

Interview with George Soros

Talking Points Memo

By Josh Marshall

We are extremely pleased this morning to bring you TPM's interview with George Soros, which was conducted last Friday morning. We had initially intended to bring it to you yesterday. But certain logistical issues tied to reporting here from New Hampshire made that impossible. Yet, I think today is actually more appropriate, since it comes as a sort of rebuttal to points set forth yesterday evening in the president's State of the Union address.

Most of you are probably already quite familiar with Soros. He was born in Hungary in 1930, then emigrated to the U.K. in 1947 and finally to the U.S. in 1956. He had an extremely successful and lucrative career running an investment fund. And beginning in 1979, and increasingly so after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he founded a series of foundations "dedicated to building and maintaining the infrastructure and institutions of an open society."

Recently, Soros has turned his attention to U.S. politics, putting a good deal of money into the effort to turn President Bush out of office in this November's election. And he's authored a new book entitled *The Bubble of American Supremacy*, which is a critique of Bush administration foreign policy and particularly the 'Bush Doctrine.'

Soros has also agreed to field questions from TPM readers who've read his book, in a sort of moderated dialogue. And we'll be posting more details about that shortly.

For now, the interview, which was conducted last Friday. . . .

TPM: Let's get started. I've obviously read your book and have been following it. But for our readers who haven't, what is the essential problem that you see with the Bush Doctrine, both as a doctrine and how it's been practiced over the last two years now?

SOROS: Basically it asserts American supremacy, particularly *military* supremacy. It does so by combining two—it's built on two pillars: One, that the United States must preserve and maintain its unquestioned military supremacy both globally and in any particular region. Two, the United States has a right to preemptive action. Each of these points on their own have some validity. It is desirable that we should have such military superiority, and under some circumstances it may be necessary to engage in preemptive action. But if you combine the two, it really establishes two classes of sovereignty: the sovereignty of the United States, which is sacrosanct and not subject to any international constraint, and the sovereignty of all other states, which is subject to the Bush Doctrine—preemptive action by the United States.

So it is reminiscent of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. You know, all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others. And this is in contradiction of the values that have made America great. It is basically one of the belief in inequality. And it is unacceptable—cannot possibly be accepted—by the rest of the world, as demonstrated by the allergic reaction to the first practical application of this doctrine in Iraq.

TPM: There are a number of questions that I want to ask, but let me start with this one: There's obviously an ongoing debate about how the Iraq war took place, about how the lead-up to the UN happened, and comparisons with the Balkans, and so forth. And that conversation sometimes gets down to almost a fetish of the words "unilateral" and "multilateral." And we get into conversations about, you

know, how large coalitions need to be before U.S. action becomes legitimate and so forth. It's like what that Supreme Court justice said about pornography—you know it when you see it—that is, whether you have a coalition that in some sense expresses some unity of will in the international community. But how do you codify this or create some sort of model, comparing our actions in the Balkans, which you supported in the '90s, to Iraq, and looking forward? Obviously, we didn't have UN sanction in Kosovo. What's the line? When does legitimacy come into our actions or not?

SOROS: As you say, you know it when you see it, and so, you know, legitimacy is in the eyes of the beholder. Nevertheless, you can make some theoretical case and I develop such a case in the book. The problem is this: That sovereignty, the principle of sovereignty, stands in the way of intervening in the internal affairs of individual countries. Yet, in some circumstances, it is necessary to do so. To decide when it is necessary and legitimate, we have to re-examine the concept of sovereignty, because sovereignty is really an anachronistic concept. It goes back to kings and subjects.

And then, in the French Revolution, the king was deposed and sovereignty was taken over by the people. That made it more modern. So really sovereignty belongs to the people. But, in many cases you have got rulers that actually abuse the people over whom they rule. In these cases, there is a need for justification for external intervention. And this principle has now been recognized in the proposal—is it called, [The] Responsibility to Protect? This is a report submitted to Kofi Annan. . .

TPM: Right—I know which one you're referring to.

SOROS: The Canadian thing. The Responsibility to Protect. And that, I think, is the principle on which one can base intervention. But then, the question is: where do you find the legitimacy of the intervener, the international community? What constitutes the international community? Obviously, the United Nations has that legitimacy. And, whenever possible, the action should be through the United Nations. But it isn't always possible because you've got some countries with vetoes. And they may stand in the way.

In these cases, you can have a coalition of open societies, of democracies, that could constitute a source of legitimacy. In the case of Kosovo, NATO did constitute such a body, because Kosovo is in Europe, and NATO is basically an alliance of European countries. In the case of Iraq, NATO would not be sufficient, because Europe is no more legitimate than the United States as an intervener in the Middle East.

So you would need a broader coalition of other democracies—developing countries, in Latin America, South Africa, India, and possibly some of the neighboring countries. That would constitute a legitimate source of intervention in the case of Iraq, in case the United Nations would not have been willing because of a French veto.

TPM: Now, and I'll use this as a sort of a general description, the neoconservatives—or just perhaps the hawks—in this administration, I think, would say that in some ways, their argument is closer to yours than the realists, who want to build an international state system where sovereignty is sort of the glue that holds everything together. And they are about overthrowing dictatorships and expanding democracy and so forth. But in the case of Iraq, well . . . I think that they would argue that the bordering states had selfish interests, let's say, for not wanting to upend the *status quo* in Iraq.

SOROS: Yes, and therefore you could have done it without the bordering states, if you had Latin America, South Africa, other African countries, and India, for instance, on your side. And in fact, you're also right in saying that, let's say, I have more in common in some ways with the hawks who *do* want to intervene than I have with the geopolitical realists, who are only concerned with the more narrow national self-interest. So I share some of the proselytizing zeal of the neocons—of the hawks. That is exactly why I'm so upset with them. Because I think that they are acting dishonestly and using the concern with tyrants, you know, that we can't tolerate tyrants, as an excuse for asserting American supremacy. And basically in promoting open society, they forget the first principle of open society: namely, that we may be wrong. That is my main concern.

TPM: In your book you talk about the hawks' vision of international statecraft and also American conservatives' ideas of how our domestic polity should be organized as a crude sort of neo-Social Darwinism, informing both. Can you elaborate on that? Particularly on the international stage.

SOROS: I think that the reliance on military power is sort of an excess of this Social Darwinist point of view. I had been opposed to market fundamentalism as a philosophy or as an ideology. Namely, that life is a struggle for survival, and the struggle manifests itself mainly in competition. And the competition is, who is stronger? And the survival of the fittest is basically the survival of the strongest in competition. But, in actual fact, survival also requires cooperation. And there is a need for having rules to which everybody agrees for us to survive. And there are also problems like the environment, that can only be . . . and maintaining peace in the world, that can only be achieved through cooperation. So there's a misinterpretation of the Darwinist theory of survival of the fittest—that achieving power over others is the goal. And that is not really the basis of our civilization.

TPM: Well, it sounds almost like there's sort of a neo-Hobbesian view—where the U.S. government is the Leviathan over the whole—to create order through the world.

SOROS: Basically, as I say in the book, the ideology is that international relations are relations of power, not law. That law merely serves to ratify what power has achieved and accomplished. And this is not totally wrong, in the sense that, in fact, international law is very weak. It's certainly much weaker than the rule of law that prevails in the United States. However, this ideology is a self-fulfilling prophecy, because if the strongest power in the world decides that it's power that rules and not law, then in fact that's what happens. And that is, in my view, a retrograde step. It is contrary to what has made us prosper.

TPM: Let me ask you: I've obviously read your book and seen you interviewed a number of times on this topic. And you have explained your involvement in this election cycle partly by pointing to the importance of this next election as a referendum on the Bush Doctrine. And if the president is turned out of office, it will, this last few years will seem like sort of an aberration—in part, the shock of 9/11, and so on and so forth.

My question is this, though: Clearly, as we've seen, in a direct military sense, we can overthrow a government like Saddam Hussein's. Again, in a pure military sense, we can occupy it, we can at least in the short-to-medium term fund this occupation. And NATO may be strained, but it hasn't collapsed. And one could say similar things about our alliances in different parts of the world. And the reason I bring up the point about this coming election is that the argument I think that people like yourself have made—and probably people like myself—is that the

consequences of what we are doing now probably won't be clear in their totality in the next year. They'll be clear five years from now, ten years from now. To the extent that you can, assuming President Bush is re-elected—what do you see those consequences as being? When do they become tangible? People who are on the hawk side I think would say, yeah, there's a lot of opposition around the world to what we're doing, but, you know, so what?

SOROS: First, let me say that the consequences are already clear. It's only a question of recognizing it. Just today, the U.S. is turning to the UN to help in legitimizing the creation of an Iraqi government—that's today's news. Which means that under the duress of the coming elections and the need to, let's say, correct the mistakes that we have made in Iraq, that we are now recognizing that we can't do it on our own.

I've been arguing this all along. It's now being admitted. Now, this administration will never admit that it has made a mistake. But anybody who looks at it can see that they are actually even trying to correct the mistakes that they have made by turning to the UN now.

So that's the first thing: the fact that their ideology of power and dominance is false. It actually doesn't work. That's number one. Secondly, it's profoundly un-American, because we have, you know, a belief in the equality of opportunities and the very principles of America are not ones of dominance. We don't believe in, you know, we fought the Civil War to abolish slavery. So, secondly, it's really un-American; it's a break with American values.

And there is another aspect that is coming into sharper focus to me, even since I wrote the book. That is that this administration has no compunction in misleading the people. It has no respect for the truth. This, I think, is a real danger. It is the danger of an Orwellian world. It's not new, because obviously, Orwell wrote about this fifty years ago. But what he wrote in 1984, you know, the Ministry of Truth being the Propaganda Ministry, the use of words meaning the opposite of what they are meant to mean. The Fox News, "Fair and Balanced," the "Clear Skies" Act for permitting pollution, the "Leave No Child Behind" [that] provides no money for the legislation. All these things I think pose a real danger to our democracy if they succeed in misleading the electorate. And there is only one remedy: an intelligent and enlightened electorate that sees through it.

Now, I find myself in a peculiar position, because having grown up or been exposed to the Nazi regime and the communist regime, I am very sensitive to this kind of propaganda. And the American people, not having been exposed to quite the same extent, seem to be more easily misguided. And that is something that I have been trying to say. And, as a result, I have been accused of calling Bush a Nazi. And that, to me, is itself a demonstration of how this propaganda machine works. That is a real danger, and I think that we really have to somehow become more sensitive to it, and reject it. So, I focused on rejecting the Bush Doctrine. But really behind it is this conviction that we must reject Orwellian Doublespeak. And that, in a sense, was why Dean had such great appeal because, he said, 'what I say is what you get.' He's losing some of that now that he's the front runner. But this is what people are really hankering after.

TPM: Let me ask you another question, sort of along these lines. I obviously follow politics very closely. And from what one can glean about public opinion from polls and so forth—and I know you follow politics very closely as well. A few months ago, say, September, October of last year, I think everybody would say that in terms of perception, at a minimum, things were at a nadir for how people

were seeing the president, seeing Iraq, seeing the economy. And you could see that the President's poll numbers went down and so forth. And yet they never went really below 50 percent, even when things seemed to really be falling apart in Iraq. And I've asked myself this and I wonder what you've come up with—does it say something about the direction that this country's going in, its own culture, its own politics, that there's the kind of sufferance of the policies that we've been discussing?

SOROS: Yes it does. And I focus my ire on Bush. And I hope that we can pin the shortcomings of our culture and of our attitudes on Bush. And that would be a wonderful way out, because we could have blamed Bush for it. And it was an aberration and we rejected it.

But the fact is, maybe we don't reject it. Maybe we are complicit. Maybe the general distrust and resentment of the United States is more justified than I would like to see it. So there is a real danger here. Now, September 11th has a lot to do with this, because after September 11, the Bush administration very cleverly used the terrorist attacks and the war on terror as a patriotic rallying cry, when it became totally unacceptable to be critical of anything that the administration did. You have the quote from Ashcroft, "Anybody who opposes the USA Patriot Act is giving aid and comfort to the terrorists." You have Bush saying, "Those who are not with us are with the terrorists."

And that, temporarily, stilled any kind of criticism of the president. It was practically impossible for a politician to be critical. Then, in the absence of critical process, the administration abused its mandate by attacking Iraq. And that became obvious. And that sort of led to a breakdown of the taboo. It became legitimate to criticize, because the deception was just too obvious. And there was a rising criticism. And that's when Bush started sinking. But the propaganda machine is fabulously well-functioning. It's really very successful. And Karl Rove is a superior strategist. And so the Bush administration has regrouped and is now again, I think, managing to deceive the people. And that's what's happening.

TPM: You've obviously been involved in democracy-building of a non-military sort in Central and Eastern Europe for, I guess, almost fifteen years now. And now you've become directly involved in politics in the United States. And this has been written about and you've talked about it and so forth. But, can you explain, what is your experience of direct political involvement been thus far? You're writing a book, you're funding various organizations and so forth. What is jumping into the fray? How have you experienced it?

SOROS: Well, this is a novel experience for me. I've never had this before. And I can't say that I'm particularly successful or comfortable in doing it. But, I feel that I have an obligation to do it. A sense of obligation or responsibility, because I believe that really, we are going in a very dangerous direction and, because the United States is so powerful, it endangers the prospect for the world and for our civilization.

TPM: How does it—I mean, obviously you've been on the receiving end of attacks of various sorts. How does—

SOROS: How does it feel?

TPM: Yeah.

SOROS: I'm quite human and I'm not a politician, so it doesn't leave me unaffected. I'm affected by it. But it actually strengthens my resolve. Because, I'm in a rather

unusual position to be able to take it. However, it does intimidate, I think, others. And I think that one of the objectives is to intimidate others from joining me.

TPM: Let me jump back for just a last question about what we spoke about before. You have spoken about as a child and an adolescent living, sort of experiencing first-hand the two great power ideologies of the last century: Nazism and Communism. And you've spoken about the echoes you sense of that. There's a new book out by Chalmers Johnson where he lays out a whole argument that is similar, in some ways, to yours. He talks about the nexus between the sort of power ideology that he sees as embodied in the Bush Doctrine, and deception. That it's not a coincidence that these two come together, and operate together: ideologies of power, and the need for systematic deception.

SOROS: Who is it?

TPM: Chalmers Johnson. It's called *'The Sorrows of Empire.'* It's new out. It's been out for a month or two, or something like that.

SOROS: Unfortunately, I don't have time to read; I only have time to write. Anyhow, I'd like to see it.

TPM: But what do you make of that?

SOROS: Look, open society is always endangered. But the dangers are different in character. So, it was endangered by Nazism, it was by fascism, it was endangered by Communism. And now it is endangered in a very unusual, in a very unexpected way, from a very unexpected quarter, which is the United States. I have never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would be standing up to defend the principles of open society, which are in the core of American history and tradition, in America. But, it doesn't mean that the threat that is present today is identical with the threat that came from Nazism or Communism. By saying what I'm saying, I'm not comparing Bush to a Nazi. I'm not calling Bush a Nazi. I want to make it very, very explicit that I'm not. And I don't think that the comparison is helpful. In fact, I think it's harmful.

It's a different threat. And it's actually a very strange, unexpected [threat]. If you go back to this Doublespeak and the threat of deception, the Goebbels propaganda machine had a total monopoly of the media. The Soviets had such control that they could actually erase people from history, airbrush out leaders who fell, who were disgraced. The deception in America is practiced while you do have pluralistic media. You do have, you know, different channels that are available. Nevertheless, something is going on in the way of managing the interpretation of reality that is actually successful and poses a danger to open society. And it has been spearheaded by the conservative movement. But, it's not confined to the conservative movement. In other words, it's a cultural phenomenon. And it permeates, let's say, the Democratic primaries as much as it does the propaganda of the Bush administration.

TPM: Can you expand on that? Are we talking about demagogy?

SOROS: There is a cultural phenomenon—an unscrupulous pursuit of your cause with disregard to truth. And because of that . . . I mean, you always had adversarial relations, and, you know, it's not a new phenomenon. But it has lost its anchor because of the disregard of the truth.

TPM: OK.

SOROS: It comes back to my theory of boom, bust, and bubbles, where the process gets out of hand. And I think that the political process, and political debate, has gotten out of hand in the United States. You had a similar phenomenon in the financial markets, where you had a boom, where it wasn't a matter of what the earnings were, but how they could be dressed up. So you had these excesses of deception and shenanigans and cheating. But that came a cropper. That has been corrected. But the political arena, it hasn't been corrected.

TPM: Final quick question: are you optimistic about this election coming up?

SOROS: I'm hopeful. And I think that right now, right this minute, things don't look so good, because you don't have a Democratic candidate. But I think that will change once you have a candidate, and you have a real debate between two sides.