
Bush: It's About Me and My Crusade

By David Corn

IT'S OFFICIAL: THE 2004 CAMPAIGN

is a referendum on whether the United States should wage a crusade to bring liberty to the repressed of the world—particularly in the Middle East—in order to heed the call of God and to protect the United States from terrorists who target America because they despise freedom. Or, at least, that is how George W. Bush would like the contest to be framed.

In his acceptance speech, Bush pushed the message of the week—it's the war, stupid—to lofty heights. Like the speakers of previous nights, he fully embraced the war in Iraq. But while John McCain, Rudy Giuliani, Zell Miller, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Laura Bush depicted the war as an action necessary for safeguarding America, Bush also placed it within the context of an even grander mission. "America," he proclaimed from that altar-like podium, "is called to lead the cause of freedom in the new century...Freedom is not America's gift to the world. It is the Almighty God's gift." (Minutes earlier, New York Governor George Pataki described Bush as the Supreme Being's gift to the United States: "He is one of those men God and fate somehow lead to the fore in times of challenge.")

This rhetoric was nothing new for Bush. He has made these points previously. But at the end of a week in which the war was presented as the Number One reason to vote for Bush, he chose to highlight the messianic side of his military action in Iraq. It was this part of the speech that soared. During the first 35 minutes, Bush ticked off a laundry list of domestic initiatives, as Bill Clinton liked to do. But Bush did so without the enthusiasm that Clinton displayed when discussing such subjects. It was as if this was the obligatory portion of the evening; Bush had to talk about something other than the war to prove he has a second-term agenda. It was an act of self-inoculation, an attempt to preempt Democratic criticism that he doesn't care about the close-to-home stuff. He tossed out a few

new (but modest proposals) and the old standbys: health savings accounts, partial privatization of Social Security, tax reform, and tort reform. Especially tort reform—which the GOPers regard as a blow against John Edwards. The delegates roared when Bush pushed this button—much more loudly than when he promised more money for Pell grants or low-income health clinics. As for the details of his domestic agenda, Bush told the crowd to check his website.

He took a couple of spirited swings at John Kerry, deriding his challenger for having voted against the antigay Defense of Marriage Act, for having declared that Hollywood is the "heart and soul of America, and for opposing the \$87 billion in funding for the Iraq war. And Bush briefly dished out the red meat to the social conservatives: a few words of support for "the unborn child," a poke at activist judges, a vow to oppose gay marriage. But his passion was reserved for the war on Iraq and the larger undertaking.

The war, in Bush's view, shows that he is willing to do whatever it takes to protect America, that he is a decisive leader whose determination to defeat the nation's enemies cannot be questioned. "You know where I stand," he said—implying you might not now where that other guy stands. And what's more, the war demonstrates that he has a vision beyond kicking terrorist butt. "This young century," he declared, "will be liberty's century. By promoting liberty abroad we will build a safer world...We have a calling from beyond the stars." Idealism (democracy in the Middle East), safety (whipping al Qaeda) and faith (God is calling) all rolled into one neat package. That's not a bad sales pitch. And for a politician who occasionally blows his big speeches, he delivered this half of his acceptance address with strength and conviction.

This was not a transformational speech for Bush. "In general," Senator Orrin Hatch

Bush: It's About Me and My Crusade

By David Corn

told me, "it's what we've heard before, but he did it well." After Bush described the global campaign he wants to lead in his second term, he then did his down-home, self-deprecating thing: "People sometimes have to correct my English. I knew I had a problem when Arnold Schwarzenegger started doing it." The message: I'm a regular fella whom you have no reason to fear. And while the speech was loaded with the standard misrepresentations—e.g., his choice was to go to war or take Saddam Hussein, a madman, at his word—it did present plenty of clarity. Yes, we certainly do know where he stands when it comes to mounting a crusade.

The obvious question: will the Protector-as-Missionary bit sell? Will voters hear the term "liberty century" and be moved? Or will they ask, is that the name of a new car? It's one thing to turn a lemon (a messy war now considered a mistake by a majority of Americans) into lemonade. But can Bush turn that lemon into blessed wine?

My hunch is that Bush's acceptance speech, no matter what was said, will not make much difference—given that he neither drooled nor pulled a Zell Miller. He came across in a familiar fashion. And after three-and-a-half long years, do voters need more information about Bush to render a decision? If there are any

undecided voters—and perhaps they don't really exist—were these citizens paying attention to this speech (or the convention)? And if they were watching, do they want a crusader in the driver's seat? You tell me.

Handicapping this election is a mug's game. On Thursday, The Washington Post reported that political observers and strategists have concluded that the "political terrain has shifted dramatically" in Bush's favor and that "specific proposals are unnecessary." One Bush adviser told the newspaper, "The strategists are saying, 'Everything is breaking our way. It looks like it's almost over.'" But on the same day, The Wall Street Journal noted that a Bush strategist "confided" that "I don't think anything has changed since March. I don't think this election will see a break out." Go figure.

It's impossible to assess how the GOP convention and Bush's speech will play in the long run—meaning over the next two months. Intervening events—the debates, developments in Iraq, swings in the economy—will, well, intervene. But it is easy to discern the Bush gameplan. At this convention, Bush did not pussyfoot about. His message was nuance-free: *la guerre est moi*. In this regard, he is taking full and complete responsibility and asking to be judged accordingly. And God only knows how that's going to turn out.