

## The Spirit of the Gipper

Skinner, Kiron K. *Wall Street Journal* [Brussels] 02 Feb 2005: A.9.

The element of surprise is often associated with George W. Bush. For many, his re-election was the biggest surprise of all. More recently, some were startled by the strong content and direction of his second inaugural address -- the "Freedom Speech." Tonight's State of the Union address might generate further surprises, but those who register astonishment simply haven't been paying attention.

Despite their reputation as the party of the elite, key Republican presidents tend to have had a grassroots campaign strategy that blindsided Democrats. Like President Reagan before him, however, President Bush's policies and his strategy for electoral victory have actually been available for public scrutiny for a long time, in some instances well before he occupied the White House. Yet for some reason, his and Reagan's pre-presidential policies -- the source of their strategies in office -- never found a place in the Beltway consciousness. In fact, the reason for their success may very well have been the understated nature of their activities.

Ronald Reagan stood out from the field of contenders in the Republican primaries in 1980. Despite the fact that he was a former governor who had been out of office for five years and had never held a national public office, voters knew him and his message everywhere he campaigned. And despite the electoral wrangle of 2000, President Bush won in 2004, carrying Florida and Ohio, states Sen. John Kerry expected to win. Mr. Bush lost to Al Gore by 324 votes in Ohio's Clark County in 2000; four years later he carried it with a 1,406-vote margin. Many are still mystified.

The very principle used by Karl Rove and others to help Mr. Bush prevail in 2004 contributed also to former Governor Reagan's success: to wit, close attention to the Republican Party's rank and file during the electoral interregnum. Between January 1975 and October 1979, with a short break during his 1976 bid for the presidential nomination, Reagan used his nationally syndicated radio program to talk to the American people about major domestic and foreign-policy issues. Long before the age of Oprah and talk radio, he spoke for three minutes a day, five days a week, to between 20 million and 30 million Americans. By 1980, his message was widely known -- precisely where it mattered.

In a similar vein, Republican strategists recruited an estimated 1.4 million campaign volunteers after the 2000 election. These grassroots volunteers, spread throughout the country but with especially strong numbers in swing states like Ohio, beavered away on uncommitted voters. This intensive "sway the vote" effort paid off on Nov. 2, 2004. Presidents Reagan and Bush both secured their base while expanding their reach.

Reagan and Mr. Bush had more than electoral strategies. Each, as a presidential hopeful, had a clear message and a detailed policy plan. In his radio essays and other writings of the late 1970s, Reagan presented four theories on the Cold War that many considered to be heretical: 1) The

sole source of legitimacy of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe is the Red Army of occupation; pull the Red Army out and the countries will go their own way; 2) The Soviet economy is so weak and the incentive structure so poor that Moscow can't sustain a sophisticated military technology race with the U.S.; 3) Even in the face of defeat in Vietnam, the American public is prepared for something like rearmament as long as their leaders clearly distinguish the strategy of strength from the objective of mutual cooperation; and 4) the American economy is so fundamentally strong that it can sustain a technology race with the Soviet Union. Before the end of his presidency, these "heresies" were the conventional wisdom.

The attacks of September 11 led to the most comprehensive revision of American strategic priorities and doctrine since the early days of the Cold War, but much of the content of that revision was outlined by then-Governor Bush in speeches and statements he made from late 1999 through 2000. On Sept. 23, 1999, three months after he officially announced his presidential aspirations, Mr. Bush gave a major address on foreign and defense policy at the Citadel. He talked about his belief that freedom establishes the condition for peace, and about the need to combat new threats posed by the dangerous intersection of weapons of mass destruction and "car bombers and plutonium merchants and cyber terrorists and drug cartels and unbalanced dictators." He declared that as president he would give his secretary of defense "a broad mandate" to transform the military, and he would break out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty if he found it necessary in order to protect the U.S. and its allies. He also firmly committed himself to homeland security: "I will put a high priority on detecting and responding to terrorism on our soil. The federal government must take this threat seriously." These themes were emphasized in other speeches and statements in 1999 and 2000. In an address at the Reagan Library on Nov. 19, 1999, Gov. Bush espoused the concept of "democratic peace," the idea that mutual democracy blocks mutual belligerency.

During his first term in the White House, President Bush closely followed the policy recommendations he made in the fall of 1999. For instance, he released the U.S. from the ABM treaty, established the Department of Homeland Security (and it is conceivable that he would have done so even if the events of 9/11 had not occurred), and firmly supported Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in the often painful process of transforming the military. President Bush more staunchly advocates the democratic peace than perhaps any other American president.

His first inaugural address was as much a "Freedom Speech" as the second. On Jan. 20, 2001, the 43rd president affirmed his commitment to the belief that spreading democracy and freedom is the most important goal of the U.S. That presidential statement of an unwavering belief that increasing the zone of democratic states would ensure peace built upon pre-presidential words. No one, of course, acknowledged this at the time.

The new president went on in that address to describe America as "a slave-holding society that became a servant of freedom." The statement was neither an apology for slavery nor a statement supporting the reparations that some black Americans are calling for, but it opened the door for a difficult conversation.

That conversation may or may not materialize before President Bush leaves Washington, but other powerful statements from the Bush administration suggest that the impact of America's racist past on its hopeful present is a priority for some administration officials. Preparing for President Bush's trip to the African continent in July 2003, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice described slavery as "America's birth defect." Earlier, in a commencement address in Mississippi, she acknowledged the horror of having "lived with the home-grown terrorism" in Birmingham, Alabama in the mid-1960s. Then, on Senegal's Goree Island, President Bush stated that "many of the issues that still trouble America have roots in the bitter experience" of slavery.

These, of course, are merely words. The proof is in decisions and policies. But for President Bush, as for Reagan before him, the presidential-era words -- all reiterations of earlier statements -- are harbingers of specific policies. For American citizens, the words are a source of power. We can repeat our leaders' utterances back to them as a means of holding them accountable for the vision they ask us to buy into and the expectations they create. To do this, we must study their words carefully, and when we study their words, we may find that many things seem less surprising to us than to the sages on the Beltway.

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Ms. Skinner, an assistant professor at Carnegie Mellon University and a fellow at the Hoover Institution, is writing a book on Ronald Reagan and U.S.-Soviet relations.

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