

COMMENT

Unsteady State

by Hendrik Hertzberg

George W. Bush says he wants to go to Mars—a motion that many of his fellow-citizens would heartily second—but he probably doesn't mean it. The speech in which he announced his “New Vision for Space Exploration” was exceedingly vague about how and when the trip was to be made. It did say that in 2015 or maybe in 2020 Americans would be going back to the moon, where they would build a base for “human missions to Mars and to worlds beyond.” An official likened this speech to President Kennedy's address of May 25, 1961, in which he asked the nation to “commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.”

A week later came Bush's State of the Union address, the text of which one scans in vain for any mention of Mars, the moon, or space exploration. The subject has already been dropped. (By contrast, Kennedy's 1962 State of the Union reiterated and discussed the lunar excursion he had proposed eight months before.) Nor is a short attention span the only sign of Bush's lack of seriousness about his interplanetary venture. There is also its Wal-Mart price tag. The President is asking Congress for an extra two hundred million dollars per year, about what it costs to make a movie like “Waterworld.” Another couple of billion is to be cannibalized out of the existing space budget. This kind of money will get no one to Mars, but that isn't to say that Bush's project will yield no results. It has already led to the cancellation of maintenance on the Hubble Space Telescope, NASA's most scientifically valuable project, which means that the Hubble will go blind in three or four years' time. Bush's “New Vision” is a sharp stick in the eye.

Polls published between the two Bush speeches revealed a distinct lack of public enthusiasm for the President's space proposal, and it will be surprising if he mentions it again anytime soon. But “Mars,” “the moon,” and “space” are not the only words missing in action from the State of the Union. So are “unemployment,” “AIDS,” and “the environment.” “Deficit” makes but a single appearance, as part of an utterly unconvincing, detail-free assertion that the gigantic budget shortfalls with which Bush has replaced the surpluses he inherited can be halved in five years if Congress would just “focus on priorities.”

The word “war,” on the other hand, makes a dozen appearances in the speech, while “terror” and its derivatives appear twenty times. The surrounding contexts suggest that Bush and his political handlers plan to use 9/11 and its aftermath every bit as ruthlessly this year as they did in 2002, when Republicans captured control of the Senate by portraying Democrats as friends of terrorism. (The most prominent victim of this strategy was Senator Max Cleland, of Georgia, who lost three limbs fighting in Vietnam, and who was defeated by ads showing his face alongside those of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein.) In 2004, according to Bush, “we face a choice: we can go forward with confidence and resolve, or we can turn back to the dangerous illusion that terrorists are not plotting and outlaw regimes are no threat to us.” If the choice he is talking about is November's (and what else could it be?), then this is slander. The illusion that Bush describes is shared by none of the four remaining Democratic candidates with a chance at nomination. Nor, by the way, do any of them doubt that the Iraqi people are better off without the regime of Saddam Hussein. And, while all four are for other reasons critical of Bush's Iraq policies, all recognize that, like it or not, the rehabilitation of Iraq is now an American responsibility.

The truth is that at this point no one can be sure whether the Iraq war, in its over-all effect, will turn out in the end to have helped or hindered the larger campaign

against Islamist terrorism. What does seem fairly clear is that Iraq's biological, chemical, and, especially, nuclear weapons did not exist. Public and congressional support for the war, as well as the scattered international support it enjoyed, was therefore purchased falsely and, to a degree not yet known, dishonestly. There has been a serious breach of trust, which cannot fail to have damaging results. "For diplomacy to be effective, words must be credible, and no one can now doubt the word of America," the President said in his speech, and for a moment one couldn't be sure one had heard him right. Was he speaking ironically? America's word—the present Administration's, anyway—has in fact been cast into the deepest doubt, and that is one of the reasons its diplomacy has not been effective. Bush was talking about Libya's promise, post-Iraq, to abandon its (not very scary) nuclear ambitions, and what he actually meant, of course, is that no one now doubts America's will to make war. But that is not true, either. Iraq has stretched the Pentagon's legions thin, and the misinformation that the Administration promulgated, from whatever admixture of intelligence failure and deliberate distortion, means that it will no longer be possible to rally domestic or international support for military adventures in the absence of a clear and independently verifiable *casus belli*. Washington's word won't do.

Bush's only serious (that is, expensive) domestic program, as always, is yet another mammoth tax entitlement for the rich and the superrich. The new plan would make permanent his earlier tax cuts, which, in a gimmick designed to make future deficits look less terrifying, were scheduled to expire in 2010. This new round of relief for the unneedy, like the previous three, is to be financed (though the President didn't mention this part) by confiscating the Social Security "trust fund," curtailing federal activities that benefit society at large, and borrowing more trillions—taking out a fourth mortgage on the future, payable to foreign creditors. The rest of Bush's proposals were either ruinously expensive, socially poisonous non-starters (such as privatizing Social Security) or cheap cuts of wormy red meat for the conservative and evangelical base. Of the latter the cheapest was an exhortation to professional athletes to quit taking steroids, the wormiest a threat to deface the Constitution with anti-gay graffiti.

In last year's State of the Union, Bush's buzz phrase was "weapons of mass destruction," the threat of which justified the impending conquest of Iraq. This year's speech subsumed that phrase into the longer, mealier "weapons of mass destruction-related program activities," a usefully adaptable locution. Were teams of inspectors to fan out across Bush's domestic policies in search of solutions to the nation's problems, they would be less likely to return empty-handed if they settle for environment-related program activities (such as logging in national forests), education-related program activities (such as requiring tests without providing the funds to help kids pass them), and health care-related program activities (such as forbidding Medicare to negotiate for lower drug prices). Like the speech itself, all this comes under the heading of winning the election-related program activities. Here's hoping it will prove equally effective.