

The Republican Party Platform and the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

The 2004 Republican Party platform, "A Safer World and a More Hopeful America," devotes a third of its ninety pages to foreign policy under the heading "Winning the War on Terror." The platform represents a comprehensive summary of the Bush administration's accomplishments and details the philosophy and principles behind the party's foreign policy. Explaining why "the American people are safer" now than they were three years ago, the platform points to gains in combating terrorists and tyrants, curbing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), promoting democracy, improving homeland security, and strengthening relationships with key allies via counterterrorism efforts. According to the platform, the administration's approach is "marked by a determination to challenge new threats, not ignore them, or simply wait for future tragedy -- and by a renewed commitment to building a hopeful future in hopeless places, instead of allowing troubled regions to remain in despair and explode in violence."

Winning the War on Terror

First and foremost, the Republican national security agenda seeks to demonstrate that the president has been proactive in prosecuting the war on terror, both by targeting terrorists directly and by combating the conditions in which extremism and terrorism prosper. The platform declares, "We are defending the peace by taking the fight to the enemy. . . . Month by month, we are shrinking the space in which they can freely operate, by denying them territory and the support of governments. . . . We are preserving the peace by working with more than 80 allied nations, as well as international institutions, to isolate and confront terrorists and outlaw regimes." In addition to a detailed section on improving homeland security, the platform specifies the importance of intelligence in the war on terror. It endorses the 9-11 Commission's recommendation to create the position of national intelligence director, though it does not specify whether this figure would have authority over budget and personnel.

Fostering Political Reform

One prominent theme in the platform's foreign policy section is the pursuit of freedom internationally as a means of combating the conditions in which extremism thrives. In fact, the word "freedom" appears fifty times in that section. The platform supports the administration's commitment to double the budget of the National Endowment of Democracy, as well as its "expansion of America's public diplomacy efforts, including the use of radio and television to broadcast uncensored information and a message of tolerance in Arabic and Persian to tens of millions of people."

The platform also endorses the president's "Forward Strategy of Freedom in the Middle East," noting that "Republicans support President Bush's policy of working with every government in the Middle East dedicated to destroying the terrorist networks, while in the longer term expecting a higher standard of reform and democracy from our friends in the region." The platform does not elaborate on the details of this strategy, however, offering no discussion of how the president intends to walk the fine line between working with friendly governments in the near term and supporting reforms that threaten those very regimes in the long term. The platform's subsequent praise for Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Libya seem to suggest that regional stability is, at least for now, more important to the war on terror than reform.

Halting WMD Proliferation

Curbing the spread of WMD is another focal point of the document. According to the platform, President Bush has pursued "a comprehensive strategy through which the United States works with its allies" to enforce existing agreements related to WMD proliferation; preempt threats by individuals or states; improve American response capabilities in the event of an attack; and "detect, disrupt, and block the spread of dangerous weapons and technology." As examples of this strategy, the platform highlights the administration's efforts to topple Saddam Hussein's regime, shut down Abdul Qadir Khan's nuclear network, confront North Korea and Iran, secure weapons materiel in the former Soviet Union, and promote the Proliferation Security Initiative -- "a broad international partnership to coordinate actions to interdict shipments of WMD." Libya is singled out as exemplifying the success of the administration's policy of confronting states with WMD programs and rewarding them with international recognition and support if they renounce their weapons programs. With respect to Iran, the platform notes, "The development of a nuclear weapon in Iran is intolerable to the international community." There is no reference to the fact that Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency are again at loggerheads, and, like the Democratic platform, the Republicans do not suggest a specific strategy for getting Iran to abandon its efforts to produce nuclear weapons.

Succeeding in Iraq

While acknowledging that "the stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction we expected to find in Iraq have not yet materialized," the platform is unequivocal in justifying the war in Iraq on the basis of Saddam's "decades-long pursuit of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons," his ability to reconstitute his weapons programs, and his longstanding "brutal dictatorship." According to the platform, the president faced a clear choice in his decision to go to war: "Trust a madman or defend America." Moreover, after praising U.S. soldiers in Iraq at length for their service and calling on "responsible political leaders of both parties" to declare that America "will persevere in [its] mission there, not cut and run," the platform suggests that victory in Iraq can be achieved by continuing on the course currently being pursued by Iraq's interim government. The document asserts that Washington and its coalition partners are helping to "prepare Iraqis for the defense of their own country, including through the work of the NATO mission to train Iraqi security forces."

Standing by Israel and Promoting Palestinian Reform

The platform is effusive in expressing support for Israel, "America's democratic ally." In addition to pledging U.S. support for Israeli security, it connects the ideological battle that America is waging globally to Israel's struggle against Palestinian terrorism: "Terror attacks against Israelis are part of the same evil as the September 11, 2001, attacks against America." The platform endorses "two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security," reiterating the president's speech of June 24, 2002. It also praises Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement initiative as a "courageous step toward peace in the face of continuing violence." The platform approvingly cites Israeli efforts toward "removing unauthorized outposts and improving the humanitarian situation by easing restrictions on the movement of Palestinians not engaged in terrorist activities." No mention is made,

however, of the ongoing negotiations regarding limitations on West Bank settlement construction and the removal of illegal outposts. The platform reiterates the commitments made by the president in his April 14, 2004, correspondence with Sharon, which recognized the right of Palestinian refugees to resettle in a Palestinian state, not Israel, and suggested de facto acceptance of some Israeli settlement blocs in the West Bank as part of a final peace agreement. Continued support for a Palestinian state will be contingent on whether the Palestinians "embrace democracy and the rule of law, confront corruption, and firmly reject terror."

Praising Saudi Arabia and Pakistan

The platform is unequivocal in its praise of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia for their help in combating terror, a distinction that seems to ignore the rest of the document's heavy focus on promoting freedom and democracy. The platform notes that "Saudi Arabia is working hard to shut down the facilitators and financial supporters of terrorism. The government has captured or killed many first-tier leaders of the al-Qaeda organization in Saudi Arabia. Today, because Saudi Arabia has seen the danger and has joined the War on Terror, the American people are safer." The only subsequent mention of the kingdom occurs in the domestic section, where the platform advocates "energy development in the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), which, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, holds as much as 16 billion barrels of oil -- enough to replace oil imports from Saudi Arabia for nearly 20 years."

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