

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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The State of the Union

President Bush's State of the Union address last Wednesday evening drove home for me some of the many reasons why I am thankful to be a citizen of the United States.

This is a country of great economic opportunity and material prosperity. I am thankful for its vitality. This is a country in which many scientists and medical professionals work to achieve medical breakthroughs and to care for the ill and infirm. I am thankful for the "culture of life" to which so many are committed. This is a country where people who differ greatly over existing laws and policies can be elected to public office to contend with one another openly in the shaping of new laws and policies. I am thankful for the rule of law in an open society with representative government. This is a country that has the privilege of being able to look out on the whole world and consider what role it might play in world affairs. I am thankful to be living in a country that has so much potential to help shape a more just international order. And this is a country where many young people voluntarily enter military service, willing to give up their lives in service to others, including me. I am thankful that so many American young people show such dedication.

What I found missing from the president's address, however, was an account of the real state of our union. The president spoke almost entirely about freedom and economic growth. Even when addressing government's actions toward education, health care, energy, Social Security and America's role in the world he framed them largely as means to the end of economic expansion, security and freedom.

But what about the state of our republic as a *political* community? How strong is the bond of justice among us as a community of citizens? What about the continuing partisan fracturing and even bitter incivility of Congress? What about the signs of weak citizenship training in our schools? If it is proper to celebrate the courage of Iraqis who voted in face of violence, would

it not be proper to urge Americans to rededicate themselves to the strengthening of our civic order?

Second, the president called for a significant (and expensive) reform of Social Security and for more funding for medical research, energy production, Pell Grants, the military and the Palestinians. He did not, however, indicate how he would cut expenditures to produce the reduced deficit spending he promised. Nor did he mention the financial dangers our country now faces because of a growing trade deficit, the falling value of the dollar, and billions of dollars of extra-budgetary spending for our military in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet these will all add to the considerable debt burden we will be passing on to our children, a burden that could overwhelm any small gains in retirement income derived from Social Security reforms.

Third, the president held out a bright vision of America's role in the world, working with allies to advance freedom. But he made no mention of the pervasive anti-Americanism that has mounted over the last two years. He did not help us understand why Afghanistan's elected president is almost powerless to stop warlord heroin-trafficking that may yet destroy the very weak government of that country. Nor did President Bush mention any of the long-term economic and political challenges the United States faces from rapidly growing China and India. Long before our Social Security system reaches the point of crisis the president warned of, the dynamics of the global economy will likely have changed far more dramatically, and not necessarily to America's benefit.

In none of this am I criticizing what the president has not yet done or may yet do in office. I am asking how the president might have evaluated the state of our union if he had taken more of reality into account?

—James W. Skillen
President

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