



## Empire of Liberty: The Historical Underpinnings of the Bush Doctrine

By Thomas Donnelly

*In reelecting George W. Bush, Americans voted to continue foreign policies often caricatured at home and abroad as militaristic, expansionist, and unilateralist. The question is why a majority of voters backed Bush in the face of these charges. Does the Bush Doctrine, which urges the transformation of the political order in the greater Middle East and the broader international order in ways that defend and promote human freedom, constitute a radical break in the practice of American statecraft? Or is the Bush administration's approach—and the general public's acceptance of it—better explained by the “strategic culture” of the United States, the precepts of which can be traced through the history of U.S. foreign policy to the founding of the republic?*

Although typically ill-regarded for its attempts at diplomacy, the Bush administration has managed in the past two years to bring about one of the most striking rapprochements in foreign policy memory: that of conventional conservatives and doctrinaire liberals, both of which groups have been vociferous in their condemnation of the war in Iraq.

To Democratic Party mandarins like Ivo Daalder and James Lindsey—National Security Council staffers in the Clinton administration—the war in Iraq marks a “Bush Revolution,” an arrogant and self-defeating exercise of unilateral American power. “The lesson of Iraq,” the pair wrote in their recent book, *America Unbound*, “was that, sometimes, when you lead, few follow.”<sup>1</sup>

Many conventional conservatives have joined in this critique of President Bush’s “forward strategy of freedom,” inveighing in defense of the status quo. Leading lights of the first Bush administration have been especially susceptible to this view, with Lawrence Eagleburger, former secretary of state

under George H. W. Bush, arguing in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq that war was justified only if Saddam were preparing an imminent attack on the United States. In advocating a preemptive strike, Vice President Dick Cheney was, in what was reportedly Eagleburger’s term, “chest thumping.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, some of the most notable pieces of pre- and antebellum criticism have originated from Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser during the first Gulf War and confidant of the first President Bush. While acknowledging that “we will all be better off” with Saddam Hussein removed from power, Scowcroft warned in an August 2002 Wall Street Journal op-ed:

Any campaign against Iraq, whatever the strategy, cost and risks, is certain to divert us for some indefinite period from our war on terrorism. Worse, there is a virtual consensus in the world against an attack on Iraq at this time. So long as that sentiment persists, it would require the U.S. to pursue a virtual go-it-alone strategy against Iraq, making any military operations correspondingly more difficult and expensive. The most serious cost, however, would be to the war on terrorism.

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Ignoring that clear sentiment would result in a serious degradation in international cooperation with us against terrorism. And make no mistake, we simply cannot win that war without enthusiastic cooperation, especially on intelligence.<sup>3</sup>

Less conventionally minded commentators of both the Left and Right have argued the Iraq war is indicative of an emerging strain of American “militarism” that is not only strategically dangerous but also a threat to freedoms at home. Chalmers Johnson, for instance—once a prominent critic of U.S. trade policy with Japan—has written of the “sorrows of empire”:

From the moment we took on a role that included the permanent military domination of the world, we were on our own—feared, hated, corrupt, maintaining order through state terrorism and bribery, and given to megalomaniac rhetoric and sophistries that virtually invited the rest of the world to unite against us.<sup>4</sup>

The conservative writer Andrew Bacevich, himself once a senior cavalry officer who served in Iraq after Operation Desert Storm, has similarly warned that militarism has “insinuated” itself into the very fabric of American life: “By the end of the 20th century, the skepticism about arms and armies that informed the American experiment from its founding had vanished.”<sup>5</sup>

This cross-fertilization of Left and Right, spurred by Iraq and the broader Bush foreign policy, has produced some strange results, such as Senator John Kerry’s wan attempt to embrace the “realist” mantle in his campaign pronouncements on Iraq. At times, the Democratic presidential nominee sounded less like a Massachusetts liberal than a Scowcroft realist: “I have always said from day one,” Kerry told the editors of the *Washington Post*, “that the goal is a stable Iraq, not whether or not that’s a full democracy.”<sup>6</sup> What the United States needed, Kerry insisted, was “a policy that finally includes a heavy dose of realism.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman wrote in the days immediately before the 2004 election, in a thinly veiled endorsement of Kerry, that his readers should “vote for the candidate who embodies the ethos of George H. W. Bush—the old guy. Vote for the man who you think would have the same gut feel for nurturing allies and restoring bipartisanship to foreign policy as him. . . . Yes, next Tuesday, vote for the real political

heir to George H. W. Bush. I’m sure you know who that is.”<sup>8</sup>

George W. Bush’s victory in the 2004 election did little to quiet this Left-Right chorus of criticism. Prior to the Iraqi elections of January 31, 2005, Scowcroft continued to warn against the Bush administration’s efforts at Iraqi democratization, predicting that elections there presaged “an incipient civil war.” “The Iraqi elections,” he told a think-tank session, “rather than turning out to be a promising turning point, have the great potential for deepening the conflict.”<sup>9</sup> Nancy Soderberg, yet another former Clinton NSC staffer, concluded her post-election book, *The Superpower Myth*, by arguing that Washington policymakers needed to shed their “essentially unilateral hegemonic approach” to international politics if they are “to succeed in making America safe once again.”<sup>10</sup>

How could the United States have gone so wrong? Were Americans, in reelecting the president last November, abandoning their own best foreign policy traditions? Or does the Bush Doctrine resonate more deeply in the American experience than its critics allege? Do we have a habit of hegemony, a fetish for military force? Are Americans imperialists?

## America’s Strategic Culture

Far from constituting a radical break from American foreign policy, the basic impulses of the Bush Doctrine can be traced throughout much of our history. If asked of empire, for instance, the American Founders would not have hesitated to embrace the word. For who could doubt that a nation of such size and strength was anything less? Thomas Jefferson conceived the United States as “a republican empire” and “an empire for liberty.” In the very first paragraph of the very first *Federalist* paper, Alexander Hamilton described the country as “an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world.” To Hamilton, the United States was “Hercules in a cradle.” James Madison’s more modest term was “extended republic.”<sup>11</sup> A century or so later, Theodore Roosevelt would be an even more enthusiastic imperialist. In 1899, addressing the Lincoln Club in New York, he spoke of the legacy of the Spanish-American War, of America’s new role as a world power:

We have a great duty to perform and we shall show ourselves a weak and a poor-spirited people if we fail to set about doing it or if we fail to do it right. . . .

We have taken upon ourselves, as in honor bound, a great task, befitting a great nation, and we have a right to ask of every citizen, of every true American, that he shall with heart and hand uphold the leaders of the nation as from a brief and glorious war they strive to a lasting peace that shall redound not only to the interests of the conquered people, not only to the honor of the American public, but to the permanent advancement of civilization and of all mankind.”<sup>12</sup>

The rhetoric of Roosevelt and the Founders is not so different from that of President Bush; the times and the strategic circumstances of the United States profoundly changed but the habits of mind are consistent. Indeed, the balance of history suggests that there is an enduring American “strategic culture,” that is, a set of predilections, tendencies, visions, myths, fallacies, traditions, and experiences that has led Americans to make choices in international politics that others might not and which, taken together, form a remarkably consistent approach to making policy and, especially, to using armed force.

The existence of an American strategic culture is not to deny the importance, even preeminence, of contingency in history. Indeed, one of the principle strengths of the theory of strategic culture is that, as a model of international relations, it is less deterministic than most varieties of realism. There may indeed be an *identifiable* American strategic culture, but there is no *inevitable* American strategic culture. Culture changes slowly, but it does change—and strategic culture should be understood less as preordaining national behavior so much as informing, shaping, and coloring the choices decision-makers must make.

The key idea behind the notion of strategic culture is that a nation—or, more broadly, any “actor” on the international stage—defines its security goals and strategy in a way that reflects its political culture, that political culture is an “independent variable” having a measurable effect on the ways in which decisions are made and wars waged. Alastair Iain Johnston’s summary definition of strategic culture is plain: “[T]hose who use it tend to mean that there are consistent and persistent historical patterns in the way particular states think about the use of force for political ends.”<sup>13</sup> It follows that two different states facing roughly similar challenges of international politics or security might well act in entirely different ways, reflecting different strategic cultures. Also, strategic culture can be measured not simply

by observable behavior but by attitudes and domestic political debate, ideas expressed in military doctrine, the writings of elite and popular commentators—almost any cultural “representation” or “text.” Others have noted the interaction of organizational issues and culture, most particularly the peculiarities of professional armies, in shaping strategy-making.

The concept of strategic culture first attracted academic interest during the 1970s and 1980s, as it became apparent that the Soviet Union and the Red Army regarded the use of nuclear weapons differently than did U.S. statesmen and soldiers. In particular, the Soviets sounded, in their military doctrines, as though they were far more willing to employ such weapons, especially “tactical” nuclear devices in the event of a war against NATO. A short 1977 RAND monograph by Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options*, might be said to be the spark that ignited the intellectual fire about strategic culture.<sup>14</sup>

As Alastair Iain Johnston points out, Snyder made relatively narrow claims about Soviet strategy-making; his purpose was primarily to contrast Soviet writings with what Americans understood to be the universal logic of nuclear weaponry, war, and escalation.<sup>15</sup> Yet far from liberating strategists from the excessively deterministic interpretations of realism, the early work on strategic culture tended simply to substitute another, equally rigid and ironclad set of assumptions about international behavior. In the work of Colin Gray, for example, the Cold War appeared as an inevitable confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, with each side driven by its own inescapable strategic culture.<sup>16</sup>

Although much of the initial interest in the idea of strategic culture derived from the desire to understand the Soviet Union, the concept was equally applicable to explain American strategy-making, as Reginald C. Stuart demonstrated in his 1982 study, *War and American Thought*.<sup>17</sup> Stuart begins his book with an essentially sound argument:

Armed conflict litters the American past, even though Americans believe themselves to have been historically pacific. Viewed through a patriotic lens, all American wars have been justified struggles in self-defense, initiated only after unprovoked aggression. But the record reveals that Americans have fought both offensive and defensive wars, and that many can only be labeled aggressive, and even expansionist. Further probing suggests that in all

cases, these conflicts arose from the ambitions of politicians and leaders who conceived of themselves as thinking and acting in the national interest. War, like peace or trade, has always been used as an instrument of policy, although American mythology has maintained that Americans always rejected Carl von Clausewitz's dictum to that effect.<sup>18</sup>

## The Sources of American Conduct

Stuart's observation about U.S. attitudes toward war is an appropriate entry point for a discussion about the deeper American strategic culture, which has four broad and interrelated features—each of which can be recognized in the Bush administration's post-9/11 policies.

Above all, American strategic culture is notable for the disproportionate role played in it by American political principles, or, to use the modern term, by ideology. We have sought to make an empire for liberty, to wield power not for its own sake but for the sake of securing the natural political rights "inalienable" to all mankind and which, alone in the American imagination, legitimize power.

This is not to say that the United States has pursued an entirely altruistic course or been unconstrained by the realities of statecraft and the limits of power throughout its history. Rather, it is to assert that American strategy-making and war-making have been informed by a belief that long-term security can be achieved, and only achieved, by the spread of liberal governance, and that American liberal governance is in turn impossible absent the exercise of American military power. In the case of the Revolutionary War, Americans understood themselves as Englishmen in America, and they would have preferred to remain within the British Empire had the price of security been accompanied by the liberties that were their rights as citizens of the empire. But what Americans wanted, London would not give. Increasingly, the colonists understood that only their own power could guarantee their natural political rights.

From the willingness of the revolutionaries to shed blood on behalf of what they held to be "self-evident" truths about human political equality to Lincoln's declaration at Gettysburg that the Civil War, more than a struggle over states' rights, would result in "a new birth of freedom," America's wars have consistently been shaped by the desire to create a balance of power that favors freedom. As American power and the empire of

liberty—now including Europe, maritime East Asia, and new footholds in Afghanistan and Iraq—have grown, so the definition of an acceptable balance of power has shifted. The Bush administration's focus on the greater Middle East is a natural step in this evolution.

The second source of American strategic conduct has been a belief that we stand at the center-point of international politics; the United States regards itself as a kind of "Middle Kingdom." American strategic horizons have always extended in many directions: east, west, north, and south. Far from being natural "isolationists," Americans have always felt themselves exposed to threats and dangers, with little strategic "depth." When the United States reached its supposed natural frontier with the settlement of the American West, the American strategic imagination leaped over the oceans, first in the Pacific and then the Atlantic, believing that the homeland was only as safe as the farthest frontier. As the "rimlands" of Europe and the western Pacific were secured, the American security perimeter has moved forward into central and eastern Europe, the Middle East, central and south Asia.

The third theme of American strategy is the habit of expansionism. Believing ourselves to be safest not only when our outer perimeter is secure but also free, Americans have felt a necessity to project power unto the farthest reaches of the globe. In the period from the Monroe Doctrine to the Spanish-American War, the habits of expansion and preemption became more than rhetoric, and the commitment to individual liberty, wrenched from the fire of the Civil War, became an ingrained reality. In sum, American strategic culture came of age during this period, and, at century's end, was no longer content to simply stand behind its ocean walls. Increasingly, a North American empire of liberty could not be separated from the larger world of empires abroad.

A brief taste of European-style imperialism in the late nineteenth century sufficed to sour Washington on direct conquest and rule, yet U.S. leaders have insisted for more than a half-century on exercising a *de facto* hegemony over defeated foes even well after they become formal allies. The United States cannot be said to "rule" Germans or Japanese, yet America asserts its desire to make the rules by which the international system operates and in which these nations are embedded; the phenomenon of economic globalization rests on a phenomenon of political and strategic Americanization. By incorporating past enemies into the ever-growing empire of liberty, the New World fundamentally

changed the Old, and American strategic culture not only proved its enduring strength, but its fundamental flexibility and adaptability. At times, as during the late–Cold War period of détente, that flexibility proved so great as to call into question the basic tenets of American strategic culture. Yet though they bent, these tenets did not break.

Finally, as observed by Yale University historian John Lewis Gaddis and others, Americans have long had a predilection for preemption, prevention, and for what has lately been called “regime change.” Contrary to conventional wisdom, the concept of the “failed state” is one Washington policymakers have recognized throughout history; moreover, Americans have often moved rapidly to address these perceived dangers when the balance of forces appeared to be in our favor. Thus, as American colonists grew in strength vis-à-vis neighboring Indian tribes, their approach became strategically preemptive, preventive, and decisive—likewise with Spanish and Mexican competitors for the North American continent. When, during the twentieth century, the cost of preempting European great powers or preventing their wars seemed too great, the United States initially settled for a return to the status quo even while—in the voice of Woodrow Wilson—preaching revolution and regime change. Further involvement in Europe hardened American attitudes. Now, as the guarantor of a global order, the old habit is hard to break: acting to prevent weak, corrupt, and illegitimate governments from making mischief is central to American strategic thought and practice. And we most often regard wars as successfully concluded when failed states have been replaced with stable ones constructed on an American model.

## Implications for the Future

In sum, there has been a more or less consistent purpose to American power and a strategic culture that remains a source of American conduct. It is at once “realistic,” in the sense of being a keen calculation of power, especially military power, and at the same time “idealistic,” in the sense of being motivated by a set of transcendental claims about the nature of the good society. The quest for the good society, as Gerald Stourzh observes in his study of Alexander Hamilton, has confined itself “within the walls of the city. Principles of political obligation and organization have been sought within the confines of a given society.”<sup>19</sup> The growth of American power has

raised our understanding of where our walls are, of the outer limits on the good society; our peculiar strategic culture has driven us onward.

The “Long 1990s”—the period commencing with the fall of the Berlin Wall and ending with the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001—were arguably a kind of “interwar” period, during which American strategic culture experienced a crisis of confidence. The unexpected victory of the Cold War left leaders unsure, disorienting the world’s “sole superpower.” But the attacks of September 11 awoke a dormant American strategic culture and set the United States on a path toward an ambitious new expansion of the empire of liberty to “the greater Middle East.” Faced with a surprise attack from abroad, the United States reacted by reverting to its most natural strategic habits and traditions, imbued not only with a new sense of the need to exercise its power but a deepening sense of the righteousness of its ideals.

The Bush administration’s policies are thus not the result of an evanescent “unipolar moment” but rather a reflection of a deeper strategic culture that has guided the United States from the earliest days of the republic. Those policies are sustained not simply by the fact of American power or the extent of its military might, impressive as those may be. Rather, it is the enduring belief that the only true, lasting security is to be found in a large, “international” order, founded on individual political rights and freedoms—the very “empire of liberty” of which Jefferson wrote.

## Notes

1. Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 196–197.
2. See Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 411.
3. Brent Scowcroft, “Don’t Attack Saddam,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2002.
4. Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 284.
5. Andrew J. Bacevich, “The Real World War IV,” *The Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 2005): 37.
6. See Thomas Donnelly and Vance Serchuk, “John Kerry, Reactionary,” *The Weekly Standard* (July 19, 2004): 12.
7. John Kerry, “A Realistic Path in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, July 4, 2004.

8. Thomas L. Friedman, "The Apparent Heir," *New York Times*, October 31, 2005.

9. Dana Priest and Robin Wright, "Scowcroft Skeptical Vote Will Stabilize Iraq," *Washington Post*, January 7, 2005.

10. Nancy Soderberg, *The Superpower Myth: The Use and Misuse of American Might* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), 7.

11. James Madison, *Federalist* No. 51.

12. Theodore Roosevelt, *An American Mind: Selected Writings*, ed. Mario DiNunzio (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 812–813.

13. Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1.

14. Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1977).

15. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 6. My understanding of the various strains of thought about strategic culture owes much to Johnston's analyses.

16. See, especially, Colin Gray, "National Styles in Strategy: The American Example," *International Security* 6, no. 2 (Autumn 1981): 21–47. In fact, Gray's work, looking deep into history in search of the roots of American strategic culture, has much to recommend it and is a similar approach to the one employed in this work.

17. Reginald C. Stuart, *War and American Thought: From the Revolution to the Monroe Doctrine* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1982).

18. *Ibid.*, ix.

19. Gerald Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1970), 128.