

Reaganism v. Neo-Reaganism

Richard Lowry

SINCE THE end of the Cold War, conservatives have been at odds over the way forward for America in the world. September 11 and the new American orientation toward preventive defense have united most conservatives in strong support of President Bush, but have not clarified what it is exactly that conservatives believe about American grand strategy. Indeed, the picture has gotten muddier. The *New York Times* and other inartful observers characterize the conservative foreign policy choice as between the unmitigated crusading of a William Kristol or the rejectionist nativism of a Patrick Buchanan. This is a false dichotomy. It elevates flawed splinter schools of thought above the broad conservative foreign policy tradition.

The messianic vision of the neoconservatives and the rejectionist attitude of the paleoconservatives represent dueling fantasies. Neither is truly conservative. Both are impractical, bound to be unsuccessful in protecting America and unlikely to maintain public support. In fact, none of the three major foreign policy schools identified with the right—neo-, paleo-, or realist—fully captures a true conservative foreign policy. That foreign policy, and its major premises and practices, are hidden

in plain view in the practical policy of the Bush Administration.

Too Hot, Too Cold and Just Right

THE TERM “neoconservative” has dominated discussion of conservative foreign policy over the last few years primarily because of Iraq. Any supporter of the war has been lumped in with the neocons, a slippery label that is most reliably applied to the sort of idealistic crusading associated with the *Weekly Standard*. It is important to recall that prior neoconservative causes, whether braying against China in the 1990s or supporting John McCain’s presidential bid in 2000, were rejected by the conservative mainstream. Iraq was different. Most un-hyphenated conservatives supported the invasion. They did so for a host of strategic and moral reasons, and not just because it was thought Saddam possessed WMD. But neither they nor the broader American public would have supported the war on purely humanitarian grounds, as many of the neoconservatives would have done—something they made clear after WMD weren’t found in Iraq. For neocons, digging up mass graves was enough to justify the war.

Herein lies an important difference between neocons and conservatives. Almost all conservatives believe that American power can be a force for good,

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and they are unashamed about the aggressive use of that power in defense of national interests. The difference is over limits. Neoconservatives appear to believe U.S. military power can be wielded in almost any situation to produce exactly the results they desire, and that it is appropriate to wield it even in interventions with only an attenuated connection to U.S. national interest. As Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 1996, since “America has the capacity to contain or destroy many of the world’s monsters”, failing to do so is to endorse “a policy of cowardice and dishonor.”

Conservatives are more discriminating. As Charles Krauthammer has noted, an agenda of expanding the zone of open systems must be “targeted, focused and limited”—not a worldwide crusade, but one concentrated “in those regions where the defense or advance of freedom is critical” to vital U.S. interests.¹ Discrimination is the essence of pursuing this project—discrimination about how, where, why and when America is to use its power, especially its military power.

Much of the intra-conservative debate turns on this key question: the malleability of much of the world, and the suitability of the U.S. government as an agent for fundamentally changing it. Conservatives have a strong dose of Reaganite optimism but are also clear-eyed in their view both of human progress and of America’s ability to promote liberal values around the world. Since Burke, conservatives have sought just this balance between respect for reality as it exists and the possibilities for change.

Neoconservatism displays impatience at any reminder that the world is not infinitely plastic and that not all problems will break down under the solvent of American power. It assumes a universal admiration for America that does not exist, and it tends to dismiss the desire of local actors to have a say in how a project is carried out. For neoconservatives, liberal democ-

racy can be achieved simply by an American invasion, or a set of sanctions, or a ritual invocation of the policy of “regime change.” The government of China will fall as long as the United States doesn’t grant it “most favored” trading privileges. Proponents of such free trade are latter-day Neville Chamberlains (never mind that the rest of the world will keep trading with Beijing). Russian President Vladimir Putin will see the advantages of liberalism if President Bush just scolds enough. And regime change—as much a wish as a policy—is promulgated as the U.S. strategy for every nasty government in the world. Those who are skeptical of this strategy might, according to their rhetorical barbs, have a “casual animus” about U.S. power.

Responding to such skepticism, neoconservatives routinely invoke the experience of Germany and Japan for the proposition that societies can be remade by American power. But those were exceptional cases where the countries were smashed by the United States in total war. Neoconservatives never cite the Philippines at the turn of the century, a host of Latin American countries (where the United States repeatedly intervened with Wilsonian aims in the early 20th century), and the subjects of the humanitarian ventures of the 1990s—Haiti, Somalia and the Balkans. All of them disappointed to varying degrees the ability of the United States to remake them.

Iraq may well avoid joining this litany of frustrations. Despite the success of the January 30 elections, however, Iraq is still a testament to the difficulties of nation-building in a tribal society ravaged by three decades of tyranny. No credible discussion of conservative foreign policy can take place without a serious and honest accounting of post-invasion Iraq, which the neocons have assid-

¹“In Defense of Democratic Realism”, *The National Interest* (Fall 2004).

uously avoided, except for complaints about insufficient troop levels.

As John Nagl argues in his book, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, the British were quite successful at imperial policing because they were conditioned to accept less than 100 percent victories, had no illusions about the human timber with which they were working, and were always attuned to the idiosyncrasies and practical requirements of the cultures in which they were operating. It was an approach suffused with British empiricism, prudence and realism. These are the exact qualities for which neoconservatives often have a sneering contempt, preferring instead ideological grandiosity and sweeping moral universals.

Linked with this is a tendency to view foreign policy as a domestic political, philosophical and cultural project. Kristol and Kagan have maintained that the

remoralization of America at home ultimately requires the remoralization of American foreign policy. For both follow from Americans' belief that the principles of the Declaration of Independence are not merely the choices of a particular culture but are universal, enduring, "self evident" truths.

But conservatives have always maintained that young American men should be sent abroad to die and be maimed only if it serves an important national interest, not to remoralize ourselves at home. Nor do they believe that if democracy should fail to take root in Iraq—because of a host of cultural, religious and economic factors—this invalidates the Founding Principles of America's democracy.

SOME OF these points are echoed by the most bitter ideological enemies of the neocons—the so-called paleoconservatives associated with Patrick Buchanan. Yet the paleocons are more flawed. The libertarian-isola-

tionist tradition that the paleoconservatives and a few liberals seek to revive was marginalized in post-World War II conservatism from the start and soon died out as a political force. Indeed, the "paleo" in paleoconservatism is designed to obscure the fact that it is a recent ideological creation of post-Cold War politics.

If the "paleo" prefix is bogus, so in many ways is the "conservatism." The Buchananites' hostility to free trade violates the conservative faith in markets. Their belief that if the United States curls up in a defensive crouch, the world will leave it alone is naive, ahistorical and, especially after September 11, discredited. The United States never enjoyed any period of splendid isolation. The list of U.S. interventions prior to the Civil War is extensive; indeed, after the War of 1812, the United States pursued a unilateral policy of pre-emption and hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. Throughout the 20th century, America's responsibilities in the world inevitably grew with its power, and the conservative isolationism of figures such as Senator Robert A. Taft disappeared in the face of the imperative—deeply felt by virtually all conservatives—to confront the Soviet empire.

Finally, the arguments of the paleoconservatives are often tinged with anti-Americanism, or at least with a hostility to American power of the sort associated with the post-Vietnam Left. Some paleocons essentially blamed America and its support for Israel for 9/11. The *American Conservative*—to pick one example at random—ran an article comparing the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan to the Soviet occupation of that country, something that could have been ripped straight from the pages of the left-wing *Nation* (perhaps without the harsh words for the Soviets).

If neither neoconservatism nor paleoconservatism really represents American conservative views on foreign policy, neither does traditional realism. A policy rooted in amoral calculations of power and

interest—grand strategies associated with Richelieu, Metternich, Kissinger and others—will never sit comfortably with Americans. The falsity of the core belief of the academic realists, that the internal nature of regimes doesn't matter, is demonstrated before our eyes daily.

Nor, as Burke argued, is clinging mindlessly to the status quo in an ever-changing world true conservatism. George Will, for instance, lodges powerful criticisms against Wilsonianism. But he sometimes seems to take it as a given that undemocratic political cultures are fated to stay undemocratic. This view cannot account for the liberalization of Europe, Latin America and Asia, or indeed for the entire "third wave" of democratization that swept the Second and Third Worlds from the 1980s onwards.

There is no longer any need to have a stale debate on the role of values in American foreign policy. It was settled long ago: They have a central one. That has been the case since Woodrow Wilson, as even Henry Kissinger acknowledges, and has become even more pronounced as the Christian Right—a vital member of the GOP coalition—has taken a greater interest in the world from an idealistic perspective. The question is whether vital distinctions and limits will be ignored as unnecessary, amoral accretions on our national strategy. A foreign policy can be prudent and moral at the same time. Indeed, insofar as prudence creates the conditions for increased success, it will be more moral than an unrealistic but self-consciously moral foreign policy that costs the nation dearly.

As numerous authors have outlined in these pages, this necessarily ties conservative strategy to a kind of realist thinking. The term realism is routinely rendered in sneer quotes in neoconservative commentary, as if nothing could be more contemptible. Neoconservatives maintain that realists are in fact unrealistic, that they systematically underestimate the

power of idealism and the possibility of change in the world. There is something to this, but a conservative foreign policy begins with a keen sense of the contours of international reality, of the limits it places upon and the opportunities it holds for American power, and of the local conditions that must guide our actions in any part of the world. Prudence may never make for a rallying cry, but it is indispensable to a successful foreign policy.

A truly realistic foreign policy—and thus a truly conservative one—would be aware of the power of ideals and the necessity of expressing U.S. foreign policy in idealistic terms. It should have imagination and seek to shape the world to our advantage. But it should be prudent, flexible, aware of power relationships and immune to juvenile excess. It might be called "neo-realism", or what Krauthammer has termed "democratic realism."

Conservatives and Foreign Policy

SEVERAL BASIC principles guide a conservative foreign policy, grounded in realism and conservative understandings of liberty and the American character. The first is that the best defense is a good offense. Conservatives are realistic about the world and its disappointments and dangers. They know war has always been with us and always will be, and that there are foreign actors who are so evil, intransigent or ambitious that only force will stop them. They are comfortable with wielding power and realize its importance. The Bush Doctrine—of pursuing threats where they originate rather than waiting for an attack—is a sound one for the post-9/11 world and accords with this vein in conservatism.

The second, related to their realism about the world, is a healthy skepticism about government action. If conservatives are believers in the law of unintended consequences at home, they should be believ-

ers in it abroad as well. A bombing raid may not bear much relation to a welfare program, but foreign interventions—especially ones more ambitious than simply punishing or defeating a given enemy—will have the same dismaying tendency to go astray and so can never be undertaken lightly as prospective “cakewalks.”

This leads to the third bedrock principle: a healthy appreciation for all the instruments by which national power is projected. Conservatives have slipped—partly under the influence of the bully-boy rhetoric of the neocons—into a lazy contempt for diplomacy, allies and multi-lateral institutions. All are necessary tools in a foreign policy oriented toward the correct goals. All these tools can be grossly inefficient (such as unconditional foreign aid) or maddeningly corrupt (as evident in the UN Oil for Food scandal), or they can prompt unintended consequences worse than the problems they were created to solve. But the power of these tools and others cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Conversely, many neoconservatives place far too much reliance on the U.S. military—an inspiring faith that stems from admiration of the institution. While American military power is indubitably a force for good, it is important to understand its true strengths and its fundamental purpose—to smash enemies of the United States. To throw combat units into nation-building projects with little or no preparation, as has happened in Iraq, serves neither the end of successfully achieving our policy goals nor the interests of the military as an institution.

The fourth principle is a proper appreciation for the role of democracy in fostering liberty. Democratic elections in Afghanistan and Iraq have been useful—even inspiring—exercises. The Afghan elections provided a boost of legitimacy to the U.S.-favored leader there and served to further isolate Taliban and Al-Qaeda remnants. The January 30 vote in Iraq

gave Iraqis a jolt of confidence as they undertook a national project for which they had the chief responsibility—namely, showing up and voting—for the first time in decades. It satisfied the demands of the most powerful player in the country, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, and may have been the only way to create a government with enough legitimacy to navigate the country’s religious and ethnic tensions. But, as a general matter, elections by no means guarantee a liberal society.

Liberty is a creature of institutions and culture that must be built slowly over time. Economic liberty is often the precursor of political liberty. Some neoconservatives dismiss this as economic determinism. It is really a core belief of Anglo-American liberalism from Locke onward. Elections without a proper institutional and cultural grounding will not necessarily produce liberty—and in some cases they can be the least important ingredient in it. The rule of law and institutions bolstering non-electoral facets of constitutional liberalism have as much to do with liberty, prosperity and freedom as electoral democracy, a fact that should increase our patience for reforming authoritarian governments.

Indeed, if a U.S. intervention in a threat-producing region of the world can inspire the creation of unthreatening governments with political and economic systems that are benign versions of the region’s norms, that is a perfectly reasonable goal. If the minimal conditions of pluralism can be attained, along with enduring stability (another value neoconservatives blithely dismiss), then we should be satisfied. This is certainly more attainable than a strategy implicitly based on the singular and exclusive legitimacy of American-style democracy.

Finally, any conservative foreign policy must be grounded in American traditions, built on the four schools identified by Walter Russell Mead: the Wilsonians (the crusading idealists), Jacksonians (the

bloody-minded nationalists), Hamiltonians (the capitalists) and Jeffersonians (the lead-by-example-only idealists). Jacksonians are ignored at conservatives' peril, since they are such an important part of the conservative coalition, even if one without much in the way of intellectual expression. Their support is crucial for any sustained and difficult military intervention, and they will never support one for purely humanitarian reasons. This is why many of the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s were undertaken without formal congressional support, and why—absent the WMD case—it would have been difficult for Bush to muster support for an invasion of Iraq. It is also why Kristol and Kagan complained in the 1990s that the American public wasn't willing enough to go slay monsters willy-nilly, blaming "[w]eak political leadership and a poor job of educating the citizenry to the responsibilities of global hegemony."

Moreover, in these days of the all-volunteer force, it is the Jacksonians who are wearing the nation's uniform—especially in the combat branches. As military sociologists have noted, with an all-volunteer force, the combat branches of the military are increasingly the NASCAR warriors. These traditional members of America's fighting class do not shrink from sacrifice but want their losses incurred in pursuit of something enduring, important, practically attainable and related to American interests. Conservatives recognize that U.S. strategy is unsustainable if it is based on a Wilsonian elite's interventions that a Jacksonian citizenry will not sustain.

The Reagan Synthesis

SO A CONSERVATIVE foreign policy has a sober framework of power, appreciates the imperatives of geopolitics and harbors a guarded optimism about the power of change. It integrates into its fiber conservative notions of political liberty, economic free-

dom, the role of the state, the power of culture and a realistic appraisal of human nature, as well as sheer pragmatism. It is aggressive in conducting a proactive defense against today's threats and is colored by American exceptionalism, but its application is framed by realism's appreciation for power and its limits.

What would such a foreign policy look like in practice? Ronald Reagan provides a model. His foreign policy was enunciated with a ringing idealism. It was not, however, idealism for its own sake or one applied indiscriminately, but one with a specific purpose and grounded in power politics. It aimed at eroding and defeating a hostile world empire. His means were not mere words, but the sheer weight of U.S. power, augmented in a massive arms build-up designed to spend the Soviets into the ground. All the "tear down this wall" speeches in the world wouldn't have won the Cold War without this exercise in cold-blooded power politics.

If Reagan was willing to give a corrupt authoritarian a shove when the opportunity presented itself (for example, Marcos in the Philippines), he also depended on authoritarian regimes as crucial allies in the Cold War. He was willing to work with the material the international order presented him; he would not allow an unrestrained idealism to get in the way of prudence and necessity; and he understood how progress toward liberalization often occurs. It usually happens gradually, as less-than-savory regimes change over time in reaction to a variety of forces, from the growth of a middle class to the development of a free market to American diplomatic pressure. This practical policy, which had its theoretical foundation in Jeane Kirkpatrick's "Dictatorships and Double Standards", was condemned at the time by liberals who talked in the same sweepingly idealistic terms used by today's neoconservatives.

Reagan unapologetically called the Soviet Union evil. During the Cold

War's endgame, however, he worked diplomatically with its leader—circumstances changed and his policy changed with them. Indeed, Reagan's embrace of Gorbachev in the face of traditional conservative opposition to dealings with communists was a lesson in the entrepreneurial nature of modern conservative thinking. Conservatives do take chances—but not without a cold-eyed appreciation of all the dynamics at hand. If Reagan had a black-and-white worldview, its implementation came in shades of gray.

It is precisely this approach that needs to animate a conservative foreign policy today. A conservative grand strategy will support simple but durable steps towards order and security in many of the world's poorly governed places. It will not resist change and indeed will support policies to quicken it, as Reagan did in Central America and Eastern Europe in the 1980s. But wise conservatives also know that the U.S. military is an imperfect instrument for openly forcing such change on alien populations. They are willing to put American energy behind the effort to promote the emergence of roughly harmonious political and economic systems—rather than asking the U.S. military to create American-style democracies and judging success or failure by that exacting and unrealistic standard.

With a few exceptions, Bush is pursuing this kind of conservative policy. Consider his handling of Russia, which has been prudent and mindful of the limits of U.S. influence over Moscow—although not by any means mindlessly wedded to the status quo. The administration supported the Orange Revolution in Ukraine over Putin's objections. The central organizing theme of Bush's foreign policy—the Bush Doctrine, emphasizing the expansion of liberty abroad and preventive war as a last resort—is correct. The Bush Doctrine reflects a fundamental

belief in the goodness of American power and the necessity of its robust assertion around the world. The United States should be proactive in seeking to reshape an international order, especially in the Middle East, that produced the mass murder of 9/11. The expansion of liberty, constitutional liberalism and market-based economic systems will tend, although not inevitably or perfectly, to shape nations that respect the norms of civilized behavior and pose less of a threat to the United States. But the policy of achieving this goal will prudently reflect differing realities in countries from Pakistan to Iran and not one universal moral standard.

In the neocon over-interpretation, however, the Bush Doctrine becomes problematic. Yes, Bush's rhetoric—especially in his second inaugural address—suggests that the American model of democracy has universal validity and applicability. But in its grand sweep, the Bush rhetoric is just that—rhetoric, which he has not allowed to trump pragmatic considerations, whether with regard to Russia, China, the Central Asian republics or Saudi Arabia. Immediately after the inaugural, administration officials were out explaining the obvious—the administration's policy in the real world would remain largely unchanged. But the neocons often seem to take the rhetoric literally, as if the crooked timber of humanity can be straightened and emblazoned with the U.S. Bill of Rights.

It is crucial that the Bush Doctrine succeed. When it has indulged in neoconservative excess, as it has occasionally in its over-optimistic post-invasion approach to Iraq, it has teetered on the edge of failure. It is through Reaganite realism that Bush will navigate the world in a way that protects our interests, expands the zone of decency and makes us safer. For conservatives, this is the way forward for America in the world. □

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