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Freedom as a Ticket for Power

by James Bovard

President Bush exploits the word “freedom” more than any other president. Unfortunately, Americans are sufficiently ignorant that almost any reference to freedom garners applause.

“Freedom” has become simply another word to lull listeners to whatever politicians are pushing.

“The Restraint of Government Is the True Liberty and Freedom of the People” was a popular saying in the 1770s. But “freedom” is apparently no longer any constraint on government power.

Bush has cited freedom to justify his education policy (regardless of the quantum leap of federal meddling with local schools), his new Medicare drug-prescription benefit (regardless of how its red tape torments elderly Americans or how much more financial burden is placed on taxpayers), his free down payments for non-creditworthy homebuyers (the American Dream Downpayment Act), and the Millennium Challenge Account (lavishing U.S. tax dollars on obedient foreign governments).

U.S. military power is now routinely equated with liberty. Bush recently informed the American Legion that “we have the greatest force for freedom in the history of the world on our side, the men and women of the United States Armed Forces.” His assertion would have mortified the Founding Fathers, who saw a standing army as the greatest threat to liberty.

In his second inaugural address, Bush deluged listeners with 40 mentions of freedom and liberty. But none of these comments referred to limits on U.S. government power. Instead, they sanctified the president’s right to forcibly intervene abroad wherever he believes necessary. In a speech at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in June 2005, he mentioned freedom and liberty more than 20 times to justify the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

Bush declared in July 2003 that because of U.S. action in Iraq, people are “going to find out the words ‘freedom’ and ‘America’ are synonymous.” Freedom, Iraqi-style, means giving the U.S. military the right to incarcerate entire towns in barbed wire and the right to lock up thousands of people without charges. The Bush administration responded to outrage over leaked torture photos in 2004 by christening “Camp Liberty,” a new tent compound for Iraqi detainees next to Abu

Ghraib. But the petty details of U.S. action in Iraq are irrelevant to the transcendent goal he perennially proclaims.

Bush drenches his war on terrorism with freedom rhetoric. In his Oval Office address on the night of September 11, 2001, he declared, “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.” The administration never offered evidence to back up this claim. He pronounced authoritatively on the motives of the attackers even before the FBI and CIA knew their identities.

Bush’s concept of freedom hinges on omnipotent government as the savior of freedom. Attorney General John Ashcroft titled his 2003 tour to defend the USA PATRIOT Act, “Securing Our Liberty: How America Is Winning the War on Terror.” “Securing liberty” is the same pabulum recently recited by administration officials to justify the National Security Agency’s warrantless roundup of Americans’ phone calls.

Respect for individual rights is the bulwark of freedom. But in order to vanquish terrorism, Bush claims the right to destroy all rights by using the “enemy combatant” label. Justice Antonin Scalia rightly noted in a Supreme Court dissent, “The very core of liberty secured by our Anglo-Saxon system of separated powers has been freedom from indefinite imprisonment at the will of the Executive.” Yet this aspect of liberty is now an unaffordable luxury, at least according to the prevailing wisdom in the West Wing. Instead, freedom is simply whatever the president commands — since he is the supreme defender of freedom.

The administration is defining freedom down. Freedom is becoming little more than the warm glow people are supposed to feel when government promises to protect them. The more ignorant people become about the reality of freedom, the easier it is for rulers to con them into submission.

Americans cannot afford to confuse presidential supremacy with individual freedom. Bush’s lofty words and presumed good intentions are no substitute for inviolable constitutional rights. Rather than stirring patriotic pride, Bush’s mentions of freedom should set off Americans’ warning bells.

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