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A fantasy of freedom

If Bush wanted to tackle tyranny, he could start with regimes under US control. But liberty clearly has limits, says Gary Younge.

Gary Younge (Op-Ed)
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There is one tiny corner of Cuba that will forever America be. It is a place where innocent people are held without charge for years, beyond international law, human decency and the mythical glow of Lady Liberty's torch. It is a place where torture is common, beating is ritual and humiliation is routine. They call it Guantánamo Bay.

Last week the new United States secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, listed Cuba, among others, as "an outpost of tyranny". A few days later President Bush started his second term with a pledge to unleash "the force of freedom" on the entire world. "The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world," he said

You would think that if the Americans are truly interested in expanding freedom and ending tyranny in Cuba, let alone the rest of the world, Guantánamo Bay would be as good a place to start as any. But the captives in Guantánamo should not ask for the keys to their leg irons any time soon. Ms Rice was not referring to the outpost of tyranny that her boss created in Cuba, but the rest of the Caribbean island, which lives in a stable mixture of the imperfect and the impressive.

In short, while the US could liberate a place where there are flagrant human rights abuses and over which they have total control, it would rather topple a sovereign state, which poses no threat, through diplomatic and economic - and possibly military - warfare that is already causing chaos and hardship.

Welcome to Bush's foreign policy strategy for the second term. His aim is not to realign the values at Guantánamo so that they are more in line with those championed by the rest of the world. It is to try and realign the rest of the world so that it is more in keeping with the values that govern Guantánamo, where human rights and legal norms are subordinated to America's perceived interests.

Under this philosophy, the Bush administration understands the words "tyranny" and "freedom" in much the same way as it understands international law. They mean whatever the White House wants them to mean. Bush is happy to support democracy when democracy supports America, just as he is happy to dispense with it when it does not. Likewise, when tyranny is inconvenient, he will excoriate it; when it is expedient, he will excuse it.

Take Uzbekistan, one of the most repressive regimes in central Asia. In April 2002, a special UN rapporteur concluded that torture in the country was "systematic" and "pervasive and persistent... throughout the investigation process". In the same year, Muzafar Avazov, an opposition leader, was boiled alive for refusing to abandon his religious convictions and attempting to practise religious rites in prison. In 2003, Bush granted a waiver to Uzbekistan when its failure to improve its human rights record should have led to its aid being slashed. In February 2004 the US secretary of defence, Donald Rumsfeld, visited the country's dictator, Islam Karimov, and said: "The relationship [between our countries] is strong and growing stronger. We look forward to strengthening our political and economic relations."

Yet the US continues to shower the country with aid, docking a mere \$18m last year (around 20% of the total) after expressing its "disappointment" that Mr Karimov had not made greater strides towards democracy. Pan down the shopping list of tyrannical states in Ms Rice's in-tray (Iran, Burma, North Korea, Zimbabwe, Belarus and Cuba) and you will find no mention of Uzbekistan. Why? Because Uzbekistan, with an estimated 10,000 political prisoners, hosts a US military base that offers easy access to Afghanistan and the rest of the region.

So for every tenet that Mr Bush claimed last week to hold dear, it was possible to pick out a country or place he is bankrolling or controlling that is in flagrant violation, and where he could improve conditions immediately if he wished. The point here is not that the US should intervene in more places, but that it should intervene consistently and honestly or not at all.

Bush's inauguration speech was packed with truisms, axioms, platitudes and principles that appear reasonable at first glance. The trouble is they are contradicted by the reality he has created and continues to support.

As he delivered his address, you could almost whisper the caveats. "America will not pretend that jailed dissidents prefer their chains [apart from in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay], or that women welcome humiliation and servitude [apart from in Saudi Arabia] or that any human being aspires to live at the mercy of bullies [apart from Uzbekistan and Israel]."

Such hypocrisy is not new. When Mr Bush said "Our goal instead is to help others find their own voice, attain their own freedom and make their own way", nobody imagined he was referring to the Bolivian peasants fighting oil price hikes and globalisation or the landless Venezuelans taking over farms.

The agenda for a second Bush term represents not a change in direction but an acceleration of the colossal and murderous folly that he, and most of his predecessors, have pursued.

The damage that this selective notion of liberty inflicts on the rest of the world should by now be pretty clear. According to the independent website Iraqbodycount.net, reported civilian deaths in Iraq have already reached between 15,365 and 17,582 since the war started, while the recent study for the Lancet estimated the death toll at 100,000 at least, and probably higher; meanwhile, the number is growing remorselessly. Next weekend's elections in Iraq - which take place in the midst of a war against foreign occupiers with most candidates too scared to campaign, the location of polling sites kept secret until the last minute and key areas unable to participate - have become not an example of democracy but an embarrassment to the very idea of democracy.

Meanwhile, a global poll for the BBC last week showed the US more isolated than ever, with people in 18 out of 21 countries saying that they expect a second Bush term to have a negative impact on peace and security.

What is less clear is whether most Americans understand that this isolation leaves them more vulnerable to attack. Ms Rice last week promised "a conversation, not a monologue" with the rest of the world. But as the situation in Iraq shows, conversations that start with "D'you want a piece of this?" rarely end well for anybody.

Both Osama bin Laden and the Taliban have shown that the tyrants the US supports today can easily turn against it tomorrow while fostering resentment among their victims. Yet the idea that the US is a civilising force endowed with benevolent intentions is still as prevalent within the US as it is rejected outside it.

Indeed, Tony Blair seems to be the only foreign leader who still holds to the mixture of wishful thinking, wilful ignorance and warped logic behind the idea that Bush is leading humanitarian interventions at the barrel of a gun.

When questioned about the prospects for Bush's second term, the British prime minister was upbeat. "Evolution comes with experience," he said. The fact that Bush does not believe in evolution has long been known. Only now are we discovering how little Blair learns from experience.