

January 28, 2002

The State of the Union

President Bush will be correct tomorrow night to emphasize that the fundamental task of government is to protect the republic. If defense and security spending must go up in order to achieve this end, then we citizens had better be willing to pay taxes sufficient to make that possible.

Even today, however, before any spending increases, the state of the union as measured by defense capability is exceedingly strong. The president will not have to report that we are threatened by foreign aggression because our military has crumbled or fallen behind that of other nations and alliances.

If defense and security are fundamental, the question that follows is this: fundamental to what? This is the question that brings into view the wider horizon of the State of the Union address. Given the president's most recent speeches and those of many congressional leaders, it is likely that our union will be described preeminently as "an economy." In other words, a strong defense is fundamental for a flourishing economy. First fight terrorism, then secure jobs and promote economic growth.

But this is too narrow a view. Americans do indeed have an economy, but we also have families, schools, and countless associations for cooperation, fellowship, and service. Government's chief aim should not be economic growth, but justice for all—for all that we are, including our economy. Defense and security are fundamental, in other words, for a just and well-balanced republic.

With this in mind, I believe the president should focus his and Congress's attention on three goals that would strengthen the union where it is now weak.

First, the president should return to the underlying theme of his faith-based and community initiative. What is fundamentally at stake here is not simply encouraging government and citizens to do more to care for the poor and needy. The weakness in our union at present is due to confusion and unnecessary disagreement over the very meaning of religious freedom. The president's original plan had nothing to do with promoting discrimination or encouraging the imposition of religion on those who don't want it. To secure a just republic, there must be equal treatment of all faiths and philosophies in public as well as in private life. Our union will grow more divided, its poor may become poorer, and its communities may be further weakened if the president and Congress do not enact legislation that insists on the equal treatment of all social-service organizations. It is time to end discrimination against self-acknowledged religious organizations because they refuse to secularize themselves.

Second, our republic must be strengthened to lead more effectively in the shrinking globe. There is more to life beyond as well as within our borders than military accomplishments and economic management. A just republic must work for a just world. The president should highlight the ways in which our developing relationship with China, our involvement in the Middle East, and our dealings with Muslim countries will aim to promote justice and not only economic growth and the stifling of terrorism.

And third, the president should lead Congress in a long-term program to secure the environment. Nothing could be more fundamental to our republic's long-term well-being than the defense of a healthy environment. If we need to spend tens of billions of dollars over 10-20 years to develop a missile-defense capability, then what about a quarter or an eighth of those many billions to secure wetlands, clean up air and drinking water, and help turn the country to the use of renewable energy sources.

The American republic's military security is strong; its sustainability as a just and well-balanced political union is not so certain. That is the challenge Congress and the president should address now.

—James W. Skillen, *President*

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