

# The Bush Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of Republican Empire

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by Mackubin Thomas Owens

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*Abstract: The dominant narrative concerning the Bush Doctrine maintains that it is a dangerous innovation, an anomaly that violates the principles of sound policy as articulated by the Founders. According to the conventional wisdom, the Bush Doctrine represents the exploitation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, by a small group of ideologues—the “neoconservatives”—to gain control of national policy and lead the United States into the war in Iraq, a war that should never have been fought. But far from a being a neoconservative innovation, the Bush Doctrine is, in fact, well within the mainstream of U.S. foreign policy and very much in keeping with the vision of America’s founding generation and the practice of the statesmen in the Early Republic. The Bush Doctrine is only the latest manifestation of the fact that U.S. national interest has always been concerned with more than simple security.*

Our true situation appears to me to be this—a new extensive Country containing within itself the materials for forming a Government capable of extending to its citizens all the blessings of civil and religious liberty—capable of making them happy at home. This is the great end of Republican establishments. We mistake the object of our government, if we hope or wish that it is to make us respectable abroad. Conquest or superiority among other powers is not or ought not ever to be the object of republican systems. If they are sufficiently active and energetic to rescue us from contempt & preserve our domestic happiness and security, it is all we can expect from them—it is more than almost any other Government ensures to its citizens.

Charles Pinckney, speech to the Federal Convention, June 25, 1787

It had been said that respectability in the eyes of foreign nations was not the object at which we aimed; that the proper object of republican Government was domestic tranquility & happiness. This was an ideal distinction. No Government could give us tranquility & happiness at home, which did not possess sufficient stability and strength to make us respectable abroad.

Alexander Hamilton, speech to the Federal Convention, June 29, 1787

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If any one therefore wishes to establish an entirely new republic, he will have to consider whether he wishes to have her expand in power and dominion like Rome, or whether he intends to confine her within narrow limits.

Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I. 6.

Besides, to recede is no longer possible, if indeed any of you in the alarm of the moment has become enamored of the honesty of such an unambitious part. For what you hold is, to speak somewhat plainly, a tyranny. To take it perhaps was wrong, but to let it go is unsafe.

Pericles, Funeral Oration

When he was elected to the American presidency in 2000, George W. Bush gave every indication that he, like his father before him, was a conventional “realist” in foreign affairs, committed to a grand strategy of selective engagement and critical of the open-ended nature of the Clinton doctrine and its indiscriminate use of military force in instances not involving vital national interests. In his speeches, Bush stressed foreign policy retrenchment and military “transformation” in preparation for the emergence of a future large peer competitor in the vein of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Neither Bush nor his advisers, most notably national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of State Colin Powell, spoke of spreading democracy throughout the world.

Then came 9/11. To the surprise of almost everyone, the president abandoned his realism and embraced an approach to foreign affairs that seemed to be nothing short of revolutionary. The “Bush Doctrine,” was first enunciated in a speech he delivered on September 20, 2001, only nine days after the attacks, and then refined and elaborated in three more speeches over the next nine months.

The dominant narrative concerning George W. Bush’s foreign policy—especially his doctrine of preemptive war and his emphasis on the spread of democracy—is that it represents a radical break with the American past. According to this narrative, U.S. foreign policy was originally based on the principle of non-intervention; the American Founders are often invoked in support of the claim that the default position of U.S. foreign policy is isolationism. Who has not heard the argument that Washington’s Farewell Address counsels “virtuous isolationism,” that in the words of John Quincy Adams, while America is “the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all,” she is the “champion and vindicator only of her own,” going “not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy,” and that the Monroe Doctrine represents a ratification of this “isolationist” principle?

But, the narrative continues, while isolationism and non-intervention prevailed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, circumstances required the United States to abandon this posture at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet even then, America did so only reluctantly in response to threats to U.S. national interests. Thus, with the exception of the failed effort

by Woodrow Wilson to base U.S. foreign policy on idealistic principles and George W. Bush's quixotic effort to impose democracy on the Middle East, the United States has normally adhered to the principles of foreign policy "realism," a theory based on the idea that the driving force in international politics is national security, which can be ensured only by possessing sufficient power relative to other states.

According to the conventional narrative, neoconservatives are dangerously moralistic and idealistic when it comes to world affairs. They believe in America's exceptional role as a promoter of the principles of liberty and democracy, they are committed to the preservation of American primacy, they are suspicious of international institutions, and they favor the unilateral use of power, especially military power, in order to defend and advance democracy.

But the conventional wisdom is wrong. While all are entitled to their opinions concerning the wisdom or folly of the Bush Doctrine, they are not entitled to make up their own facts regarding its place in the American foreign policy tradition. And the fact is that all of the elements of the Bush Doctrine have been observable in American foreign policy since the inception of the Republic.

As Walter Russell Mead observes, the idea of America's "virtuous isolationism" is an historical myth. Far from a being a neoconservative innovation, the Bush Doctrine is in fact well within the mainstream of U.S. foreign policy and very much in keeping with the vision of America's founding generation, as well as the practice of the Early Republic's statesmen. The Bush Doctrine is only the latest manifestation of the fact that U.S. national interest has always been concerned with more than simple security—it has always had both a commercial and an ideological component.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to the Bush Doctrine, the main issue—as is the case with foreign policy in general—is *prudence*, which Aristotle described as deliberating well about those things that can be other than they are (means). According to Aristotle, prudence is the virtue most characteristic of the statesman. In foreign affairs, prudence requires the statesman to adapt universal principles to particular circumstances in order to arrive at the means that are best given existing circumstances. In fact, the Founders and the statesmen of the Early Republic were not isolationist but prudent.

## The Bush Doctrine

The most concise statement of the Bush Doctrine can be observed in George Bush's Second Inaugural Address: "it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in

<sup>1</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), pp. 3-29.

every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”<sup>2</sup> While this statement captures the essence of the Bush Doctrine, it is useful to examine the principles upon which it is based.<sup>3</sup> The first of these is the rejection of “moral equivalency” in international affairs. The Bush Doctrine unapologetically asserts the need for—and the possibility of—moral judgment in international affairs. As a species of what Robert Kaufman has called Moral Democratic Realism, the Bush Doctrine holds that liberal democratic regimes are superior to tyrannies.<sup>4</sup>

The second principle of the Bush Doctrine is the repudiation of the “social work” theory of terrorism: the belief that economic factors—poverty and hunger—are the “root” causes of the phenomenon. The Bush Doctrine is founded on the contention that the terrorism that spawned 9/11 and its precursors, both against the United States and Israel, is a murderous ideology aimed at the destruction of Western liberalism. Accordingly, this ideology is as dangerous as fascism/Nazism and communism. According to the Bush Doctrine, the fountainhead of 9/11 and similar aggression is “the culture of tyranny in the Middle East, which spawns fanatical, aggressive, secular, and religious despotisms.” The remedy for this is democratic regime change.

The final principle of the Bush Doctrine is the recognition that after 9/11 the traditional approaches to threats—deterrence, containment, and *ex post facto* responses—are inadequate when dealing with terrorists and rogue regimes seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Thus, under the Bush Doctrine, the United States reserves the right to undertake *preventive* war. While international law and norms have always acknowledged the right of a state to launch a *preemptive* strike against another when an attack by the latter is imminent, it has rejected any right of preventive war. President Bush argued that in an age of globalization, catastrophic terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction, this distinction had become meaningless. If an attack is imminent, it is now too late to preempt it.

As a policy or grand strategic approach to international relations, the Bush Doctrine is a species of *primacy*, based on the intersection of *hegemonic stability theory* and the *theory of the democratic peace*. Hegemonic stability theory holds that a “liberal world order” does not arise spontaneously as the result of some global “invisible hand.”<sup>5</sup> Instead, such a system requires, in the

<sup>2</sup> George Bush, *Second Inaugural Address*, January, 20, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See Norman Podhoretz, *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islofascism* (New York: Doubleday, 2007). Cf. Michael Abramowitz, “Many Versions of ‘Bush Doctrine’: Palin’s Confusion in Interview Understandable, Experts Say,” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2008; p. A01.

<sup>4</sup> Robert G. Kaufman, *In Defense of the Bush Doctrine* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), pp. 87-99.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 72-80 and 85-92 and Gilpin, *Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 93-100.

words of Ethan Barnaby Kapstein, a “hegemonic power, a state willing and able to provide the world with the collective goods of economic stability and international security.”<sup>6</sup> The United States, as Great Britain before it, took up the role of hegemon not out of altruism but because it is in its national interest to do so.

Primacy can be caricatured as a “go-it-alone” approach in which the United States intimidates both friends and allies, wields power unilaterally, and ignores international institutions. But while some may mock the term, the Bush Doctrine, in fact, represents “benevolent” primacy, an approach in keeping with the liberal political traditions of the United States but which recognizes the world as a dangerous place in which a just peace is maintained only by the strong.

This form of primacy is based on the assumption that U.S. power is good not only for the United States itself but also for the rest of the world. The argument is that the United States can be fully secure only in a world where everyone else is also secure. The existence of liberal institutions is not sufficient. Donald Kagan observes that history seems to indicate

that good will, unilateral  
disarmament, the avoidance  
of alliances, teaching and  
preaching the evils of war by those states who seek to preserve peace are to no avail.

What seems to work best . . . is the possession by those states who wish to preserve peace of the preponderant power and of the will to accept the burdens of an responsibilities required to achieve that power.<sup>7</sup>

Such a liberal world order is possible only if the United States is willing and able to maintain it. In the words of Samuel Huntington,

- the maintenance of U.S. primacy matters for the world as well as for the United States
- A world without U.S. primacy will be a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth than a world where the United States continues to have more influence than any other country in shaping global affairs. The sustained international primacy of the United States is central to the welfare and security of Americans and to the future of freedom, democracy, open economies, and international order in the world.<sup>8</sup>

According to the theory of hegemonic stability, the alternative to U.S. power is a more disorderly, less peaceful world. The precedent for the United States is the decay of *Pax Britannica*, which, many believe, created the

<sup>6</sup> Ethan Barnaby Kapstein, *The Political Economy of National Security: A Global Perspective* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p. 570.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Huntington, “Why International Primacy Matters,” *International Security*, Spring 1993, pp. 82-93.

necessary, if not sufficient conditions for the two world wars of the twentieth century. As British hegemony declined, smaller states that previously had incentives to cooperate with Britain “defected” to other powers, causing the international system to fragment. The outcome was depression and war. The decline of American power could lead to a similar outcome.<sup>9</sup>

The “democratic peace” is based on the idea, popular among liberal internationalists, that liberal democracies do not fight one another.<sup>10</sup> The concept originated with Immanuel Kant, who argued in *Perpetual Peace* that the spread of constitutional republics was a necessary, if not sufficient, cause of peace among states. While Bush has invoked the idea on numerous occasions, he is not alone. In his 1994 State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton said: “Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don’t attack each other.”<sup>11</sup> In 2005, Congress passed legislation introduced by Senators John McCain and Joe Lieberman, the *Advance Democracy Act*, which states: “Wars between or among democratic countries are exceedingly rare, while wars between and among nondemocratic countries are commonplace, with nearly 170,000,000 people having lost their lives because of the policies of totalitarian governments.”<sup>12</sup>

Far from representing a “neo-conservative” innovation in American foreign policy, the Bush Doctrine is in the tradition of the Founders and statesmen of the Early Republic, as well as Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Ronald Reagan. The Bush Doctrine represents a continuation of a policy that fuses American security and the “American Mission.” The “ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world” has been a cornerstone of American foreign policy since the earliest days of the Republic.

### **The Early Republic and the Genesis of the ‘American Mission’**

As suggested earlier, critics of the Bush Doctrine dismiss it as the work of a cabal of “neo-conservatives” who co-opted U.S. foreign policy in the wake

<sup>9</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Joseph Greico, *Cooperation Among Nations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); and Charles Kindleberger, *The World in Depression: 1929-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> See Michael W. Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 3, Summer, 1983, pp. 205–235 and “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part 2,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Autumn, 1983, pp. 323–353, as well as Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997). For a critique, see Christopher Layne, “Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace,” *International Security*, Autumn, 1994, pp. 5–49.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Clinton, State of the Union speech, Jan. 25, 1994, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/states/docs/sou94.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> 109th Congress, 1st Session, S. 516, *Advance Democracy Act*.

of 9/11. So-called neo-conservatives have indeed frequently supported the Bush Doctrine because, as Francis Fukuyama observes in his recent book, *America at the Crossroads*, neo-conservatives, unlike realists, believe that “the internal character of regimes matters and that foreign policy must reflect the deepest values of liberal democratic societies.” And unlike liberal internationalists who seem to believe that international law and institutions alone are sufficient to achieve peace, neo-conservatives contend that there are certain problems that can be addressed only through the prudent exercise of American power.<sup>13</sup>

But the suggestion that the Bush Doctrine is an innovation attributable to neo-conservatism alone is simply a-historical. After all, Andrew Bacevich’s description of the neo-conservative enterprise as “fus[ing] American power to American principles, ensuring the survival of those principles and subsequently their propagation to the benefit of all humankind” applies to American statecraft since the beginning of the Republic.<sup>14</sup>

The principles of the American founding have always been at least as important a determinant of U.S. foreign policy as “interests” in the narrow realist sense. An implication of this argument is that there is linear progression from the Declaration of Independence to President Bush’s attempt to mid-wife the creation of an Iraqi democracy.

As Walter Russell Mead has shown in *A Special Providence*, U.S. foreign policy cannot be understood in terms of the two dominant schools of international relations theory, *realism* on the one hand and *liberalism* or *liberal internationalism* on the other. In essence, the debate between academic realists and liberal internationalists is little more than a sterile dispute between Machiavelli and Kant that only serves to illustrate the poverty of academic international relations theory.

Realism stresses the importance of power and military security in international affairs and is most concerned about maintaining stability and a peaceful balance of power. For the realist, the state’s most vital interest—and its only meaningful goal, no matter its form of government or what it says for public consumption—is to maintain enough power to ensure its security. Realists ban economics, morality, and democracy from high politics. In contrast, liberal internationalists contend that the goals of actors within the international political system transcend power and security to include peace and prosperity.

For realists, liberals are too abstract and place too much emphasis on the “good side” of human nature. For liberals, realists are too pessimistic and

<sup>13</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 71.



cynical. In addition, their theory is too parsimonious; it fails to explain enough in the world.

The fact is that American principles have been at least as important in shaping U.S. foreign policy as the raw pursuit of power beloved by realists. America's westward expansion and rise to global power have been inextricably linked to the idea that liberal democracy is the best form of government, not only for the United States, but also for the world at large. American "realism" has always been shaped by economic and moral considerations.

For Americans, geopolitics, economic and commercial interests, and political principle have always been inseparable. Accordingly, Americans have seen the spread of liberalism as very much a U.S. interest. This desire to expand the "American way" has transcended partisan differences.

For instance, both Jefferson and Hamilton agreed that the United States was to be a republic, but they differed concerning the sort of republic that it would be. Jefferson and those who shared his views sought an agrarian republic and hoped to instill in Americans agrarian civic virtue. Hamilton, on the other hand believed the United States should be a commercial republic and sought to unleash among his countrymen modern freedom. Jefferson was an advocate of Sparta, Hamilton an advocate of Athens.<sup>15</sup>

Despite their differences, both Jefferson and Hamilton agreed nonetheless that the new Republic was destined for greatness. Remarkably, both Jefferson and Hamilton envisioned an American polity that combined the principles of republic and empire, despite the dominant view of the eighteenth century that viewed the two as incompatible. Thus Hamilton sought a "republican empire"<sup>16</sup> while Jefferson envisioned a vast "empire of liberty" spreading west, north, and south across the continent.<sup>17</sup> For both Jefferson and Hamilton, an American empire would be an innovation, not based on conquest, as had empires of old, but instead constitute a "new order for the ages."

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> See *Federalist* Number 1, in which Publius (Hamilton) addresses the issue concerning "the fate of an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world. It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force." Cf. Karl-Friedrich Walling, *Republican Empire: Alexander Hamilton On War and Free Government* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999) and Patrick Garrity, "Foreign Policy and The Federalist," in Charles Kesler, ed., *Saving the Revolution: The Federalist Papers and the American Founding* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Jefferson to George Rogers Clark, December 25, 1780, in Julian P. Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Volume 4 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951) pp. 237-238. Cf. Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

For the founding generation, the principles underlying the American Empire were universal in application. As Robert Kagan has argued, in an age of monarchy and despotism, such universal principles by their very nature made America a “dangerous nation” because by liberating human potential, they would “capture the imagination and the following of all humanity.”<sup>18</sup> Realists in the tradition of Hans Morgenthau have criticized the “crusading spirit” in foreign relations, but American foreign policy has often been motivated by the belief that the United States stood in opposition to tyrannical power and despotism.

American foreign policy has often been criticized for being “moralistic.” But it is important to note that before the American founding, all regimes were based on the principle of interest or advantage alone—the interest of the stronger. That principle was articulated by the Greek historian Thucydides in his description of the conversation between the Athenians and the rebellious Melians: “Questions of justice arise only between equals. As for the rest, the strong do what they will. The weak suffer what they must.”<sup>19</sup> Inequality, whether between master and slave or between aristocrat and commoner were simply part of the accepted order of things.

The United States was founded on different principles—justice and equality. No longer would it be the foundation of political government that some men were born “with saddles on their backs” to be ridden by others born “booted and spurred.” In other words, no one had the right to rule over another without the latter’s consent.<sup>20</sup>

While the United States has not always lived up to its own principles, it has nonetheless created the standard of justice in both domestic and international affairs. For instance, the stated desire of the United States to free Cuba from a despotic Spain, which helped to bring about the Spanish-American War, can be traced Abraham Lincoln’s speech on the Dred Scott Decision of 1857, a speech that illustrates the logic of liberty. “I think the authors of [the Declaration of Independence] intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say that all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal in ‘certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America’s Place in the World From Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Robert B. Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996), Book 5, section 89, p. 352.

<sup>20</sup> Jefferson to Roger C. Weightman, June 24, 1826, in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Jefferson, Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 1517.

<sup>21</sup> Lincoln, “The Dred Scott Decision,” Speech at Springfield, June 26, 1857, Roy Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (New York: Da Capo, 1946), p. 360.

Lincoln also argued that the Founders:

did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all men were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for a free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.<sup>22</sup>

Such rhetoric informed both American domestic and foreign policy. And it was not limited to the nineteenth century. As Kagan has observed, “the twentieth century, of course, rang with the rhetoric of greatness, moralism, and mission.”<sup>23</sup>

For instance, the Republican Party’s campaign platform of 1900 made Lincoln’s argument explicit with regard to the recently concluded war with Spain. According to this document, the Spanish-American War had been fought for “high purpose.” It was a “war for liberty and human rights” that had given “ten millions of the human race” a “new birth of freedom” and the American people “a new and noble responsibility . . . to confer the blessings of liberty and civilization upon all the rescued peoples.”<sup>24</sup>

It is important to recognize that Woodrow Wilson did not invent the rhetoric of a foreign policy shaped by moral purpose. Accepting the Republican vice-presidential nomination in 1900, Theodore Roosevelt asked, “Is America a weakling to shrink from the world work of the great world-powers?” He replied to his own rhetorical question by proclaiming: “The young giant of the West stands on a continent and clasps the crest of an ocean in either hand. Our nation, glorious in youth and strength, looks in the future with eager eyes and rejoices as a strong man to run a race.”<sup>25</sup>

Statesmen of both parties saw the Civil War as America’s first great moral crusade and World War I as its second. It was not Wilson but Roosevelt who declared: “As our fathers fought with slavery and crushed it, in order that it not seize and crush them, so we are called on to fight new forces.” It was not Wilson but Henry Cabot Lodge who called World War I “the last great struggle of democracy and freedom against autocracy and militarism.” These same statesmen of both parties justified U.S. military interventions in the affairs of

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Kagan, “Neocon Nation: Neoconservatism c. 1776,” *World Affairs Journal*, Spring 2008, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/2008%20-%20Spring/full-neocon.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Republican Party Platform of 1900, June 19, 1900. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29630>.

<sup>25</sup> Louis Auchincloss, ed., *Theodore Roosevelt: Letters and Speeches* (New York: Library of America, 2004).

Latin American and Caribbean peoples, as a means of spreading liberal principles abroad.<sup>26</sup>

This is not to suggest that expanding liberal democracy was the only motive for U.S. actions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was most certainly not. But far from reflecting the conventional narrative of “virtuous isolationism”—the idea that the United States was an exemplar of liberty and nothing more—the statesman of these periods embraced the mission of spreading liberal principles for the betterment of not only Americans but also of the peoples of the world.

### **American Security in the Early Republic and the ‘American Mission’**

As important as the American mission may have been in the formulation and practice of U.S. foreign policy during the Early Republic, promulgating American principles depended on the security of the American regime. The United States could not be an exemplar of liberty unless it could survive in a hostile world. U.S. foreign policy must always be seen as a prudent balance between principle and power. Actions in support of American principles undertaken when the United States was weak looked different than those undertaken when the United States was strong.

As Hamilton wrote in *Federalist*, the United States established a constitution for governance based on “reflection and choice,” rather than “on accident and force.” But to create such a constitution, it was necessary for the Americans to survive, first during the Revolution and then during the dangerous period of the Early Republic when the new nation was surrounded by hostile powers. To paraphrase Thomas Hobbes, without security, American principles were but words. Without a successful Revolution and the consolidation of American power on the North American continent, the principles of the American Founding would have been stillborn.

As early as 1778, George Washington foresaw the strategic problem that the young Republic would face in the years following the Revolution. As he explained to Henry Laurens, he opposed a combined French-American offensive against Canada because he was concerned that the price of cooperation with the French in this case would be the reestablishment of French power in Canada, leading to a situation in which the United States would subsequently be hemmed in by a combination of Europeans and Indians.

France acknowledged for some time past the most powerful monarchy in Europe by land, able now to dispute the empire of the sea with Great Britain, and if joined with Spain, I may say certainly superior, possessed of New Orleans, on our Right, Canada on our left and seconded by the numerous tribes of Indians on our Rear from one extremity to the other, a people, so generally friendly to her and whom she knows so

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Kagan, “Neocon Nation.”

well how to conciliate; would, it is much to be apprehended have it in her power to give law to these states.<sup>27</sup>

As John Lewis Gaddis has argued, the American response to threats to its security differed from the approach of most nations—to seek safety by retreating to a defensive posture—although this is arguably what the United States had done during the Jefferson and Madison administrations. The result was a British invasion and the burning of the capital in 1814.

The attack on the American homeland in 1814 demonstrated that liberty was vulnerable to attack if the United States relied on a defensive posture. Thereafter, Americans “generally responded to threats—and particularly to surprise attacks—by taking the offensive, by becoming more conspicuous, by confronting, neutralizing, and if possible overwhelming the sources of danger rather than fleeing from them.”<sup>28</sup> Having established a “beachhead for liberty in a world run by tyrants,”<sup>29</sup> the security of liberty required that the beachhead be expanded. This approach led Americans to adopt an expansionist grand strategy based on three principles: hegemony, unilateralism, and preemption. Gaddis attributes this grand strategy to John Quincy Adams, whom Gaddis characterizes as “the most influential American grand strategist of the nineteenth century.”<sup>30</sup>

*Hegemony* was based on the idea that the Republic’s safety precluded any sharing of power on the North American continent. North America constituted the United States’ sphere of influence. The United States would not accept a balance of power in the Western Hemisphere but sought to ensure a predominance of power.

Both the Founders and the statesmen of the Early Republic recognized that the real danger to American security and independence was the inability of a weak United States to prevent European quarrels from being transplanted to the American continents. The farsighted among them understood that the antidote to such a possibility was a strong and viable Union. The alternative, approved by some who opposed the Constitution, was a series of smaller confederacies. But as John Jay observed in his contributions to *The Federalist*, the consequences of a weak and divided America, “split into three or four independent and probably discordant republics or confederacies, one inclining to Britain, another to France, and a third to Spain, and perhaps played off against each other by the three...” would constitute a “prey to discord,

<sup>27</sup> To Henry Laurens, November 14, 1778, in Jared Sparks, ed., *Washington’s Writings*, Vol. VI (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1847), p. 108.

<sup>28</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Gaddis, “Ending Tyranny: The Past and Future of an Idea,” *The American Interest*, Vol. 4, No. 1, September/October 2008. <http://www.the-american-interest.com/ai2/article.cfm?id=459&Mid=21>.

<sup>30</sup> Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience*, p. 15.

jealousy, and mutual injuries. . .,” inviting strife because these polities would be “*formidable only to each other.*”<sup>31</sup>

John Quincy Adams was equally adamant in rejecting the possibility that the United States could coexist with any other great power in North America. As he wrote in 1811, the choice was between “an endless multitude of little insignificant clans and tribes at eternal war with one another for a rock, or a fish pond, the sport and fable of European oppressors” or “a nation, coextensive with the North American continent, destined by God and nature to be the most populous and most powerful people ever combined under one social compact.”<sup>32</sup>

*Unilateralism*, which accepted the need for international cooperation in the form of treaties but rejected alliances as an unnecessary limit on American action, has often been confused with isolationism. The French alliance of 1778 demonstrated to most Americans the dangers of agreeing to “commitments to act in concert with other great powers against future contingencies which no one could foresee.”<sup>33</sup>

The tendency to confuse unilateralism and isolationism has contributed to longstanding misperceptions of Washington’s Farewell Address. For instance, after the passage that everyone misuses to prove that the real policy of the United States should be isolationist—“. . .it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves. . .in the ordinary vicissitudes of [Europe’s] politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships and enmities”—Washington continues:

If we remain one People, under an efficient government, the period is not far off, when we may defy material injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisition upon us, will not lightly hazard giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interest guided by justice shall Counsel.”<sup>34</sup>

Far from a universal admonition against intervention, the Farewell Address represents a prudential combination of interest and principle, to be pursued unilaterally by the United States.

The Monroe Doctrine represents an extension of the unilateralist principle. When it became clear in the early 1820s that the newly independent Latin American republics might not be able to defend their sovereignty against Spain, possibly assisted by the reactionary monarchies of France, Austria, and Russia, Great Britain suggested a joint Anglo-American statement opposing

<sup>31</sup> *Federalist* Nos. 4 and 5.

<sup>32</sup> To Abigail Adams, June 30, 1811, Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed. *Writings of John Quincy Adams* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), Vol IV, p. 128.

<sup>33</sup> Gaddis, *Surprise, Security and the American Experience*, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> “Farewell Address,” September 19, 1796, in William B. Allen, ed., *George Washington: a Collection* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988), pp. 524-525.

future European colonization in the western hemisphere. While President James Monroe, along with former presidents Jefferson and Madison, liked the proposal, Adams, Monroe's secretary of state sought to transform it into a unilateral statement, in order "to avow our principles explicitly" rather than "to come in as a cock-boat in the wake of the British man-of-war."<sup>35</sup>

As Gaddis observes, Adams realized that the United States lacked the means to enforce the policy, but "he shrewdly calculated that Great Britain, with its navy, did have such means, and that its own interests in this instance would complement those of the United States even in the absence of a formal commitment." The Monroe Doctrine permitted the United States to avoid the dangers illustrated by the French alliance of 1778—the obligation to align American long-term interests with those of another state, or to provide assistance when those interests were threatened. Unilateralism characterized American foreign policy right up until World War II. As Gaddis notes, the Bush Doctrine does not represent a new approach to foreign affairs but a return to an older one.<sup>36</sup>

*Preemption* arguably has been a part of an American grand strategy since the Revolution, justifying early steps to prevent an adverse outcome in the future. U.S. actions in Florida after the War of 1812 constitute the clearest example of preemption during the Early Republic.

Karl Walling has argued that the Declaration of Independence represents an even earlier example of preemption. After all, when the Declaration was issued, only Massachusetts and New York had been subject to direct attack by the British and were, therefore, justified in making "an unambiguous claim to be fighting in self-defense." Walling observes that

the delegates [to the Continental] Congress were essentially ambassadors from the separate colonies sent to deliberate on common policy and strategy to oppose the British efforts to centralize power in Parliament during the decade after the Seven Year's War. In other words, Americans declared their independence more as a coalition of independent states than a single nation, with all the problems incident to coalition war for the rest of the conflict with Great Britain and the subsequent peace, until 1787, when they shifted from a coalition toward something new, with its exact nature to be worked out over time.

One of the many rhetorical purposes of the Declaration, argues Walling, was to demonstrate to the people of colonies not under attack that they soon would be and that they all had "no choice but to fight the British before it was too late to do so, that is, before it used its military power to subdue the colonies one by one." By warning of British tyranny to come, the Declaration called for the colonies to preemptively unite before Great Britain could divide and conquer them.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Knopf, 1949), p. 385.

<sup>36</sup> Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience*, pp. 24-26.

<sup>37</sup> Walling, e-mail to the author. Walling argues that the logic of preemption found in the Declaration originates in John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*.



The Early Republic faced many threats, including a continuing European presence in North America—Great Britain in Canada and Spain in Florida and Texas—and what we would today call “non-state actors”: marauding Indians and pirates, ready to raid lightly defended areas on the frontier. These threats were exacerbated by the weakness of what Adams called “derelict” provinces (today we would call them “failed states”), which provided an excuse for further European intervention in the Americas, and sanctuary for hostile non-state actors. In 1818, Florida provided an occasion to address such threats.

After Creeks, Seminoles, and escaped slaves launched a series of attacks on Americans from sanctuaries in Spanish Florida, General Andrew Jackson, acting on the basis of questionable authority, invaded Florida, not only attacking and burning Seminole villages but also capturing a Spanish fort at St. Marks. He also executed two British citizens whom he accused of aiding the marauders.<sup>38</sup>

Most of Monroe’s cabinet, especially Secretary of War John Calhoun, wanted Jackson’s head, but Adams came to Jackson’s defense. He contended that the United States should not apologize for Jackson’s preemptive expedition but insist that Spain either garrison Florida with enough forces to prevent marauders from entering the United States or “cede to the United States a province. . . which is in fact a derelict, open to the occupancy of every enemy, civilized or savage, of the United States, and serving no other earthly purpose than as a post of annoyance to them.” As Adams had written earlier, it was his opinion “that the marauding parties. . . ought to be broken up immediately.”<sup>39</sup> As Gaddis observes, Adams believed that the United States “could no more entrust [its] security to the cooperation of enfeebled neighboring states than to the restraint of agents controlled, as a result, by no state.”<sup>40</sup>

This reasoning informed U.S. foreign policy in Latin America and the Caribbean through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the reasons the United States was keen to annex Texas was the fear of British designs on the American Southwest. The United States intervened in Haiti and Nicaragua in the early twentieth century because it feared that European powers would use the “dereliction” argument as an excuse to intervene in the Caribbean. Such American fears were validated in the 1860s when France took advantage of the American Civil War to establish Maximilian I as emperor of Mexico.

The principles of American statecraft—linking principle to power—that shaped U.S. foreign policy with respect to the American continent are

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 111-116.

<sup>39</sup> Adams to Don Luis d’ Onis, July 23, 1818, in Ford, *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, Vol. VI, pp. 386-394; and Adams to the President, July 8, 1818, *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>40</sup> Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience*, p. 18.



logically expandable to the global arena. The logic of security is expandable as well.

For instance, while critics of the Bush Doctrine argue that its emphasis on expanding liberal democracy, mocking this enterprise as “muscular Wilsonianism,” the expansion of like regimes can be found in Thucydides, who noted that an important goal of both Athens and Sparta was to establish and support regimes similar to their own, democracies in the case of Athens and oligarchies for Sparta.

Indeed, the Bush Doctrine endorses this very Thucydidean perspective on a global basis. As the president declared during a June 2004 speech at the Air Force Academy:

Some who call themselves “realists” question whether the spread of democracy in the Middle East should be of any concern of ours. But the realists in this case have lost contact with a fundamental reality. American has always been less secure when freedom is in retreat and more secure when freedom is on the march.<sup>41</sup>

The Bush Doctrine is based on the recognition that, as Thucydides understood, the security of a state is enhanced when it is surrounded by others that share its principles and interests.

### **American Foreign Policy and the American Character**

The persistence of the American mission—the tendency toward expansion, the belief that the globe can be transformed on the basis of the universal principles articulated by the Declaration of Independence, and what critics call the “messianic” impulse—is no aberration but represents the mainstream of American opinion regarding foreign policy. Of course, as many scholars have noted, it is not the only foreign policy tradition. Another is what Walter Russell Mead has called the “Jeffersonian” or “Old Republican” school.<sup>42</sup> This school was adumbrated by Charles Pinckney, who, as an advocate of the dominance of domestic over foreign affairs, can be properly described as isolationist.

Old Republicans such as John Randolph of Roanoke and John Taylor of Caroline were deeply suspicious of centralized power and its corrupting effects on the people who wield it. They opposed the War of 1812, calling it merely “war for honour,” a “metaphysical war” that could not be justified by American interest and which, by requiring a strong federal government to wage it, would end in “the destruction of the last experiment in . . . free government.” The Old Republican argument is today embraced by many on the right of the political spectrum, especially so-called libertarians and

<sup>41</sup> George Bush, Graduation Speech at the US Air Force Academy, June 2, 2004, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/20040602.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Meade, *Special Providence*, pp. 174-217.

“traditionalist” conservatives but concerns about the impact of war on growth of centralized governmental power can also be observed on the political left as well.<sup>43</sup>

There is also the aforementioned “realist” school, which criticizes the tradition that includes the Bush Doctrine. Realists stress the importance of power and military security in international affairs and are most concerned about maintaining stability and a peaceful balance of power. For the realist, the state’s most vital interest—and its only meaningful goal, no matter its form of government—is to maintain sufficient relative power to ensure its security. Insofar as they are the heirs of Hans Morgenthau, realists also reject the “crusading spirit,” eschewing ideology and defining the state’s interests as narrowly as possible, making it less likely that they will come into conflict with the interests of other states.<sup>44</sup>

But these other foreign policy approaches, as well as others, have never been able to supplant the idea of an American mission, despite the recurrent fervent hopes of critics, and despite frequent disappointments and setbacks. Critics who hope that the Iraq War will lead the United States to abandon the “expansive, moralistic, hubristic American approach” to foreign policy will be as disappointed as Pinckney, John Randolph of Roanoke, John Taylor of Caroline, the “America Firsters” of the mid-twentieth century, and assorted pacifists and socialists before them.

The reason for this is the combination of the intuitive American commitment to universal principles articulated in the nation’s founding documents, and an abiding belief by the American public at large in the legitimacy of liberal democracy, on the one hand, and their desire for power and wealth, one the other. This drive led Gouverneur Morris to describe his fellow-countrymen as “the first-born children of the commercial age.” As Robert Kagan observes:

The expansive, moralistic, militaristic tradition in American foreign policy is the hearty offspring of this marriage between Americans’ driving ambitions and their overpowering sense of righteousness. These tendencies have been checked at times by overseas debacles, or by foreign powers too big and strong to be coerced into acceptance of the American truth. At those times, the counter-traditions have been able to assert themselves and take temporary control of American policy, as in the

<sup>43</sup> On the Old Republicans, see Norman K. Risjord, *The Old Republicans: Southern Conservatism in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

<sup>44</sup> Examples of realist thought, both classical and “neo,” include Kenneth M. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to US Primacy* (New York: Norton, 2005); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, Revised by Kenneth Thompson (New York: Knopf, 1985); George F. Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956); and Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

1930s or in the 1970s. But these victories have been fleeting. The story of America's first century is not one of virtuous restraint but of an increasingly powerful nation systematically eliminating all competitors on the North American continent. The story of its second century is not one of caution and a recognition of limits but of a steady and determined rise to global dominance.<sup>45</sup>

American foreign policy has always reflected this American character. The description of the Athenians by the Corinthians in Thucydides' Peloponnesian War is applicable to Americans as well: active, innovative, daring, quick, enterprising, acquisitive, and opportunistic. Like the Athenians, Americans "were born into the world to take no rest themselves and to give none to others."<sup>46</sup>

The most astute critics of the Bush Doctrine recognize that attributing foreign policy decisions to the manipulation by nefarious individuals or groups or to deception, as has been charged in the case of both Vietnam and Iraq, is seriously at odds with the historical record. As they see it, the real problem is the American character itself. As Andrew Bacevich writes in *The Limits of Power*, "The impulses that have landed us in a war of no exits and no deadlines come from within. Foreign policy has, for decades, provided an outward manifestation of American domestic ambitions, urges, and fears." For Bacevich, the Bush Doctrine represents continuity, not innovation, reflecting "the accumulated detritus of freedom, the by-products of our frantic pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness."<sup>47</sup>

While Bacevich's jeremiad is unlikely to change the American character, it does provide a useful cautionary note. As the case of Athens illustrates, states and nations can overreach, to their detriment. The Bush Doctrine is well within the mainstream of American foreign policy and as such, is likely to outlive the administration that gives it its name, but as with any approach in international affairs, it must be guided by prudential considerations.



<sup>45</sup> Kagan, "Neocon Nation."

<sup>46</sup> Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*, Book 1, Sec. 5, p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), p. 5.