# George W. Bush, Idealist

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As I write this, the war to liberate the Iraqi people from the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein is under way. It is a war to prevent Hussein's Iraq from becoming a veritable factory of weapons of mass terror and destruction, and a war to deprive the world's terrorist organizations of a friend and sponsor. It is many things to many people: justified, callous, unilateral, long-overdue, hopeful, perilous. But one thing it is not is representative of a world view conditioned by classical realism.

There are many ways to understand the complexion of George W. Bush's foreign policy and the group that runs it. One of them is through the lens of traditional frameworks for thinking about international relations. It is easy to forget, now, that the early conventional wisdom held that President Bush and his foreign policy team in fact embraced realism as their guiding philosophy. Virtually every Bush foreign policy appointee uttered the term at some point during the administration's first year. 'I am a realist,' said Bush's National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. 'Power matters.'[1] An interviewer returned from a conversation with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to divulge that 'he has no code words or doctrine to describe his outlook, other than what he termed "old-fashioned" realism.'[2] Candidate Bush himself, in his first major foreign policy speech (delivered in 1999), said that 'a President must be a clear-eyed realist.'[3]

In practice, however, the Bush administration's assumptions, doctrines and policies stem generally from a very different world view from that proposed by classical realism. This fact has now been widely remarked upon.[4] Not so well appreciated or understood, though, are the details and implications of the administration's stance. In what specific ways is the Bush administration not realist?

* The views expressed here are the author's own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US government, the Department of Defense or the National Defense University.

1 Cited in Steve Kettman, 'Bush's secret weapon', *Salon.com*, 20 March 2000, available at http://dir.salon.com/politics2000/feature/2000/03/20/rice/index.html.

2 Bill Gertz, 'Rumsfeld affirms Asian presence', *Washington Times*, 25 July 2001.

3 Quoted in Nicholas Lehman, 'Letter from Washington: the next world order', *New Yorker*, 1 April 2002, available at www.newyorker.com/printable/?fact/020401fa_FACT1, p. 2.

4 See e.g. Nicholas Lehman, 'Letter from Washington: the war on what?', *New Yorker*, 16 Sept. 2002, available at www.newyorker.com/printable/?fact/020916fe_fact.

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Why does it matter? And, ultimately, if realism is passé and liberal institutionalism still not credible to most Americans, what is left? Washington is no closer to an answer to that question than it was in 1989—raising the further question of whether the world at that moment left behind, not only the Cold War, but also the hope for any meaningful theory of world politics at a time when the mantras of realism and those of its critics sound equally plausible.

## II

The Yale historian Donald Kagan has offered what may be the best one-sentence summary of realism. 'In a world of sovereign states,' he wrote in the conclusion of his magisterial *On the origins of war and the preservation of peace*, 'a contest among them over the distribution of power is the normal condition', and 'such contests often lead to war.'[5] Owen Harries, who fashioned the fine journal *The National Interest* into a home for realist thinking, writes similarly that a realist disposition 'would respect the primacy of self-interest as a motive, and of power as a means, in an international system that lacked a polity.'[6] The quintessential modern realist, Hans Morgenthau, put it this way: 'International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim … [W]henever [statesmen and peoples] strive to realize their goal by means of international politics, they do so by striving for power.'[7]

Several themes can be teased out of such definitions. Realism is about power and its distribution. For classical realists, the drive for power and the selfish character of that drive come from human nature, which is acquisitive and self-interested and often violent. In a world where security is at a premium, the kind of power that matters most is political–military power, as opposed to economic or cultural or other kinds. Realists are further interested in material strength, not ideological—they see threats in the numbers of tanks and missiles a country has, not in its form of government. The road to peace in such a world is to confront power-hungry leaders and states with sufficient opposing power to deter them; the most famous mechanism is the balance of power in which several states ally to counterbalance the power of a would-be hegemon, but the important point is that strength deters, that power underwrites the peace. Placing hope in treaties and international laws and the spread of democracy amounts to fruitless, and dangerous, dreaming. In such a world, morality can play no meaningful role in state policy.

There are different varieties of realism, to be sure. But the essence of realist thinking is clear: human nature causes war; military power and material forms of power trump other kinds; only balances of power deter war; the international

[5] Donald Kagan, *On the origins of war and the preservation of peace* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1995), p. 569.
[6] Owen Harries, 'Over and out', *National Interest*, Summer 2001, p. 5.
[7] Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*, brief edn, ed. Revd Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), p. 29.



NTA79_3_02_Mazarr 504 5/13/03, 11:38

system is and will remain lawless; morality has no place in foreign policy. And there is a good case to be made that the vast majority of senior Bush administration foreign policy and defence officials disagree with nearly all those points to some significant degree. They do not all disagree the same way, because there is, as has now become famous, no unanimity of views among the administration's foreign policy leaders. Different members of the Bush team diverge from realism in different ways. But, led by the president, diverge they do, in ways that have produced arguably the most surprising developments in US foreign and defence policy since at least 1980, and perhaps since 1945.

## III

The foundation stone of classical realism is its starkly pessimistic view of human nature. Hans Morgenthau scoffed that both Enlightenment liberals and Marxists 'believe that the lust for power, the Augustinian *animus dominandi*, is nothing more than a symptom of a passing phase of human history'. Instead, Morgenthau proclaimed that 'the "lust for power" and the social configurations to which that lust gives rise is an intrinsic element, an intrinsic quality of human nature itself. It cannot be reformed out of existence. There is no phase of history which will not show it. There is no social organization which will not bear the mark of it.'[8]

Bracing stuff, that, and distinctly theological. Classical realism brims with religious overtones, in part because of the formative role of the theologian and political theorist Reinhold Niebuhr. 'The behavior of collective man,' he wrote, 'naturally has its source in the anatomy of human nature.'[9] That nature is one obsessed with power and 'dominion,' the lunge for which represents the central characteristic of human social order.[10] This depressing litany of human imperfectibility leads directly to realism's central theme—one of limits, restraint and prudence. Such an emphasis will come as a surprise to those who equate the theory with aggression and ultimatums, but the core beliefs of realism are all about humility and caution. Only such an outlook makes sense, given what so many realists see as the 'tragic' nature of politics, in which collective humanity so frequently violates its own obvious interests.

The first test of anyone aspiring to the label of realist is, therefore, one's view of human nature and, more broadly, one's degree of optimism about the ability of human beings to get along smoothly for long periods of time.

George W. Bush himself is famously gregarious, positive, upbeat—very nearly Reaganesque in at least his public expressions of belief in essential human goodness. He seems, from public indications and those inside accounts that have so far emerged, to have perhaps a tougher, somewhat less naïvely straightforward

[8] Harold R. Landon, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: a prophetic voice for our time* (Greenwich, CT: Seabury, 1962), pp. 111, 100.
[9] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The structure of nations and empires* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 287.
[10] Ibid., p. 41.



INTA79_3_02_Mazarr 505 5/13/03, 11:38

optimism than Reagan did, but he nonetheless has made numerous statements and taken actions that together suggest a belief in the potential of right-thinking people to get along with one another. Part of this faith surely stems from Bush's religious convictions: references to his faith and its implications for policy are sprinkled throughout Bob Woodward's book *Bush at war*.[11] Combined with strong convictions about freedom and free markets, these sensibilities would appear to furnish Bush with a very specific view of progress: good will prevail over evil, because most people want the same things for themselves and their families. This sense of a directional history, driven by human desires, has a rich theoretical pedigree and strong empirical support. But little of it would appeal, and none of the rhetoric would seem necessary, to a realist.

Bush's Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, now widely known as one of the strongest proponents of ousting Saddam and liberating Iraq, has said that an American invasion and occupation can create a democratic government there, with positive ripple effects throughout the Middle East. This view makes sense only in the larger context of an idealism about human nature and the appeal of freedom. Many interviewers of Wolfowitz come away with the same impression: Bill Keller wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* that one striking thing about Wolfowitz 'is an optimism about America's ability to build a better world. He has an almost missionary sense of America's role.' This 'moralistic streak and the generally sunny view of the world's possibilities', Keller continues, 'may explain the affinity' between Bush and Wolfowitz.[12]

Secretary of State Colin Powell, too, seems more optimistic than traditional realists. Throughout his career, Powell has displayed a faith in the ability of common backgrounds or circumstances to overcome human differences. He remained surprisingly unscarred by racism (at least, in so far as he has publicly stated), growing up in a racially mixed area with friends of all races, working, for example, in a Jewish store and learning some Yiddish. He joined an army that was still working out the kinks of desegregation but in which he found an institution dedicated in some measure to equality of opportunity. Later he discovered commonalities with Russian military officers; talking with General Moiseyev, the chief of the Soviet general staff and a man who had spent a career planning to destroy Powell's country, Powell found himself becoming one of 'two old infantrymen swapping war stories'.[13] About the Russians he met during a tour of the country while a White House Fellow, Powell writes that 'What I sensed was the common humanity of all people, including these Russians who were then supposed to be our mortal enemy. The people I met … were not political ideologues. They were the Soviet equivalent of my own family.'[14]

[11] Bob Woodward, *Bush at war* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), pp. 46, 67, 205.
[12] Bill Keller, 'The sunshine warrior', *New York Times Magazine*, 22 Sept. 2002.
[13] Colin Powell (with Joseph Persico), *My American journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 534.
[14] Ibid., p. 165.



NTA79_3_02_Mazarr 506 5/13/03, 11:38

## IV

If the basic foundation of classical realism is human nature, the second piece of its world view—and the foundation stone of neorealism—is the existence of an anarchic realm of self-interested, competitive, mutually suspicious and antagonistic states. For realists, nation-states are the fundamental actors to be concerned about, overawing all others; and state sovereignty, drawing rigid lines between actors thereby separated into an anarchic realm of competition and conflict, is a fundamental principle of the overall system.

The established defence and foreign policy doctrines of the Bush administration have now elevated the enforcement of certain global norms over state sovereignty, and made clear the administration's view that a globalizing world of democratic, trading states is no longer the world once portrayed by realists. The new world structure, for the Bush team, has been variously described with terms roughly equating to a 'core' versus a 'periphery': a core of like-minded, democratic, free-market-orientated nations is building norms and rules to govern their own behaviour as well as imposing those rules on, and trying to bring into their own number, the still-developing or still-unfree 'peripheral' states. This is a persuasive analysis of world politics on the cusp of the twenty-first century, but it has little to do with realism.

A major piece of the Bush view of the structure of world politics—little discussed before September 11 (and in fact arguably endangered by the process of going to war with Iraq), but much emphasized afterwards—is the essential commonality of interests among the states of the 'core'. One implication of this view is that state sovereignty, which in many ways remains the first and dominant rule to which the core states have agreed, can be safely ignored when the core is enforcing one of its rules on the periphery. Such an approach appears in the US National Security Strategy of September 2002. This is largely a document about terrorism—a significant fact in itself, as there is almost no mention of threats other than terrorists and rogue states. There are, to be fair, a number of references to the possibility that the consensus in the core could break down.[15] More prominent, however, are two themes: a continuation of the by now traditional American emphasis on idealistic support for freedom, and a clear expectation that a like-minded group of major powers could inaugurate a new era in world politics. 'Today', says the transmittal letter by President Bush,

> the international community has the best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war. Today the world's great powers find ourselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos … We are also increasingly united by common values.

[15] These include such statements as 'We will strongly resist aggression from other great powers' (transmittal letter); reference to the need to avoid 'rekindl[ing] rivalries among the major powers' (p. 9); and the flat claim that 'We are attentive to the possible renewal of old patterns of great power competition' (p. 26). *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: The White House, Sept. 2002).



INTA79_3_02_Mazarr 507 5/13/03, 11:38

The report itself concludes that September 11 'fundamentally changed the context for relations between the United States and other main centers of global power, and opened vast, new opportunities'.[16]

The Bush National Security Strategy does not claim that the risk of great power conflict has already disappeared. It most certainly does, however, hold out the possibility that it *could* disappear, and be replaced with a sort of concert of major powers linked together by common values and building an increasingly dense network of norms, rules and even laws to govern their conduct towards each other.

Thomas Barnet, a professor at the US Naval War College, offers a model that may well capture essential elements of administration thinking about world politics. Barnet is not an administration official, nor is his piece based on interviews with such officials, but his thoughts match well the perspectives offered in the Bush National Security Strategy. 'Disconnectedness', Barnet claims, 'defines danger'—specifically, disconnectedness from 'the globalizing world', from its 'rule sets, its norms, and all the ties that bind countries together in mutually assured dependence'. He splits the world into two camps: the 'Functioning Core'—developed or developing parts of the world closely tied to globalization; and the 'Non-Integrating Gap'—poor, repressive and unstable regimes being shut out of globalization. The main national security threat for countries of the Core is not one another, as realists would presume, but the instabilities, resentments and terrorists issuing from the Gap.[17]

Richard Haass, director of policy planning in the Bush State Department, appears to have a similar view of the Functioning Core and its responsibilities. 'What you're seeing from this administration is the emergence of a new principle or body of ideas—I'm not sure it constitutes a doctrine—about what you might call the limits of sovereignty,' Haass has said. Sovereignty entails obligations, Haas continues; when governments fail to meet them, 'other governments, including the United States, gain the right to intervene.' More broadly, Haas nominated a 'successor to the idea of containment': the idea of integration. The goal of US foreign policy should be to persuade the other major powers to sign on to certain key ideas as to how the world should operate: opposition to terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, support for free trade, democracy, markets. Integration is about locking them into these policies and then building institutions that lock them in even more.[18]

If this sounds a good deal like the hope of the liberal institutionalist, that's because it is. The connection is not simple or linear; an interesting paradox of the idealistic Bush foreign policy, for example, is the pursuit of institutionalist and liberal ends in a manner more aggressive and, at times, more unilateral than foreign policy liberals can support. And the administration surely does not believe that international institutions can yet tackle security problems on their own, or that leading powers have to abide by the majority votes of such

[16] Ibid., p. 28.
[17] Thomas P. M. Barnet, 'The Pentagon's new map', *Esquire*, 1 March 2003.
[18] Quoted in Lehman, 'Letter from Washington: the next world order', web version, p. 5.



NTA79_3_02_Mazarr 508 5/13/03, 11:38

institutions. National security remains very much in the hands of nations, acting through 'coalitions of the willing'. Still, the internationalist sentiment is there, which perhaps explains the broad sympathy for the administration's goals in Iraq even among those who fret about its tactics. This is a missionary, idealistic administration in the best—and sometimes worst—traditions of Wilsonianism.

## V

Realism, to repeat, is concerned with power. And it defines that concept in very specific ways, with two distinctions of special import: political–military power versus other forms; and material versus ideological power. Leading officials of the Bush administration appear to reject both distinctions.

Hans Morgenthau led the modern charge to elevate political–military issues above all others. He used the phrase 'political power' to refer to those aspects of military force and geopolitical diplomacy that defined, for him, international politics itself. Not all actions fall under this category, he recognized; many others 'are normally undertaken without any consideration of power … Many legal, economic, humanitarian, and cultural activities are of this kind.'[19] Power means geopolitics, not trade or legal arrangements or cultural exchanges. This is a fundamental part of the realist canon.

And yet Morgenthau himself, that man of many contradictions, diverged from the narrow conception of political power in the very same work. 'Power may comprise anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man,' he wrote, an expansive definition that subsumed many non-military forms.[20] People's minds are drawn to inspiring ideals, to promises of a better life, to compelling values.

In his discussion of one form of imperialism—cultural—Morgenthau seemed to recognize as much. 'If one could imagine the culture and, more particularly, the political ideology, with all its concrete imperialistic objectives, of State A conquering the minds of all the citizens determining the policies of State B, State A would have won a more complete victory and would have founded its supremacy on more stable grounds than any military conqueror or economic master.'[21] This was a pretty good preview of the Cold War's end: the political and economic philosophy of the West conquered enough Soviet minds to fracture its system and end the basic standoff. Non-military forms of power had carried the day.

Properly, then, the emphasis on non-military forms of power continues in the Bush administration. Colin Powell, for one, sees many non-military forms of power at large in the world today. In his January 2001 confirmation hearings he mentioned AIDS, organized crime and many other 'non-traditional' threats as security issues. Once, attending to such problems would have been a purely

[19] Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, pp. 29–30.
[20] Ibid., p. 11.
[21] Ibid., p. 72.



INTA79_3_02_Mazarr 509 5/13/03, 11:38

altruistic goal; today, Powell said, 'meeting such challenges … appeals to even more basic instincts—caring for our own interests'.[22]

Powell is by no means the only Bush administration appointee to hold such views. Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs Paula Dobrianski's confirmation hearing speech was a disquisition on the importance of political scientist Joseph Nye's notion of 'soft power'. Nye's argument was a direct attack on the limits of realist power definitions, and Dobrianski embraced it wholeheartedly. 'I intend to draw on America's enormous cultural, ideological, and scientific appeal and accomplishments, so as to both promote appropriate solutions to global problems, as well as to persuade others … to support us.' The debate between hard and soft power is 'sterile', Dobrianski insisted; 'both hard and soft power issues have to be on our foreign policy agenda.'[23] Rice, too, has referred to the strength of American values and ideals as crucial components of the country's strength,[24] and Paul Wolfowitz seems to agree. Most of all, President Bush himself seems to see much in American values that serves American purposes, independent of the size of its military. By now, in fact, such notions are simply taken for granted by all US foreign policy officials, and have been for decades.

## VI

A second realist distinction is between material and ideological forms of power, with realists very big on the first and very sceptical about the second. The subheadings of a chapter in *Politics among nations* make Morgenthau's position clear: as 'elements of national power', he lists geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, and such vaguer but nonetheless measurable qualities as national character and national morale. Look to capabilities, he is saying, to gauge threats, not to transitory and ephemeral qualities such as intent or ideology. He disdained the 'demonological' approach to the Cold War, which had Americans fixated on 'the adherents of Communism' rather than on what realists truly worry about—the 'real threat: the power of states, Communist or not'.[25]

On this point the Bush administration seems unanimous in its support for a fundamentally anti-realist proposition: the ideology of a state—as Ronald Reagan profoundly said of the Soviet Union—matters a great deal. In particular, democracies are more peaceful, more law-abiding, more predictable, more friendly than non-democratic states. A world of democracies might not be a world without war, but it would be closer to it. Thus Bush's officials, much

[22] Colin L. Powell, 'Statement at confirmation hearings', 17 Jan. 2001, available at http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2001/443.htm.
[23] 'Statement of Paula J. Dobrianski, Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs nominee', Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 25 April 2001.
[24] Condoleezza Rice, 'National security challenges for the new administration', remarks at the US Institute of Peace, 17 Jan. 2001, available at http://www.usip.org/oc/transcripts/rice20010117.html.
[25] Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, p. 9.



NTA79_3_02_Mazarr 510 5/13/03, 11:38

like Reagan's, are adherents of the distinctly liberal and idealist (not to mention fundamentally valid) notion of the 'democratic peace'.

Paul Wolfowitz is one of those in the Bush camp with the strongest ties to this Reaganite approach to the world. Friends have called him an 'ideologue', in the sense that he self-consciously chose to 'distinguish himself from balance-of-power realists who tended to focus more on the achievable than on fixed ideals'.[26] His warm embrace of the democracy-as-security-tool thesis is thus unsurprising. One of the Cold War's enduring lessons, he believes, is that 'democracy matters'. The US emphasis on human rights and democracy 'contributed in an important way to the triumph of democracy in the Cold War.' Wolfowitz continues: 'Nothing could be less realistic than the version of the "realist" view of foreign policy that dismisses human rights as an important tool of American foreign policy. There are no doubt examples of human rights policies that can damage other U.S. interests, but … what is more impressive is how often promoting democracy has actually advanced American interests.'[27]

In endorsing an engagement approach towards China, Wolfowitz says the US has a 'fundamental strategic interest' in 'supporting democratic trends in China'. While 'democracies are not as irenic as the extreme proponents of "democratic peace" like to argue,' Wolfowitz more or less concurs with their assessment: 'A China that governs its own peoples by force is more likely to try to impose its will on its neighbors. And in turn, China's neighbors and the United States will be more likely to trust it and accept its growing influence if it becomes a democracy.'[28]

In his confirmation hearings, Colin Powell spoke glowingly about the progress of democracy—and its benefits for US security. 'The rise of democracy and the power of the information revolution combine to leverage one another,' he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January 2001. And eventually, the ideas inherent in democratic practice 'will flow into every dark place and illuminate that place for the betterment of mankind … Democracy and free markets work and the world knows it … A guiding principle of President-Elect Bush's foreign policy will be that America stands ready to help any country that wishes to join the democratic world.'

Condoleezza Rice has written of the ideological rather than material challenge formerly posed by the Soviet Union. It was 'more than just a traditional global competitor', she wrote in 2000, because it 'strove to lead a universal socialist alternative' to Western capitalist democracy[29]—implying, of course, that a change in ideology radically changes the nature of the threat.

Even more ambitiously, in a defining essay published before the 2000 election in *Foreign Affairs* and designed to set out the basic principles of a Republican

[26] Elaine Sciolino, 'In a humble world, defense deputy stands firm', *New York Times*, 2 April 2001, p. A10. See also the discussion of Wolfowitz's family background in Keller, 'The sunshine warrior'.
[27] Paul Wolfowitz, 'Remembering the future', *National Interest*, no. 59, Spring 2000, available at www.nationalinterest.org.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Condoleezza Rice, 'Exercising power without arrogance', *Chicago Tribune*, 13 Dec. 2000.



INTA79_3_02_Mazarr 511 5/13/03, 11:38

foreign policy, Rice waxed positively Fukuyamic. 'Powerful secular trends are moving the world toward economic openness and—more unevenly—democracy and individual liberty … [T]he United States and its allies are on the right side of history.' History, she put it bluntly, is 'march[ing] toward markets and democracy'. In the same essay, Rice took to task 'those who would draw a sharp line between power politics and a principled foreign policy based on values. This polarized view—that you are either a realist or devoted to norms and values—may be just fine in academic debate, but it is a disaster for American foreign policy. American values are universal.'[30] Presumably, that universal appeal is part of America's strength—as much as (or more than) its fancy weapons.

Lewis Libby, now Vice-President Cheney's chief of staff, agrees. In a speech delivered in October 1992, Libby, then Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, spoke of Russia. 'We have high hopes for the success of democracy in Russia,' he said of the previous Bush team. The goal was important because, Libby continued,

> A democratic Russia would be an integral part of the community of Western democratic nations, a community bound together by a web of political, economic, and security ties. This 'zone of peace' created through postwar cooperation offers a framework for security not through unstable balances of power or competitive rivalries in arms, but through cooperative approaches and collective security organizations … The question is sometimes asked, Does America want a strong or weak Russia? America wants a strong, democratic one. A weak Russia is still dangerous and more likely to be a problem … We want a democratic, rejuvenated Russia to take its rightful place on the world stage and to add its voice and its power to the existing community of nations that seeks peace and, when necessary, opposes aggression.[31]

A neater and more concise statement of anti-realism is hard to imagine.

A similar sense of the opportunity to engage Russia, to mould it into a 'good' state rather than a dangerous one, was on display in an essay by Stephen Hadley. Long a proponent of rapid deployment of missile defences, by all accounts he continues to hold such views now that he is Deputy National Security Advisor. But in an essay published in summer 2000 in the *Washington Quarterly*, Hadley appreciated the potential for an action–reaction cycle in missile defences, especially with Russia, and this appreciation presumably led him to a radical proposal: that the United States 'should offer to include Russia in any cooperative programs that it has with friends and allies to develop defenses against' ballistic missiles. Washington should consider making US and Russian theatre missile defence systems interoperable, Hadley went on, in part to help Russia get some hard currency by selling its systems alongside US ones.[32]

[30] Condoleezza Rice, 'Promoting the national interest', *Foreign Affairs* 79: 1, Jan.–Feb. 2000, pp. 46, 49, 60.
[31] I. Lewis Libby, 'American perspectives on civil–military relations and democracy', speech at the Heritage Foundation, 29 Oct. 1992, Washington DC.
[32] Stephen J. Hadley, 'A call to deploy', *Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2000, p. 107.



NTA79_3_02_Mazarr 512 5/13/03, 11:38

This is astonishing stuff. Russia is a great power, and one with a history of intimidating and invading its neighbours; yet here is a leading voice for hard-headed realism in US foreign policy arguing that the United States should prop up its ailing defence industry and help protect it from attack. Such thinking—as well as the implications of September 11, and Russian leader Vladimir Putin's seeming commitment to place Russia firmly in the camp of industrial democracies—may help account for the gradual shift from an early scepticism to an open embrace of Putin's regime in a fashion reminiscent of the camaraderie that developed between Reagan and Gorbachev.

In view of all of this, it is hardly surprising that President Bush and his senior officials have characterized the threat of terrorism in strikingly ideological, rather than material, terms. In his speech to a joint session of Congress on 20 September 2001, Bush said of Osama bin Laden and his allies: 'We have seen their kind before. They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions—by abandoning every value except the will to power—they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way, to where it ends: in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies.' The battle against such foes would not just be 'America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.'[33]

This is utopian, transformative language, derived from a perspective that sees history as a contest of ideas and minds more than of battalions and budgets. It is precisely the sort of language, in other words, that one would have expected from Ronald Reagan.

## VII

And this may be precisely the point. The Bush administration's affinity for non-realist ideas surely stems in part from the fact that many of them would identify Ronald Reagan—rather than Richard Nixon—as their philosophical lodestar. Reagan was one of the century's leading idealists, believing in things like the eventual triumph of democracy and the possibility of global nuclear disarmament. He just happened to marry his idealism to an abiding hatred of Soviet totalitarianism, a commitment to the importance of military power, and an astonishing faith that the world simply knew America was the good guy and would react to its growing power with relief rather than resentment.

Reagan was an out-and-out optimist about human nature. Most maddening to the true realists was his dogged belief that his legendary charm and persuasiveness could serve as antidotes to the power competition of world politics. Reagan repeatedly said, for example, that if he could just take Gorbachev for a tour of middle-class America—its 'clean and lovely homes', as he put it at one

[33] George W. Busy, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People', US Capitol, 20 Sept. 2001; www. whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html.



INTA79_3_02_Mazarr 513 5/13/03, 11:38

1985 dinner party, 'with a second car or boat in the driveway'—he could jolt the Soviet leader into a major reform programme.[34] More pragmatic, 'realistic' conservative luminaries in attendance at the meeting are said to have literally rolled their eyes at the suggestion.

Of course, Gorbachev turned out to be a legitimate reformer. The astonishing thing is that Reagan's optimism and belief in his own persuasive abilities were so powerful that he thought exactly the same things about Gorbachev's predecessors. Reagan sent a famous handwritten letter to that apparatchik extraordinaire, Brezhnev himself, in 1981 offering his personal assurances that the United States meant the Soviet Union no harm, and offering a dialogue to make this clear—writing, as Henry Kissinger would later point out, 'as if seventy-five years of communist ideology could be removed by a personal appeal'.[35] Reagan would express the very same sentiments to Andropov and Chernenko. At the base of it all was a clear faith in the essential goodness of human beings. Reagan seemed convinced that, if armed with the right perspectives and information, people would generally tend towards the good. 'My optimism comes not just from my strong faith in God,' he said in 1991, 'but from my strong and enduring faith in man.'[36]

Reagan's idealism was most on display in his belief in the power, and ultimate global triumph, of democracy. 'Humanity refuses to accept that freedom, or the spirit of man, can ever be extinguished,' he once said.[37] The Soviet Union 'runs against the tide of history', Reagan told the British Parliament in 1982, precisely by 'denying freedom and human dignity to its citizens'.[38] It was such sentiments that allowed a dour realist like Henry Kissinger to refer in passing to 'the idealism of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, or Ronald Reagan', and elsewhere to remark that Reagan's rhetoric sounded more like Jimmy Carter than Richard Nixon.[39]

Reagan's inspiration came from precisely the same place as Wilson's—the idea that the values for which America stands are, in fact, universal. This is not a realist attitude. It is a view, however, that remains alive and well in the Bush administration, with its portrayal of the fight against terrorism as a contest of good versus evil.

## VIII

This faith-inspired tendency to see the world as a contest between right and wrong, Bill Keller has argued in the *New York Times Magazine*, is the central element of a very profound similarity between Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. 'They are the least introspective of presidents,' Keller writes of the two,

[34] Dinesh D'Souza, *Ronald Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p. 1.
[35] Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 769.
[36] D'Souza, *Reagan*, p. 37.
[37] Quoted ibid., p. 234.
[38] Ibid., p. 4.
[39] Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p. 18.



NTA79_3_02_Mazarr 514 5/13/03, 11:38

'but unashamedly spiritual, professing a personal faith that goes well beyond churchgoing.' More than other recent presidents, Reagan and Bush have 'suggested that America has a divine assignment in the world to spread what Reagan called "the sacred fire of human liberty".' Bush 'talks, as Reagan did, about a world of black and white, and tends to measure his counterparts in politics and world affairs by a moral standard'.[40] That view, according to many reports, comes from a deeply felt faith that shapes the president's thinking about world affairs. 'Behind all life and all history,' Bush told a National Prayer Breakfast in February 2003, 'there is a dedication and purpose, set by the hand of a just and faithful God.'[41]

Examples of such thinking are legion. One of the best known involves the way in which Bush came to trust Russian leader Vladimir Putin. When the two leaders first met in person in June 2001, Bush began the session by mentioning a story he had heard about Putin's mother having given him a cross, and Putin having had it blessed in the Holy Land in Israel. Putin said yes, the story was true. Bush replied, 'I said it amazed me, that here you were a Communist, KGB operative, and yet you were willing to wear a cross. "That speaks volumes to me, Mr. President. May I call you Vladimir?"' Putin then told Bush a poignant story of his house burning down and the cross being the only thing Putin saved from it. Then Putin turned to discussing Russian debt—but, as Bush told the story to Bob Woodward, all he could think about was the cross. 'I was more interested in, who is this person I'm dealing with.' When Putin showed Bush the cross at a later meeting, Bush said, they had a successful session. 'I had convinced him,' Bush concluded, 'that I no longer viewed Russia as an enemy, and I viewed him, on a personal level, as somebody with whom we could deal.'[42]

Bush's apparent feelings about North Korean leader Kim Jong Il are equally moralistic. Describing their interview, Bob Woodward recalled, 'I thought [Bush] might jump up he became so emotional as he spoke … "I loathe Kim Jong Il!" Bush shouted, waving his finger in the air. "I've got a visceral reaction to this guy, because he is starving his people. And I have seen intelligence of these prison camps," Bush added. "It is visceral. Maybe it's my religion, maybe it's my—but I feel passionate about this."'[43]

Such passionate reactions further separate Bush foreign policy thinking from realism, which, of course, has little time for moral certitude in politics. 'Political realism', Morgenthau wrote simply, 'refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.' He did not deny that moral laws existed which ought to restrain national behaviour, but he reserved a special disdain for those who would use moral appeals to justify national policies. It is worth quoting him at length on this point:

[40] Bill Keller, 'Reagan's son', *New York Times Magazine*, 26 Jan. 2003, p. 28.
[41] Howard Fineman, 'Bush and God', *Newsweek*, 10 March 2003, p. 24.
[42] Woodward, *Bush at war*, pp. 119–20.
[43] Ibid., p. 340.



INTA79_3_02_Mazarr 515 5/13/03, 11:38

All nations are tempted—and few have been able to resist the temptation for long—to clothe their own particular aspirations and actions in the moral purposes of the universe. To know that nations are subject to the moral law is one thing, while to pretend to know with certainty what is good and evil in the relations among nations is quite another … [To equate moral laws with national policy] is that very sin of pride against which the Greek tragedians and the Biblical prophets have warned rulers and ruled. That equation is also politically pernicious, for it is liable to engender the distortion in judgment which, in the blindness of crusading frenzy, destroys nations and civilizations—in the name of moral principle, ideal, or God himself.[44]

Strong stuff. But what would Morgenthau do with Saddam Hussein? Surely, a clearer moral judgement could not be possible; surely, Saddam represents a wrong crying out to be righted. Perhaps—but a realist would not think so. A realist does not think in terms of righting wrongs. A realist thinks in terms of power—its acquisition, preservation and balancing. A realist does not think as George W. Bush does.

## IX

In each of the areas so far surveyed, one can make a very strong case that the Bush administration stands on the right side of history. A globalizing world of trading democracies and international institutions, one in which the progress of democracy and free markets has been nothing short of astonishing, is not a world hospitable to the realist's dour obsessions. There are certain human values that deserve to be held up as universal and fought for. America is a special nation, with a special claim to leading such a fight. Perhaps most hopeful—and praiseworthy—is the administration's assumption that productive long-term relations with Russia and China are not only possible but even likely, a stance that reverses earlier signals of a potentially self-fulfilling hostility towards both those great powers.

Such an instinctive antagonism towards other states, in fact, would have reflected arguably the biggest flaw in a realist approach to the world—the tendency of a suspicious, hostile attitude to other major powers to generate self-fulfilling prophecies of competition and war. And yet realism, at the same time, is a theory about that precise risk. Realism worries about the very power it seems to celebrate, warns against the anarchic struggle for unilateral security that it portrays as the natural and necessary foundation for every nation's foreign and defence policies.

This same tension appears to be alive and well in the thinking of key Bush administration officials, from the president downwards. If the Bush administration does embrace any element of the realist canon, for example, it must be the notion reflected by the resonant phrase 'peace through strength'. Classical realism is very big on the notion that states are always testing each other, and

[44] Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, p. 13.



NTA79_3_02_Mazarr 516 5/13/03, 11:38

history is full of examples—Saddam *circa* 1990, Kim Il Sung *circa* 1950, Khrushchev *circa* 1962—of bullies and thugs and would-be great powers who took signals of weakness as an excuse for adventurism. Realism stresses the need for individual nations to provide for their own defence, to rely on unilateral strength rather than multilateral commitments or treaties as the foundation of their security.

The Bush administration clearly agrees with this. Donald Rumsfeld has put it well: 'I never believed weakness was your first choice,' he told a reporter in July 2001. 'I have always felt that weakness was provocative, that it kind of invites people to do things that they otherwise wouldn't think about doing.'[45] Bush himself seems to value the importance of strength in leadership, broadly defined. 'A president has got to be the calcium in the backbone,' he told Bob Woodward. 'If I weaken, the whole team weakens. If I'm doubtful, I can assure you there will be a lot of doubt.'[46]

It seems safe to say that weakness and doubt, from the perspective of the Bush team, were the main failings of the Clinton foreign policy, and that those characteristics played some role in inviting the calamities of September 11. When asked by Nicholas Lehman whether America's terrorism policy before September 11 should have been different, Lewis Libby listed a number of earlier terrorist attacks and then put a rhetorical question in reply: 'Did we respond in a way which discouraged people from supporting terrorist activities, or activities clearly against our interests?' Libby concluded that 'many observers' would say that the United States had not responded strongly enough, which allowed Osama bin Laden and others 'to rise up and say credibly, "The Americans don't have the stomach to defend themselves."'[47]

For some observers—including, based on persuasive evidence, some in the Bush administration—the logical next step beyond 'peace through strength' was, in an era of American predominance, 'lasting peace through primacy'. Proponents of such a view advocate a lasting US hegemony, a situation in which other states not only cannot balance US power but are dissuaded from even making the attempt. The most famous official example of such thinking was the original version of the 1989–90 Defense Planning Guidance prepared for then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney by Paul Wolfowitz—a defence of American primacy as the best guarantee of peace, and a strategy designed to keep others from matching US power. A revised version, influenced by the controversy that resulted from the leaking of the document, spoke in more muted terms. But the sentiment remained very much alive.

Whatever one thinks of this proposed strategy, it is not one of which Hans Morgenthau would have approved. Realism advocates balancing power, not transcending the need for such a balance—precisely the sort of idealistic, history-denying notion against which realists spend much of their time railing.

[45] Gertz, 'Rumsfeld affirms Asian presence.'
[46] Woodward, *Bush at war*, p. 259.
[47] Lehman, 'Letter from Washington: the next world order', web printed version, p. 8.



INTA79_3_02_Mazarr 517 5/13/03, 11:38

The paradox is central to understanding the Bush administration's approach to the world: while muscle-flexing and power-maximizing answers to weakness would seem a natural realist strategy, they are not. Realism arguably *worries* about power more than any other theory of world politics. Yes, it says, power deters, but too much power deters (in a manner of speaking) too well: it forces others to react and sparks a 'security dilemma' in which everyone's power-grabbing leaves them all less, not more, secure. Realists know that the world is littered with tourist site ruins of empires brought down by their own hubris and excessive unilateralism. This is one reason why classic realists tend to be more cautious, more humble, and in fact more alliance-prone and multilateral than a crude reading of their philosophy might suggest.

Before they took office, many officials of the Bush administration revealed in their writings a very clear recognition of this dilemma. They wrote of the risks of hubris and the importance of collective action. They wrote, in other words, much as classic realists would have done.

Paul Wolfowitz, in a balanced and thoughtful 2000 essay in *The National Interest*, basically endorsed the 'lesson of Munich'—that appeasement equals war. But he also admits that it is 'somewhat overused' and has encouraged countries to overreach. 'Let us remember,' he wrote, 'that it was also with Munich in mind that British Prime Minister Anthony Eden and French Prime Minister Guy Mollet took the unfortunate decision to oppose with force Nasser's takeover of the Suez Canal in 1956, and that a few years later, with even worse consequences, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson decided that Vietnam was a similar case of aggression that had to be opposed.'[48]

Condoleezza Rice has argued that 'The world needs a balancer,' presumably for the reason that power contests are part of global life. But the role can be taken too far; throwing one's weight around is a recipe for reaction and decline. 'If you are too promiscuous in the use of military power,' she says, 'you will deprive the world of a balancer.'[49] If it is truly strategic rather than tactical, realism is about *avoiding* the need for confrontation—and using a modest brush when painting the portrait of one's own national interests is an unavoidable part of that strategy.

Peter Rodman, formerly of the Nixon Center and now Bush's Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, has realized—as a realist should—that manifestations of US hegemony are not in the country's interests. In a monograph called *Uneasy giant*, Rodman sketches out the dimensions of the challenge. 'The extraordinary predominance that America now enjoys is a problem rather than a blessing,' he writes. 'Most of the world's other major powers have made it into a central theme of their foreign policy to attempt to build counterweights to American power. This is, in fact, one of the main trends in international politics today.'[50]

[48] Wolfowitz, 'Remembering the future'.
[49] Jacob Heilbrunn, 'Condoleezza Rice: George W's realist', *World Policy Journal* 16: 4, Winter 1999/2000.
[50] Peter Rodman, *Uneasy giant: the challenges to American predominance* (Washington DC: Nixon Center, 1999), p. 2; available in its entirety at the Nixon Center website, www.nixoncenter.org.



NTA79_3_02_Mazarr 518 5/13/03, 11:38

As Rodman exhaustively chronicled, the risk of a reaction to American hegemony and confrontationalism was much more than theoretical, at least before September 11: it was well under way, all over the globe. American unilateralist hegemony was not coming without a price—precisely as realists would expect. In fact, George W. Bush himself did predict the outcome; in a debate with Al Gore during the 2000 presidential campaign, he said of US foreign policy that 'Our nation stands alone right now in the world in terms of power. And that's why we've got to be humble and yet project strength in a way that promotes freedom … If we are an arrogant nation, they'll view us that way, but if we're a humble nation, they'll respect us.'[51]

Strength is good, and necessary. Yet restraint and prudence are also important. The United States is stronger when it acts in alliances and under the United Nations banner, but it sometimes will be forced to act in lonelier company. These conclusions go to the heart of the tensions bedevilling US foreign policy at such an untidy moment in history. Washington needs to be strong, muscular and decisive. It needs to be restrained, prudent and collaborative. It should speak clearly about values and about evil, but not become doctrinaire or ideological. It must be all things at once; and—like the Clinton administration before it—the Bush administration is having trouble squaring this exasperating circle.

As a result, it may be that the major issue confronting the Bush administration, the dilemma that its world view inevitably produces, is whether it is possible to combine a sincere idealism with restraint. One could conceive of the challenge as a strategic triangle, each of whose corners hosts a crucial principle. At one corner lies an amalgam of idealism and multilateralism—the commitment to freedom, human rights, and good relations among the major powers that the Bush administration has trumpeted since September 11. At another corner lie the requirement for and value of toughness and credibility, and perhaps as an associated principle, the value of directness and honesty about universal values. The third corner complicates things tremendously: here we find the need for restraint, humility and prudence; the recognition that an imperfect world demands limited, imperfect solutions to problems; the inevitability that strength invites balancers and creates frustrated, fanatical opponents.

Each corner of this imagined strategic triangle stands in substantial tension with the other two. Idealistic policies may be imprudent and weak; strong ones may be imprudent and unilateral; restrained policies may be insufficiently tough or idealistic. The challenge is to strike a continuing balance among these three requirements, always recognizing the value of all of them, never losing sight of the need to preserve each against the temptations of the other two. Where one finds criticism of recent US administrations, justified or not, it is usually for neglecting one or more corners of the triangle—in the case of the Clinton

[51] Cited in Joseph S. Nye, *The paradox of American power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 156.



INTA79_3_02_Mazarr 519 5/13/03, 11:38

administration, too often neglecting the requirement for toughness and credibility (and in some cases, such as Somalia, the need for prudence); in the case of the Bush administration, underplaying the need for multilateralism and restraint.

This balance, moreover, must be struck in the specific context of the post-Cold War world. One of its many paradoxes lays the unavoidability of US predominance alongside the growing reaction to US power, while another counterposes the need to avoid hegemony alongside the dangerous willingness of a peace-orientated world community to sweep real risks under the collective rug. Robert Kagan has famously and brilliantly made this latter argument with regard to Europe, but it is equally true of other areas—for example, the South Korean and Japanese approach to North Korea, or the Arab world's strategy towards Saddam Hussein.[52]

This context magnifies the importance of all three corners of the triangle at the same time, which makes for crippling dilemmas. Saddam is evil and poses a clear threat to world peace, but multilateralism and prudence suggest caution: what to do? Multilateral idealism and a devotion to honesty point in the direction of a true global commitment to humanitarian intervention in cases of genocide or famine, but the importance of restraint (and fears about the potential for flawed missions to undermine credibility) raise numerous red flags. Meanwhile, the world's view of the United States is as strewn with contradictions as America's own thinking; as a nation-state, as an ideal, as a collection of policies, the United States is needed and resented, admired and despised, respected and insulted—more so every day.

## X

The same strategic triangle furnishes another lens through which we can view the well-documented contradictions built into realism. Realism discards one of the three principles—idealistic multilateralism—clearly enough. But the whole theory of realism might profitably be seen as simply an ongoing war between the important truths residing in the other two corners of the triangle: the need for strength, and for others to know that you are strong; and the dangers of that same requirement. That one dilemma is painful enough. It becomes positively maddening when the third part of the triangle—the tantalizing possibilities of a more multilateral, norm-bound world—is brought into play. And it becomes crippling when all of those dilemmas are dropped into a context as contradictory as that which exists today. No wonder the United States has been unable to respond to the repeated call for a clear and consistent doctrine to replace containment.

Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik wonder whether the Bush administration has embraced the realist mantle because it 'gives good spin'. They cite Herbert Butterfield to the effect that realism is 'more often a boast than a

[52] Robert Kagan, *Of paradise and power: America vs. Europe in the new world order* (New York: Knopf, 2003).



NTA79_3_02_Mazarr 520 5/13/03, 11:38

philosophy'.[53] Perhaps; though it is possible to be more charitable. President Bush and his administration called themselves realists because, on the grand spectrum of thinking about military force and international law and alliances and treaties, they are more comfortable closer to one end than the other, and that end is called realism. Yet much of what Bush and his advisers seem to believe is closer to idealism, in the Reaganesque sense—a belief in the victory of certain value systems and a willingness to place American power and military might in service of that trend, even to the extent of acting alone on major issues.

There is much to like about a doctrine that points in the direction of a better world and, at times, is willing to fight for it. But one result of this approach—of the tactics more than the overall doctrine—is to shine a bright light on the contradictions built into post-Cold War US foreign policy. If democracy and capitalism really are sweeping the globe; if a community of like-minded democracies really is emerging, a group that may include Russia in the not-too-distant future; then shouldn't Washington act as collaboratively as possible, to strengthen that community? When forced to reject a bad accord—say, the flawed Kyoto or International Criminal Court treaties—should the United States not rush forward with alternative proposals to make clear its commitment to the positive trends reflected by those flawed agreements?

These questions were less obvious during the Reagan years because, with a Cold War to fight, US toughness and unilateralism were more excusable while the West faced what was indeed an 'evil empire'. Now others expect the United States to have the luxury to act as if it believes its own idealistic rhetoric. It may be telling that Reagan himself, with the Cold War winding down and then concluded, began talking in terms—complete nuclear disarmament, aid to a prostrate Russia, an international peacekeeping force—that were at once ambitious, generous and multilateral in spirit.

Perhaps, then, the problem is not with the idealism of the Bush administration per se, but with the incompleteness of that idealism. The occasional bouts of unilateralist toughness might seem far less onerous to friends and allies if the idealistic, value-based impulses of the administration's world view were more in evidence in its policies. A rejection of the badly flawed Kyoto Protocol, for example, would have gone down a lot better if it had been combined with an ambitious (and, from the standpoint of hard-headed US national interests, urgently needed) initiative on renewable energy. A recognition that the International Criminal Court was coming into being without careful thought about its implications could perhaps have been communicated more delicately than with threats to abandon allies in the midst of a crucial Bosnia peacekeeping mission. The ultimate US offer to increase foreign aid in exchange for better governance in developing countries could have been the lead US position, not the fallback.

[53] Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, 'Faux realism', *Foreign Policy*, 125r, July–Aug. 2001.



INTA79_3_02_Mazarr 521 5/13/03, 11:38

There may be no getting around the essential contradictions required of US foreign policy in an age when America is the leading power, when a new global community of trading democracies is emerging, and yet when a number of distinctly old-style threats to the peace remain very much in evidence. But Washington could do more to smooth the edges of those contradictions, to bring more notice to the idealism and hopefulness of US policy. Achieving that goal is the long-term foundation for American national security in the post-realist age, and it ought to be appreciated as such.