

Remaking the World: Bush and the Neoconservatives

By Joshua Micah Marshall

America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy.

Ivo H. Daalder, James M. Lindsay.

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Days before the United States launched Operation Iraqi Freedom this past March, a well-known intellectual close to the White House walked me through the necessity and promise of the coming invasion. Whatever rancor it caused in the short term, he said, would pale in comparison to the payoff that would follow. In the months and years to come, Iraqis who had suffered under Saddam Hussein's tyranny would write books and testify to the brutality of the regime, the bankruptcy of the Arab nationalism that stood idly by while they suffered, and the improvement of their lives. That testimony and the reality of an Iraqi state where basic human rights were respected would shatter the anti-Americanism that fills the Muslim Middle East and start a wave of change that would sweep over the region.

It was a breathtaking vision, and one that was difficult to dismiss out of hand. But from the vantage point of late 2003, it seems little better than a fantasy. To be sure, the war did eliminate a dangerous and evil regime. But the Bush administration greatly exaggerated the scale and imminence of the danger Saddam posed, while dramatically underestimating the cost and burden of the postwar occupation. The prewar links between Iraq and terrorism proved to be as minimal as skeptics had charged. And the Iraqis' feelings toward their liberators turned out to be more ambivalent than Washington had assumed, the regional ripple effects less extensive, and the diplomatic damage of the whole episode worse and longer lasting.

The Bush administration's foreign policy has played out equally poorly on other fronts as well. The administration came into office scoffing at Clinton's "appeasement" of North Korea, and soon stiffened its hard-line stance further by including Pyongyang in the "axis of evil." But after the North's clandestine uranium enrichment program was disclosed in late 2002, the administration slowly backtracked. The White House is now not only negotiating with Kim Jong Il and discussing a security guarantee, but it has even broached the possibility of granting him more aid before he dismantles his nuclear programs—a line the White House repeatedly pledged not to cross. The grand result of the Bush team's tough approach is that North Korea now has two ongoing nuclear weapons programs, while U.S. relations with South Korea have deteriorated dramatically.

In Israel, meanwhile, the situation is strikingly similar. After giving a low priority to the peace process during his first two years in office, George W. Bush pushed the "road map" for peace while relegating Yasir Arafat to the sidelines. At first, this approach appeared to lead to some progress, but a few months later it collapsed. Finding himself stymied, the new Palestinian prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, resigned; Arafat faces death or expulsion while being lionized among his constituents; bombings continue; and the region is as volatile and violent as ever.

The Mind of the President

"America Unbound," by Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, is one of the first in what promises to be a long line of efforts to tell these stories and take stock of the United States' tumultuous role in the world under Bush. In 200 short, painless pages, the authors present an overview of the first 30 months of the Bush administration's foreign policy—a lucid and concise account of what the authors call "the Bush revolution" in foreign affairs.

Although written by two staffers of Clinton's National Security Council, the book is not quite what one might expect. It is conspicuously short on polemics or rancor, and there is no score settling. If anything, the authors go out of their way to give the president and his chief advisers the benefit of most doubts. Daalder and Lindsay provide a clear, almost clinical, review of the intellectual roots of the administration's policy, the key personages involved, and the way the president used both to guide the nation from the relative quiescence of early 2001 through the storm clouds of 2003.

Their emphasis on the president is no accident. According to the authors, Bush was no figurehead or pawn in the revolution that bears his name, but rather the key decision-maker. "Bush," they write, may not have spent any time consciously trying to develop a philosophy about foreign affairs. However, a lifetime of experience had left deeply formed beliefs—instincts might be more precise—about how the world works and, just as important, how it does not. ... The fact that Bush could not translate his gut instincts into a form that would please political science Ph.D.s really did not matter.

The book's central argument is simple and, by now, familiar: the president's unilateralist policies have produced quick victories in Afghanistan and Iraq but have also fractured the nation's alliances, and as a result the world system is more chaotic and unfriendly, and the United States is less secure. Daalder and Lindsay are concerned about more than the truculent face the administration sometimes shows abroad. "The deeper problem," they write in the book's concluding chapter, is that "the fundamental premise of the Bush revolution—that America's security rested on an America unbound—was profoundly mistaken."

The strength of the book's contribution lies not in the originality of its thesis but in its clarity and brevity, its mastery of detail, and its analysis of the essential continuity of the administration's policy before and after September 11, 2001. The attacks on that day allowed President Bush to refashion American foreign policy in a far bolder and more audacious fashion than otherwise would have been possible, the authors argue, but in fact the administration's essential goals, premises, and assumptions changed very little.

A key example is the belief that states, rather than individuals or groups, remain the essential force in international affairs. It is now widely known that the incoming Bush administration initially downgraded its predecessor's focus on al Qaeda and other nonstate terrorist groups. To the extent that it was concerned about unconventional weapons and asymmetric threats, its focus was on rogue states and state-centric policy solutions such as missile defense. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon altered those priorities overnight, putting al Qaeda and Islamist terrorism at the top of the nation's agenda. But according to the authors, the epochal events failed to alter how most high administration officials understood the world. The emphasis on states, for example, remained. As Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith said, the reliance of terrorists on state sponsors was the "principal strategic thought underlying our strategy in the war on terrorism."

Another abiding characteristic of the administration's foreign policy, Daalder and Lindsay note, has been its belief that forceful U.S. leadership would cow the United States' enemies and bring wavering friends into line. Handwringing or grumbling from allies, the Bush team believed, stemmed not from too much American direction, but from too little. Vice President Dick Cheney summarized this view just before the outbreak of the Iraq war, when he told NBC's Tim Russert that he had no doubt that in the long run, after Saddam had been overthrown, "a good part of the world, especially our allies, will come around to our way of thinking." Readers can judge for themselves to what extent this prediction has been borne out.

You Say You Want a Revolution

It is doubtful that another book will come along soon that covers all the important points of the administration's foreign policy with more clarity and evenhandedness. The authors' basic point, accordingly—that the Bush approach deserves the label “revolutionary”—strikes home with that much more force. Ironically, however, one of the book's few weak points lies in its attempt to explain just where the revolutionary fervor came from.

Placing great weight on Bush's personal world view and the influence of hard-line advisers such as Cheney and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Daalder and Lindsay argue that the role of neoconservative intellectuals in driving the administration's policies has been greatly overstated. The “neocons,” they say—referring to them as “democratic imperialists”—may be powerful at magazines such as *The Weekly Standard* and think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute, but key movement figures such as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Pentagon adviser Richard Perle actually missed out on the top appointments. Those plums went to people such as Cheney, Rice, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who the authors claim are more properly classified as “assertive nationalists.”

It is true that none of the administration's principals—Bush, Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Rumsfeld, or Rice—could fairly be called a neoconservative. But it is also true that despite being relegated to the second tier of executive branch appointments and various positions in the conservative foreign policy establishment outside of the government, the neocons have been peculiarly capable of advancing their views with their superiors. The defining characteristic of the Bush administration's foreign policy, in fact, has been the way the neocons in and out of office have been able to win so many of the key battles—if not on the first go-round, then on the second or the third. The neocons have not always written the libretto, but the score has in most cases remained firmly in their hands, and particularly so in the case of Iraq.

At the Pentagon, for example, Rumsfeld may have played the key part in internal debates over defense transformation, but on foreign policy issues, his neocon lieutenants, Wolfowitz and Feith, were decisive, and managed to secure nearly total control of all aspects of policy surrounding the war and the subsequent occupation.

Something similar occurred with Vice President Cheney, a believer in hard power and aggressive leadership abroad and an opponent of constraints on the United States' ability to act in its own national interests. Cheney seems to have been transformed by the September 11 attacks more than any of the other administration principals. In the late 1990s, he had gone so far as to lobby for the loosening of sanctions against Iran and had stood apart from the Iraq hawks. After September 11, however, he became the crucial advocate of overthrowing Saddam, and it is clear that the shift was nurtured and guided by neocon voices both inside and outside of the administration. “Soon after the attacks,” as Daalder and Lindsay note, “Cheney immersed himself in a study of Islam and the Middle East, meeting with scholars such as Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami who argued that toppling Saddam would send a message of strength and enhance America's credibility throughout the Muslim world.” Having spent time with such tutors, and under the influence of his chief of staff, I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, the vice president became the chief advocate of their positions.

The Grand Experiment

Unfortunately for Daalder and Lindsay, the process by which foreign policy has evolved under Bush might best be captured with the tools of a novelist rather than with the constrained, technical means available to writers of quasi-academic foreign policy analysis. To the extent that neoconservatism has been influential, for example, it has been so through the cohesiveness of a group of individuals and a shared mindset among them

rather than as a clearly delineated theory of foreign policy. But covering that part of the story would take a different book—one more attuned to backroom dealing, to the communities of interest that shape policymaking in Washington, and to the power of ideas aggressively advanced.

Neoconservatism never really had a well-explicated theory of foreign policy in the first place. It developed as an ideological movement in the context of American domestic politics, one that favored, among other things, muscular American action abroad and confrontation rather than coexistence with the Soviet Union. It championed democratic dissident movements behind the Iron Curtain as a challenge to Soviet power. But on the peripheries of the Cold War—in Africa, Latin America, and Asia—the movement was rather less demanding of the allies it chose, and so identifying it too firmly with democratic imperialism may be a mistake. Although it is the sworn enemy of realism, neoconservatism has never been and is not now limited to one particular foreign policy school. It is a protean construct centering on a belief in the righteousness of American power, the wonder-working qualities of bold gestures, and an unwillingness to muddle through.

No matter who had occupied the White House on September 11, it was all but inevitable that after addressing Afghanistan, the American government would pay increased attention to Iraq's unconventional weapons programs. But absent the intellectual framework provided by the neocons, it is highly improbable that the result of this heightened attention would have been a rapid lonely march into an essentially unprovoked war. Not only the fact of the war, moreover, but also the way it was conducted, the Iraqi partners involved, the postwar planning (or lack thereof), and the theory that governed the whole operation all emanated from a relatively small and interlocking circle of thinkers, pundits, and policymakers.

In the old days, one could often find a certain sort of leftist who would insist that socialism or communism had not really failed, because it had never actually been tried. One crucial legacy of the Bush revolution is that it will not be possible to say something similar about neoconservatism. Rarely in American history has such a cohesive and distinctive group managed to exert so decisive an influence on such a crucial issue as the neocons did on Iraq from the collapse of the twin towers through the early stages of the occupation of Baghdad almost two years later. To the extent that their chosen policies are deemed a success, they will be able to claim an extraordinary degree of vindication. If the verdict of history goes the other way, however—and the early returns are decidedly mixed—at least it will be clear whom to blame.