

February 19, 2006

After Neoconservatism

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As we approach the third anniversary of the onset of the [Iraq](#) war, it seems very unlikely that history will judge either the intervention itself or the ideas animating it kindly. By invading Iraq, the Bush administration created a self-fulfilling prophecy: Iraq has now replaced Afghanistan as a magnet, a training ground and an operational base for jihadist terrorists, with plenty of American targets to shoot at. The United States still has a chance of creating a Shiite-dominated democratic Iraq, but the new government will be very weak for years to come; the resulting power vacuum will invite outside influence from all of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran. There are clear benefits to the Iraqi people from the removal of [Saddam Hussein's](#) dictatorship, and perhaps some positive spillover effects in Lebanon and Syria. But it is very hard to see how these developments in themselves justify the blood and treasure that the United States has spent on the project to this point.

The so-called Bush Doctrine that set the framework for the administration's first term is now in shambles. The doctrine (elaborated, among other places, in the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States) argued that, in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, America would have to launch periodic preventive wars to defend itself against rogue states and terrorists with weapons of mass destruction; that it would do this alone, if necessary; and that it would work to democratize the greater Middle East as a long-term solution to the terrorist problem. But successful pre-emption depends on the ability to predict the future accurately and on good intelligence, which was not forthcoming, while America's perceived unilateralism has isolated it as never before. It is not surprising that in its second term, the administration has been distancing itself from these policies and is in the process of rewriting the National Security Strategy document.

But it is the idealistic effort to use American power to promote democracy and human rights abroad that may suffer the greatest setback. Perceived failure in Iraq has restored the authority of foreign policy "realists" in the tradition of [Henry Kissinger](#). Already there is a host of books and articles decrying America's naïve Wilsonianism and attacking the notion of trying to democratize the world. The administration's second-term efforts to push for greater Middle Eastern democracy, introduced with the soaring rhetoric of Bush's second Inaugural Address, have borne very problematic fruits. The Islamist Muslim Brotherhood made a strong showing in Egypt's parliamentary elections in November and December. While the holding of elections in Iraq this past December was an achievement in itself, the vote led to the ascendance of a Shiite bloc with close ties to Iran (following on the election of the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran in June). But the clincher was the decisive Hamas victory in the Palestinian election last month, which brought to power a movement overtly dedicated to the destruction of Israel. In his second inaugural, Bush said that "America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one," but the charge will be made with increasing frequency that the Bush administration made a big mistake when it stirred the pot, and that the United States would have done better to stick by its traditional authoritarian friends in the Middle East. Indeed, the effort to promote democracy around the world has been attacked as an illegitimate activity both by people on the left like Jeffrey Sachs and by traditional conservatives like Pat Buchanan.

The reaction against democracy promotion and an activist foreign policy may not end there. Those whom Walter Russell Mead labels Jacksonian conservatives — red-state Americans whose sons and daughters are fighting and dying in the Middle East — supported the Iraq war because they believed that their children were fighting to defend the United States against nuclear terrorism, not to promote democracy. They don't want to abandon the president in the middle of a vicious war, but down the road the perceived failure of the Iraq

intervention may push them to favor a more isolationist foreign policy, which is a more natural political position for them. A recent Pew poll indicates a swing in public opinion toward isolationism; the percentage of Americans saying that the United States "should mind its own business" has never been higher since the end of the Vietnam War.

More than any other group, it was the neoconservatives both inside and outside the Bush administration who pushed for democratizing Iraq and the broader Middle East. They are widely credited (or blamed) for being the decisive voices promoting regime change in Iraq, and yet it is their idealistic agenda that in the coming months and years will be the most directly threatened. Were the United States to retreat from the world stage, following a drawdown in Iraq, it would in my view be a huge tragedy, because American power and influence have been critical to the maintenance of an open and increasingly democratic order around the world. The problem with neoconservatism's agenda lies not in its ends, which are as American as apple pie, but rather in the overmilitarized means by which it has sought to accomplish them. What American foreign policy needs is not a return to a narrow and cynical realism, but rather the formulation of a "realistic Wilsonianism" that better matches means to ends.

The Neoconservative Legacy

How did the neoconservatives end up overreaching to such an extent that they risk undermining their own goals? The Bush administration's first-term foreign policy did not flow ineluctably from the views of earlier generations of people who considered themselves neoconservatives, since those views were themselves complex and subject to differing interpretations. Four common principles or threads ran through much of this thought up through the end of the cold war: a concern with democracy, human rights and, more generally, the internal politics of states; a belief that American power can be used for moral purposes; a skepticism about the ability of international law and institutions to solve serious security problems; and finally, a view that ambitious social engineering often leads to unexpected consequences and thereby undermines its own ends.

The problem was that two of these principles were in potential collision. The skeptical stance toward ambitious social engineering — which in earlier years had been applied mostly to domestic policies like affirmative action, busing and welfare — suggested a cautious approach toward remaking the world and an awareness that ambitious initiatives always have unanticipated consequences. The belief in the potential moral uses of American power, on the other hand, implied that American activism could reshape the structure of global politics. By the time of the Iraq war, the belief in the transformational uses of power had prevailed over the doubts about social engineering.

In retrospect, things did not have to develop this way. The roots of neoconservatism lie in a remarkable group of largely Jewish intellectuals who attended City College of New York (C.C.N.Y.) in the mid- to late 1930's and early 1940's, a group that included Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Irving Howe, Nathan Glazer and, a bit later, [Daniel Patrick Moynihan](#). The story of this group has been told in a number of places, most notably in a documentary film by Joseph Dorman called "Arguing the World." The most important inheritance from the C.C.N.Y. group was an idealistic belief in social progress and the universality of rights, coupled with intense anti-Communism.

It is not an accident that many in the C.C.N.Y. group started out as Trotskyites. Leon Trotsky was, of course, himself a Communist, but his supporters came to understand better than most people the utter cynicism and brutality of the Stalinist regime. The anti-Communist left, in contrast to the traditional American right, sympathized with the social and economic aims of Communism, but in the course of the 1930's and 1940's came to realize that "real existing socialism" had become a monstrosity of unintended consequences that completely undermined the idealistic goals it espoused. While not all of the C.C.N.Y. thinkers became neoconservatives, the danger of good intentions carried to extremes was a theme that would underlie the life

work of many members of this group.

If there was a single overarching theme to the domestic social policy critiques issued by those who wrote for the neoconservative journal *The Public Interest*, founded by Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Bell in 1965, it was the limits of social engineering. Writers like Glazer, Moynihan and, later, Glenn Loury argued that ambitious efforts to seek social justice often left societies worse off than before because they either required massive state intervention that disrupted pre-existing social relations (for example, forced busing) or else produced unanticipated consequences (like an increase in single-parent families as a result of welfare). A major theme running through James Q. Wilson's extensive writings on crime was the idea that you could not lower crime rates by trying to solve deep underlying problems like poverty and racism; effective policies needed to focus on shorter-term measures that went after symptoms of social distress (like subway graffiti or panhandling) rather than root causes.

How, then, did a group with such a pedigree come to decide that the "root cause" of terrorism lay in the Middle East's lack of democracy, that the United States had both the wisdom and the ability to fix this problem and that democracy would come quickly and painlessly to Iraq? Neoconservatives would not have taken this turn but for the peculiar way that the cold war ended.

[Ronald Reagan](#) was ridiculed by sophisticated people on the American left and in Europe for labeling the Soviet Union and its allies an "evil empire" and for challenging [Mikhail Gorbachev](#) not just to reform his system but also to "tear down this wall." His assistant secretary of defense for international security policy, Richard Perle, was denounced as the "prince of darkness" for this uncompromising, hard-line position; his proposal for a double-zero in the intermediate-range nuclear arms negotiations (that is, the complete elimination of medium-range missiles) was attacked as hopelessly out of touch by the bien-pensant centrist foreign-policy experts at places like the Council on Foreign Relations and the State Department. That community felt that the Reaganites were dangerously utopian in their hopes for actually winning, as opposed to managing, the cold war.

And yet total victory in the cold war is exactly what happened in 1989-91. Gorbachev accepted not only the double zero but also deep cuts in conventional forces, and then failed to stop the Polish, Hungarian and East German defections from the empire. Communism collapsed within a couple of years because of its internal moral weaknesses and contradictions, and with regime change in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact threat to the West evaporated.

The way the cold war ended shaped the thinking of supporters of the Iraq war, including younger neoconservatives like William Kristol and Robert Kagan, in two ways. First, it seems to have created an expectation that all totalitarian regimes were hollow at the core and would crumble with a small push from outside. The model for this was Romania under the Ceausescus: once the wicked witch was dead, the munchkins would rise up and start singing joyously about their liberation. As Kristol and Kagan put it in their 2000 book *"Present Dangers"*: "To many the idea of America using its power to promote changes of regime in nations ruled by dictators rings of utopianism. But in fact, it is eminently realistic. There is something perverse in declaring the impossibility of promoting democratic change abroad in light of the record of the past three decades."

This overoptimism about postwar transitions to democracy helps explain the Bush administration's incomprehensible failure to plan adequately for the insurgency that subsequently emerged in Iraq. The war's supporters seemed to think that democracy was a kind of default condition to which societies reverted once the heavy lifting of coercive regime change occurred, rather than a long-term process of institution-building and reform. While they now assert that they knew all along that the democratic transformation of Iraq would be long and hard, they were clearly taken by surprise. According to George Packer's recent book on Iraq, *"The Assassins' Gate,"* the Pentagon planned a drawdown of American forces to some 25,000 troops by the end of the summer following the invasion.

By the 1990's, neoconservatism had been fed by several other intellectual streams. One came from the students of the German Jewish political theorist Leo Strauss, who, contrary to much of the nonsense written about him by people like Anne Norton and Shadia Drury, was a serious reader of philosophical texts who did not express opinions on contemporary politics or policy issues. Rather, he was concerned with the "crisis of modernity" brought on by the relativism of Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as the fact that neither the claims of religion nor deeply-held opinions about the nature of the good life could be banished from politics, as the thinkers of the European Enlightenment had hoped. Another stream came from Albert Wohlstetter, a Rand Corporation strategist who was the teacher of Richard Perle, Zalmay Khalilzad (the current American ambassador to Iraq) and [Paul Wolfowitz](#) (the former deputy secretary of defense), among other people. Wohlstetter was intensely concerned with the problem of nuclear proliferation and the way that the 1968 Nonproliferation Treaty left loopholes, in its support for "peaceful" nuclear energy, large enough for countries like Iraq and Iran to walk through.

I have numerous affiliations with the different strands of the neoconservative movement. I was a student of Strauss's protégé Allan Bloom, who wrote the bestseller "The Closing of the American Mind"; worked at Rand and with Wohlstetter on Persian Gulf issues; and worked also on two occasions for Wolfowitz. Many people have also interpreted my book "The End of History and the Last Man" (1992) as a neoconservative tract, one that argued in favor of the view that there is a universal hunger for liberty in all people that will inevitably lead them to liberal democracy, and that we are living in the midst of an accelerating, transnational movement in favor of that liberal democracy. This is a misreading of the argument. "The End of History" is in the end an argument about modernization. What is initially universal is not the desire for liberal democracy but rather the desire to live in a modern — that is, technologically advanced and prosperous — society, which, if satisfied, tends to drive demands for political participation. Liberal democracy is one of the byproducts of this modernization process, something that becomes a universal aspiration only in the course of historical time.

"The End of History," in other words, presented a kind of Marxist argument for the existence of a long-term process of social evolution, but one that terminates in liberal democracy rather than communism. In the formulation of the scholar Ken Jowitt, the neoconservative position articulated by people like Kristol and Kagan was, by contrast, Leninist; they believed that history can be pushed along with the right application of power and will. Leninism was a tragedy in its Bolshevik version, and it has returned as farce when practiced by the United States. Neoconservatism, as both a political symbol and a body of thought, has evolved into something I can no longer support.

The Failure of Benevolent Hegemony

The Bush administration and its neoconservative supporters did not simply underestimate the difficulty of bringing about congenial political outcomes in places like Iraq; they also misunderstood the way the world would react to the use of American power. Of course, the cold war was replete with instances of what the foreign policy analyst Stephen Sestanovich calls American maximalism, wherein Washington acted first and sought legitimacy and support from its allies only after the fact. But in the post-cold-war period, the structural situation of world politics changed in ways that made this kind of exercise of power much more problematic in the eyes of even close allies. After the fall of the Soviet Union, various neoconservative authors like Charles Krauthammer, William Kristol and Robert Kagan suggested that the United States would use its margin of power to exert a kind of "benevolent hegemony" over the rest of the world, fixing problems like rogue states with W.M.D., human rights abuses and terrorist threats as they came up. Writing before the Iraq war, Kristol and Kagan considered whether this posture would provoke resistance from the rest of the world, and concluded, "It is precisely because American foreign policy is infused with an unusually high degree of morality that other nations find they have less to fear from its otherwise daunting power." (Italics added.)

It is hard to read these lines without irony in the wake of the global reaction to the Iraq war, which succeeded in uniting much of the world in a frenzy of anti-Americanism. The idea that the United States is a hegemon more benevolent than most is not an absurd one, but there were warning signs that things had changed in America's relationship to the world long before the start of the Iraq war. The structural imbalance in global power had grown enormous. America surpassed the rest of the world in every dimension of power by an unprecedented margin, with its defense spending nearly equal to that of the rest of the world combined. Already during the Clinton years, American economic hegemony had generated enormous hostility to an American-dominated process of globalization, frequently on the part of close democratic allies who thought the United States was seeking to impose its antistatist social model on them.

There were other reasons as well why the world did not accept American benevolent hegemony. In the first place, it was premised on American exceptionalism, the idea that America could use its power in instances where others could not because it was more virtuous than other countries. The doctrine of pre-emption against terrorist threats contained in the 2002 National Security Strategy was one that could not safely be generalized through the international system; America would be the first country to object if Russia, China, India or France declared a similar right of unilateral action. The United States was seeking to pass judgment on others while being unwilling to have its own conduct questioned in places like the International Criminal Court.

Another problem with benevolent hegemony was domestic. There are sharp limits to the American people's attention to foreign affairs and willingness to finance projects overseas that do not have clear benefits to American interests. Sept. 11 changed that calculus in many ways, providing popular support for two wars in the Middle East and large increases in defense spending. But the durability of the support is uncertain: although most Americans want to do what is necessary to make the project of rebuilding Iraq succeed, the aftermath of the invasion did not increase the public appetite for further costly interventions. Americans are not, at heart, an imperial people. Even benevolent hegemonies sometimes have to act ruthlessly, and they need a staying power that does not come easily to people who are reasonably content with their own lives and society.

Finally, benevolent hegemony presumed that the hegemon was not only well intentioned but competent as well. Much of the criticism of the Iraq intervention from Europeans and others was not based on a normative case that the United States was not getting authorization from the United Nations Security Council, but rather on the belief that it had not made an adequate case for invading Iraq in the first place and didn't know what it was doing in trying to democratize Iraq. In this, the critics were unfortunately quite prescient.

The most basic misjudgment was an overestimation of the threat facing the United States from radical Islamism. Although the new and ominous possibility of undeterrable terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction did indeed present itself, advocates of the war wrongly conflated this with the threat presented by Iraq and with the rogue state/proliferation problem more generally. The misjudgment was based in part on the massive failure of the American intelligence community to correctly assess the state of Iraq's W.M.D. programs before the war. But the intelligence community never took nearly as alarmist a view of the terrorist/W.M.D. threat as the war's supporters did. Overestimation of this threat was then used to justify the elevation of preventive war to the centerpiece of a new security strategy, as well as a whole series of measures that infringed on civil liberties, from detention policy to domestic eavesdropping.

What to Do

Now that the neoconservative moment appears to have passed, the United States needs to reconceptualize its foreign policy in several fundamental ways. In the first instance, we need to demilitarize what we have been calling the global war on terrorism and shift to other types of policy instruments. We are fighting hot counterinsurgency wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and against the international jihadist movement, wars in

which we need to prevail. But "war" is the wrong metaphor for the broader struggle, since wars are fought at full intensity and have clear beginnings and endings. Meeting the jihadist challenge is more of a "long, twilight struggle" whose core is not a military campaign but a political contest for the hearts and minds of ordinary Muslims around the world. As recent events in France and Denmark suggest, Europe will be a central battleground in this fight.

The United States needs to come up with something better than "coalitions of the willing" to legitimate its dealings with other countries. The world today lacks effective international institutions that can confer legitimacy on collective action; creating new organizations that will better balance the dual requirements of legitimacy and effectiveness will be the primary task for the coming generation. As a result of more than 200 years of political evolution, we have a relatively good understanding of how to create institutions that are rulebound, accountable and reasonably effective in the vertical silos we call states. What we do not have are adequate mechanisms of horizontal accountability among states.

The conservative critique of the United Nations is all too cogent: while useful for certain peacekeeping and nation-building operations, the United Nations lacks both democratic legitimacy and effectiveness in dealing with serious security issues. The solution is not to strengthen a single global body, but rather to promote what has been emerging in any event, a "multi-multilateral world" of overlapping and occasionally competing international institutions that are organized on regional or functional lines. Kosovo in 1999 was a model: when the Russian veto prevented the Security Council from acting, the United States and its NATO allies simply shifted the venue to NATO, where the Russians could not block action.

The final area that needs rethinking, and the one that will be the most contested in the coming months and years, is the place of democracy promotion in American foreign policy. The worst legacy that could come from the Iraq war would be an anti-neoconservative backlash that coupled a sharp turn toward isolation with a cynical realist policy aligning the United States with friendly authoritarians. Good governance, which involves not just democracy but also the rule of law and economic development, is critical to a host of outcomes we desire, from alleviating poverty to dealing with pandemics to controlling violent conflicts. A Wilsonian policy that pays attention to how rulers treat their citizens is therefore right, but it needs to be informed by a certain realism that was missing from the thinking of the Bush administration in its first term and of its neoconservative allies.

We need in the first instance to understand that promoting democracy and modernization in the Middle East is not a solution to the problem of jihadist terrorism; in all likelihood it will make the short-term problem worse, as we have seen in the case of the Palestinian election bringing Hamas to power. Radical Islamism is a byproduct of modernization itself, arising from the loss of identity that accompanies the transition to a modern, pluralist society. It is no accident that so many recent terrorists, from Sept. 11's Mohamed Atta to the murderer of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh to the London subway bombers, were radicalized in democratic Europe and intimately familiar with all of democracy's blessings. More democracy will mean more alienation, radicalization and — yes, unfortunately — terrorism.

But greater political participation by Islamist groups is very likely to occur whatever we do, and it will be the only way that the poison of radical Islamism can ultimately work its way through the body politic of Muslim communities around the world. The age is long since gone when friendly authoritarians could rule over passive populations and produce stability indefinitely. New social actors are mobilizing everywhere, from Bolivia and Venezuela to South Africa and the Persian Gulf. A durable Israeli-Palestinian peace could not be built upon a corrupt, illegitimate Fatah that constantly had to worry about Hamas challenging its authority. Peace might emerge, sometime down the road, from a Palestine run by a formerly radical terrorist group that had been forced to deal with the realities of governing.

If we are serious about the good governance agenda, we have to shift our focus to the reform, reorganization and proper financing of those institutions of the United States government that actually promote democracy,

development and the rule of law around the world, organizations like the State Department, U.S.A.I.D., the National Endowment for Democracy and the like. The United States has played an often decisive role in helping along many recent democratic transitions, including in the Philippines in 1986; South Korea and Taiwan in 1987; Chile in 1988; Poland and Hungary in 1989; Serbia in 2000; Georgia in 2003; and Ukraine in 2004-5. But the overarching lesson that emerges from these cases is that the United States does not get to decide when and where democracy comes about. By definition, outsiders can't "impose" democracy on a country that doesn't want it; demand for democracy and reform must be domestic. Democracy promotion is therefore a long-term and opportunistic process that has to await the gradual ripening of political and economic conditions to be effective.

The Bush administration has been walking — indeed, sprinting — away from the legacy of its first term, as evidenced by the cautious multilateral approach it has taken toward the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea. [Condoleezza Rice](#) gave a serious speech in January about "transformational diplomacy" and has begun an effort to reorganize the nonmilitary side of the foreign-policy establishment, and the National Security Strategy document is being rewritten. All of these are welcome changes, but the legacy of the Bush first-term foreign policy and its neoconservative supporters has been so polarizing that it is going to be hard to have a reasoned debate about how to appropriately balance American ideals and interests in the coming years. The reaction against a flawed policy can be as damaging as the policy itself, and such a reaction is an indulgence we cannot afford, given the critical moment we have arrived at in global politics.

Neoconservatism, whatever its complex roots, has become indelibly associated with concepts like coercive regime change, unilateralism and American hegemony. What is needed now are new ideas, neither neoconservative nor realist, for how America is to relate to the rest of the world — ideas that retain the neoconservative belief in the universality of human rights, but without its illusions about the efficacy of American power and hegemony to bring these ends about.

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