

## Bush: U.S. is safer, 'world is changing for the better'

By Richard Benedetto, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — President Bush used his third State of the Union speech to preview an optimistic re-election campaign theme, telling a joint session of Congress and a national television audience Tuesday night that "the world is changing for the better" because of his administration's leadership and resolve.



President Bush delivers the final State of the Union address of his term Tuesday.

By Evan Vucci, AP

Bush said Americans are safer from terrorist attacks, the economy is getting better and the nation is living up to its charge to help neighbors in need.

But he said much remains to be done: "We have not come all this way through tragedy and trial and war only to falter and leave our work unfinished."

The unapologetic speech was designed to position Bush for the November elections. It came the day after Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry's win in the Iowa caucuses redefined the Democratic presidential race.

Bush, who spoke for 53 minutes, noted that 28 months have passed since Sept. 11, 2001, without an attack on American soil. "It is tempting to believe that the danger is behind us. That hope is understandable, comforting and false," he said.

On the domestic front, an area in which he is judged weakest by many Americans, the president proposed new job-training programs. He also:

- Urged Congress to make tax cuts enacted in 2001 and 2003 permanent to feed economic growth.
- Called for renewal of the USA Patriot Act, which gives the government sweeping powers to investigate suspected terrorists.
- Said a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage might be needed if "activist judges" continue "forcing their arbitrary will upon the people."
- Offered incentives to hold down health care costs and help families retain private health insurance.
- Vigorously defended the war in Iraq. Last year, Bush said there was "no doubt" that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. This year, the president referred to "weapons of mass destruction-related program activities."
- Defended his decision to go to war without United Nations approval. "America will never seek a permission slip to defend the security of our country."

Speech watchers in a USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll gave Bush high marks for his policies on terrorism and taxes. He was most effective in changing minds on Social Security and health care. Before the speech, 47% thought his Social Security policies would move the country in the right direction; that rose to 59% after the speech. The percentage who felt his health care policies would move the country in the right direction rose to 63% from 48%. The poll of 381 people reflected a viewing audience sympathetic to Bush,

with 46% Republican, 28% independent and 26% Democrat.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle delivered the Democratic response to the speech. Pelosi criticized Bush's "go-it-alone foreign policy." Daschle said the president's tax cuts benefit the wealthy, fail to create jobs and create huge deficits.

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