

Bush's Grand Strategy

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All but lost amidst the heated talk of regime change in Baghdad, the White House in late September issued the Bush administration's *U. S. National Security Strategy*. In one sense, publication of this document is a routine event, just one more periodic report mandated by Congress. Yet this latest rendering of U. S. grand strategy – the first to appear since 9/11 -- deserves far greater attention than it has received.

The Bush *USNSS* offers the most comprehensive statement to date of America's globe-straddling post-Cold War ambitions. In it, the administration makes plain both its intention to perpetuate American military supremacy and its willingness – almost approaching eagerness -- to use force to reshape the international order. This new strategy places the approaching showdown with Saddam Hussein in a far wider context, showing that overthrowing the Iraqi dictator is only the next step in a massive project, pursued under the guise of the “war on terror,” but aimed ultimately at remaking the world in our image.

Calling back into service a phrase first employed by candidate Bush, the *USNSS* propounds what it refers to as “a distinctly American internationalism.” When George W. Bush used that phrase on the campaign trail, it was devoid of content. Here it takes on meaning, at once grandiose and combustible.

The Bush strategy does qualify as truly distinctive in one specific sense -- in its fusion of breathtaking utopianism with barely disguised *machtpolitik*. It reads as if it were the product not of sober, ostensibly conservative Republicans but of an unlikely collaboration between Woodrow Wilson and the elder Field Marshal von Moltke.

On the one hand, the document rings with assurances affirming the inevitable triumph of liberty around the world. America's “great mission,” President Bush writes in the document's introduction, is to hasten this triumph, by “extend[ing] the benefits of freedom across the globe.” Fulfilling that mission obliges the United States to assume responsibility for eliminating the obstacles to freedom everywhere: war and terror, poverty and disease, “the clashing wills of powerful states and the evil designs of tyrants.”

But America's mission has a positive as well as a negative aspect. Fulfilling it requires not only removing obstacles but also creating a new global order conducive to freedom. When it comes to identifying the principles around which to organize that order, George W. Bush harbors no doubts. Like his predecessor Bill Clinton, he is certain that the United States has deciphered the deepest secrets of history and understands its direction and purpose. There is, he declares, only "a single sustainable model for national success," one to which all people aspire and to which all societies must ultimately conform. That model is ours.

Democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech and worship, respect for private property and for the rights of women and minorities: these comprise the "nonnegotiable demands of human dignity." (Regarding rights of the unborn, the *USNSS* is silent). But beyond those principles, the quality that will bind the world together and bring Utopia within reach is "openness." In an increasingly interdependent world, one in which "the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs is diminishing," nations – including this nation – have no choice but to "be open to people, ideas, and goods from across the globe."

In an open and integrated world – achieved in the first instance by removing impediments to trade and investment -- all things become possible. Without openness, material abundance for those who presently enjoy it becomes unsustainable and for those who yearn for it remains beyond reach. Here too Bush echoes the views of Bill Clinton who based his foreign policy on the conviction that an "open world" knit together by the forces of globalization offered a sure-fire formula for limitless prosperity, universal freedom, and perpetual peace.

The Johnny Appleseed of globalization, Clinton spent eight years travelling the world, extolling the benefits of openness and exuding good cheer, no doubt expecting peace and prosperity to spring up wherever he trod. But events in the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, the Balkans, and elsewhere showed such expectations to be illusory. To these indicators that openness might not be quite the panacea that its advocates claimed, Clinton responded by resorting to force, usually belatedly, almost always indecisively, but with remarkable frequency.

Throughout the Clinton era, U. S. military forces marched hither and yon, intervening in a wider variety of places, for a wider variety of purposes than at any time in our history. More often than not, once the troops arrived, they stayed. As a result, by the time that Clinton left office in 2001, the defining fact of international politics – albeit one vigorously denied by the outgoing administration – had become not openness and not globalization but the emergence of a *Pax Americana*.

Bringing into office a greater affinity for exercising power and a pronounced belief in the efficacy of coercion – both reinforced by the chastening experience of 9/11

-- senior members of the Bush administration do not share Bill Clinton's ambivalence about American military might. Hence, the second major theme of the new *U. S. National Security Strategy* – a candid acknowledgment and endorsement of the progressively greater militarization of U. S. foreign policy.

To state the point bluntly, the Bush administration no longer views force as the last resort; rather, it considers military power to be America's most effective instrument of statecraft – the area in which the United States owns the greatest advantage. Beginning with the premise that “our best defense is a good offense,” the *USNSS* describes how President Bush intends to exploit that advantage to the fullest.

He will do so in two ways. First, he will expand U. S. global power projection capabilities. Already spending roughly as much on defense as the entire rest of the world combined, the United States will spend still more – much, much more. The purpose of this increase is not to respond to any proximate threat. Rather, the Bush administration is boosting the Pentagon's budget with an eye toward achieving a margin of such unprecedented and unsurpassed superiority that no would-be adversary will even consider mounting a future challenge. The United States will thereby secure in perpetuity its status as sole superpower. Old concerns about the “clashing wills of powerful states” will disappear; henceforth, a single power will call the tune.

Second, with the *USNSS* codifying the concept of “anticipatory self-defense,” President Bush claims for the United States the prerogative of using force preemptively and unilaterally, however its interests may dictate. (That prerogative belongs exclusively to the United States; the Bush strategy pointedly warns other nations not to “use preemption as a pretext for aggression.”) In contrast to his predecessor's reactive, half-hearted military adventures, Bush will employ America's armed might proactively and on a scale sufficient to achieve rapid, decisive results. The prospect of ever greater U. S. military activism – against terrorists, against rogue states, against evildoers of whatever stripe – beckons.

Nowhere does the Bush administration's national security strategy pause to consider whether the nation's means are adequate to the “great mission” to which destiny has ostensibly summoned the United States. Asserting that American global hegemony is necessarily benign and that Washington can be counted on to use the Bush Doctrine of preemption judiciously, nowhere does it contemplate the possibility that others might take a contrary view. Nowhere does it tally up the costs of shouldering an ever-expanding array of military commitments that flow from efforts to police the world. Nowhere does it convey any awareness that America's power and the world's plasticity may each have limits. Nowhere does it even speculate on when the United States might be able to lay down its imperial burdens and become a normal nation. Indeed, in all likelihood, the zealots who crafted this strategy have no interest in such matters.

The Bush administration's grand strategy reeks of hubris. Yet one may also detect in its saber-rattling occasional notes of desperation. America today is, by any measure, the most powerful nation on earth, enjoying a level of mastery that may exceed that of any great power or any previous empire in all of history. Yet to judge by this extraordinary document, we can not rest easy, we can guarantee our freedom or our prosperity until we have solved every problem everywhere, relying chiefly on armed force to do so. In the end, we have little real choice -- as the similarities between this new strategy and the Clinton strategy that Republicans once denounced with such gusto attest. In truth, whatever their party affiliation or ideological disposition, members of the so-called foreign policy elite cannot conceive of an alternative to "global leadership" – the preferred euphemism for global empire.

"In the new world that we have entered," George W. Bush writes, "the only path to peace and security is the path of action." So we must press on, with vigor and determination. Following our president, we must charge down that path until we drop from exhaustion or fling ourselves off the precipice fashioned of our own arrogance.

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