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Think Again: Bush's Foreign Policy

Not since Richard Nixon's conduct of the war in Vietnam has a U.S. president's foreign policy so polarized the country -- and the world. Yet as controversial as George W. Bush's policies have been, they are not as radical a departure from his predecessors as both critics and supporters proclaim. Instead, the real weaknesses of the president's foreign policy lie in its contradictions: Blinded by moral clarity and hamstrung by its enormous military strength, the United States needs to rebalance means with ends if it wants to forge a truly effective grand strategy.

BY MELVYN P. LEFFLER | OCTOBER 23, 2009, 7:57 PM

"George W. Bush's Foreign Policy Is Revolutionary"

No. Bush's goals of sustaining a democratic peace and disseminating America's core values resonate with the most traditional themes in U.S. history. They hearken back to Puritan rhetoric of a city upon a hill. They rekindle Thomas Jefferson's vision of an empire of liberty. They were integral to Woodrow Wilson's missive that "the world must be made safe for democracy." They flow from Franklin Roosevelt's four freedoms. They echo the noble rhetoric of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, to "oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."

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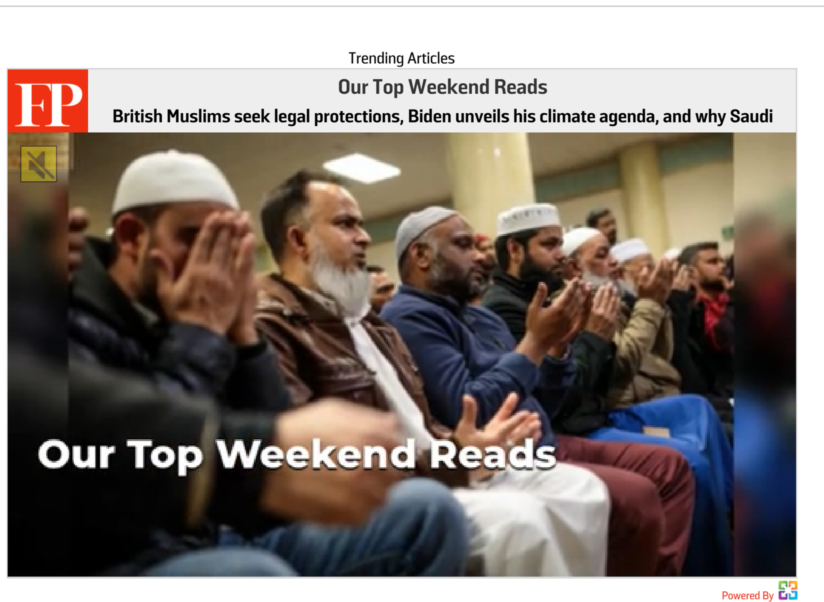

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Nor is unilateralism new. From America's inception as a republic, the Founding Fathers forswore entangling alliances that might embroil the fragile country in dangerous Old World controversies and tarnish the United States' identity as an exceptionalist nation. Acting unilaterally, the United States could prudently pursue its own interests, nurture its fundamental ideals, and define itself in opposition to its European forbears. This tradition is the one to which Bush returns.

Critics argue that Bush's "revolutionary" foreign policy repudiates the multilateralism that flowered after World War II and that served the United States so well during the Cold War. These critics have a point, albeit one that should not be exaggerated. The wise men of the Cold War embraced collective security, forged NATO, created a host of other multilateral institutions, and grasped the interdependence of the modern global economy. Nonetheless, they never repudiated the right to act alone. Although they reserved the option to move unilaterally, they did not declare it as a doctrine. They did precisely the opposite. Publicly, they affirmed the U.S. commitment to collective security and multilateralism; privately, they acknowledged that the United States might have to act unilaterally, as it more or less did in Vietnam and elsewhere in the Third World.

The differences between Bush and his predecessors have more to do with style than substance, more to do with the balance between competing strategies than with goals, with the exercise of good judgment than with the definition of a worldview. The perception of great threat and the possession of unprecedented power have tipped the balance toward unilateralism, but there is nothing revolutionary in Bush's goals or vision. The U.S. quest for an international order based on freedom, self-determination, and open markets has changed astonishingly little.

"The Bush Doctrine of Preemptive War Is Unprecedented"

Preemptive strikes to eliminate threats are a strategy nearly as old as the United States. Securing the nation's frontiers in its formative decades often required anticipatory action. When, for example, Gen. Andrew Jackson invaded Spanish Florida in 1818, attacked Indian tribes, executed two Englishmen, and ignited an international crisis, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams told the Spanish ambassador that Spain's failure to preserve order along the borderlands justified preemptive American action.

More overtly, President Theodore Roosevelt announced in 1904 that the United States would intervene in the Western Hemisphere to uphold civilization. Otherwise, he warned, the Europeans would deploy their navies to the hemisphere, seize national customs houses, and endanger U.S. security. Decades later, another president named Roosevelt renounced his distant cousin's corollary to the Monroe Doctrine and declared a Good Neighbor Policy. But Franklin Roosevelt did not eschew the preventive use of force. After war erupted in Europe, he deemed it essential to supply the European democracies with munitions and food. When Nazi submarines attacked the U.S. destroyer Greer in September 1941, Roosevelt distorted the circumstances surrounding the incident and declared, "This is the time for prevention of attack." Thereafter, German and Italian vessels traversing waters in the North Atlantic would do so "at their own peril." In one of his trademark fireside chats, Roosevelt explained his thinking: "[W]hen you see a rattlesnake poised to strike, you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him."

During the Cold War, preventive action in the Third World was standard operating procedure. If the United States did not intervene, falling dominos would threaten U.S. security. In other words, containment and deterrence in Europe did not foreclose unilateral, preventive initiatives elsewhere. The United States took anticipatory action to deal with real and imagined threats from Central America, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. In each case, policymakers employed the same rhetorical justification that Bush uses now: freedom.

Contrary to the public caricature, the Bush administration does not use preventive military action as its only — or even principal — tool. It has hesitated to act preventively in Iran and North Korea, calculating that the risks are too great. It acts selectively, much as its predecessors did. Vietnam, like Iraq, was a war of choice.

"Bush's Policies Are a Radical Departure from Clinton's"

What is striking about President Bill Clinton's foreign policy is that it actually increased U.S. military preponderance vis-à-vis the rest of the world. During the late 1990s, U.S. defense spending was higher than that of the next dozen nations combined. The overall goal, according to Clinton's joint chiefs of staff, was to create "a force that is dominant across the full spectrum of military operations — persuasive in peace, decisive in war, preeminent in any form of conflict."

Neither liberals nor neoconservatives want to acknowledge it, but the Clinton administration also envisioned the use of unilateral, even preemptive, military power. Prior to the September 11 attacks, the last strategy paper of the Clinton administration spelled out the nation's vital interests. "We will do what we must," wrote the Clinton national security team, "to defend these interests. This may involve the use of military force, including unilateral action, where deemed necessary or appropriate."

Clinton himself already had approved the use of preemptive force. In June 1995, he signed Presidential Decision Directive 39, regarding counterterrorism. Much of it remains classified, but the sanitized version is suggestive of a preemptive stance. The United States would seek to identify groups or states that "sponsor or support such terrorists, isolate them and extract a heavy price for their actions." And responding to al Qaeda attacks against U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, Clinton authorized the bombing in Sudan of the al-Shifaa chemical plant, which was suspected of manufacturing weapons for Osama bin Laden. Some in the White House raised concerns about the legality of preemptive bombings against a civilian target in a nation that had never threatened the United States. But National Security Advisor Sandy Berger made a compelling case: "What if we do not hit it and then, after an attack, nerve gas is released in the New York City subway? What will we say then?"

President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright talked nobly and worked tirelessly to preserve alliance cohesion and to enlarge NATO. Unlike Bush, they sought to contain and co-opt the mounting parochial nationalism in the United States, a nationalism that wavered between isolationism and unilateralism and that increasingly rejected international norms and conventions. But, notwithstanding these efforts, it was the Clinton administration, not Bush's, that appointed the bipartisan U.S. Commission on National Security in the 21st Century. This commission was chaired not by neoconservatives, but by former Democratic Sen. Gary Hart and by former Republican Sen. Warren Rudman (who is a moderate internationalist). The commission ruefully acknowledged that "the United States will increasingly find itself wishing to form coalitions but increasingly unable to find partners willing and able to carry out combined military operations."

In short, the preemptive and unilateral use of U.S. military power was widely perceived as necessary prior to Bush's election, even by those possessing internationalist inclinations. What Bush did after September 11 was translate an option into a national doctrine.

"September 11 Transformed the Bush Administration's Foreign Policy"

More than that, it transformed the administration's worldview. Prior to September 11, the Bush team prided itself on a foreign policy that embraced realism. American power, future National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice boldly declared during the 2000 presidential campaign, should not be employed for "second order" effects, such as the enhancement of humanity's well-being. Bush argued that freedom, democracy, and peace would follow from the concerted pursuit of the United States' "enduring national interests." This foreign policy would reflect America's character, "The modesty of true strength. The humility of real greatness."

The changes in the Bush administration's thinking and rhetoric after the terrorist attacks are therefore all the more striking. Heightened threat perception elevated the focus on ideals and submerged the careful calculation of interest. The overall goal of U.S. foreign policy, said the Bush strategy statement of September 2002, is to configure a balance of power favoring freedom. "Our principles," says the strategy statement — not our interests — will "guide our government's decisions... [T]he national security strategy of the United States must start from these core beliefs and look outward for possibilities to expand liberty."

In times of crisis, U.S. political leaders have long asserted values and ideals to evoke public support for the mobilization of power. But this shift in language was more than mere rhetoric. The terrorist attacks against New York and Washington transformed the Bush administration's sense of danger and impelled offensive strategies. Prior to September 11, the neocons in the administration paid scant attention to terrorism. The emphasis was on preventing the rise of peer competitors, such as China or a resurgent Russia, that could one day challenge U.S. dominance. And though the Bush team plotted regime change in Iraq, they had not committed to a full-scale invasion and nation-building project. September 11 "produced an acute sense of our vulnerability," said Rice. "The coalition did not act in Iraq," explained Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, "because we had discovered dramatic new evidence of Iraq's pursuit of WMD [weapons of mass destruction]; we acted because we saw the existing evidence in a new light — through the prism of our experience on 9/11." Having failed to foresee and prevent a terrorist attack prior to September 11, the administration's threshold for risk was dramatically lowered, its temptation to use force considerably heightened.

"Bush's Foreign Policy Has Inflamed Anti-Americanism Worldwide"

To be sure, anti-Americanism has plagued previous administrations. Violent demonstrations greeted Vice President Richard Nixon in various Latin American cities in 1958; so much rioting was expected in Tokyo in 1960 that President Dwight Eisenhower canceled his visit. In the late 1960s, the war in Vietnam aroused passionate anti-Americanism in Europe; so did President Ronald Reagan's decision more than a decade later to deploy a new generation of intermediate-range nuclear weapons.

But the breadth and depth of the current anti-Americanism are unprecedented. According to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, favorable attitudes toward the United States in Europe plunged during the last two years, dropping from 75 percent to 58 percent in Britain, from 63 percent to 37 percent in France, and from 61 percent to 38 percent in Germany. It's even worse in the Muslim world, where substantial majorities think the United States is overreacting to the terrorist threat and that Americans seek to dominate the world. Most worrisome of all is the reaction among "friendly" Muslim nations: 59 percent of Turks, 36 percent of Pakistanis, 27 percent of Moroccans, and 24 percent of Jordanians say that suicide bombings against Americans and Westerners are justified in Iraq.

In retrospect, these numbers are not surprising, given that heightened threat perception tempts U.S. officials to obfuscate interests and stake their policies on the universality and superiority of American values. Yet a careful calculation of interests is essential to discipline U.S. power and temper its ethnocentrism. There is no greater and sadder irony, perhaps even tragedy, that while Bush officials assert the superiority of American values, the overweening use of U.S. power breeds cynicism about its motives and distrust of its intentions. Indeed, preemption and unilateralism complicate the struggle against terrorism. Terrorism, at least in part, is spawned by feelings of revulsion against U.S. domination and by a sense of powerlessness and humiliation. Preventive wars and intrusive occupations intensify such sentiments and breed more terrorists. By elevating the hegemonic posture of the United States to official doctrine, these policies make the United States and its citizens even more attractive targets for terrorists. According to recent State Department data, terrorism is waxing, not waning.

"The Bush Administration Has the Right Strategy but Implements It Badly"

Strategy links means to ends, designing tactics capable of achieving goals. Bush's foreign policy is vulnerable to criticism not because it departs radically from previous administrations, but because it cannot succeed. The goals are unachievable because the means and ends are out of sync.

Rice says the Bush administration's strategy rests on three pillars: First, thwarting terrorists and rogue regimes; second, harmonizing relations among the great powers; third, nurturing prosperity and democracy across the globe. But the effort to crush terrorists and destroy rogue regimes through preemption, hegemony, and unilateralism shatters great power harmony and diverts resources and attention from the development agenda. An effective strategy cannot be sustained when the methods employed to erect one pillar drastically undermine the others.

Consider, for instance, Bush's quest for a democratic peace. He says that peoples everywhere, including the Middle East, yearn for freedom and coexistence. The democratic peace theory, which postulates that democratic societies do not wage war against one another, is appealing. But the war on terrorism, as presently conceived, makes it more difficult to democratize the Arab world. Waging preventive wars requires basing rights throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. To satisfy its military needs, the United States must sign agreements with and support repressive, even heinous, regimes that despise democratic principles.

Democratizing the Middle East is a noble goal, but it is one unlikely to be achieved through unilateral initiatives and preventive war. Democratization requires far more resources, imagination, and patience than the Bush administration, or perhaps any U.S. administration, is willing to muster. The ends of Bush's foreign policy cannot be reconciled with domestic priorities that call for lower taxes. A recent Rand Corporation study concludes that the most important determinants of a successful occupation are related to the "level of effort — measured in time, manpower, and money." Bush's domestic agenda simply does not allow for this level of effort, and he shows no inclination to alter his programs at home in order to effect his strategic vision abroad.

"Bush Is Reagan's Heir"

But is that a good thing? Bush and his advisors love to identify themselves with Reagan. Bush, like Reagan, says Rumsfeld, "has not shied from calling evil by its name...." Nor has he been shy about "declaring his intention to defeat its latest incarnation — terrorism." Moral clarity and military power, Bush believes, emboldened Reagan and enabled him to wrest the initiative from the Kremlin, liberate Eastern Europe, and win the Cold War.

Yet most scholars of that period interpret the past differently. They know that the most successful and far-reaching initiatives of the Cold War came in its early years, long before the Reagan military buildup. In 1947, President Harry Truman and his advisors grappled with agonizing trade-offs and chose to meet the Soviet threat in Europe with reconstruction rather than a massive arms buildup. They were initially guided by diplomat George F. Kennan, who warned against military thinking, overcommitments, and ideological rhetoric. He did not talk about remaking and refashioning other societies, but of containing and reducing Soviet power and invigorating U.S. domestic institutions.

In 1950, the national security document NSC-68 institutionalized the emphases on moral clarity and military prowess. Prompted by the Soviet acquisition of atomic capabilities, the onset of McCarthyism, and then the outbreak of the Korean war, NSC-68 accentuated the ideological war and accelerated the arms race. But moral clarity and ideological purity made it difficult to assess threats and understand the international environment. Blinded by ideology, U.S. officials found it difficult to discern the Sino-Soviet split and to grasp the roots of revolutionary nationalism in the Third World. In the early 1980s, moral clarity prompted Reagan to assist repressive rightist regimes in Central America. Cold War thinking encouraged him to support Saddam Hussein in Iraq. And subsequent triumphalism over the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan led Reagan's heirs to ignore the ensuing turmoil and the emergence of a Taliban theocracy.

Nor do scholars readily agree that Reagan's arms buildup and rhetorical pronouncements brought victory in the Cold War. In fact, the most thoughtful accounts of Reagan's diplomacy stress that what really mattered was his surprising ability to change course, envision a world without nuclear arms, and deal realistically with a new Soviet leader. And most accounts of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's diplomacy suggest that he was motivated by a desire to reform Communism, reshape Soviet society, and revive its economy, rather than intimidated by U.S. military power. Gorbachev was inspired not by U.S. democratic capitalism but by European social democracy, not by the self-referential ideological fervor of U.S. neoconservatives, but by the careful, thoughtful, tedious work of human rights activists and other nongovernmental organizations.

Bush and his advisors seek to construct a narrative about the end of the Cold War that exalts moral clarity and glorifies the utility of military power. Moral clarity doubtless helps a democratic, pluralistic society like the United States reconcile its differences and conduct policy. Military power, properly configured and effectively deployed, chastens and deters adversaries. But this mindset can lead to arrogance and abuse of power. To be effective, moral clarity and military power must be harnessed to a careful calculation of interest and a shrewd understanding of the adversary. Only when ends are reconciled with means can moral clarity and military power add up to a winning strategy.

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