

## **When reality no longer matches rhetoric**

Michael Fullilove  
Financial Times  
6 June 2006

President George W. Bush is well known for his verbal awkwardness. Sometimes it is hard not to be disheartened by his speeches – for example, when he told a New Hampshire audience: “I know how hard it is for you to put food on your families.”

In fact, though, many of the president’s speeches – in particular his foreign policy speeches after 9/11 – are beautifully written and more than competently delivered. Starting with his ad-libbed bullhorn cry atop a wrecked fire truck at Ground Zero (“I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!”) and his address to a joint session of Congress nine days after the attack, he has generally struck a fine note. If anything, Mr Bush’s foreign policy speechifying suffers from the opposite problem: he is too verbal.

Many policy wonks and diplomats are nervous nellys when it comes to foreign policy speeches. They want more matter and less art. They argue that foreign policy is technical and difficult stuff, and flashiness is fatal. Of course it is true that care must be taken, shouting avoided, pronunciations checked and all the rest of it. That does not mean that foreign policy speeches need be boring. In the end, a speech is just a speech. A speech is not a treaty and drafting a speech should not be like negotiating a diplomatic text.

Foreign policy speeches that have flair as well as substance are able to mobilise support and crystallise intent. Franklin D. Roosevelt used his fireside chats to dramatise a distant war, convert America into “the great arsenal of democracy” and ratchet up public preparedness to enter the European conflict. Ronald Reagan assembled his words and sent them into battle against the evil empire: “Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

However, a declaratory presidency also poses dangers. Mr Bush has badly overwritten his foreign policy, in two distinct ways. For most of his first term, Mr Bush pursued a muscular grand strategy aimed at imposing America’s will on the world. He was the Charles Atlas of international relations. To reinforce his seriousness he delivered speeches that were strangers to nuance. They drew an explicit link between values and coercion, between freedom and force.

The reference in the 2002 State of the Union address to the “axis of evil” formed by Iran, Iraq and North Korea was the world’s worst analogy: inflammatory, operationally useless and bad history to boot. On the same occasion the following year, Mr Bush upped the ante further by making a dubious assertion about Saddam Hussein’s supposed hunt for uranium in Africa.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the sustained power of Mr Bush’s language nudged the administration (and perhaps the president himself) toward risky policies that have proved costly.

Past US presidents have used their speeches to marshal the opinion of the world. Sometimes they have honeyed their words in order to sweeten their unilateral actions. The sweeping, unqualified tone of Mr Bush’s rhetoric, by contrast, actually exaggerated the defects of his policies and scared off even the most ardent Americanophiles. Not only did his speeches reveal little understanding of the dilemma of multiple and diverse audiences, they explicitly denied that such a dilemma existed. At West Point in 2002, for instance, the president decreed: “Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place . . . We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name.”

Thankfully, in the past two years US policy has reverted to a more moderate course. The failure of foreign policy adventurism, especially in Iraq, has made diplomacy the comeback concept. Washington’s conditional offer to join its European partners in negotiating directly with Tehran on the nuclear issue is the latest and clearest indicator of this shift.

Strangely, though, the old highfalutin speaking style remains in place, opening up a chasm between rhetoric and reality.

In his second inaugural address in 2005, President Bush claimed that “America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one” and that US policy was to promote democracy “in every

nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world". The problem with that line is that the dream of Middle Eastern dictatorships falling like dominoes ended with Washington's rapprochement with Libya. The White House's reluctance to lean too hard on allies such as Egypt and Pakistan to democratise drains the president's words of meaning.

Even worse than double standards, though, is weakness. The tenor of this year's State of the Union address was surprising because it failed utterly to reflect either the sensible recalibration of policy that has taken place or the present results of US actions. The president boasted: "We will act boldly in freedom's cause" and committed his country to "the end of tyranny in our world". But banging on about the liberty agenda when ordinary Iraqis are not at liberty to walk to the market without being kidnapped or killed is seriously damaging to foreign policy credibility.

A diplomatic briefing note does not usually make a great foreign policy speech. Neither does a string of 10-dollar words. The best speeches are finely crafted arguments. Given America's historical and continuing contribution to global peace and prosperity, any president has a very good argument to make to the world – so long as the language is not privileged over content and effect.

*The writer is programme director for global issues at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney and editor of "Men and Women of Australia!" Our Greatest Modern Speeches (Vintage, 2005).*