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## President Bush's Governing Philosophy

By Peter Wehner

*(Editor's Note: Peter Wehner is the Director of the Office of Strategic Initiatives at the White House. The following is the text of a speech he delivered at The Hudson Institute last week.)*

We live in remarkable times – and in working at the White House, one of the striking things is the sheer pace of events. Given the advent of talk radio, cable news and the Internet – good things all -- I suspect it at least feels as though the pace of events has accelerated compared to just a few decades ago.

This afternoon I hope to take a step back from the rush of daily events and discuss President Bush's governing philosophy. I'll briefly look at three areas – foreign, social, and economic policy – and make the case for why I believe the President is making significant intellectual contributions to each.

### Spreading Liberty Abroad

Let me begin with foreign policy, and by stating a proposition: one of President Bush's key conceptual contributions is the idea that expanding freedom leads to peace among nations – and that America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are twined.

A close reading of [the President's second Inaugural Address](#) reveals it is an effort to break down the dividing wall that has sometimes separated American interests and American idealism. The President's speech argues that pursuing our core principles will promote our national security – and that what happens within the borders of other nations is often of intense interest to our own.

The clearest expression of this is President Bush's break with six decades of Western policy that accommodated the lack of freedom in the Middle East. For more than a half-century, tyranny and oppression in the Middle East were met with at best indifference, and at worst support. No effort was made to spread liberty to the Arab world. But then came what President Bush called “a day of fire” – and in its aftermath emerged a new doctrine for this new century.

The core of this doctrine rests on the President's belief that stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty – and as long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation and resentment, a cauldron of anti-Western hatred and violence.

In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, President Bush made a decision to relentlessly pursue terrorists – and to go after the conditions of oppression and corruption that give rise to terrorism. The President adopted a fundamentally new approach – what he calls a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East. This means giving practical support to the rise of democracy in the broader Middle East, and the hope and progress that democracy brings.

Our Administration is not without its critics – but it is worth noting, I think, that our critics have offered no competing theory on how to address the generator of global terrorism. They may

take issue with our execution of policy – but they have no conceptual theory to offer in its place. And that is itself revealing.

The President believes the course he has chosen is wise because it is rooted in recent human experience. We are, after all, witnessing the swiftest advances in human freedom in history. According to Freedom House, of the 192 countries in the world, 119 – or 62 percent – have freely elected governments. And since the mid-point of the last century, we have seen almost a doubling in the percentage of people living in democratic states.

It's worth bearing in mind that in less than four months, we have seen elections take place in Afghanistan, the Ukraine, among the Palestinians, and in Iraq. In the span of 113 days, more than 100 million people, living on two continents, have cast free votes in nations that had never known true democracy. More than half of these voters are people of the Muslim faith who live in the broader Middle East.

For those who remain skeptical of the appeal of liberty and its capacity to take root in foreign soil, it is worth recalling a line from philosophy: you can prove the possible by the actual.

Unfolding before our eyes are historical, and enormously hopeful, achievements. We are witnessing a great movement toward human liberty.

But the Bush Administration's policies are anchored in more than recent human experience; they are also grounded in a particular view of human nature – and in the truths articulated in the Declaration of Independence. In the “enlightened belief” of the Founders, Lincoln said, “nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows.”

President Bush's policies are consistent with America's “ancient faith;” he believes “liberty is the design of nature,” which explains why it leads to human flourishing. In an important essay in [The Public Interest](#), [James Ceasar and Daniel DiSalvo](#) wrote on the foundational principles of the Bush foreign policy and concluded this: “Not since Lincoln has the putative head of the Republican party so actively sought to ground the party in a politics of natural right.”

Let me insert some important caveats. Foundational principles are vital – but they do not provide a President with specific guidance on how to act in every circumstance faced by every nation. The goal of the Bush Doctrine is to advance liberty – but the means to the end will vary. Is it really necessary to point out that in pursuing its commitment toward spreading liberty and ending tyranny, we may use different tactics with an ally that is not yet fully free but is taking steps toward democracy versus a totalitarian enemy that is taking steps toward greater oppression and aggression?

Perhaps it is.

And to those who say that the declared goal of American policy -- to eventually end tyranny in the world – is impossible to achieve and cannot possibly be serious, let me offer an enlightened understanding of balancing moral ends and means. It once again comes to us courtesy of Abraham Lincoln, who said this in his 1857 Springfield speech on the Dred Scott decision:

*"[The Founders] did consider all men created equal -- equal in 'certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' This they said, and this they meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all men were enjoying that equality, or yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact, they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for a free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and therefore*

*constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere."*

Those of us in this Administration understand that for liberty to take root in a society more than an election is required. Elections are vital – but they do not by themselves constitute a vibrant democratic culture. This requires certain civic habits, which take time to develop – and which elections themselves can help develop. And elections can also help de-legitimize a brutal and bitter insurgency, as we saw in El Salvador in the 1980s and as I believe we are now seeing in Iraq. Elections by themselves cannot defeat an insurgency; but they can certainly contribute to its demise.

I would add that our own democratic development – which was gradual and halting and involved us in a “fiery trial” that cost more than 600,000 American lives – is a reminder that we must be patient with others. Working democracies need time to develop – and as they develop, they will reflect their own cultures. In the United States we've taken a two-century- long journey toward equality and social justice – and this should make us patient with other nations at different stages of this journey. The President has called this the work of generations; it is not something that will come into being in the blink of an eye.

With those caveats in place, let me return to my main point: President Bush believes in certain fixed, immutable principles. In his words, “We will persistently clarify the choice before every ruler and every nation: The moral choice between oppression, which is always wrong, and freedom, which is eternally right.”

To those who disagree with this approach, let them say so loudly, clearly, publicly, and repeatedly.

### **Being Worthy of Liberty at Home**

As the world is moving toward freedom, President Bush believes we must show we are worthy of it here at home. He believes rights must be tethered to responsibilities – and that the public interest depends on private character. In the words of the President, “Self-government relies, in the end, on the governing of the self.” This belief goes back to the ancient Greeks and to the American Founders. It is an old truth – but one that has been often overlooked in these modern times.

Character is formed by habits – and habits are shaped by key institutions: families and schools, communities and places of religious worship. These are the institutions that help give purpose and meaning to our lives – and government cannot be indifferent to them. To cite a line penned by one of this year's Bradley Prize winners, statecraft is soulcraft.

That is why the President has spoken out often, and eloquently, in defense of marriage as a sacred institution and the foundation of society. It is why he has put the government on the side of supporting safe and stable families, adoption, and responsible fatherhood. It is why he signed into law the most important Federal education reform in history – one that insists on high standards and accountability. It is why faith-based groups are receiving unprecedented support and encouragement. It is why the President has fostered a culture of service and citizenship. And it is why the President is building a culture of life and upholding the dignity of the human person.

There are of course limits to what government can do to shape the habits of the heart. Government is a blunt instrument, and everyone in this room is familiar with the Law of Unintended Consequences. Yet surely we can expect the government to be an ally instead of an adversary when it comes to strengthening vital social institutions – those that provide our children with love and teach them empathy, that instill in them compassion and courage, self-discipline and honesty, respect for others and love of country.

One of the duties of adulthood is to teach future generations what is worthy of their affection and passion, their honor and their allegiance. "What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how," Wordsworth said. And "teaching them how" is preeminently the responsibility of families and schools, communities and houses of worship.

### **Creating An Ownership Society**

Let me now turn to the President's economic agenda. President Bush has made the case that many of our most fundamental systems – the tax code, health care coverage, pension plans, and worker training – were created for a bygone era. The President is committed to transforming these systems so citizens are better prepared to make their own choices and pursue their own dreams. "Whatever else it does," Business Week wrote during the 2004 election, "Bush's throwing down the gauntlet will open one of the more striking debates of the campaign. That's because there's a philosophical gulf between liberals' evocations of social equity and the comfort of a government helping hand vs. conservatives' paeans to individualism and entrepreneurship."

The philosophical underpinning of what President Bush calls the "ownership society" is to provide Americans with a path to greater opportunity, more freedom, and more control over their own lives. This young century will be liberty's century, the President has said, and here at home we will extend the frontiers of freedom. And so the President has embraced the ideas of voluntary personal accounts in which younger workers can save some of their Social Security taxes in order to build a nest egg for retirement; lifetime savings accounts which would allow every American to save as much as \$7,500 a year and shield from taxation the investment returns on those savings; health savings accounts, tax-free accounts designed to help individuals save for health expenses; and tax credits for low-income families and individuals to purchase health insurance.

The President has also pledged to reform the current tax code, which he calls "archaic" and "incoherent." He wants a new tax code that is simpler, fairer, and more pro-growth. Homeownership in America is at an all-time high – and President Bush will build on that achievement. And in almost every realm – education, the federal civil service system, drug treatment programs, foreign aid, and much else – the President is tying public spending to competition and accountability.

Ownership also contributes to community. When people own their own houses, they become vested not just in their property, but their community. It makes people more communally responsible. Ownership also elicits greater commitment and care from owners themselves. "In the history of the world," it has been said, "no one has ever washed a rented car."

As I mentioned before, one of the core questions of political philosophy has to do with the habits that government encourages among the citizenry. The aim of the President's policies is to encourage self-reliance and provide greater opportunity.

He believes government should promote market reforms and strengthen liberty – and underlying all of this is the belief that government must begin with the proper conception of the individual. Government's default position should not be to view citizens as wards of the state, but rather as responsible and independent, self-sufficient and upright.

The closest example to what President Bush is attempting to do with his emphasis on an "ownership society" may be found in the policies of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In her remarkable 1992 book *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, the political philosopher Shirley Robin Letwin wrote this:

*"... the Thatcherite argues that being one's own master -- in the sense of owning one's own home or disposing of one's own property -- provides an incentive to think differently about the*

*world... A Thatcherite ... stresses that [ownership and moral attitudes] are connected, and sees in wider individual ownership a useful means of promoting the moral attitudes that Thatcherism seeks to cultivate. Nor is it only independence and self-sufficiency which the Thatcherite hopes to encourage by means of wider ownership. Personal energy and adventurousness, critical components of the vigorous virtues -- are also believed by the Thatcherite to be encouraged by wider ownership."*

The President's agenda is an ambitious one – but to quote The Economist magazine, "Mr. Bush is nothing if not ambitious. If his new philosophy endures, he will be a transformative figure in the history of the modern conservative movement."

## **Conclusion**

Let me conclude with a few words about conservatism and America's 43rd President. Many of you in this audience are conservative because you believe it is the political philosophy that best allows societies to prosper and flourish. Conservatives understand the important role that traditions, institutions, habits, and authority have in our common life.

At the same time, there is a conservative temperament that can be politically counterproductive. For many years, conservatism was characterized by a suspicion and defensiveness toward the world in which we live. It was primarily a reactive political movement, which mitigated against boldness.

The Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that for everything there is a season. At some points in history, the role of conservatism has been to stop pernicious ideologies: the excesses of the French Revolution, socialism, fascism, and imperial communism. These were monumental achievements – but we have entered a different era. Today the role of conservatism is to be proactive, bold, energetic, and optimistic – to shape history rather than to impede it.

We live in a history-shaping moment. Conservatism is the dominant political philosophy of this young century – and President George W. Bush is making significant philosophical and political contributions to it.

In late January 2001, America's new President said, "We are here to make progress, we are not here to mark time." George W. Bush has been true to his word. He is one of history's Consequential Presidents. In a single term he has shaped and refined the direction of his own party. He has fundamentally recast America's national security strategy. And he has put forward a transformative domestic agenda. In foreign policy President Bush has earned the title as one of history's Great Liberators – and I believe in domestic policy he will be seen as one of its Great Reformers. His first term was enormously eventful – and very successful. But there is more, much more, that remains to be done. And now this good man has a mandate to claim, and a nation to govern. To be part of that enterprise has been – for me and for so many of my colleagues -- the professional honor of a lifetime.

Thank you very much.

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