

The Bush Doctrine: Take It or Leave It?

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It is obvious that the foreign policy decisions made under the George W. Bush administration have stirred much controversy both at home and abroad. The three main tenets of the current United States national security strategy, namely those of the preemptive use of force, unilateral action, and aggressive regime change, have been decried by critics as a radical departure from traditional U.S. foreign policy as well as a gross abuse of power. These critics maintain that traditional policy trends of containment and deterrence, along with the peaceful promotion of democracy, have been set aside in favor of nation building and the unwarranted exercise of hegemonic power. On the other hand, proponents of the Bush doctrine argue that these three core elements of the present-day foreign policy doctrine are in fact a natural progression of United States foreign policy. The only “revolution” which has taken place has been that of the security threats the United States now faces in a post-9/11 world. Preemption, unilateralism, and the call for regime change are simply new means to achieve the original ends as put forth by the founding fathers: preservation of democracy at home and the spread of democracy’s most basic principles abroad. In this paper, I will examine both sides of the debate surrounding these three primary components of the Bush foreign policy doctrine. In doing so I will assess the value of each of the three foreign policy tenets and arrive

at a conclusion as to whether or not these core ideas should be carried into the policy decisions of the next administration.

The events of September 11th abruptly woke the United States from a largely peaceful decade as the world's sole superpower, a position it had enjoyed since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. After 9/11 it was clear that the greatest threat to the United States lay not in the economic and technical prowess of other great powers, but instead in the hands of small networks of terrorists and the rogue states which supported them. Such terrorist networks lacked association with a defined territory, as well as concrete interests and demands, yet they had weapons, money, and a seemingly endless supply of zealous recruits. It was and is the belief of the Bush administration that with the advent of terrorism came a new age of warfare. Now, the fight must be taken to the enemy before they have the chance to strike, ad hoc "coalitions of the willing" must be used in place of antiquated international agreements, and, most importantly, regime change was required in those states which harbored and bred terrorism.

However, presented with a catastrophic war in Iraq, as well as a war on terrorism which has thus far proven largely futile, Americans and others are left to debate whether the failures of this administration come from the doctrine it adhered to so strongly, or simply its execution of this doctrine. Were the ideas espoused by the Bush administration a true "revolution" in foreign policy, which departed from all previous American strategy and with devastating results? Or, were the core tenets of Bush foreign policy a necessary answer to a new status quo in which world superpowers could be threatened by small groups of extremists? Should any elements of the current administration's national security strategy be considered for use by the next president? These are the questions we

are left with today as we prepare for next year's elections, and the questions which I will address in this paper. Through a thorough examination of each of the three major components of current American foreign policy, it is my goal to formulate an idea of what the foreign policy agenda of the next administration should be.

The George W. Bush foreign policy strategy has centered around three distinct elements: the use of preventive war, the active promotion of democracy abroad, and the practice of unilateralism. It is my opinion that the use of preventive war and the goal of democracy promotion should remain on the agenda of the next administration, but that each should be pursued with international support. Unilateralism remains the weak point of the Bush doctrine, as well as the element which continues to draw the most protest from both American citizens at home and the international community at large. Therefore, a multilateral approach to the undertaking of preventive war and democracy promotion would be an ideal security strategy for the future.

Preventive War

The first component of the Bush strategy to be discussed is the use of preventive war to counter today's threats. In the 2002 National Security Strategy President Bush asserts,

“While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists, to

prevent them from doing harm to our people and our country.” (National Security Strategy 2002)

It is important here to note the distinction between preemption and prevention. Preemption refers to striking when threat is imminent, whereas prevention concerns making a strike before the other side has the ability to pose a threat. As Lawrence Freedman explains, “Prevention is cold-blooded: it intends to deal with a problem before it becomes a crisis, while preemption is a more desperate strategy employed in the heat of the crisis.” (Freedman p. 107) Though Bush originally established a policy of preemption in the National Security Strategy, the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown that the administration has in fact taken on a policy more focused on prevention. By targeting rogue states and pursuing regime change, the Bush administration has aimed to cut terrorists off at their source, in an effort to eliminate the problem of terrorism altogether, before a terrorist plot can become imminent.

Preventive force is controversial because it involves taking action before action is taken against you, so it is difficult for other actors in the system to know if you are actually acting in a form of anticipatory self-defense, or if you yourself are the aggressor. The events of September 11th signaled a dramatic change in the nature of threat. No longer are we faced with rational state actors who might be contained or deterred. Instead, as Lawrence Freedman explains, “Against stateless and militant terrorist groups who have shown little evidence of cautious decision-making, it may be necessary to take the initiative.” (Freedman p. 105) When faced with underground terrorist networks acting independently of states, and working with weapons of mass destruction, it is extremely difficult to anticipate when and where they might next strike. Because there is generally

no warning as to when terrorists will strike, it is the only choice in foreign policy to rid them of the opportunity to strike at all. As Bush explained in his address to West Point in June 2002,

“The gravest danger to freedom lies at the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology – when that occurs even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations... We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systematically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.”

(Commencement Address at West Point June 2002)

Thus, a major component of the argument for prevention is that prevention is all the more appropriate as a security strategy because containment and deterrence fail to work effectively against terrorists. The act of terrorism itself is designed to create chaos and incite fear. Because terrorists generally lack concrete demands as well as their own defined territory, it is difficult to come up with a manner of deterring or containing their aggression. Bargaining is not an option when your opponent’s goal is to destroy and disrupt your basic way of life. As Bush continues in his West Point address,

“For much of the last century, America's defense relied on the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment. In some cases, those strategies still apply. But new threats also require new thinking. Deterrence -- the promise of massive retaliation against nations -- means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend. Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles

or secretly provide them to terrorist allies.” (Commencement Address at West Point June 2002)

Therefore, the Bush administration deemed preventive war the best and only means for combating terrorists in a post-9/11 world.

I agree with this first tenet of the Bush doctrine. It is in my opinion that preventive action aimed at rogue states which harbor terrorists or against the terrorist networks themselves is not only justified in today’s world, it is absolutely necessary. Provided we have ample and accurate intelligence implicating the rogue states and terrorist networks in such hostile activity, it is appropriate to defend ourselves preventively. The best way to guard against terrorists attacks is to remove the capability for attack from the terrorist networks. To do so, we should actively work to dismantle terrorist networks themselves, place sanctions against those states which we know are harboring or assisting terrorists, and closely monitor the development and exchange of weapons of mass destruction. Such actions should be taken within a multilateral framework in which we would have the resources and support of other nations. I believe preventive action conducted in this manner should absolutely remain on the policy agenda of the incoming administration.

Democracy Promotion

The second element of the Bush doctrine to be examined is that of active democracy promotion abroad. Critics hold that democracy cannot be forced upon others; it is a system of government which can only grow from the bottom up, from the

population itself into the higher ranks of government. Any U.S. effort to impose democracy from the top down is fruitless, and the dismantling of the government and its institutions by an outside power leaves the state in a highly unstable position. Also, such aggressive democracy promotion can alarm our friends and allies as to our motives and intentions. Other states do not know which country we will next deem appropriate for our intervention, and so the international community is placed on edge.

Despite its criticism, democracy promotion does have its merits. Tony Smith explains the value of democracy promotion at its most basic level,

“Whatever liberal democracy’s continued shortcomings, those who live under such systems feel that it has proved more capable of providing freedom and justice to its inhabitants than any other system in history.” (Smith, p. 183)

It is often the case that the oppressive conditions of autocratic states create the very conditions which breed terrorism. These states create resentment among the younger generations of their populations, and, at the same time, deny these people any outlet for expression of their grievances. As John Gaddis explains,

“Authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East support terrorism indirectly by producing generations of underemployed, unrepresented, and therefore radicalizable young people from whom Osama bin Laden and others like him can draw their recruits.” (Gaddis, p. 55)

Therefore, it is now the case that even if an autocratic state is not outwardly acting aggressively towards the United States, the ideology it proclaims and the rights it denies create a humanitarian crisis which generates hatred and violence. It follows that the promotion of democracy, through peaceful means, serves both the interests of American

security as well as the freedom and general well-being of people around the world. As Bush explains in the 2002 National Security Strategy,

“Finally, the United States will use this moment of opportunity to extend the benefits of freedom across the globe. We will work actively to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world. The events of September 11th taught us that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states. Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.” (National Security Strategy 2002)

The area of democracy promotion is understandably controversial. Though the ends of democracy promotion are noble, the way in which it has been conducted under the Bush administration has proven largely futile. The dismantling of the government in Iraq created a power vacuum in the country which allowed for the outbreaks in sectarian violence that continue to shake the country today. It is in my opinion that the next administration must reevaluate the manner in which we have thus far sought to promote democracy abroad. Economic sanctions and incentives paired with active diplomacy would be far more effective in promoting democracy than wars and occupations. It is appropriate to return to Woodrow Wilson’s goal of creating a “world made safe for democracy.” We should focus on creating a peaceful and stable international order which will foster democracy, rather than continue to force the creation of a democratic world which will foster peace. As I mentioned previously, democracy cannot be imposed from the top-down, it must come from the people within a nation. If we create conditions for

peace through economic and diplomatic means, democracy will surely follow, and this should be the aim of the next administration.

Unilateral Action

It is my argument that the major failings of the Bush administration can be attributed to its pursuit of its goals through unilateral action. The merits of the first two tenets of the Bush foreign policy doctrine, the right to act preventively in response to today's threats and the promotion of democracy, have been grossly overshadowed by the fact that the Bush administration has pursued both of these policy elements without the approval or backing of the international community. The issue of unilateralism must be addressed if these two elements of the Bush doctrine are ever to be seen as legitimate foreign policy strategies.

The major problem with unilateral action is acting alone invites speculation and alarm on the part of the international community, as is seen in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq. Other actors begin to question your intentions and wonder if they might be next on your list. It is extremely important to remain in good favor with the international system. Abiding by the rules of the international institutions to which we belong gives credibility to our actions and places allies at ease. In flouting the guidelines set forth by the global community, we discredit our own actions and encourage others to do the same. Additionally, the invasion of Iraq has shown that we simply do not have the means or the authority to "go it alone." We absolutely need the military support,

intelligence, and approval of the international community in order to see our goals to completion. As G. John Ikenberry explains,

“The enlightenment origin of the American founding has given the United States a political identity of self-perceived universal significance and scope. The republican democratic tradition that enshrines the rule of law reflects an enduring American view that polities – domestic or international – are best organized around rules and principles of order. America’s tradition of civic nationalism also reinforces this notion that the rule of law is the source of legitimacy and political inclusion. The tradition provides a background support for a multilateral foreign policy.” (Ikenberry, p. 543)

Therefore, if we wish to promote democracy and fight terrorism in an effective manner it is critical that we do so in a framework of multilateral support. Operating within a system of established rules and norms only gives more credibility to the system itself as well as to our actions. As Bush notes in the 2002 National Security Strategy, “We are also guided by the notion that no nation can build a safer, better world alone. Alliances and multilateral institutions can multiply the strength of freedom-loving nations.” (2002 National Security Strategy) Again, we can return to the Wilsonian ideal of a world made safe for democracy. It is in the interests of the democratic nations to work together in an effort to create a stable and peaceful international order in which democracy can flourish. It may be time for a reorganization of institutions like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization to make them better able to meet the threats and conditions of the 21st century. As Philip Zelikow explains in his article, “The Transformation of National Security: Five Redefinitions,” “The United States is not

challenging the necessity of international institutions for common action, but it is pressing other nations to decide what they want, to reconsider how to get it, and to re-evaluate old habits in light of new realities.” (Zelikow, p. 27)

Conclusion

As the wars in Iraq and against terrorism carry on, and the end of the administration which created them approaches, it is important to reflect upon the events and ideas which originally set these campaigns into motion. It is the responsibility of the next administration to take stock of the decisions made in the preceding presidency in order to decide which foreign policy strategies should remain on the agenda. It is in my opinion that the events of September 11th did signal the rise of a wholly new threat to the United States, that of non-state actors with the aim of creating chaos through mass destruction. The ideas of preventive action and democracy promotion as championed in the 2002 National Security Strategy are the most appropriate and effective means of countering the new threat posed by terrorism. However, it is vitally important that the next administration pursue these two policies in a context of international support. Only then can the United States gain the means and legitimacy to see its policies through. With a new base of international support, we will see the creation of a markedly more effective security strategy, one which defends both American interests in particular and the interests of freedom everywhere.

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