Bush as freedom marcher

by Robert_J_Caldwell

Abu Ghraib, alleged Gitmo abuses and the bloody mess in Iraq have supposedly tarnished America's standing on human rights and democracy. That's a crabbed view of history even if these critiques were valid, which mostly they are not.

Clearly, President Bush doesn't buy the blame-America arguments. He used the global stage of his speech to the United Nations General Assembly to preach the cause of democracy and sharply condemn the world's worst human rights violators. The case he laid out is, broadly put, unassailable.

Bush named the governments of seven countries - Cuba, North Korea, Myanmar, Iran, Syria, Zimbabwe and Belarus - as serial violators of the United Nations' own Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Adopted in 1948, the declaration proclaims a global standard of fundamental human rights, including civil and political liberties wholly denied in the countries he named.

Bush might have included others, the political dictatorships of China and Vietnam, for example, where economic freedoms are expanding but political rights are wholly denied. He might have mentioned, too, the newly independent but still autocratically governed "stans" in Muslim South Asia, formerly parts of the defunct Soviet Union.

Still, the list he cited indisputably includes the planet's worst violators of fundamental human freedoms.

This was no mere academic rhetorical exercise. Even as Bush spoke, 100,000 peaceful demonstrators were parading through the streets of Myanmar's capital protesting a brutal and corrupt military dictatorship that has utterly ruined the country once known as Burma. A day later, the ruling junta's soldiers turned their guns on these peaceful protesters.

And what of the others on Bush's list?

Cuba might long since have become the prosperous jewel of the Caribbean but for the 48-year Castro dictatorship. Instead, its 11 million people live suspended in a socialist time warp where they subsist on average monthly salaries of $20 plus government slogans such as "socialism or death."

North Korea under "dear leader" Kim Jong-Il is a famished, Orwellian hell, without doubt the world's most totalitarian state.

Iran, a theocratic Islamic state, has trappings of democracy but is operationally tyrannical. Liberals and reformers are systematically ruled off the ballot, women are oppressed and political dissidents are hanged. Worse yet, Iran's illicit nuclear weapons program and its support for international terrorist groups threaten war and destabilization in the Middle East.

Syria is a dynastic dictatorship with a brutally efficient secret police. Zimbabwe's ruling autocrat, Robert Mugabe, has wrecked his country and its once prosperous economy. Zimbabwe now features 70 percent unemployment, 11,000 percent annual inflation and widespread food shortages. To stay in power, Mugabe bullies and jails his political opponents and rigs elections. Belarus remains a Soviet-style throwback, stubbornly defying the liberalization that has swept Eastern and Central Europe.

Myanmar remains an impoverished, socialist backwater run by a corrupt cabal of generals. The junta nullified the 1990 elections won overwhelmingly by the pro-democracy opposition and have kept Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for a decade and a half.

By any decent, democratic standard, the conduct and character of these regimes are indefensible. Kudos to Bush for saying so.

Beyond this specific bill of particulars, Bush's heartfelt proselytizing for expanding human rights and democracy puts him on the right side of history.

When the United Nations was founded in 1945, only 19 of its member states qualified as full-fledged democracies. Today, no fewer than 122 of the U.N.'s 192 member states have governments chosen by free elections. To one degree or another, all of these democratic nations codify and respect the basic civil and political liberties of their citizens. This democratic tide amounts to a rolling revolution of immense significance.

Decolonization, the collapse of communism, the failure of autocratic political models in Latin America and Africa and the rise of Asia's new democracies have all contributed to this global march of freedom.

Moving this march forward was the centerpiece of Bush's second inaugural address and of his speech Tuesday to the U.N. General Assembly. It's a noble and worthy cause. A winning one, too.

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