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Connected Destinies
Thinking big.

By Gleaves Whitney

These are crowded weeks. During the past fortnight, historic elections in Iraq were framed by two important speeches by President George W. Bush — the second inaugural address and 2005 State of the Union message. As these three events settle into the American consciousness, they gather moral, intellectual, and emotional force.

Morally Bush is staking out the high ground by insisting that Iraqis deserve a chance at freedom. Intellectually he is winning the argument by contrasting the anarchy of terrorism with the dignity of democracy. Emotionally the president wept for us all in that cathartic moment — that authentic moment — when a Texas mom who had lost her son in the Battle of Fallujah embraced an Iraqi woman who had voted in last Sunday's election. Not even Tolstoy could have woven together such disparate lives so simply and masterfully.

Over the course of American history, our presidents have delivered 216 annual messages; last night's was the 30th *wartime* State of the Union message. But it would be difficult to imagine a wartime oration with a more powerful gesture than occurred when Janet Norwood embraced Safia Taleb al-Suhail, or a more fitting symbol of our connected destinies than when the dog-tag of Marine Sergeant Byron Norwood, clutched in his mother's left hand, became entangled in Safia's sleeve.

George Bush is the 16th U.S. president who ran successfully for a second term. Most presidents who served two full terms found the later years less than fulfilling; often they were distracting, disappointing, or disheartening. Not even the Founders were spared. In his second term George Washington, so eager for Union and unity, desperately tried but failed to stop his top advisers from forming rival factions. In his last four years Thomas Jefferson launched the Embargo of 1807, surely the most disastrous economic policy in U.S. history. And in his second term James Madison watched helplessly as a foreign enemy invaded our nation's shores and burned much of Washington, D.C., to the ground.

During the 20th century, presidents reelected to serve a second term almost always experienced a declining fortunes. Woodrow Wilson tilted quixotically at European nation states in an effort to make the world safe for democracy and lost much of his moral suasion. Franklin Roosevelt watched his New Deal sputter and falter. Eisenhower's health suffered.

In more recent memory, Richard Nixon's second term quickly descended into the chaos of Watergate; Ronald Reagan's was blemished by Iran Contra; and Bill Clinton's was sullied by the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

George W. Bush is certainly aware of this pattern of disappointing second terms and seems determined to avoid that fate. The soaring rhetoric of the second inaugural address, the better-than-expected elections in Iraq, the focused message of the 2005 State of the Union — all reveal a man on a mission. Setting the bar high, he is nothing if not bold in foreign and domestic affairs.

Ultimately George W. Bush's success as a president will be judged by what happens in five arenas: the war on terror, nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan, Social Security reform, Supreme Court appointments, and Election 2008 when he will try to get his handpicked successor into the White House. With a Republican-controlled House and Senate, he has a better shot than most of his predecessors at achieving a measure of success.

Yet President Bush's supporters would not be unwise to dial down their expectations. Total victory is often denied to those who set historic change in motion. Even Moses did not reach the Promised Land. Likewise, it was not on Abraham Lincoln's watch that a war-torn nation got stitched back together, but on Andrew Johnson's; not on Franklin Roosevelt's watch that the Axis powers surrendered, but on Harry Truman's; not on John F. Kennedy's watch that civil-rights bills were passed, but on Lyndon Johnson's; not on Ronald Reagan's watch that the Berlin Wall came down, but on George H. W. Bush's. Again and again, history counsels humility and patience.

Republicans and I suspect most Americans very much want the president to succeed in his mission. Evidence of broad support can be seen in last night's speech, which was interrupted by applause some 65 times; 58 times by standing ovations in which Democrats frequently joined in. The president will clearly have the opportunity to spend the political capital he has earned. Still, we would do well to measure President Bush's success from a vantage that is more than four years in the future. He thinks big, and we should too.

— Gleaves Whitney is director of the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Grand Valley State University.