



President Bush Outlines Agenda At Home And Abroad

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In his fifth State of the Union address President Bush outlined an ambitious agenda for the year ahead, asking Congress to revamp Social Security, calling on Americans to help spread democracy throughout the world, and announcing that first lady Laura Bush will lead a new effort to help boys and girls resist the lure of gangs.

Delivered in front of a joint session of Congress and a national television audience, Mr. Bush said the Social Security program would go bankrupt if changes were not made.

"Social Security ... on its current path, is headed toward bankruptcy. And so we must join together to strengthen and save Social Security," the president said. Behind him Vice President Dick Cheney and House Speaker Dennis Hastert, and other Republicans in the chamber, clapped, but some Democrats booed.

Although the president said all options would be on the table, from increasing the retirement age -- currently 67 years -- to changing the way benefits are calculated, President Bush again pledged not to raise taxes or change benefits for those 55 years or older.

In addition, he said young people should be allowed to divert some of their Social Security contributions into personal investment accounts, a plan that has already met with resistance from Democrats.

"If you've got children in their 20s, as some of us do, the idea of Social Security collapsing before they retire does not seem like a small matter. And it should not be a small matter to the United States Congress," the president said.

In the Democrats' response to the State of the Union, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., called the personal accounts proposal, which rely to some extent on the stock market, "Social Security roulette" with a hefty transition cost of up to \$2 trillion.

"Democrats are all for giving Americans more of a say and more choices when it comes to their retirement savings. But that doesn't mean taking Social Security's guarantee and gambling with it. And that's coming from a senator who represents Las Vegas," said Reid.

Foreign policy

With the annual speech coming just three days after a successful election in Iraq, the president pledged continued support for the American mission.

"We will increasingly focus our efforts on helping prepare more capable Iraqi security forces, forces with skilled officers, and an effective command structure," Mr. Bush said.

But the president refused to say when American troops would come home.

“We will not set an artificial timetable for leaving Iraq, because that would embolden the terrorists and make them believe they can wait us out,” he said.

Success in Iraq would mean “a country that is democratic, representative of all its people, at peace with its neighbors and able to defend itself,” Mr. Bush said.

Some Republicans waved purple ink stained fingers in solidarity with the Iraqis who voted Sunday -- in Iraq, the ink was used to indicate those who had cast ballots so that they could not vote twice, but the mark also became a symbol of pride in democracy.

In other foreign policy areas, the president pledged continued American support for the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, asking Congress for \$350 million to support the Palestinians under their new president Mahmoud Abbas.

“The goal of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace is within reach -- and America will help them achieve that goal,” he said.

To counter criticism that his agenda was selective in promoting freedom, the president encouraged two allies with autocratic governments -- Saudi Arabia and Egypt -- to work to reform.

Mr. Bush had harsher words for the leaders of two other Middle East nations, demanding that Syria stop harboring terrorists and that Iran stop its nuclear development program. He told Iranian dissidents that “as you stand for your own liberty, America stands with you.”

Legislative laundry list

The 53-minute address also contained Mr. Bush’s legislative laundry list -- issues and programs that he’d like to see addressed in this year’s Congress. They included overhauling the tax code to make it simpler, changes in immigration law, restrictions on medical malpractice suits, as well as a new three-year initiative to be led by his wife, Laura Bush, to “keep young people out of gangs.”

Mr. Bush also pledged support for a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as between a man and a woman and repeated his belief in a “culture of life.”

The president then left Thursday on a five-state, two-day trip to put pressure on Democratic lawmakers in North Dakota, Montana, Nebraska, Arkansas and Florida to accept restructuring Social Security.

-- Compiled from wire reports and other media sources

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