

NEO-IMPERIALISM AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION HAS ARGUED THAT THE 9/11 ATTACKS USHERED IN A NEW GEO-STRATEGIC REALITY REQUIRING NEW DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICY APPROACHES. THIS IS A FALSE AND DANGEROUS PREMISE.

By LOUIS JANOWSKI

American foreign policy at its best combines a clear understanding of our national interests, the limits of our power, and the real and psychological needs of the American people. Effective foreign policy in our democracy has always been a combination of realpolitik and moral idealism. Pearl Harbor remains the classic example: a Japanese attack created the catalyst that allowed President Franklin Roosevelt to unite the American people behind moral and idealistic policies which successfully structured U.S. policies and advanced U.S. interests for the remainder of the 20th century.

Yet the U.S. foreign policy record over the past half-century has been mixed. All too often, our political leadership appears to suffer from attention deficit disorder and the dangerous, self-destructive behaviors that too often accompany ADD.

The Vietnam War failed the test of meeting a clearly defined and limited national interest. In addition, the realities of conducting guerrilla warfare meant that the average American perceived a nightmare rather than an idealistic and moral crusade for a better world. Both the Korean and Persian Gulf Wars had clear causes, limited objectives (recall President Harry Truman's dismissal of Gen. Douglas MacArthur over widening the scope of the Korean War) and wide global support. The Persian Gulf War was a good

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example of clear causes, limited objectives, morality, and broad international support. By contrast, Somalia was an example of unrealistic moral idealism combined with a lack of concrete national interest.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq failed to meet these criteria. It lacked virtually every element of this formula for success: a clearly defined casus belli, an overriding national interest, limited goals, and international legitimacy. Indeed, the Bush administration was able to win popular support for the war only by pandering to the worst fears of the American public, conjuring up a link of terror between the secular nationalist Ba'athist rulers of Iraq and the diametrically opposed pan-Islamic religious fundamentalists of al-Qaida. The two represent essentially opposing ends of the political spectrum in the Middle East with little in common other than shared anti-Americanism.

Equally unbelievable was the portrait of an "axis of evil" linking Iran and Iraq (and North Korea). Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran and the ensuing 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War render such a linkage a grotesque distortion of historical reality, as does the participation of several senior officials from the current Bush administration in the Reagan administration's efforts to cultivate Saddam during that period.

More generally, the Bush administration has attempted to argue that the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center ushered in a new geo-strategic reality requiring new domestic and foreign policy approaches. This is a false premise. All that changed with 9/11 was a naive assumption that somehow the U.S. — unlike any other nation — could involve itself in ever-expanding external acts without potential negative or retaliatory responses on its territory.

In this regard, it is useful to recall that terrorism is specifically designed to cause overreaction. Perhaps terrorism's greatest success in the past century was Austria-Hungary's

overreaction to the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand by a Serbian Pan-Slav "terrorist" which, in turn, led to World War I and the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Empire Building

The 9/11 attacks have been used to redefine U.S. foreign policy along neoconservative lines. The new policies emphasize unilateralism, unlimited objectives, and the use of military force as a primary adjunct to policy. This set of characteristics has little in common with historic U.S. policy, which until the 1940s emphasized isolationism, limited foreign policy objectives and an aversion to the use of military force outside the Western Hemisphere.

In one respect, the neoconservatives do harken back to the past in their approach to foreign policy. Unfortunately, they do so by invoking the now-obsolete political-military premises of the Cold War, such as a perceived need for overwhelming military superiority. The administration's proposed military budget of \$401 billion for FY 2004-2005 is as great as those of the next six powers combined. Where is the threat to justify this expenditure? Ongoing efforts to expand the forward deployment of U.S. forces to areas such as Central Europe and South Asia can hardly be justified on the basis of a military threat to the territorial integrity or national existence of the United States or of our principal allies. There was a sound rationale for a forward projection of U.S. forces during the Cold War. But there is no basis for transforming forward defense into a strategy of unilateral global political-military imperialism, as we are in the process of doing.

President Dwight Eisenhower's farewell address, in which he warned of the dangers posed by the "military-industrial complex," was perhaps the last example of a leadership vision

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coupling an emphasis on adequate power with an understanding of the dangers that excessive power creates. Since Eisenhower, American political leadership has actively sought an ever-expanding role on the world stage and an expansion of military presence into far-flung regions of the world where U.S. interests are marginal at best.

For the sake of argument, however, let us assume that the only way for the United States to remain secure in the post-9/11 environment is to forge an empire. The basic ingredients for success at such an enterprise are: skillful diplomacy to forge strong alliances; the ability to formulate and implement rational decisions based on realistic threat assessments; sound decisions about when to use military force; and the wherewithal to support the demands of running and defending a global presence (e.g., a sound economic base, military hardware and human resources).

Keeping Bad Company

The long-term viability of any American empire will be based on the ability to make alliances with nations and leaders who support the long-term goals and values of American democracy while, to the extent possible, avoiding alliances of convenience with known bad actors. Yet in the case of Iraq, we reversed that formu-

la. Nearly all our major allies were strongly opposed to the war, and the few who stood with us did so despite strong domestic opposition. Thus, major by-products of the war have been a fundamental weakening of the NATO alliance, rifts in the longstanding unity of the West, and the undermining of pro-American governments in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

The war on terror demonstrates a similar inconsistency on the other side of the equation. In our zeal to acquire new allies against al-Qaida, the Bush administration seems willing to overlook the very same human rights violations and brutal suppression of democracy that the State Department details in its latest set of worldwide country reports. Countries like Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Pakistan were quick to learn that lesson, and others seem poised to follow in their footsteps.

This phenomenon is nothing new, regrettably. In Afghanistan, U.S. covert operations in support of Islamic fundamentalists fighting the Soviets two decades ago paved the way for the Taliban to fill the vacuum created when Moscow withdrew. When we eventually turned to tribal surrogates to help us oust the Taliban, we conveniently overlooked the fact that some of them were major players in the international drug trade. The result? Afghanistan today is the world's largest source of opium and heroin prices have fallen around the globe. It is, therefore, hard to make a convincing case that Afghanistan is any less a global danger to U.S. interests now.

Getting the Threat Right

Whether or not one believes that the Bush administration politicized the findings of the intelligence community concerning Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction programs, that debate underscores the need for sound analysis of often-

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ambiguous and incomplete indications regarding what our foes are doing and planning.

Understandably, the various components of the U.S. intelligence community frequently disagree among themselves when it comes to assessing the data, but in general, the most unrealistic threat assessments tend to come from the Defense Intelligence Agency and the other military intelligence services. This is so for several reasons. First, military commanders understandably want to ensure that they do not inadvertently endanger their troops by underestimating the forces they face. Second, DOD budgets are directly related to threat projections, while State, CIA and NSA budgets lack this seminal link. Third, DIA assessments frequently ignore political, economic and cultural factors, and therefore misread both enemy intentions and capabilities. For example, the military threat the Soviet Union posed during the Cold War was never as serious as estimated. And in the post-Cold War period, our experiences in the Balkans, Iraq and elsewhere have clearly demonstrated the gaps between the military threat projected by DOD and actual conditions on the ground.

In the case of Iraq, Gen. Eric Shinseki and other combat-seasoned

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military officers were fully aware that our lack of cultural and language capability would seriously limit the utility of modern arms, particularly in non-traditional warfare. They therefore requested force levels higher than they otherwise would have. Yet the White House rejected the requests, citing the ability of our troops to destroy all conventional military resistance in Iraq. But the administration neglected to take into account the importance of destroying or forcing the surrender and disbanding of Iraqi units in place and securing weapons and ammunition dumps to ensure that most Iraqis perceived the likelihood of successful unconventional warfare as poor. It also ignored the reality that terrorism and unconventional warfare are the logical by-products of overwhelming military inferiority.

The other side of the threat assessment coin is formulating an appropriate response. Just as even the best analysts sometimes either overestimate or underestimate potential threats, policy-makers tend to favor the use of force to keep other countries from assessing U.S. decision-makers as weak or uncertain.

American military dominance has resulted in both the overuse of military force and errors in how we have applied it. Overuse is a natural result of being able to use military force in almost any scenario; as the saying goes, when you have a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. But it also reflects the desire for quick solutions to complex problems, and the political reality that the use of military force builds short- to midterm political support at the polls.

The potential for error exists in large part because there are major disconnects in our system between global political, economic, social and political-military knowledge and national decision-making power.

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America's foreign and strategic policy decision-making structures are so complex and multi-layered, and actual "on-the ground" knowledge is so far removed from those with decision-making authority, that serious mistakes are inevitable. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire from within is an excellent example of this type of structural problem. The Soviet centralized economic planning system worked reasonably well when the system it ran was a relatively simple one. But as the Soviet Union became economically mature and far more complex, centralized planning became incapable of meeting the varied tasks it faced. A similar reality is faced by American foreign policy today, with a potentially parallel outcome.

Then there is the problem of developing the human resources necessary for maintaining a global empire. After all, "smart" weapons systems are only as "smart" as those who operate them. It is exceptionally difficult to identify, track and destroy irregular forces and terrorists when you don't speak the local language or understand the local norms and mores — much less the broader culture and its complicated subcultures. What was true in Vietnam 35 years ago is just as true today in Iraq and

Afghanistan. Yet no administration has been willing to commit the funds to ensure that U.S. diplomats, intelligence operatives and military forces have adequate linguistic, cultural and area-specific skills.

Despite our relative under-investment in these areas, our military, intelligence and diplomatic services have amassed an immense amount of knowledge (especially compared to what the political leadership of the day possesses). But power rivalries at both the political and bureaucratic levels and complex hierarchical structures work to keep knowledge and power apart. The longtime rivalry between the FBI and the CIA was one of the main factors that prevented solid intelligence about terrorist training in U.S. flight schools from cutting through multiple levels of bureaucracy and preventing the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Following 9/11, top Defense Department officials chose to confine decision-making and intelligence assessment with respect to Iraq to a small group of like-thinking individuals (the "Office of Special Plans"). The result was that policy was made in secret by individuals with only a limited knowledge of the region, who never allowed their recommendations to face the open and ongoing scrutiny of the entire intelligence community (much less the political system). The outcome demonstrated manifold errors. There were no weapons of mass destruction. The assumption that Iraqi Arabs would warmly welcome the U.S., particularly given our longstanding support for Israel, failed to stand up in the light of day. Exiled Iraqis were not warmly welcomed upon their return. The assumption that Iraq's clan structure — where nepotism is a virtue, not a vice — is amenable to democracy appears to be either a misguided assumption or a cynical ploy.

Finally, the administration's insis-

tence on requesting military force levels well below what the Joint Chiefs wanted, and its refusal to draw up clear-cut plans for occupation and exit, clearly created conditions more favorable to insurgency, costing hundreds of American lives.

Again, the lesson is that decision-makers need to have access to, and be willing to consult, those diplomats, analysts, troops and agents with first-hand knowledge of conditions on the ground. For this to occur, of course, a certain amount of humility is required by the political leadership as well as a fair amount of structural change to reduce the rigidity of our foreign affairs bureaucracies.

When he first arrived at State, Secretary Powell stunned the bureaucracy by occasionally leaving the 7th floor and personally going to desk officers to seek out knowledge. Coming from a military background and drawing on his experiences in Vietnam, Powell was undoubtedly aware that bad news is repeatedly filtered by multiple levels of bureaucracy before it reaches senior decision-makers. And, as any problem works its way through the system, more and more filtering is done by officials who, no matter how competent or capable, are less likely to have adequate knowledge of the realities on the ground. Furthermore, they have bureaucratic reasons not to disturb the status quo and existing chains of power and control. Few are prepared to appear disloyal by failing to cheerlead administration priorities and policies of the moment. Bureaucratic advancement is as much the result of the absence of perceived error as it is of actual accomplishment.

Paying the Tab

Finally, in an era of half-trillion-dollar budget deficits, can we afford an empire?

One of the major consequences of seeking a global political-military

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empire is the relegation of critical domestic and global economic, financial and other policy questions to secondary status rather than addressing them as key issues.

Except for the United States, almost every developed nation (and many aspiring to that status) has placed economic and financial policies, not political-military objectives, at the top of their respective agendas since the end of the Cold War. And, in large part, they did so precisely because they knew U.S. leadership — for its own reasons — was prepared to carry the burden for them. This was a rational decision both because of the lack of a pressing threat and in view of the lesson learned by other developed states from 1939 to 1989: namely, empires are expensive. The average citizen of a former colonial power may today regret the loss of his or her perceived superiority by association with an empire, but he or she certainly does not regret no longer having to pay the extravagant costs of maintaining an imperial system.

United States policy-makers desperately need to pay more attention to America's pressing financial and economic needs. Cordell Hull is almost completely forgotten today, but he deserves to be remembered not only for being the longest-serving Secre-

tary of State in history (1933-1944) but for being the last one to concentrate on promoting U.S. economic interests.

Admittedly, the collapse of the global economic and financial order left him and FDR with no alternative, but it is still disheartening to see how far we have gone in the opposite direction.

Today, U.S. policies seem to be assisting a collapse of the very international financial order we created in the aftermath of World War II. The disconnect between the United States and Western Europe on trade matters is growing. American restrictions on steel imports have caused greater harm to U.S. steel fabricators and consumers than the benefits they provided to domestic steel producers, and provoked threats of retaliatory measures from Europe, China and Japan. Coincidentally or not, Washington sharply increased subsidies to American agribusiness on the eve of global discussions on finding a way to increase and rationalize global agricultural trade, with predictable results.

If the United States were a minor player on the world stage instead of the major funding source for the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, those organizations would be demanding that the U.S. administration make major fiscal and economic policy changes. The United States' staggering trade deficit (5 percent of GDP) would have to be addressed, as would its addiction to foreign investment capital to finance that trade deficit. The IMF and the World Bank would also demand progress toward a balanced U.S. budget. The rapid fall of the U.S. dollar relative to other major currencies over the past two years is a clear indication that investors worldwide are today far less comfortable with investing in the United States. Whatever else one may think of the policies of

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the Clinton administration, its fixation on a strong dollar and balanced budgets was, in part, based on a clear understanding of the need to assure foreign investors of the long-term strength of the U.S. economy.

A Return to Core Competencies

The impact of American unilateralism and its concentration on political-military matters is obvious. There is a vacuum of leadership in other international policy areas, be they political, economic, legal, or environmental. The vacuum exists by definition. If you have a unilateral policy, you can't lead, because you have been unwilling to make the compromises necessary for others to follow.

As with domestic issues, success in foreign policy means meeting the often-conflicting needs of concerned parties. For example, if we had shown some regard for the views of the United Nations and our traditional allies as we prepared for war (or even afterward), we might not be bearing the costs almost entirely alone — and the situation in Iraq, not to mention its prospects, would likely be considerably brighter. Compare the current mess with the handling of the Persian Gulf War. There, patient diplomacy ensured that the financial, political and human costs to the U.S. were minimal — as opposed to the open-ended costs of the present “Coalition of the Willing” in Iraq.

The unilateralist neoconservative policies of today are a badly mutated descendant of our isolationist heritage. Isolationism at least had the clear advantage of limited objectives, keeping the United States from entering two world wars until a national consensus existed for intervention. Our late entry into both conflicts spared the United States from most of the human, social and financial consequences of those two

great conflicts.

Of course, isolationism is dead, buried by technology that makes it outmoded except in backwaters such as North Korea and Burma. But the concept of limiting commitments on the basis of national interest and real needs makes as much sense today as it always has. American foreign policy today needs to re-examine its commitments worldwide and redefine them. Our 60-year relationship with Europe is crumbling, and better solutions exist than moving U.S. military bases from Western to Central Europe.

U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East has been a disaster since 1967. An even-handed policy with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would do more to reduce the threat of anti-American terrorism than any other step we could take. We also need to question why, in view of the end of the Cold War and a vastly changed energy situation worldwide over the past three decades, we need a military presence in the Persian Gulf.

In sum, the primary need of the United States today is to greatly reduce U.S. commitments worldwide. The existing U.S. decision-making and intelligence structures are no more capable of running a global empire (at least one in accord with the moral and democratic views of the American public) than the centralized Soviet system was of controlling a far less complicated global equation.

In the language of the business community, the United States needs to get back to its core competencies. In the 21st century, there is no reason for Americans to play the “Great Game” in the mode of 19th century European elites — particularly when no vital U.S. interests are at stake. To follow such a course is, in the words of Talleyrand, “Worse than wrong, monsieur. It is stupid.” ■