

WHAT BUSH GOT RIGHT

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Freedom's march: The president has been right on some big questions. Now, if he can get the little stuff right, he'll change the world.

Events in the Middle East over the past few weeks have confirmed the theories of that great scholar of the region, Thomas (Tip) O'Neill. The late speaker of the House's most memorable aphorism was "All politics is local." It's true even of the politics of rage. As long-repressed societies in the Middle East open up, we are discovering that their core concerns are not global but local. Most ordinary Arabs, it turns out, are not consumed by grand theories about the clash between Islam and the West, or the imperialism of American culture, or even the Palestinian cause. When you let the Lebanese speak, they want to talk about Syria's occupation of their country. When Iraqis got a chance to congregate, they voted for a government, not an insurgency. When a majority of Palestinians were heard from, they endorsed not holy terror to throw Israel into the sea, but practical diplomacy to get a state.

Tomorrow, were the Egyptian Street to voice its views—I mean the real Egyptian Street, not President Mubarak's state-controlled media—we would probably discover that its deepest discontent is directed not at the president of the United States, but at the president of Egypt. Perhaps Arabs and Muslims are not some strange species after all. It is their rulers who are strange.

The other noted political scientist who has been vindicated in recent weeks is George W. Bush. Across New York, Los Angeles and Chicago—and probably Europe and Asia as well—people are nervously asking themselves a question: "Could he possibly have been right?" The short answer is yes. Whether or not Bush deserves credit for everything that is happening in the Middle East, he has been fundamentally right about some big things.

Bush never accepted the view that Islamic terrorism had its roots in religion or culture or the Arab-Israeli conflict. Instead he veered toward the analysis that the region was breeding terror because it had developed deep dysfunctions caused by decades of repression and an almost total lack of political, economic and social modernization. The Arab world, in this analysis, was almost unique in that over the past three decades it had become increasingly unfree, even as the rest of the world was opening up. His solution, therefore, was to push for reform in these lands.

The theory did not originate with Bush's administration. Others had made this case: scholars like Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami, Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times*, the Arab intellectuals who wrote the United Nations' now famous "Arab Human Development Report" and even this writer. (Three weeks after 9/11 I wrote an essay titled "[Why Do They Hate Us?](#)" that made this case.) These ideas were gaining some ground in

the Arab world, especially after 9/11. But Bush's adoption of them was absolutely crucial because he had the power to pressure the region's regimes. Efforts to change the dynamics of the Middle East had always collapsed in the past as its wily rulers would delay, obstruct and obfuscate. Bush has pushed them with persistence and, increasingly, he is trying to build a broader international effort. The results might surprise.

Repressive regimes are often extremely fragile. Syria is the perfect example. Bashar al-Assad's rule rests on the narrowest base of fear and coercion. His ruling clique, mostly coming from the country's small Alawite sect, is well aware that it lacks support in their society. That's why it is so easily rattled and why the events in Lebanon could snowball into something much, much bigger. The other Arab regimes are less fragile. Mubarak, while unpopular, is not despised. The Saudi royal family is more stable than many think. It uses money, marriage and connections—and yet more money—to create an elaborate patronage network that sustains it. But everywhere, there is pressure to change.

The Middle East would do well with incremental but persistent reform, as is taking place in Jordan, Qatar and Dubai. But in too many places, small, gradual reforms have been a smoke screen for doing nothing. Economic reforms are the most crucial because they modernize the whole society. But they are also the most difficult because they threaten the power and wealth of the oligarchies that run these countries. So far there has been more talk than action on this front.

People have often wished that the president had traveled more over the years. But Bush's capacity to imagine a different Middle East may actually be related to his relative ignorance of the region. Had he traveled to the Middle East and seen its many dysfunctions, he might have been disheartened. Freed from looking at the day-to-day realities, Bush maintained a vision of what the region could look like.

But therein lies the danger. It is easier to imagine liberal democracy than to achieve it. Ronald Reagan imagined a Soviet Union that was politically and economically free. Twenty years later, except for the Baltic states, not one country of the former Soviet Union has achieved that. There have been more than 50 elections in Africa in the past 15 years—some as moving as those in Iraq, had we bothered to notice them—but only a few of those countries can be described as free. Haiti has had elections and American intervention, and still has foreign troops stationed there. Yet only a few of these elections have led to successful and free societies.

Every country, culture and people yearns for freedom. But building real, sustainable democracy with rights and protections is complex. In Lebanon, for example, the absence of Syria will not mean the presence of a stable democracy. It was the collapse of Lebanon's internal political order that triggered the Syrian intervention in 1976. That problem will have to be solved, even after Syrian forces go home. In Iraq, the end of the old order has produced growing tendencies toward separatism and intolerance. Building democracy takes patience, deep and specific knowledge and, most important, the ability to partner with the locals.

If Bush is to be credited for the benefits of his policies, he must also take responsibility for their costs. Over the past three years, his administration has racked up enormous costs, many of which could easily have been lowered or avoided altogether. The pointless snubbing of allies, the brusque manner in which it went to war in Iraq, the undermanned occupation and the stubborn insistence (until last summer) on pursuing policies that were fueling both an insurgency and anti-Americanism in Iraq—all have taken their toll in thousands of American and Iraqi lives and almost \$300 billion.

Perhaps an even more lasting cost is the broad and deep shifts in public opinion against America around the world. Look at countries as disparate as Britain, Poland, Turkey and Japan, all allies of the United States. In every one of them, public views have changed significantly in the past few years, and being pro-American is now a political liability. Tony Blair, once the most popular British leader in decades, has fallen far in public esteem, largely because of his unflinching support for the Bush administration.

For most countries, the debate over Iraq was not really about Iraq. It was about how America would wield its enormous global power. And to many countries, it seemed that the Bush administration was doing it irresponsibly. On this front, the signs from Bush's second term are heartening. In the Middle East, however, everything will depend on success on the ground. If, five years from now, Iraq, Afghanistan and perhaps an independent Palestine and a democratic Lebanon are thriving countries with modern political and economic systems, America will be honored and respected—and the talk of anti-American terror will have dissipated considerably. If, on the other hand, these countries are chaotic and troubled—more like Central Asia than Central Europe—people there will blame America. Remember, all politics is local.