ways that the "democratic West" actually reinforces inequality, authoritarianism, and the violation of human rights. The most notable example of this is the *carte blanche* that most petro-states are accorded in international politics, not to mention the Obama Administration's decision to not push a human rights and democratization agenda in its engagement of China and Russia .

Consequently, although both the President and the Congress (in the Advance Democracy Act) committed to support democratic movements worldwide, Christian realists ask if such open-ended declarations would be better to take into consideration the realities of power politics, more specifically how power tends to balance in international relations. A broad-brush to supporting all "people power"

movements provides authoritarian regimes with an easy label for their political opponents--"American stooges"--and is just as likely to turn off the undecided middle in many countries, not to mention to create counter-American alliances among non- and quasi-democracies (e.g. China-Russia, the old non-aligned movement, Latin American leftists, etc.). Indeed, this is perhaps precisely what explains the reaction of African governments to the implementation of the U.S. Defense Department's African Command, "AFRICOM," in the past year. In short, what Christian realists share with many other realists is a keen appreciation for the varied roles that power plays in domestic and international life, and how often wonderful ideas fall to bits when they encounter countervailing power.

Hence, Christian realist counsel on democracy promotion in the twenty-first century would suggest that U.S. foreign policy deal with the realities of power in international relations while nonetheless being a consistent advocate for human liberty--based on the moral and spiritual worth of humanity--both at home and abroad.

What of the 2003 Iraq War? How do these notions of power and democracy play out in a Christian realist analysis of Bush's decision to invade Iraq ? If the purpose of the Iraq war was to promote democracy by force, then the Iraq war was inconsistent with Christian realism. In other words, if Bush's primary intent was to disrupt the region in order that freedom-loving citizens could topple their autocrats, it certainly was a strategy that did not take into account the value of political order, the tenuousness of political opportunity, and it lacked both humility in international affairs as well as was blind to its own obvious self-interest.

However, if the Bush Administration went to war in 2003 based on considerations of security and power, particularly following the 2001 attacks, Hussein's avowed support of terrorists (although not al Qaeda), his public determination to continue WMD programs, and the like--then such motives seem consistent with Christian realism. Furthermore, after a successful hot war (just as in World War II and

Korea), the U.S. as victor then had a responsibility to the ideals of constitutional government, rule of law, human rights, and civil liberties to promote security and just governance in Iraq. Regardless of whether one supported the war or not, the evidence is clear that the U.S. and some of its allies have heavily invested blood and treasure in Iraq. All of this is consistent with Christian realism.


Nonetheless, Christian realism recoils from self-confidence and optimism as conceit, and the "Mission Accomplished" banner of 2003 and the president's tough, confident expressiveness undoubtedly had Reinhold Niebuhr rolling over in his grave. If the Freedom Agenda was hubristic in its glorification of democratization as "the end of history" and if political leaders, the president in particular, were vainglorious in extolling democracy or American goodness--as many believe--then this violates the humility and sense of responsibility in which Christian realism is rooted.


To be fair, however, part of this disjuncture is also the difference of roles between "prophet" and "king." Christian realism tends to take a prophetic role, casting a critical eye on all political pronouncements and programs, whereas elected and appointed officials deal in the day-to-day world of public opinion, elections, and power. I am convinced that much of Bush's formal speeches and informal communication about freedom and democracy were based on his solid convictions as well as the political need of politicians to justify policies, particularly in tough times. Nevertheless, universalistic declarations about freedom and cowboy-esque rhetoric and actions undoubtedly rebounded negatively in some quarters, and suggests a certain hubris.

A twenty-first century democracy promotion program must decide what it means by human freedom. Christian realism is particularly skeptical of the swollen contemporary definitions of Western liberty. Liberty seems to have become licentiousness in Western societies--the notion that anything goes, and that the individual has absolute freedom to think, say, do, or be anything that he or she wants to. Christian realists would agree that people want to be represented justly and have some autonomy, but

are unconvinced that Euro-American societal mores are always prized by those in much more collectivist and obligatory, kin-based societies common in the Near and Far East. Moreover, if the U.S. means that Western-style "social" freedoms are desirable everywhere (e.g. legalized divorce, abortion, promiscuity, violence, pornography, homosexuality, opiate abuse, lack of familial responsibility for the elderly), many Christian realists as well as millions in other cultures aver, "no thank you."

In other words, this libertinism rejects notions of individual duty or obligation either to state institutions or to social ones (e.g. family, kin, tribe, collective), and thus is not only portends the apocalypse to medieval mullahs like the Taliban, but is foreign and threatening to hundreds of millions of people for whom notions of collective identity and responsibility are important. Western policies that promote, or even simply broadcast, a hedonistic or atomistic liberalism will continue to cause resistance and resentment, and is inconsistent with Christian realist principles of order and responsibility.

In conclusion, Reinhold Niebuhr's famous 1952 monograph *The Irony of American History* is a *propos*. For Niebuhr the ironic is marked by a certain pretension (e.g. strength, virtue) that obscures unconscious weakness. For example, Niebuhr observed the irony that the US trumpets its prosperity, believing it to be evidence of its virtues, while critics abroad see American wealth and boasting as evidence of imperialism. He observes, "every effort we make to prove the virtue of our  way of life' is used by our enemies and detractors as proof of our guilt."³⁶ [36]

Niebuhr's central thesis in *The Irony of American History* is that the juxtaposition of American naiveté  with inordinate American power in the immediate post-war world was ironic. Niebuhr was observing an adolescent US motivated by the rhetoric and reality of its own unique history infused with a

³⁶ [36] Ibid, 110.

youthful idealism. Niebuhr did not dispute that there were elements of the American experience that truly made it a "city on a hill," but he critiqued the "Messianic dream" that underscored American exceptionalism. Indeed, it was the pretension that America acted exclusively in terms of a higher morality without regard to self-interestedness that Niebuhr indicted. Niebuhr observed, "our sense of responsibility to a world community beyond our borders is a virtue, even though it is partly derived from a prudent understanding of our own interests."³⁷ [37] The irony of American naiveté was its lack of appreciation for how its own moral discourse obfuscated politics based on national interests (e.g. Manifest Destiny, the Spanish-American War).³⁸ [38] This is the dilemma that George W. Bush faced over the past decade and one that the Obama Administration must now come to grips with, that American diplomatic engagement combined with awesome Yankee power ironically generates insecurity--the classic security dilemma--rather than trust in some parts of the globe:

◆the paradise of our domestic security is suspended in a hell of global insecurity◆we are the poorer for the global responsibilities we bear. And the fulfillments of our desires are mixed with frustrations and vexations.³⁹ [39]

Conclusion: Democracy Promotion and the Obama Administration

³⁷ [37] Ibid, 7.

³⁸ [38] Ibid, 15, 18-19, 22-23.

³⁹ [39] Ibid, 7.

A year ago it appeared that candidate Obama, although striving to be the anti-Bush, would nonetheless follow George W. Bush as a fervent promoter of democracy worldwide. He was a late co-sponsor of the Senate version of the 2007 Advance Democracy Act and, based on his speeches and associations, political scientist Amy Zegart wrote last year, "Obama has managed to out-freedom Bush." She concluded that Bush's "grand strategy will undoubtedly set the course of American foreign policy for the next administration, and possibly the next generation."⁴⁰ [40]

Consider one of Obama's most important foreign policy speeches, made in 2007 at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs:

We have heard much over the last six years about how America's larger purpose in the world is to promote the spread of freedom--that it is the yearning of all who live in the shadow of tyranny and despair.

I agree. But this yearning is not satisfied by simply deposing a dictator and setting up a ballot box. The true desire of all mankind is not only to live free lives, but lives marked by dignity and opportunity; by security and simple justice⁴¹.⁴¹ [41]

More recently, President Obama addressed the entire Muslim world from a university campus in Cairo on democracy promotion and U.S. foreign policy:

I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq . So let me be clear: no system of government can or should be imposed by one nation on any other.

⁴⁰ [40] Amy Zegart, "The Legend of a Democracy Promoter" in *The National Interest Online* (September 16, 2008). Available at <http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=19688>.

⁴¹ [41] The transcript of this address is available at http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/dynamic_page.php?id=64.

That does not lessen my commitment, however, to governments that reflect the will of the people. I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.⁴² [42]

However, at the time of this writing it is unclear that the Obama Administration plans renewed concrete action to overtly promote democracy. The President's first budget saw no real rise in funding for democracy promotion programming but rather flat lines or modest cuts in various areas. Both the President and the Secretary of State have been reluctant to talk about human rights issues with the Chinese and Russians, and the Administration has been heavily focused on domestic economic issues rather than a grand strategy for promoting democracy and human rights worldwide. Indeed, senior Administration officials appear to agree that stability is the goal in places like Iraq and Central Asia rather than Western-style democracy.

This may signal pragmatism in light of real-world trends consistent with political realism, or it may be cynicism and self-interestedness masking itself as realism. The President's Cairo speech in May 2009 emphasized themes of humility, respect, and justice--all consistent with the values of Christian realism. The first question for this Administration, one which remains unanswered, is what value-system [if there is one] will cohere and inform the Administration's policies on democracy and human rights over time? The second question is will that framework be mere rhetoric, or will substantive action follow? In either

⁴² [42] "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning," Cairo , Egypt , June 4, 2009. Available from the White House Office of the Press Secretary at www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University.

case, Christian realism will continue to not only suggest policy possibilities but also critique initiatives, ideas, and circumstances as they arise.
