

Back to the Future

What Bush would do if he were president.

By William Saletan

NEW YORK—For \$2.4 trillion, guess what word—other than “a,” “and,” and “the”—occurs most frequently in the acceptance speech George W. Bush delivered tonight. The word is “will.” It appears 76 times. This was a speech all about what Bush will do, and what will happen, if he becomes president.

Except he already is president. He already ran this campaign. He promised great things. They haven’t happened. So, he’s trying to go back in time. He wants you to see in him the potential you saw four years ago. He can’t show you the things he promised, so he asks you to envision them. He asks you to be “optimistic.” He asks you to have faith.

“Since 2001, Americans have been given hills to climb and found the strength to climb them,” said Bush. “Now, because we have made the hard journey, we can see the valley below. Now, because we have faced challenges with resolve, we have historic goals within our reach and greatness in our future.”

Recession. Unemployment. Corporate fraud. A war based on false premises that has cost us \$200 billion and nearly a thousand American lives. They’re all hills we’ve “been given to climb.” It’s as though Bush wasn’t president. As though he didn’t get the tax cuts he wanted. As though he didn’t bring about postwar Iraq and authorize the planning for it. All this was “given,” and now Bush can show up, three and a half years into his term, and start solving the problems some other president left behind.

It’s all downhill from here, he assures us. The mountain precedes the valley. Because the results have been bad, they’ll start to be good—but only if we keep doing the same thing. Everything that hasn’t happened will happen. Bush “will” control spending, he pledged. He “will make our country less dependent on foreign sources of energy.” He “will lead a bipartisan effort to reform and simplify the federal tax code.” “Soon every senior will be able to get prescription drug coverage.” “More people will own their health plans.”

Wonderful, unprecedented things will occur abroad. “Democracy is coming to the broader Middle East,” Bush promised. We’ll soon be “on the path of stability and democracy” in Iraq. “Our troops will return home.” “As the citizens of Afghanistan and Iraq seize the moment, their example will send a message of hope throughout a vital region. Palestinians will hear the message that democracy and reform are within their reach, and so is peace with our good friend Israel.” “As freedom advances—heart by heart, and nation by nation—America will be more secure and the world more peaceful.”

Why will these things happen? Because resolve brings good things, and we’ve maintained our resolve through bad times. “Having come this far, our tested and confident nation can achieve anything,” said Bush. The bad things that have happened while we’ve stayed resolved show that good things will happen if only we stay resolved.

“A presidential election is a contest for the future,” Bush argued. “Tonight I will tell you where I stand, what I believe, and where I will lead this country in the next four years.” So, Bush told us where he stood: “I stood where Americans died, in the ruins of the Twin Towers.” And he told what he thought: “I wake up every morning thinking about how to better protect our country.” But standing and thinking are not doing. Beliefs and promises are what you talk about when you have no progress to report. Bush pointed to the wars he had launched and the bills he had signed, but he couldn’t point to the benefits those laws and wars were supposed to deliver. The benefits haven’t happened yet. They “will.”

My favorite moment was when Bush touted the No Child Left Behind Act. No more social promotion, he promised. “We are transforming our schools by raising standards and focusing on results. We are insisting on accountability.”

Wasn't this speech, full of unfulfilled promises and appeals to good character, basically a plea for social promotion? Isn't that the message of the entire Bush campaign? Shouldn't the president have to show results, too?

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