

George “Wilson” Bush

How the dark side of America’s Liberal Tradition drives us to global crusades in democracy’s name.

By Michael C. Desch

THE DIRTY SECRET of this administration is that George W. Bush and his neo-conservative allies aren’t conservatives at all when it comes to their foreign policy. They are instead part of what Harvard Professor Louis Hartz called America’s “Liberal Tradition.” The subject of his classic book *The Liberal Tradition in America* was not lower-case liberalism, the guiding ideology of the American Left, but rather capital Liberalism, the political system based on individual freedom, equality of opportunity, free markets, and political representation.

Everyone is in favor of those things here at home. The problem is that when they dominate the exercise of foreign policy, they lead us to go abroad in search of monsters. The more natural foreign policy blueprint for the traditional Right is realism—the notion that states should pursue above all else their material power interests.

Historically, American foreign policy has been more sane and our nation more secure when realism has guided us. But it is not as deeply rooted in U.S. political culture. Indeed, non-Liberal politicians—Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, George H.W. Bush, and Brent Scowcroft—and thinkers—Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, George Kennan, and John Mearsheimer—are the exception rather than the rule.

Realism has prevailed before, often during the most pivotal periods of American diplomatic history. The policy of containment and the restructuring of

the Western alliance after World War II owes much to realist conceptions, as did the successful exploitation of the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1970s. But more often than not, realists have remained outside the core Washington consensus.

As neoconservative pundit Robert Kagan rightly notes, “The United States is a liberal, progressive society through and through, and to the extent that Americans believe in power, they believe it must be a means of advancing the principles of a liberal civilization and a liberal world order.”

The problem with America’s Liberal Tradition is that, as Hartz argues, at its core it contains a “deep and unwritten tyrannical compulsion” that “hampers creative action abroad by identifying the alien [the non-Liberal] with the unintelligible, and it inspires hysteria at home by generating the anxiety that unintelligible things produce.”

Thus America’s Liberal Tradition leads us to see today’s global War on Terror as a much more threatening type of war that can only be won by employing extreme tactics like pre-emption and torture. What makes it dangerous in this view is not so much the physical threat to our country (which is serious, to be sure), but rather the existential threat to our way of life and the uncivilized means our adversaries employ.

President Bush argues that our enemies “want to destroy what we stand for and how we live.” “Our terrorist enemies,” in his view, “seek to impose Tal-

iban-like rule, country by country.” Then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice offered a particularly poignant argument that the global War on Terror is being fought to defend American Liberal values:

Like many of you, I grew up around the home-grown terrorism of the 1960s. I remember the bombing of the church in Birmingham in 1963, because one of the little girls that died was a friend of mine . . . [L]et our voice not waver in speaking out on the side of people seeking freedom. And never let us indulge the condescending voices who allege that some people are not interested in freedom or aren’t ready for freedom’s responsibilities. That view was wrong in 1963 in Birmingham and it is wrong in 2003 in Baghdad.

The application of America’s Liberal Tradition to foreign policy casts our enemies in the War on Terror as outlaws operating beyond the bounds of civilization. The president has repeatedly reminded us that on 9/11, al-Qaeda targeted “our . . . civilian population, in direct violation of one of the principal norms of the law of warfare.” He sees rogue states like Saddam Hussein’s Iraq waging war against us in an uncivilized fashion, “In this conflict, America faces an Enemy who has no regard for the conventions of war or the rules of morality.”

America's Liberal Tradition leads us to think that the threat from terrorists or rogue states cannot simply be contained or managed but must be destroyed. It suggests two diametrically opposed strategies for doing this. On the one hand, building on longstanding Liberal arguments that democracies do not go to war with each other, America's Liberal Tradition advocates that the spread of democracy around the world be a central component of American foreign

ill-advised decision to disband the Iraqi army and undertake a large-scale purge of Iraq's civilian government.

On the other hand, the Liberal Tradition also leads Americans to believe that freedom's enemies represent such a dire peril that they must be annihilated. "Today, we face brutal and determined enemies—men who celebrate murder, incite suicide, and thirst for absolute power," President Bush claims, and "these enemies will not be stopped by

war against terrorism ushers in a new paradigm, one in which groups with broad, international reach commit horrific acts against innocent civilians, sometimes with the direct support of states. Our nation recognizes that this new paradigm—ushered in not by us, but by terrorists—requires new thinking in the law of war ..." The content of this new thinking was made clear in congressional testimony by Cofer Black, then head of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center: "There was before 9/11, and there was after 9/11. After 9/11 the gloves came off."

For Hartz, America's problem was not Liberalism *per se*, but rather Liberalism unchecked by any real ideological alternative. "It is not to disparage liberalism," he maintains, "to say that a knowledge of it and nothing else can produce an absolute temper of mind that in the end is self-defeating." In his view, America's Liberal Tradition is so deep-seated and all-encompassing that there is little real debate about the objectives of American policies such as spreading democracy, merely quibbles about how to achieve them (unilaterally vs. multilaterally).

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, support for the war was bipartisan, largely because it was justified within this bipartisan Liberal Tradition. Today, even though it is clear that the war was unnecessary and it appears increasingly unlikely that we will succeed in our efforts to democratize Iraq, most Democrats still criticize only the administration's tactics rather than its larger objectives. Liberals have a hard time criticizing the Bush administration's policies because they buy into so many of the Liberal Tradition premises that undergird them.

A real challenge can therefore only come from outside, and realism offers the clearest alternative. Realists take seriously the threat from international terrorism but keep it in historical perspective. They are also skeptical of the administration's claim that we face a

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policy. Bill Clinton's 1996 *National Security Strategy* stated, "the more that democracy and political and economic liberalization take hold in the world ... the safer our nation is likely to be and the more our people are likely to prosper." Likewise, in his 2004 State of the Union address, President Bush confirmed, "our aim is a democratic peace." His national security adviser subsequently explained, "President Bush's foreign policy is a bold new vision that draws inspiration from the ideas that have guided American foreign policy at its best: That democracies must never lack the will or the means to meet and defeat freedom's enemies, that America's power and purpose must be used to defend freedom, and that the spread of democracy leads to lasting peace."

The Liberal Tradition holds that spreading democracy is even more important than maintaining stability. Recall Defense Secretary Don Rumsfeld's cavalier dismissal of the mayhem in Iraq after the fall of Baghdad: "Freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things. They're also free to live their lives and do wonderful things." This belief led to the Coalition Provisional Authority's

negotiations, or concessions, or appeals to reason. In this war, there is only one option—and that is victory." In his view, "there is no neutral ground—no neutral ground—in the fight between civilization and terror, because there is no neutral ground between good and evil, freedom and slavery, and life and death."

Vice President Dick Cheney echoes these sentiments: "Such a group [as al-Qaeda] cannot be held back by deterrence, nor reasoned with through diplomacy. For this reason, the war against terror will not end in a treaty. There will be no summit meeting, no negotiations with terrorists. This conflict can only end in their complete and utter destruction."

Even such moderate figures in the Bush administration as former Secretary of State Colin Powell argue, "any organization that is tainted by terrorist elements in it or a philosophy of terrorism, we can't work with. And that has to be eliminated."

The most disturbing manifestation of this has been the White House's willingness to flout international norms governing the treatment of prisoners, condoning or even employing torture in the course of interrogations. In a February 2002 memorandum, the president argued, "the

more dangerous adversary now in al-Qaeda than we did from the Soviet Union during the Cold War. After all, the Soviets had a huge nuclear arsenal, while our worst-case fears today are that al-Qaeda might get one or two crude radiological “dirty bombs.” Realism counsels prudent caution but not panic in our approach to the global War on Terror.

Realists also have a more balanced perspective on al-Qaeda. Rather than seeing bin Ladin and his allies as mindless religious fanatics bent on destroying our way of life, realists understand that they are pursuing a coherent political agenda to end the United States’ military presence in the Middle East. And realists understand that al-Qaeda’s tactics—particularly suicide terrorism—make perfect sense for a weak non-state actor who has no other choice than to wage asymmetric warfare. Realists recognize that we are in a dangerous fight, but they are less inclined to regard al-Qaeda as implacable and invincible.

And it has been the realists in the American military who have been more consistently committed to upholding the Geneva Conventions and maintaining the norm against torture than have civilian politicians and pundits. True, the basis of this commitment has been pragmatic—military professionals support the Geneva Conventions because they understand that they benefit American troops—rather than principled. But no matter what their rationale, military realists are less likely than civilian liberals to place our enemies beyond the pale of civilization.

Finally, realists have been far less enthusiastic about American efforts to achieve hegemony than either liberals or the Bush administration. Realists understand that the rest of the world does not see the United States as a benign hegemon despite our good intentions. They fear that as the United States grasps for world domination it will

instead generate opposition around the world resulting in greater international tension and conflict.

The few times that realism has guided American foreign policy—Nixon and Kissinger’s decision to pull back from our failed commitment to South Vietnam and George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft’s adroit management of the reunification of Germany and the first Gulf War—the United States and the world have been better off. The challenge for realism is that, unlike the Liberal Tradition, it is not particularly American. Not only does realism have its intellectual roots in Old Europe, particularly in the states of the “Axis of Weasel” such as France (Talleyrand and Raymond Aron) and Germany (Bis-

marck and Hans Morgenthau); it is also out of sync with such core American traits as optimism about the future and the deeply rooted belief that America is exceptional, vastly different from other nations, a Shining City on a Hill.

On the other hand, when the conduct of American foreign policy has been grounded in realism—particularly in perilous times—it has been both creative and effective. A return is needed now more than ever. ■

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Know Thine Enemy

The Iraqi resistance is not the motley band that the Bush administration claims.

By Eric S. Margolis

TWO AND A HALF years after President Bush triumphantly declared “mission accomplished” in Iraq, 150,000 U.S. and British troops, aided by contingents of foreign auxiliaries, are locked in a growing guerrilla war against more than 20 different resistance groups about which remarkably little is known.

U.S. commanders in Iraq are now estimating it may take seven to 10 more years of combat before these resistance forces are defeated and Iraq becomes a docile and lucrative American ally.

To understand the ongoing guerrilla war, go back to the eve of the U.S. offensive in Kuwait in 1991. At that time, President Saddam Hussein of Iraq proclaimed “the Mother of All Battles.” This memo-

orable gasconade provoked sneers and jokes in America, particularly after Iraq’s forces were easily routed and driven from Kuwait. But what Americans did not grasp then, nor 12 years later when they invaded Iraq, was that Saddam’s planned Mother of All Battles was not to be simply a hopelessly lopsided war between America’s high-technology forces and Iraq’s World War I military.

Far from it. Saddam was no fool. He knew his regular forces could not withstand attack by the U.S. and Britain. The only way Iraq could resist was to follow the successful model of Lebanon’s Hezbollah guerrillas, the only Arab force ever to defeat the mighty, high-tech Israelis.