

[you say you want a revolution]

# Radical Son

Bush may not have read Dostoyevsky—but his speechwriters have.

By Justin Raimondo

IN A WORLD AFLAME with war and terrorism, George W. Bush's second inaugural address was a match flung onto an oil slick. By the time his 17-minute peroration reached midpoint, it was clear that was his intention:

Because we have acted in the great liberating tradition of this nation, tens of millions have achieved their freedom. And as hope kindles hope, millions more will find it. By our efforts we have lit a fire as well, a fire in the minds of men. It warms those who feel its power; it burns those who fight its progress. And one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of our world.

“A fire in the mind”—such a felicitous phrase. It aptly and succinctly describes the feverish mental state of our neoconservative policymakers, who set out to build an empire in the Middle East and now, with this speech, clearly envision much more. It also describes the mental state of some of the characters in Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* (or *The Devils*), from which the fiery metaphor is taken. Michael Barone pointed out the allusion in his *U.S. News* column, wherein he described Dostoyevsky's work as “a novel about a provincial town inspired by new revolutionary ideas. After a turbulent literary evening, a fire breaks out, and one townsman says, ‘The fire is in the minds of men, not in the roofs of buildings.’”

Well, not quite. The novel is about a group of revolutionaries who plot the destruction of a small provincial town—and, by extension, the whole of Russia and of human civilization. The intricate plot involves the governor of the province, who is continually beset by his wife and her liberal intellectual friends: they take up fashionably radical ideas almost, it seems, just to show him up as a bore. Members of this devilish clique have insinuated themselves into the higher social circles and, Rasputin-like, have bewitched the governor's wife and high society in general, all the while plotting and scheming behind the scenes. The governor is subtly provoked into cracking down on rebellious workers, the rabble rises up in the midst of a bizarre fete given by the governor's vacuous wife, and the town is burned to the ground. The scene from which Bush's fiery call to arms is taken finds the narrator discovering the governor in the midst of this chaotic scene, gesticulating and shouting at a building consumed by the blaze:

‘It's all incendiarism! It's nihilism! If anything is burning, it's nihilism!’ I heard almost with horror; and though there was nothing to be surprised at, yet actual madness, when one sees it, always gives one a shock.

Ignoring the pleas of his subordinates to get to safety, the half-mad governor continues on with his soliloquy:

‘They will wipe away the tears of the people whose houses have been burnt, but they will burn down the town. It's all the work of four scoundrels, four and a half! Arrest the scoundrel! He worms himself into the honor of families. ...It's vile, vile!’ Suddenly noticing a fireman at the top of the burning lodge, he asks: ‘What is he doing there?’

‘He is putting the fire out, your Excellency.’

‘Not likely. The fire is in the minds of men and not in the roofs of houses. Pull him down and give it up! Better give it up, much better! Let it put itself out.’

The fire does not break out as a result of spontaneous combustion, as Barone seems to imply: it is deliberately set by disgruntled workers acting under the influence of a nihilistic cabal. This is meant to dramatize Dostoyevsky's view of the Russian revolutionaries of his time, whom he saw as possessed by a desire to destroy and little else.

In any case, the borrowed imagery is far from obscure. *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* is the title of a classic study of 19th-century radicalism by James H. Billington, now the Librarian of Congress. Certainly none of this was unknown to the men who shaped this speech—not counting the man who delivered it. The *Los Angeles Times* reported:

White House political aide Karl Rove and chief speechwriter Michael Gerson held a two-hour seminar with a panel of foreign policy scholars, including several leading neocons—newspaper columnist Charles Krauthammer, Fouad Ajami of Johns Hopkins University and Victor Davis Hanson of Stanford’s Hoover Institution—according to a person who was present.

The *Washington Post* reported that Bill Kristol also coached Bush on the speech.

These four neoconservative ideologues, presided over by Rove, are the 21st-century equivalent of Dostoyevsky’s revolutionary devils—and, what’s more, they seem to know it. As Dostoyevsky put it: “It’s all the work of four scoundrels, four and a half!” A prophetic sentence, that.

Bush’s peroration was suffused with fire, it burned with the steely-eyed fanaticism of the ideologues who forged it, full of phrases that soared so far above the real world that a good many listeners had trouble believing their ears. Does the president seriously believe “the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands”? Surely he didn’t really mean to explain away the exponential expansion of big government in America as due to the lack of civil liberties in, say, the former Soviet Union or the oppression of women in Saudi Arabia? The war-weary wondered, at home and abroad, as they listened to the most powerful man on earth enunciate his militant doctrine: what new conflict will erupt as a result of a crusade to accelerate “the expansion of freedom in all the world”? What else could be the meaning of a pledge “to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in

every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world”?

In a vain attempt to reassure the panicked, Bush senior made a rare intervention. “People want to read a lot into it,” he said, “that this means new aggression or newly assertive military forces. That’s not what that speech is about. It’s about freedom.”

In other words, it’s all talk and no action. But there is already plenty of action going on in Iraq and good reason to expect more. Rumors of war with Iran are persistent and credible. Seymour Hersh, whose record has been pretty good so far, reports that U.S. operatives are already penetrating Iranian territory in search of Tehran’s elusive nukes. And in Eastern Europe, on the far frontier of what used to be the heartland of the old Russian empire, a Western-financed “orange revolution” is engineered by a coalition of the U.S. and an expansionist European super-state, while NATO edges closer to the gates of Moscow.

In Dostoyevsky’s day, urban radicals influenced by Marx and emboldened by Bakunin went out into the countryside proclaiming the doctrines of socialism and syndicalist anarchism, to little effect. They committed sporadic acts of spectacular violence and functioned roughly. Such groups as the *Narodnaya Volya* (Peoples’ Will), whose militants assassinated two Russian czars, were 19th-century versions of al-Qaeda. Dostoyevsky’s novel is a dark chronicle of the psychology that energized their terroristic brand of nihilism.

The “fire in the minds of men” eventually engulfed all Russia; *The Possessed* bitterly foreshadowed the red inferno of the 1917 revolution. That a phrase torn from its entrails should augur a new worldwide revolutionary movement seems almost like payback for the author’s notoriously “reactionary”

views. Yet it does seem as if the new militants are following in the footsteps of Dostoyevsky’s original models, venturing out from the Western metropolis into the countryside of the world, bent on “liberating” poor oppressed peasants who languish in premodernity. That they would meet with the same overt hostility that greeted the Narodniks of yesteryear was all too predictable. As Russell Kirk warned in a 1990 speech:

A politicized American army operating abroad would be no more popular ... than the Red Army has been. An imposed or induced abstract democracy thrust upon peoples unprepared for it would produce at first anarchy, and then—as in nearly all of ‘emergent’ Africa, over the past four decades—rule by force and a master.

The neocons, who revile Kirk’s memory on account of this scolding, threw their hats in the air as Bush embraced their core agenda. “This is real neoconservatism,” Robert Kagan exulted to the *Los Angeles Times*. “It would be hard to express it more clearly. If people were expecting Bush to rein in his ambitions and enthusiasms after the first term, they are discovering that they were wrong.”

Others were not so ebullient. “If Bush means it literally, then it means we have an extremist in the White House,” said Nixon Center president Dimitri Simes. “I hope and pray that he didn’t mean it ... [and] that it was merely an inspirational speech, not practical guidance for the conduct of foreign policy.”

William F. Buckley Jr. pronounced the speech “confusing.” Aside from being “an improvisation,” it was also embarrassingly ungrammatical: “Mr. Bush said that ‘whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny.’ You can simmer in resentment, but not in tyranny.” The speech was, in Buckley’s

view, bad policy as well as execrable grammar: "What about China? Is it U.S. policy to importune Chinese dissidents 'to start on this journey of progress and justice'? How will we manifest our readiness to 'walk at [their] side?'"

If the National Endowment for Democracy isn't already on the job, the president's recent pronouncements are bound to direct their efforts in China's direction. Professor Claes Ryn saw where all this was leading, and he put it quite well in his 2004 address to the Philadelphia Society:

The notion that America knows better than all other nations and has a right to dictate terms to them betrays a monumental conceit. It also guarantees that other nations will see a need to arm themselves just to have some protection against American bullying. ... China, which has long found Western hegemony intolerable and is already strongly prone to nationalism, can be expected to respond to American assertiveness by greatly expanding its military power. If present trends continue, the time should soon be ripe—in 50 years perhaps?—for a horrendous Sino-American confrontation.

Nothing is "too massive a challenge to our liberationist policy" that it dwarfs the monumental edifice of the liberationists' conceit. Yes, but "what about Saudi Arabia?" asks Buckley. "Will we refuse to buy Saudi oil?" I would think that the real objective is to seize it.

Peggy Noonan found the speech "startling," and confessed it left her "with a bad feeling, and reluctant dislike" evoked by such grandiose phrases as "we are ready for the greatest achievements in the history of freedom." This, she averred "is the kind of sentence that makes you wonder if this White House did not... have a case of

what I have called in the past 'mission inebriation.' A sense that there are few legitimate boundaries to the desires born in the goodness of their good hearts."

Drunk with power, flush with Pyrrhic victories, and convinced that they are on the right side of history, the "mission inebriation" that bedevils this administration is Ms. Noonan's polite way of describing megalomania. The defining characteristic of what Ryn calls the "imperialistic personality" is a monumental conceit: it is the same will to dominate that drove the Jacobins, the

[eve of destruction]

# Wilson's Ghost

Spreading freedom around the world will destroy democracy at home.

By Christopher Layne

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH'S reelection brought considerable speculation about what foreign-policy tack he would take during his second term. Many hoped that the administration would moderate its bellicose unilateralism and seek to repair relations with traditional allies. But during inauguration week, hopes that the Bush team would chart a more temperate foreign-policy course were dealt a one-two knockout punch by Condoleezza Rice's confirmation testimony and President Bush's inaugural address.

Although it remains to be seen how the administration will implement its foreign-policy vision, Bush and Rice outlined its intellectual assumptions. In her

Bolsheviks, and the 19th-century followers of the nihilist Sergei Nechaev, upon whom the author of *The Possessed* modeled his characters. That American policymakers will likely end up like Dostoyevsky's revolutionary conspirators—increasingly committed to state terrorism in pursuit of some utopian vision—seems horribly and tragically inevitable. ■

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