

Was George W. Bush's Foreign Policy Agenda Unprecedented in US history?

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PAIGE BARCLAY, SEP 17 2015

It is a popular misconception that the foreign policy agenda adopted by the Administration of George W. Bush is unprecedented in US history. The Bush Administration's national security doctrine after the September 11 attacks represents continuity with previous US foreign policy. As a result of its liberal internationalist nature, the doctrine stays true to the worldview that has informed the majority of previous Administrations' national security strategies. Firstly, I will briefly outline the concept of liberal internationalism and ascertain its defining characteristics. Then, I will show that the four main elements of the Bush 2002 National Security Strategy, as defined by Jervis (2003), are ideologically compatible with liberal internationalism. And, I will also show that they are not unprecedented, having had reasonably recent use in previous Administrations' foreign policies. However, I will acknowledge that – in the wake of the September 11 attacks – the Bush Administration's version of liberal internationalism is more aggressive than prior variants. This can be explained, though, through consideration of the overarching development of liberal internationalism over the past century, accentuated by the shock of the 9/11 attacks themselves.

In an age of unipolarity in the post-Cold War era, four potential security strategies opened to US Administrations: strategic disengagement, characterised by overall US withdrawal from world affairs and commitments; balance of power realism – free of liberalist goals; primacy, asserting a US-led international system; and liberal internationalism, focusing on a US duty to lead the international system in realising liberal goals (Dueck, 2004: 512-3). I argue that the Bush Administration pursued a national security strategy based on the final possibility: liberal internationalism. In doing so, therefore, the Administration has displayed continuity with previous Administrative policy: the majority of which were shaped by a set of beliefs rooted in the liberal internationalism that began with Woodrow Wilson (Ikenberry, 2009: 71). Said beliefs hinge on the promotion of democracy via soft power, in the first instance, with a willingness to consider military intervention in the event of exhaustion of all alternate efforts (Dueck, 2004: 517). In this regard, Bush's national security strategy is a direct manifestation of Americans' belief in their 'exceptionalism' (Schmitt, 2002: 13; Montan, 2005: 114), whereby a supposed unique understanding of liberal ideals permits unilateral action on behalf of perceived common international interests (Quinn, 2008: 54). Therefore, a liberal internationalist security agenda can be defined for the purposes of this essay as one in which the US acts in a manner in which it assumes its interests are always contingent with those of the international community – and thereby grants itself the privilege to act unilaterally in times where it deems the liberal principles of the current world order are at risk.

The following section will make use of Jervis' distillation of the main policy points of Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy into four distinctive elements (Jervis, 2003: 365). Through individual assessment of each of these components, I will show that the security doctrine outlined by the Bush Administration is predated by earlier policy prescriptions, and so cannot be said to represent a revolution in US foreign policy. In particular, I will draw attention to the parallels Bush's doctrine shares with the two other post-Cold War presidents: Clinton and George H.W. Bush. This focus is justified due to the fundamental shift in US security concerns following the collapse of the Soviet Union, after which the "central security challenge of the past half century – the threat of communist expansion" disappeared (Clinton, 1995: i). Additionally, where applicable, I will highlight the overall connection of the Bush doctrine's elements with the liberal internationalist history of US foreign policy.

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Firstly, Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy emphasises the importance of the democratisation of other states for US national security, linking the domestic character of rogue states with their aggressive foreign policies (Bush, 2002: 3, 18). The pursuit of global democratisation – and the purported security to be gained from such an end – is embedded in democratic peace theory, which states that democracies do not wage war against other democracies (Doyle, 1983). The historical range of American subscription to this idea is epitomised in former president Wilson's call for declaration of war against Germany in 1917, where he justifies war on its basis (Wilson, 1917). More recently, Clinton's 2000 NSS explicitly states that US security “depends upon the protection and expansion of democracy worldwide” (Clinton, 2000: 45). Unsurprisingly, this idea can be found in George H. W. Bush's 1991 NSS too: “Our interests are best served in a world in which democracy and its ideals are widespread and secure.” (Bush, 1991: 4). Of course, such a liberal view of how the world should be, and the ideals that should be embodied within it, is a decisively liberal point of view. And so, here, the Bush Administration presents convergence with prior US security strategies.

The second – and most controversial – element of the Bush security strategy is that it champions the strategy of preventive war in order to assuage threats before they can fully materialise (Bush, 2002: 4, 12, 19). The only novel aspect of this component of the doctrine is the open nature of the Administration's discussion of preventive military action (Bunn, 2003: 2; Mueller et al, 2006: 2). A number of scholars draw attention to the fact that such action has been considered by past Administrations, though it is also noted that it has often remained merely as a possibility, as opposed to actually being carried out (Leffler, 2005; Mueller et al, 2006; Freedman, 2004; Bunn, 2003). Clinton's 2000 NSS also outlined the willingness of his Administration to take military action against terrorists and those who aid them in the event of an exhaustion of all diplomatic and economic means (Clinton, 2000: 29, 37).

It is also arguable that the more openly aggressive posture of the Bush Administration is strategic in itself, and does not actually represent a huge change in policy. Tunç (2009) argues that the Bush Administration's greater openness about, and elevation of, preventive military action to doctrinal level prior to the Iraq war represents more of a strategic decision serving to convince other dictatorial states that the US threat was credible, rather than a permanent policy commitment. He further points out the post-Iraq downplaying of preventive action in dealings with Iran and North Korea as proof of preemption's temporary elevation for this strategic benefit (Tunç, 2009: 12). The ambiguity surrounding the 2002 NSS strategy of preemption – in that no concrete criteria is outlined in which it would be deemed just – certainly ensures US strategic maneuverability. Such a strategic lack of clarity in the face of hostile foes shares strong similarities with former US President Nixon's self-named ‘Madman Theory,’ which he championed particularly during the Vietnam War. Nixon's theory was that, by presenting the US as irrational and absolutely unwilling to suffer loss in any circumstances, other states in the international system would take extra care not to provoke it, and offer conciliatory gestures (Haldeman, 1978: 122). Bush's open declaration of prevention as a US tactic can thus be interpreted as hoping to send a similar signal to those challenging, or tempted to challenge, the liberal democratic world order. Hence, the inclusion of prevention as a purported diversion from the overall current of US policy – as something new and dangerous – is incorrect.

In summarising the ideological contribution of preventive action to the Administration's liberal internationalist worldview, Bush's National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice does this best:

“The danger from Saddam Hussein's arsenal is far more clear than anything we could have foreseen prior to September 11th. And history will judge harshly any leader of nation that saw this dark cloud and sat by in complacency or indecision” (Rice, 2002).

It is evident that the Bush Administration has – more so than the post-Cold War Administrations before it (Quinn, 2008: 41-2) – returned to the black and white, good versus evil, narrative typical of the US-USSR conflict of ideologies. The most famous example of this Cold War narrative being President Reagan's “evil empire” speech at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, in which he called upon the audience to remember that it is a “struggle between right and wrong and good and evil” (Reagan, 1983). Such rhetorical play on morality, with its supposed lack of any ‘grey areas’, furthers the US claim to justifiable unilateral action on behalf of all those within the liberal international order, who are assumed to share the American interest in the proliferation of such a dichotomy.

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Thirdly, Bush's security strategy presents a readiness to act unilaterally in the exhaustion of all other possibilities (Bush, 2002: 12, 34). There are clear antecedents to this element: during the Cold War, US officials often acted unilaterally. A key example is US involvement in the Vietnam War, which they participated in against French and British advice (Leffler, 2005: 401). Additionally, though it stated a commitment to "act in alliance or partnership when others share our interests," Clinton's 2000 National Security Strategy also stated a disposition to "act unilaterally when compelling national interests so demand" – with those interests characterised as "vital" including American citizens' safety both domestically and overseas (Clinton, 2000: 9, 25). In terms of unilateralism's relation to a liberal internationalist worldview, such willingness to act without a coalition of support from other actors when necessary highlights the US' strongly-held belief that it operates on behalf of all liberal democracies.

Fourthly, Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy places great weight on the responsibility of the US to act, asserting its might and primacy, in order to achieve global peace and security through ensuring the spread of liberal democratic values (Bush, 2002: 7, 34). Here, the Bush Administration's strategy forcibly rejects the neorealist notion that the international system is necessarily characterised by competitive hard power balancing between states (Waltz, 1979: 121). In its aim of promoting "a balance of power in favour of freedom," the strategy actually refers to the creation of a power imbalance based on an ideal vision in which liberal democracies are able to promote their values globally (Sloan, 2003: 318). Again, the Clinton Administration displayed a commitment to maintaining American primacy – via superior military power – in order to achieve a similar balance in favour of states championing liberal democracy (Clinton, 2000: 7, 26). George H.W. Bush's 1991 NSS also speaks of using US influence to further democratisation, presumed to be a "universal goal," as well as the opportunity emerging in the wake of the Soviet Union collapse "to build a new international system in accordance with our own values and ideals" (Bush, 1991: 17, v). Therefore, such a strategy is not without post-Cold War antecedents.

Coupled with the three other central components of the Bush security doctrine, this final element ties the overall strategy together under an idealistically-charged liberal internationalist umbrella. In line with the tradition of US liberal internationalist thinking, it embodies the belief that the realist concept of a balance of material power is an unnecessary fixture of an international system that does not have to be anarchic. Instead, US optimism believes such a state can be bypassed by the strength of shared values and interests rooted firmly in commitment to the spread of liberal democratisation (Quinn, 2008: 45). This enunciation of the benefits, and necessity, of the spread of democratic values such as freedom across the globe constitutes the base determinant of the liberal internationalist worldview. Such rhetoric has been echoed across a century of US Administrations, seeking to emphasise the universality of American values (Jervis, 2003: 366).

It is important, however, to recognise the more forceful character of Bush foreign policy in comparison to that of other post-Cold War US presidents. Though, as has been argued, Clinton and George H.W. Bush's policies signaled a similar commitment to military intervention. I will argue, however, that this shift to a more aggressive counterterrorist posture (Kertzer, 2007: 970) is the result of the evolution of the liberal internationalist world order over the 20th century. In this vein, changes to the core assumptions underpinning the order have also caused a shift in emphasis to the moral authority claimed by the most powerful states within it. Simply, the US project of liberal internationalism has grown and developed from the days of Wilson, and now encapsulates different means to the ends of achieving and maintaining a liberal international order (Ikenberry, 2009: 71). This, therefore, culminates in a greater willingness of the Bush Administration – presiding at the height of this trend – to intrude on the sovereignty of other states in order to reinforce liberal democratic ideals.

Sloan comments on the more "proactive military posture" of the Bush Administration, stating that it shows a clear change in comparison to the more "passive" Cold War strategies which focused on the deterrence and containment of the Soviet Union (Sloan, 2003: 309). I argue, however, that this is to be expected in a world order characterised by unipolarity – as opposed to the prior system of bipolarity – as unchecked power typically takes on characteristics and foreign policy goals beyond those necessary to achieve survival (Waltz, 2000). As would be expected for a state whose interests now stretch beyond maintenance of essential security, a post-Cold War US shows greater willingness to involve itself in overseas conflict. Assessment of US ground-force military intervention between 1949 and 2010 reveals a greater likelihood of such intervention in the post-Cold War world as opposed to during it (Kavanagh, 2013: 42). Further, this more militarised posture is especially to be expected in the face of a more

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prominent asymmetrical threat, terrorism, which is assumed by the US to be detrimental to the interests of all states within the international system. Most notably, a unipolar order with the US as hegemon dictates less of a dependency of American Administrations on their traditional allies. This can be traced to the human rights revolution, in concert with the unipolarity of the international system, which has transformed liberal internationalism from a worldview that respects state sovereignty into one which regards it as conditional of the internal character of the state itself and how it treats those residing within its borders (Ikenberry, 2009: 79).

The commonly-cited manifestation of the Bush security doctrine, the invasion of Iraq and attempted democratisation of the Middle East, was regarded by some as finishing business left unfinished by prior post-Cold War Administrations (Schmitt, 2002: 12-3). The Clinton Administration showed wavering patience with Saddam Hussein's regime: "Saddam's actions over the past decade lead us to conclude that his regime will never comply with the obligations contained in the relevant UN Security Council resolutions. For this reason, we actively support those who seek to bring a new democratic government to power in Baghdad" (Clinton, 2000: 75). In this sense, the invasion of Iraq can be said to be in line with both the Clinton and Bush security strategies, in that military action is considered upon exhaustion of all other options. It should also be noted that the militarised US response in the wake of September 11 remains in line with prior counterterrorism efforts undertaken by US Administrations at the end of the 20th century in that it fulfills nine factors identified as Malvesti as unique to the character of those attacks which the George H.W. Bush and Clinton Administrations responded with military force (Malvesti, 2001: 100). The fulfillment of these factors, then, suggests other post-Cold War Administrations would also have championed a militarised response – though they may not have necessarily followed this through to the invasion of Iraq.

George H.W. Bush's decision against going so far as to topple Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1991 Gulf War – which may seem at odds with the previous conclusion – is explained by his Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff at the time, Colin Powell as an act of regional balancing. In his memoirs, he says that "our practical intention was to leave Baghdad enough power to survive as a threat to an Iran that remained bitterly hostile toward the United States" (Powell, 1995: 516). Calculation of the costs of such an invasion in conjunction with US interests in the region, alongside the risk of the emergence of a radical Islamic regime in its place (Gerstenzang & Ross, 1991), meant that a full-scale invasion of Iraq was rejected at the time. The increased threat perception of a post-9/11 US worldview, however, provided the ideal setting for the invasion, as Secretary of State Rumsfeld explained: "[the US] did not act in Iraq because dramatic new evidence of Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass murder. We acted because we saw the existing evidence in a new light, through the prism of our experience on September 11" (Rumsfeld, 2003). Factoring in the events of September 11, it is therefore unclear as to whether other post-Cold War Administrations actually would have acted differently to the US. Hence, the decision to invade Iraq can be explained by a heightened sense of perceived threat to the US, unprecedented in the post-Cold War era, in combination with the gradual evolution of liberal internationalism to take on a character more inclined to intervention into the domestic affairs of states.

In conclusion, I have argued that the Bush Administration's national security doctrine after the September 11 attacks represents continuity with previous US foreign policy. This is a result of a liberal internationalist norm in the national security policymaking of previous Administrations, and that of Bush post-9/11. In arguing so, I defined liberal internationalism as a worldview that primarily – for our purposes – shows a focus on commitment to the spread of liberal democracy around the world, viewed in a light of American exceptionalism as converging both the US and the liberal international order's interests. I then highlighted how the four core aspects of the 2002 Bush National Security Strategy, identified by Jervis, are predated by other US Administrative policies, and take on liberal internationalist characteristics. In acknowledgement, however, of an overall shift to a more aggressive posture by the Bush Administration, I point to the wide-spanning development of liberal internationalism over the past century and argue that this is the result of a natural progression in the post-WWII version of the worldview, and the order it has ultimately created.

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