

Parallels between the Bush Doctrine and Obama Administration Policy

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YOHAN IDDAWELA, DEC 27 2011

"We're looking to fundamentally change the status quo in Washington. It's a status quo that extends beyond any particular party and right now that status quo is fighting back with everything it's got, with the same old tactics that divide and distract us from solving the problems people face."

Barack Obama[1]

Introduction

As the above quote suggests, the election of Barack Obama as president in 2009 was thought to be the symbolic end of the Bush doctrine and its associated neoconservative underpinnings. This essay however seeks to challenge this notion by examining the parallels between the Bush doctrine and the policies of the Obama administration. In doing so, I subsequently argue that such similarities are indicative of a new manifestation of neoconservative discourse evident in Obama's foreign policy. In order to argue this thesis I shall introduce the origins of neoconservatism and its interplay with a narrative of hyper nationalism dubbed 'American exceptionalism', which is used as a vessel to export its ideas. I then move on to discuss how neoconservative discourse along with this narrative of American exceptionalism was resurrected under the Bush Jnr administration following its demise under Clinton. Finally I endeavour to reevaluate Obama's 'liberal interventionist' foreign policy in order to expose it as a new manifestation of neoconservative discourse.

Introducing Neoconservatism and American Exceptionalism

The term 'neoconservatism' is often thrown around, frequently referred to out of context and repeatedly misinterpreted. What is often over looked is its incredibly indistinct nature. In the words of Irving Kristol, the heralded 'Godfather of Neoconservatism', neoconservatism "is not a 'movement'...[it is] a persuasion, one that manifests itself over time, but erratically, and one whose meaning we clearly glimpse only in retrospect." [2] This evolving nature of neoconservatism has seen it develop from its original association with The Democratic Party in the 1960s (due to its post-war liberalism influences) to its association with The Republican Party under Reagan. In the words of Tod Lindberg, "neoconservatism began as a dialogue with liberalism and, in fact, emerged out of it" [3]. According to Max Boot, these neoconservatives were ultimately driven to the right in the early 1970s "when crime was increasing in the United States, the Soviet Union was gaining ground in the Cold War, and the dominant wing of the Democratic Party was unwilling to get tough on their problem" [4].

At the philosophical heart of this evolving neoconservative discourse lies the work and legacy of German philosopher Leo Strauss. It is not within the scope of this essay to delve into any significant detail about the extremely dense and intricate theorisations of Strauss, however it is suffice to say his outlook was shaped by a particular reading of Plato [5] and Nietzsche [6]. In studying these works, Strauss argued that traditional liberalism has historically resulted in "political and existential chaos and a loss of cultural and historical identity." [7] Strauss believed that this crisis of relativism caused by existential chaos amongst the masses must be avoided [8]. In order to do so, Strauss believed it was up to the Platonic 'Philosopher Kings' to promulgate an esoteric/exoteric division of knowledge by conveying to

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the masses artificial discourses which produce 'noble illusions' of universally valid and irreducible truths[9]. This, according to Jim George, is why Strauss was fascinated and impressed by the Declaration of Independence which presented to the masses self evident truths and inalienable rights instilled with "a sense of natural right as the foundation of any strong, unified society"[10].

This sense of 'natural right' is symptomatic of a much broader concept which neoconservatism espouses: American exceptionalism. According to Michael McKinley, this discourse of hyper-nationality speaks of America as "embodying an inextinguishable uniqueness beyond the common conceits of national identity found universally"[11]. Imbued within this discourse, is a "national mission – a tendency to universalise the American experience and to either export it, or impose it, or both"[12]. American exceptionalism should be viewed as a powerful narrative engrained within society derived from the concept of Manifest Destiny and the Declaration of Independence[13]. It is neoconservative discourse however which understands American exceptionalism's importance in creating national unity to avoid an existential crisis[14]. Thus it seeks to lift this narrative from its subdued and embedded state within the American psyche to its role as a much more discernable and mobilising force[15]. In this sense we can view American exceptionalism as being what Foucault names a 'regime of truth':

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth – that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.[16]

In other words, discourses play an important role in the way power functions. Therefore, according to Adib-Moghaddam, "once a particular discourse sustains its effectiveness via disciplinary constellations and in practice, it can be conceptualised as a regime of truth." [17] Thus, as I shall elaborate upon later, the varying neoconservative manifestations and their different applications of the American-exceptionalist discourse allow it to be considered a regime of truth: a locus point for categorising the true from the false, the internal to the external.

I shall now provide a brief summary of this historical evolution of neoconservative discourse and its interplay with this American exceptionalist truth regime in order to discuss its incarnation under Bush Jnr. The 1980s witnessed for the first time a Republican manifestation of neoconservatism which provided a fusion of Straussian neoconservative discourse with neo-liberal market oriented policy[18]. The administration of George HW Bush on the other hand witnessed a different manifestation of neoconservatism: one which saw an allegiance between traditional realists such as Cheney, Powell and Rumsfeld with neoconservatives such as Wolfowitz who was appointed to the Pentagon's policy directorate by Cheney[19]. The influence of neoconservatism on the political sphere however was eventually disrupted with the rise of the liberal Clinton administration in January 1993. This abrupt change of direction for US political ideology spawned a sense of panic and frustration amongst the neoconservatives which culminated in a range of personal attacks on Clinton (including accusations of drug smuggling[20], womanising[21] and illegal property loans[22]), and a range of literature produced to discuss the need for a Reaganite neoconservative revival[23]. It was however with the subsequent election of George W Bush in 2001 that this desire for a neoconservative resurgence was ultimately realised.

"Either You're With Us or You're With the Terrorists": A New Manifestation of Neoconservatism Under Bush

According to George, the influence of Strauss and the neoconservatives metastasized in the Bush doctrine in its insistence upon "strong nationalism and cultural unity; upon the value of a war culture as a basis for maintaining such unity; upon the use of maximum force by the Western democracies in the face of endemic threat...and a 'peace through strength' approach to foreign policy"[24].

However it was following the tragic events of September 11 that this neoconservative discourse was seen to take a different incarnation. It provided a justification for the United States to create a new enemy in the absence of its previous Cold War rivalry with USSR. This enemy however, unlike previous Cold War opponents, was seen to be predicated on cultural difference as opposed to the political difference of socialism or communism, highlighting the

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new effect of 'cultural externalisation' of the American exceptionalist truth regime[25]. The post 9/11 rhetoric of the President embodied this concept: as the "terrorists" were characterised as "enemies of freedom" who "hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech"[26]. The remedy prescribed in the words of Bush was not "one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen. It may include dramatic strikes, visible on TV, and covert operations, secret even in success." [27]

In understanding the ramifications of this incarnation of neoconservative discourse I shall turn to a post-colonial critique, which sees this manipulation of American exceptionalism as perpetuating a Huntingtongesque Clash of Civilizations[28]. It can be seen to create an 'us vs them' mentality summed up in Bush's inculcations of "you're either with us or you're with the terrorists"[29], vehemently creating, in the words of Homi Bhaba, "binary oppositions or polarities through which we think cultural difference" [30]. Thus the neoconservative dominated foreign policy of the Bush administration can be seen to be predicated on a logic of American cultural superiority and military might. Any agent that acted against US interests was subsequently cast off as a 'terrorist', in a display of 'othering' and externalisation through the use of the post 9/11 'terrorism rhetoric'. As we shall see, such acts of externalisation that were imbued within this neoconservative discourse were able to permeate the foreign policy of Obama, somewhat continuing the trend of theory and practice from the Bush administration.

'Change is for Parking Meters' – Obama and Neoconservative discourse

The slogan 'Change is for Parking Meters' has been resorted to frequently by Republican supporters in the 2011 lead up to the primaries[31]. Prima facie this slogan represents the traditional conservative stance on progress, however if we dig a little deeper we can find a more meaningful representation of Obama's 'liberal interventionist' foreign policy – an aspect of continuity from the Bush doctrine.

Nonetheless, the major difference between the Bush and Obama administrations has been the latter's more liberal stance on the United Nations – echoing elements of Wilsonian idealism, which embraces the importance of multilateral organisations in international diplomacy and mediation between states[32]. As Anthony Barnett explains, the 2011 Libya action "observes all the norms of international law and multilateral consultation that the Neoconservatives despise. There is no pettiness. Germany is not 'punished' for not going along [unlike Bush's reaction to France in the Iraq war]"[33]. Likewise for Stephen Walt, the "important intellectual difference between neoconservatives and liberal interventionists is that the former have disdain for international institutions (which they see as constraints on U.S. power), and the latter see them as a useful way to legitimate American dominance." [34] Thus we can see that both discourses seek to extol the virtues of American democracy, both resort to a use of military power as a method of regime change (whether it be under 'national security' or 'humanitarian' pretences), and both understand the United States' role in the world as that of the global policeman faced with a responsibility to intervene[35].

However this recourse to the United Nations has not been consistent by Obama as it was in fact absent from the US's covert war in Yemen[36] and drone strikes in Pakistan[37]. Furthermore, neoconservative undertones are evident in Obama's other foreign policy decisions such as the continuation of Guantanamo Bay[38], a symbol of American cultural and military hegemony; as well as the decision to kill an unarmed Osama Bin Laden after which Obama, echoing the rhetoric of George W Bush[39], declared "justice had been done" [40].

It is nevertheless clear that both the Bush doctrine and liberal interventionism are underpinned yet again by a neoconservative manipulation of the American exceptionalist truth regime. The effect of which is to view America as culturally superior to the 'externalised other'. In the words of Obama, "when our interests and values are at stake, we have a responsibility to act. That's what happened in Libya over the course of these last six weeks." [41] For William Kristol it is such policies that "are now more like the sound policies people like me have been advocating for quite a while [and] I'm happy to support them. He's [Obama's] a born again neo-con." [42]

Thus, as a result of neoconservatism's evolving nature, we may be witnessing a new manifestation of neoconservative discourse, a manifestation which seeks to return neoconservatism to its origins in the Democratic Party and adopt a renewed liberal synthesis akin to its 1960s incarnation. However, as Irving Kristol suggests, as a

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result of neoconservatism's extremely ambiguous and diffuse nature we may only "clearly glimpse [the truth] in retrospect." [43]

Conclusion

To summarise, elements of the neoconservative discourse which greatly influenced the Bush doctrine can be seen to permeate the foreign policy decisions of the Obama administration. In both administrations' foreign policy we may see traces of Straussian philosophy, inherent in the manipulation of the American exceptionalist truth regime. This truth regime has in both the Bush and Obama administration acted as a locus point to externalise those that are viewed as culturally different. Such actions by the Obama administration, I argue, may indeed constitute a new manifestation of neoconservatism; a manifestation which exists behind the facade of Obama's more liberal rhetoric. Nevertheless one thing is clear, the neoconservative "status quo [does indeed] extend...beyond any particular party" [44], and it seems that it has successfully "[fou]ght... back" [45] under Obama.

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