

# State of the Union 2006

## Reform Jewish Leaders Respond



President Bush's fifth State of the Union address, delivered last night, highlighted the President's priorities for the coming year. Covering both domestic and international concerns, President Bush's speech ranged from Iraq to education, from Israel to combating AIDS. Below, leaders of the Reform Jewish Movement comment on the 2006 State of the Union speech.

### **Civil Rights – Rabbi David Saperstein, Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism**



Both President Bush and Governor Tim Kaine began their speeches by remembering the life of Coretta Scott King. Mrs. King was a pioneer of the civil rights movement for over half a century, dedicating her life to the work of social justice. We urge the President and Congress to honor the memory of both Coretta Scott King and Dr. Martin Luther King by reauthorizing the Voting Rights Act and ensuring the protection of equal rights for Americans of every race.

The 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) put an end to the legal and widespread disenfranchisement of minority voters, eliminating the use of literacy tests, poll taxes, intimidation, threats, and even violence. Thanks to the VRA, drafted in the building that is home to the Religious Action Center, minority communities were finally empowered in local, state, and federal elections. The President has acknowledged general support for the reauthorization of the VRA and I have had the opportunity to speak briefly with him about its scope.

Important provisions of the VRA that ensure that no eligible voter is turned away from the polls are set to expire in 2007 unless they are reauthorized. Among the provisions being considered for reauthorization are Section 5 of the Act, which requires federal "pre-clearance" before specific jurisdictions with a history of restricting minority voting rights can make changes in their current voting practices or procedures. It also grants the Department of Justice the authority to appoint federal observers to monitor elections to ensure that they are conducted in a fair manner. For 40 years, the pre-clearance provisions have protected voting rights across our nation, and without them, we risk disenfranchising vulnerable members of our population. Other provisions being considered for reauthorization require certain jurisdictions to provide bilingual assistance to voters whose first language is not English, ensuring that every eligible voter is able to cast an informed and understood vote.

We call on President Bush and Congress to work together to reauthorize the Voting Rights Act so that all Americans can continue to live the Kings' dream of equality in our land.

### **Youth/ Education – Jordyn Jacobs, Social Action Vice President, National Federation of Temple Youth**



We applaud the President's focus on America's youth and education system and his call for significant investment in training physical science teachers. But for such efforts to achieve their goals, Congress and the Administration must strengthen the No Child Left Behind Act by ensuring adequate funding levels so that our nation sees educational achievement of which we can truly be proud. Those achievements must be measured not only through statistics, but through the growth of our nation's young people into responsible citizens who are contributing positively to their communities. We are told in the Talmud "By the breath of children God sustains the world" (Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 119b). We must ensure that our children have the educational resources to sustain the world they inherit, and ultimately will pass on to their children.

## Bioethics – Rabbi Richard Address, Director, URJ Department of Jewish Family Concerns



Since early in his first term, President Bush has struggled with the issue of stem cell research, outlining his initial policy in an August 2001 speech that limited federal funding of such research. Last night's speech further addressed bioethical issues, and called for legislation to prohibit human cloning. Since some cloning involves the use of embryonic stem cells, any ban is likely to interfere with valuable scientific research in related areas.

The Union for Reform Judaism supports government funding for research using both adult and embryonic stem cells, in addition to the existing lines currently approved for funding. Furthermore, the URJ opposes "efforts to restrict or penalize scientists, clinicians, or patients for participating in stem cell research and SCNT technology for therapeutic purposes." When done in a moral fashion, many bioethicists and Jewish scholars have made strong arguments for therapeutic cloning.

The Reform Movement believes strongly in the promise that stem cell research holds for finding a cure or treatment for conditions including breast and prostate cancer, leukemia, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, spinal cord injuries and Huntington's chorea. It also holds the potential to repair and regenerate human tissues, nerve cells, and skin cells.

As President Bush said, "Human life is a gift from our Creator." For that reason, we look to use the wisdom God has given us to fulfill the commandment of *pikuach nefesh*, the saving of lives. As we are taught in the Talmud, "One who saves one life, it is accounted as if a world is saved."

## Ethics – Rabbi Harry Danziger, President, Central Conference of American Rabbis



As Washington continues to address the repercussions of the recent disclosure of lobbying abuses, President Bush used the State of the Union speech to highlight the need for reform and to call on our elected officials to uphold the public trust.

Deuteronomy 16 states, "You shall not judge unfairly: you shall know no partiality; you shall not take gifts, for gifts blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just." As members of Congress consider reform legislation, they would do well to remember that true reform begins at the root of the problem. The Reform Movement has long supported efforts to improve transparency and accountability government, particularly through campaign finance reform. The 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act was an important, but not a sufficient step, in improving our campaign finance process. Further measures, such as increased public financing, will create a more open and equal playing field in state, congressional and presidential elections. Only through such reform can we create a system that truly speaks to the needs of all Americans and of which all Americans can be proud.

## Energy and Environment – Judge David Davidson, Union for Reform Judaism Board of Trustees



The State of the Union speech took important steps toward recognizing the United States' dependence on foreign oil as one of the country's major national security challenges. Yet the proposals offered by the President, including zero-emission coal plants and hydrogen cars, are long-term efforts, and must be accompanied by immediate solutions. While many experts are skeptical of a focus on hydrogen, there is widespread agreement that increasing CAFE standards would have the most significant short-term impact, reducing our energy consumption and improving our environment.

The U.S. holds 2% of the world's population, yet we are among the world's top producers of harmful carbon dioxide emissions that are causing climate change. If we are to heed God's warning, "Be mindful then that you do not spoil and destroy My world, for if you spoil it, there is no one after you to repair it." (Kohelet Rabbah 7:13), we must recognize the immediate dangers posed by our consumption of oil and the corresponding impact of climate change

(including global warming) - the issue understood by the Reform Movement to be the most serious environmental threat facing our planet today.

Any effective energy plan must be accompanied by measures such as raising CAFE standards, investing in renewable energy, and calling for hard caps in greenhouse gas emissions.

### **Economic Justice and Health Care – Mark J. Pelavin, Associate Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism**



President Bush characterized the U.S. economy as “healthy and vigorous.” While citing positive job growth statistics, those numbers mask continuing problems in our economy that go beyond employment to issues of fair wages, rising health insurance costs and a growing income gap between high-income and middle/low income families.

Deuteronomy teaches us, “You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer... but you must pay him his wages on the same day, for he is needy and urgently depends on it (Deuteronomy 24:14-15).” Yet we have not raised the minimum wage since 1996, despite the fact that inflation has ensured that \$5.15 an hour simply does not buy what it did ten years ago.

From President Bush’s job figures to the latest statistics on the record numbers of medically uninsured Americans (46 million), it is clear that we are not doing enough to ensure the dignity and survival of Americans from all economic levels. New technology, medical liability reform, and increasing emphasis on private Health Savings Accounts each have their merits, but they are not sufficient and whatever benefits they bring will likely go mainly to those least in need—the able-bodied and the financially secure. Proposals to cut “nonsecurity discretionary spending”—that is, Medicare, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Insurance, and other programs benefiting elderly and low-income Americans—steer our society further toward a culture of inequality.

Our ability to invest in the social infrastructure of our nation depends on adequate resources to do so. The President’s adamant focus on making the tax cuts permanent, disproportionately benefiting the wealthy and leaving the poor and middle-class further behind, will maintain record deficits that will starve our nation of resources needed so desperately to address the problems.

We must act dramatically, supporting both a living wage for all Americans and universal health care. Our Jewish values compel us to acknowledge that our nation’s spending priorities are an indication of our values; compel us to recognize the dignity of workers; and compel us to fulfill our communal responsibility to ensure access to health care for all.

### **Reproductive Rights and Sexuality Education – Shelley Lindauer, Executive Director, Women of Reform Judaism**



President Bush’s State of the Union speech last night included mention of falling abortion rates and the President’s support for sexuality education. The Reform Jewish Movement has long been committed to ensuring women’s health and reproductive rights, as well as comprehensive sex education. As news reports indicate that fewer doctors are willing to risk their own lives by providing abortion services, we are troubled by the growing number of counties in which women are unable to obtain needed reproductive health services. Are abortion rates falling simply because women are being forced to carry unwanted pregnancies to term?

At the same time, the President’s support for abstinence education and failure to fund comprehensive sex education are deeply troubling. Studies indicate that abstinence-only programs often present medically inaccurate information, unsuccessfully use fear to keep teens from engaging in sexual activity, and present biased language about homosexuality and contraception. If the President is truly committed to reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies, he must support comprehensive sexuality education, which encourages abstinence and also addresses

issues relating to contraception, safe sex, peer pressure, and other issues of sexuality. America's men and women, children and adults, deserve comprehensive reproductive education and health care.

### **Iran – Barbara Weinstein, Legislative Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism**



We applaud President Bush's strong condemnation of the Iranian government's nuclear program and his deliberate call to the nations of the world to work together to ensure that Iran does not succeed in its attempts to obtain a nuclear arsenal. We share President Bush's concern about the threat posed by Iran to other nations in the region, including Israel, as well as the world at large. We remain firm in our commitment to ending the proliferation of nuclear weapons around the globe, and particularly those held by dangerous regimes, such as that of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose anti-Israel statements and anti-Semitism have so alarmed the world. We urge President Bush to continue to work with international leaders to end the threat posed by Iran's nuclear ambitions.

### **Israel – Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President, Union for Reform Judaism**



A significant portion of the State of the Union address was devoted to international concerns, including the recent parliamentary elections among the Palestinian people. We commend President Bush's caution concerning the results of that election and support his belief that "the leaders of Hamas must recognize Israel, disarm, reject terrorism and work for lasting peace." Only with such measures can the peace process resume, re-opening negotiations between Israel, the United States, and the Palestinian Authority to work toward a long-term solution for Israel and the Palestinians. But this is a goal, and we await the Administration's strategy as to how to engage with the Palestinians, strengthen Palestinian moderates, ensure humanitarian aid to the children and hungry there, move forward with the Roadmap, and respond to Israeli unilateral initiatives.

### **Domestic AIDS - Rabbi Marla Feldman, Director, Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism**



Reform Jews have long been engaged in the fight to combat domestic AIDS, and we applaud the President's important recommitment to this ongoing work. As the President stated, half of all AIDS diagnoses in the U.S. are among African Americans—additionally, many people infected with HIV in the United States are living in poverty and at any given time, one-third to one-half of all Americans with AIDS are either homeless or in imminent danger of losing their homes. We are encouraged that the President has drawn attention to the need to end waiting lists for AIDS medications in this country and to reauthorize the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act, which expired in September of last year. To fulfill the Biblical commandment not to stand idly by the blood of our neighbor, we must help to ensure continued support for over half a million needy Americans infected with this disease by supporting the renewal of the Ryan White CARE Act.

### **Immigration – Jane Wishner, Chair, Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism**



As Jews, we know well the experience of being immigrants in a strange land. Whether immigrants here or born in the United States, we Jews are eternally reminded of the importance of welcoming the stranger each time we read the words of Leviticus, "When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" [19:33-34].

We commend the President for his acknowledgement of the important role that immigrants play in our economy and society, and for his commitment to an immigration system that promotes the rule of law. As Congress considers immigration reform proposals, we urge adoption of a program of earned legalization for the millions of hard-working, undocumented migrants who would like to come out of the shadows of society and contribute openly and positively to our nation.

## Iraq – Robert Heller, Chairman, Union for Reform Judaism Board



As Reform Jews, we welcome the removal of Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and of the movement toward democracy in that nation that has suffered so greatly. However, our tradition demands that we approach the moral challenge of war with careful and critical consideration. Despite the President's assertion that the United States has made progress in Iraq, our Movement continues to express grave misgivings about the false intelligence claims on which the war was based and about the way in which the war has been conducted—the lack of planning for the invasion's aftermath, the inadequate supply of flak jackets and armored vehicles for American troops, the incidents of torture of detainees in United States' custody, and the slow pace that reconstruction of basic services for Iraqis has taken. While we support the President's ongoing commitment to combat terrorism, we have become concerned that the continued U.S. presence in Iraq, in fueling the insurgency, has left the world with more battle-hardened terrorists than have been arrested or killed, and we reiterate our call for more transparency regarding all aspects of the war and a clear exit strategy with specific goals for troop withdrawal.

## Global Poverty – Al Vorspan, Director Emeritus, Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism



The State of the Union speech included the President's plan to shape the global economic future. While we should all recognize that a State of the Union speech cannot address all issues, it should be noted in this context that there was little mention of the extreme poverty faced by billions of men, women, and children around the world. Poverty is contributing to the scourge of the AIDS pandemic, which has claimed nearly 30 million lives thus far. At the same time, 800 million people go hungry every day—300 million of them children; more than 1 billion people lack access to clean drinking water; and 2.6 billion live without decent sanitation.

President Bush must commit the United States to lead the global community in the fight against poverty, by supporting the Millennium Development Goals and meeting our commitment to those goals; by contributing our share of the world's wealth to combating AIDS; and through debt cancellation. We must also support access to essential medicines; local food production; environmental integrity (including combating global warming); the livelihoods of farmers; and a just system of international trade that protects labor rights.

## Conclusion

The State of the Union speech outlined an array of domestic and international initiatives that the Administration and Congress will be focusing on in the coming year. Our Movement will continue to advocate on behalf of policies that are faithful to the principles of *tikkun olam*, repair of the world, and we look forward to working with you on these and other issues of social justice.



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