

It's Lonely At The Top: W's Foreign Policy

Nathan Schulman

America today lives in an unparalleled time and fashion. With staggering power, simmering in intensity, it has become the dominating global player, unmatched since the Roman Empire. Carving a foreign policy from within these circumstances is certainly a daunting task, prone to risk and mistakes. Nonetheless, post cold-war containment and victory, a certain jubilation held court. In a self-congratulatory embrace, an “end of history” was proclaimed (Fukuyama). Thoroughly bloody century aside, history, it was asserted, had now come to a logical termination of value struggles. As far as systems of governments go, there was no debate—capitalist liberal democracy had won. Thus, the chug and charge of globalization would continue on its merry way. The unheralded attacks of September 11th struck down this consensus, as they did so much else. As the old international order had ended in 1989, so too was it now reborn. Always unique among nations, the US now wondered about a reluctant burden it felt it must shoulder. Under any administration, distinctly bold actions would have been taken in 9/11’s aftermath. Few though could have estimated the dramatic shifting of international affairs undertaken by the Bush administration. The move into a second war with Iraq most clearly signified the enactment of the country’s new direction, codified as the Bush Doctrine. A radical reframing of foreign policy, it moved away from a liberal internationalism of the past and in its place shifted to an experimentally pre-emptive, interventionist unilateralism. With a particularly controversial president, the United States now undergoes a level of questioning as polarizing as it is important. Is the unilateralism of the George W. Bush presidency right for America?

At the initiation of some new endeavor, especially one we would rather not have to shoulder, there can either be a lack of resolve, or an overblown counterpart. Finding the balance is the tough part. To do so, let us look at the Iraq war as the primary lens through which to analyze two varying schools of thought in foreign policy, their core beliefs, and how they deal with our new unilateralism.

The United States is the lone superpower currently left in the world. We are to the world what France's Foreign Minister deemed a "hyperpower" (Ash 25). America's advantage can be both overwhelmingly positive and exceedingly negative. Liberal Internationalism is one school of foreign policy that attempts to deal with both. Defined, this school is "a moderate, centrist internationalism that manages the international system through compromise, consensus, and international institutions" (Kupchan 2). Liberal internationalists embrace the ideals of negotiation as problem resolver. Less rash, they are the centrists of the old establishment, assertive of a "self-contained world of laws and rules and transnational negotiation and cooperation" (Kagan 1). Common interests being more important than differences, this line of theory is not opposed to force, but wary of self-promotion. The world being so entwined, preoccupation with solitary security is seen as too narrow a focus. Likewise, there is a widespread belief that a domineering presence on the global scale is unstable for the rest of the world, because opposing nations seek to counterbalance it, breeding inevitable conflict. So that power falls into balance, so that stability, justice and human rights prevail, the grand dream becomes that a worldwide interdependence will equate into a

“global community of shared interests” and worldwide cooperation (Brzezinski 1). Envisioning this move towards an enlightened, ‘perpetual peace,’ they see multilateral institutions as the best way to organize such cooperative processes (Kant 102). International agencies, they argue, “should check and complement American power” (Ash A25). Predicated on that, the United Nations, as the most venerable icon of international institutions of all, is seen as an end in and of itself. Hence our current commotion. Without broad support from the international community, America, as we all know, led an invasion into Iraq, in what UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan deemed an “illegal” act that contravened the UN charter (“Excerpts: Annan interview” 2). Saying “we cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best,” George W. Bush resoundingly thumped the multilateralism of liberal internationalist theory, finding it inapplicable (Bush, Graduation Speech 2). Asserting her singular power, America strongly diminished the UN’s, who now find itself in decline. To the liberal internationalist community at the least, and a good deal of the global community at large, America, in its drive to Baghdad, repudiated the authority of the United Nations, international law, and even more broadly a general architecture of multilateral dealings. Without compromise, a revolution took place. How could this all have come about?

When campaigning for President in 2000, George Walker Bush’s limited knowledge of foreign policy did little harm. Admittedly naïve in the area, foreign policy did not play a major role in his eventual election, as it rarely does. But Bush, seemingly someone lacking in vision, was to undergo a startling change. As “history has placed great demands on our country,” Bush formulated “a new

moral attitude” in its wake (Bush, *Outlines Steps* 3; Podhoretz 29). With an unblinking, universalist philosophy he developed principles that he would stick to under even the strongest duress. Upholding his universal morality with new, blanket expectations of freedom, Bush unveiled a foreign affairs doctrine on par in importance with Truman’s. He would go on to assert the soundness of his message repeatedly, particularly in the key idea that the strength of America lies in an America unbound (Daalder and Lindsay 1). He did so at a cost, however – through dismissing the wide-ranging and experimental nature of the principles, as well as the tension strife in their reception.

The Bush Doctrine sprung from a myriad of sources, but certainly the most debated and controversial is its neoconservative fountainhead. Neoconservatism developed from a group of liberal, largely Jewish intelligentsia in 1950’s New York, who, staunchly opposed to communism and counterculture, reaffirmed traditional moral virtues and American power. The godfathers of the neoconservative movement include Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz. Contemporarily speaking, neocon ideas about re-orienting how we take on emerging threats to international security have certainly proved influential. Believing the threat of Islamic fundamentalism is analogous to the past threat of Soviet communism, neocons sense history has thrust us into a defining moment. In their vision a new mold must be cast, people’s minds must be changed, and international institutions are simply not enough. Neoconservatives do not themselves fit into a mold of typical Conservative or American Jewish politics, and that alone draws suspicion, as does any outsider position. Nonetheless, neocons

are generally accepted to be on the frontlines today of the elite reformers of US foreign policy. Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and Douglas Feith are to name but a few of the neocon leaning Bush brass. Likewise, The American Enterprise Institute, Defense Policy Board, and The Project for A New American Century are a few of the wide-ranging and influential neocon think tanks of today. The expansion of this ideology is seen by its harshest critics as an agonizing delusion of grandeur and even its softer critics as a new course worth lamenting. The backlash has been rampant, the withering criticism virulent. Determining the true nature of the neoconservative role in the new American unilateralism is not infeasible, though it is particularly partisan. The ideology is definitely militarist and hard-line, but is it too extreme? Let's take a closer look at the tenets of the Bush Doctrine.

The Bush Doctrine was unfurled almost entirely at once, in a speech to a joint session of Congress, on September 20, 2001, and continued in a series of speeches continuing through the recent 2nd Inaugural Address. The four pillars of the Bush Doctrine, according to Norman Podhoretz are 1) "a new moral attitude," 2) "an equally dramatic shift in the conception of terrorism as it had come to be defined in standard academic and intellectual discourse," 3) "the assertion of our right to preempt," and 4) "the 'vision' of a (terrorism-opposing) Palestinian state living peacefully alongside Israel" (25-35). Encouraging the spread of liberties to as many other countries as possible feels noble, so why is the war on Terror so galvanizing? In my eyes, it's not the idea itself so much as its execution. In Bush's world, things are clear-cut, black and white, good and evil, with us or against us. This reeks of stagnant

absolutism. Europeans like to claim their approach, even in their liberal internationalism, is more sophisticated and nuanced. In this case, they're probably right. In our current stratosphere, we are defined more by who we are not than by who we are. We're not terrorists, of that we'll never be. But civilian deaths from US Bombs do not scream freedom to those affected, regardless of intent. Responses to terror can't wade into the same area, or even arena, because upon arrival, the argument becomes bereft of any moral meaning. This is what makes an Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay so troubling. In a clash between liberalism and its enemies, liberalism cannot degrade itself. It also should not be construed as arrogant, or self-righteous, as it does when Bush proclaims, "to all nations, we will speak for the values that gave our nation birth" (Bush, Inaugural Address 2). Worthy as they are, if our nation's values are to now include an integral promotion of democratization and liberalization, but primarily through force, how much hope can there ever really be? If neoconservatives are merely, as Irving Kristol once famously said, liberals "mugged by reality," should reality now not too remind them they themselves are idealists as well? (Gerson 73). Writers of doctrines needn't become doctrinaires.

The attempts of the liberal internationalist and neoconservative schools to assert and clarify just reasoning show that we are desperately trying to come to grips with what it now means to be American. Though the issues of our divisive push into the war with Iraq and its tumultuous post-war aftermath, we are trying to find our way. In the long run, attractive though it may be, believing capitalism and democracy are universal value systems, and that we have a special missions and the determination to promote them,

may appear not far enough removed from 19th century Manifest Destiny. At that time, it was thought that Christianity was a universal value system of which it was the particular mission of the US to Christianize the world. Just as God supposedly 'chose' Christians through a special contract to fulfill that manifest destiny, so too does history now 'choose' the American people, as developers of the first democracy and truly free market, and victim of the terrorist attacks which thrust us here, to bring these almost religiously noble things to the rest of the world. While this new position of ours goes beyond the older subordination of the past, it cannot completely distance itself from it. Iraqis did not welcome us with flowers as their liberators, regardless of the monstrosities committed by Saddam. Good intentions, even grand ones, have consequences we don't often understand at the time of their undertaking. We should strive not to avoid this complexity. Our power cannot be benevolent if it is produced more and more exclusively from a gun barrel, without effective soft power or diplomatic tact.

Works Cited

Ash, Timothy Garton. "The Peril of Too Much Power."
New York Times. 9 April 2002: A25.

Brzezinski, Zbigniew. "The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership." Carnegie Council. 25 March 2004. 8 Feb. 2005 [<http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/viewMedia.php/prmTemplateID/8/prmID/4424>].

Buchanan, Pat. "Colin Powell, Conservative?"
The American Conservative. 19 May 2003. 9 Feb. 2005 [http://www.amconmag.com/05_19_03/buchanan.html].

Bush, George Walker. "President Bush Delivers Graduate Speech at West Point." The White House. 11 Feb. 2005 [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>].

---. "President Outlines Steps to Help Iraq Achieve Democracy and Freedom." The White House. 11 Feb. 2005 [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/05/20040524-10.html>].

---. "President George W. Bush's Inaugural Address." The White House. 11 Feb. 2005 [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/inaugural-address.html>].

Daalder, Ivo, and James M. Lindsay. *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in American Foreign Policy*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2003.

“Excerpts: Annan interview.” BBC News. 13 Feb. 2005 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3661640.stm].

Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and The Last Man*. New York: Free Press, 1992.

Gerson, Mark. *The Neoconservative Vision: From the Cold War to the Culture Wars*. Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1996.

Kagan, Robert. “Power and Weakness.” *Policy Review* 113 (June/July 2002). *Power and Weakness - Policy Review*, No. 113. *Policy Review*. 5 Feb. 2005 [<http://www.policyreview.org/JUN02/kagan.html>].

Kant, Immanuel. “Perpetual Peace.” *Kant: Political Writings*. Ed. H.S. Reiss. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 102.

Kupchan, Charles. “The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-first Century.” *Carnegie Council* 27 Feb. 2003. 14 Feb. 2005 [<http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/printerfriendlymedia.php/prmID/876#2>].

Podhoretz, Norman. "WWIV: How It Started, What It Means, and Why We Have to Win." Commentary. Sept. 2004: 17-54.