

RE TAIWAN: BUSH FAVORS DEMOCRACY -- SELECTIVELY

By Don Feder

President George W. Bush denied his own doctrine (democracy is good for people everywhere) when he slammed the government of Taiwan for allowing its people to express themselves on a crucial matter.

In the Middle East, the president's motto is: Democracy cures all ills. Last month, Bush told the region's rulers that the key to peace and prosperity is respect for civil liberties and popular sovereignty.

But when it comes to the Far East, far from being the road to salvation, apparently, democracy is a dangerous provocation -- in the eyes of this president.

In the course of Tuesday's state visit by Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, Bush took the unusual step of denouncing democracy in action. In answer to a question from the press, the president complained, "The comments and actions made by the *leader* of Taiwan indicate that that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo, which we oppose."

Bush couldn't even bring himself to refer to Chen Shui-bian as Taiwan's president, notwithstanding that -- unlike the venerable Wen -- Chen was democratically elected to the office he holds. In 1996 and again in 2000, Taiwan's president was chosen by a direct vote of the people.

The media described Bush's pronouncement as an effort to forestall a declaration of Taiwanese independence.

But the "comments and actions" the president referred to have nothing whatsoever to do with "unilaterally changing the status quo" in the Taiwan Straits.

Chen has called for a national referendum, to coincide with the March 2004 presidential election, on whether the Taiwanese consider the missiles Beijing is aiming at them a threat to their peace and security. It would give the free people of Taiwan an opportunity to demand that China stop trying to bully them.

The mainland's communist rulers have targeted Taiwan with 496 ballistic missiles (all at sites within 600 kilometers of the island). That number is growing by 50 to 75 a year.

President Bush could have denounced this ballistic blackmail as a danger to the "status quo" in that part of the world. He could have called for their immediate redeployment. Instead, he ignored China's provocation and hailed the People's Republic as our "partner in diplomacy." (This is only slightly less ludicrous than Clinton calling Beijing America's "strategic partner.")

The president's posture is shaped by the belief that Beijing will help us reduce our enormous trade deficit with it (\$120 billion a year and growing) in time for next year's election. Our state department also believes the People's Republic is the key to convincing North Korea to abandon its nuclear program.

Both are false hopes. China, which is adept at manipulating Westerners, holds out the promise of cooperation – which somehow never materializes.

In meetings with the Bush economic team, Wen suggested that the problem wasn't American imports of Chinese products, but not enough US exports to China – which (he neglected to mention) the PRC artfully blocks with various controls and regulations. As for Kim Jong Il's nuclear program, Wen informed us that – so sorry -- North Korea is not as yet ready for talks with America, South Korea and Japan.

Thus, China holds out illusory carrots. In return, we take a stick to our real friends in the region – the Taiwanese.

Now China knows Taiwan isn't about to declare its independence (a de facto reality for more than 50 years). But it dreads any expression of popular sentiment on the island.

It is democracy, not sovereignty, which sends China's Marxist mandarins into a frothing frenzy. During the island's 1996 election, Beijing fired missiles into Taiwan's shipping lanes to express its outrage over letting

Chinese people anywhere choose their leaders. It is terrified lest the Taiwan democratic miracle someday spread to the mainland.

The policy of the People's Republic is to isolate Taiwan -- to force international organizations and the rest of the world to pretend that this nation of 23 million (with the world's 18th largest economy) doesn't exist.

This spring, while SARS ravaged the island, China once again blocked Taiwan's entry into the World Health Organization. In September, it prevailed on its allies at the United Nations to prevent a vote on a resolution establishing a study committee to consider Taiwan's membership in the world body.

Taiwan's international isolation is potentially lethal. But so are words of appeasement by Western leaders.

Beijing has learned that its bad behavior pays diplomatic dividends. It targets Taiwan with almost 500 missiles, a number augmented each year. When Taiwan's president calls for a referendum to gauge popular opinion on this aggression, Chinese generals warn that Chen is moving the island toward the "abyss of war."

And what does the leader of the free world do? Instead of denouncing a military provocation and condemning the mainland's warmongering, he takes a swipe at Taiwan for the grievous offense of engaging in democracy -- trying to determine popular opinion on a matter that intimately affects the Taiwanese. Perhaps he'd prefer Taipei to follow the formula of the People's Republic -- tell the people what they think, then shoot dissenters.

For decades, the United States has pursued a policy termed "strategic ambiguity" regarding Taiwan and China, which goes something like this:

- 1) The US recognizes that there is one China, and both Taiwan and the mainland are part of that undefined entity.
- 2) Washington opposes a formal declaration of Taiwan's independence.
- 3) But America also insists that the conflict be resolved peacefully and asserts it will intervene militarily if China attempts to achieve "reunification" by force. That was the intent of the 1979 Taiwan

Relations Act, which said the US would do what was necessary to preserve freedom in Taiwan. Once upon a time, Bush understood the morality of that course. Shortly after coming to office, in April 2001, the president said in a television interview that America had an obligation to do “whatever it took” to help Taiwan defend itself.

But the new Bush policy (Taiwanese democracy is a threat to stability) is a dangerous modification of a doctrine that has served us well for three decades. Conservative leader Gary Bauer, a White House domestic policy advisor to Ronald Reagan, warns, “Bush’s chastisement of Taiwan ... *and the policy change it reflects* is a disaster.”

China could take Bush’s comments to mean that if Taiwan does something it considers sufficiently provocative, the United States might look the other way if it initiates force. This is not the sort of signal you want to send to a bunch of trigger-happy tyrants.

Bush finds it easier to get tough with a democracy than to confront a totalitarian regime, or terrorists masquerading as a liberation movement – witness his propensity to criticize Israel for the measures it takes to enhance its security.

Because their elected leaders ultimately are answerable to the people, democracies are easier to influence than dictatorships. But unlike the latter, the former don’t start wars, invade neutrals or persecute their own people. Democracies need no warnings to refrain from making unilateral changes in the status quo -- dictatorships do.

Perhaps the most ironic aspect of Wen’s visit was when Bush took his guest to the Lincoln bedroom and showed the No. 2 man in the thugocracy a handwritten copy of the Gettysburg address. Wen then proceeded to cite Lincoln’s efforts to thwart Southern succession to justify Beijing’s aggressive actions to keep Taiwan from separating from the mainland “under the signboard of democracy.”

Only a communist bureaucrat could make such a strained analogy with a straight face. The South wasn’t separate from the Union for the century before the Civil War. (From 1896 to today, Taiwan was ruled by the mainland for approximately 4 years -- by Chiang Kai-shek’s

Nationalist government at the end of World War II.) The South fought to preserve slavery. Taiwan struggles to preserve the freedom of its people.

And, by the way Mr. Wen, how is Lincoln's "government of the people, by the people, for the people" doing in the so-called People's Republic – where the people are sovereign in name only? Government of the people is alive and well in Taiwan.

Bush's new Taiwan doctrine will subject his crusade for democracy in the Third World to withering contempt. Democracy is good – except for the Taiwanese? A vote by the free citizens of this thriving democracy on a matter that vitally affects them indicates a willingness "unilaterally to change the status quo"? Absent a change of course, our president is in serious danger of being laughed off the world stage.