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Bush's Freedom Agenda: Alive but Not Kicking

By [J. Scott Carpenter](#)

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Prior to President Bush's trip to the Middle East last week, many pundits expected him to focus little, if at all, on his longstanding "freedom agenda." Instead, he adopted a nuanced approach that managed to restate the key elements of his policy and to press, however gently, for further political and economic reform. Speaking before the trip, a senior State Department official summed up the approach: the president would not "beat up on anyone" but would press privately for stronger reform efforts at each stop and give praise where it was due. Indeed, the president's reiteration of the freedom agenda signaled that the United States remains engaged on certain policy issues that many governments hoped would disappear altogether. At the same time, however, these issues were clearly the trip's third priority (after Arab-Israeli peace and regional security), confirming that the freedom agenda has become a tertiary concern for the Bush administration.

The Speech

The main theme of the president's only speech during his eight-day trip was freedom. Lacking the punch and rhetorical flourish of other speeches he has given on the subject, this one was notable in how it subtly demoted the democracy agenda from its past prominence.

First, the speech sought to be polite and culturally respectful. There were no references to "Islamic extremism" or "tyranny." Instead, the president blended the deeply embedded Muslim theme of justice with the theme of liberty. Referencing positive changes in parts of the Persian Gulf, he stated, "In my country, we speak of these developments as the advance of freedom. Others may call it the advance of justice. Yet whatever term we use, the ideal is the same." Regardless of whether people in the region would agree with that statement, variants of the words "freedom/liberty" and "justice" appear together twelve times in the speech's first few paragraphs -- testifying the subtle effort to merge the two distinct ideas.

Second, the president decided not to name names in the speech, remaining intentionally generic in his criticisms. For example, when he stated, "You cannot build trust when you hold an election where opposition candidates find themselves harassed or in prison," one could only infer that meant Egypt. Although these vague insinuations robbed the criticisms of much of their power, they also managed to make a point without unduly offending the allied governments whose cooperation the president needs to pursue peace and contain Iran.

Third -- and perhaps the most telling -- was the message conveyed by the choice of venue. The president chose to deliver the speech not in Cairo or Riyadh -- capitals he singled out in two State of the Union addresses -- but in a small emirate that has a booming economy and reflects the president's best hopes for the region. This choice shows how much has changed since 2005, when the administration had Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice deliver a spirited explanation of the freedom agenda in Cairo in front of university students, and not -- as was in the case in Abu Dhabi -- in front of business and tribal elites.

Giving Praise Where It Was Due?

While the president kept his criticisms generic, he praised specific governments for their efforts during the past seven years to expand freedom and opportunity. Bush was on solid ground when praising economic developments, since many indicators demonstrate that the region's economies are in fact heating up. The rising price of oil has certainly been the most important factor in the boom, but domestic investment -- as a result of huge capital inflows -- has evenly spread growth across the region. Economies are growing and integrating, and governments, with large budgetary windfalls, are finally choosing to invest heavily in the development of social capital. Although a great deal remains to be accomplished, growth rates of 7 percent, once unheard of in the region, have become typical for large economies like Egypt's.

There was less to be optimistic about on the political front, but the president found progress to note. In Kuwait, for example, he praised the emir and parliament for extending women's voting rights. In the United Arab Emirates, he praised the creation of a still protean legislature, and in Bahrain, he singled out King Hamad for being "on the forefront of providing hope for people through democracy."

These unqualified statements inadvertently gave democracy activists the impression that the president was soft-pedaling. In Bahrain, for instance, Bush did not accompany his public praise of the king's constitutional reforms with any statements regarding the petition submitted by local human rights activists asking the president to highlight their cause.

In Egypt, the president was in an almost impossible position given the high bar he has set for that country over the course of his two terms. With a stoic-looking President Hosni Mubarak by his side, Bush stressed the importance of journalists, bloggers, and judges who are "determined to build a democratic future." Although this statement was significant, there was no indication the two presidents discussed the continued crackdowns on political opposition, both Islamist and secular, or the increasing pressure on Egypt's free press.

Understanding Activist Frustration

All of this contributed to the widely reported disappointment among democracy activists in the region. Many have expressed concern that the president's rhetoric has not been matched with sufficient action, and that the rhetoric itself has now been toned down. Moreover, they worry that images of Bush performing the sword dance with Saudi King Abdullah and joking with Mubarak signal a return to unquestioning support for the region's autocrats. Given the centrality of the freedom agenda in 2005, this criticism is understandable.

What few have commented on, however, is the inverse relationship between the administration's current focus on the peace process and its once energetic application of the freedom agenda. At one point, the administration successfully disconnected progress on the two concepts, but today that is no longer the case -- a point that countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt are well aware of. For example, the Middle East Partnership Initiative -- the president's key effort to support reform programs across the region -- received \$120 million a year at its peak. Today, with no one in the administration advocating for it, the program's funding has dropped to \$38 million. Worse still, just days after the president's speech in Abu Dhabi, the State Department is reportedly considering further cannibalization of the initiative to pay for other priorities, including security reform in the West Bank and even the Palestinian Authority's operational costs.

Conclusion

Ultimately, progress toward democracy in the Arab world will depend on the region's citizens. Nevertheless, the United States can and should continue to play a supportive role. If President Bush deserves credit for launching the freedom agenda and initiating programs to support it, his administration also bears responsibility for failing to pursue the policy in a coherent way. The president should be lauded for trying to keep the agenda alive on his last trip, but in reality it is no longer kicking.

J. Scott Carpenter is the Keston Family fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its [Project Fikra](#), which focuses on empowering Arab moderates and liberals in their struggles against extremism. Previously,

he served as deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and as coordinator of the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiatives.

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