

# The Deal: The Balance of Power, Military Strength, and Liberal Internationalism in the Bush National Security Strategy

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The Bush National Security Strategy, even as it calls for “a balance of power that favors freedom,” in truth rejects a balance of power approach to international order. It foresees instead the cooperation of all Great Powers under American leadership in furtherance of a common agenda imagined to be founded in universal values. Such rejection of a genuine “balance of power” approach represents a coherent evolution from America’s long tradition of foreign policy thought. Emerging from its founding tradition of separation, U.S. strategic thought was influenced both by Theodore Roosevelt’s advocacy of military strength in the service of good and Woodrow Wilson’s ideological conviction that American engagement in the world could be made conditional on the pursuit of global reform in line with an idealized conception of American values and practices. The conviction that this notional “deal” is still valid provides this administration’s ideological bedrock. The Bush worldview should not be seen as a radically new phenomenon, but as a logical outgrowth from the American foreign policy tradition.

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To some extent all politicians must practice the art of high-functioning self-contradiction, or at least its appearance. The foreign policy of George W. Bush has served to illustrate this on the grandest of scales. Though, by some lights, it has represented the apotheosis of unilateral, national-interest power politics, Bush’s foreign policy has simultaneously embodied some of the most internationally engaged and politically universalistic impulses of the American tradition, impulses descended in no small part from the bloodline of liberal internationalism. The purpose of this short article is twofold. First, to offer one interpretation of why this administration has uncompromisingly considered itself justified in pursuing a course in foreign policy regarded as problematic by a diverse array of critical analysts. Second, to connect the central ideological points of the Bush strategy to a historical portrait of evolution in American foreign policy thought over the long term. In so doing, this piece focuses specifically on two thinker-statesmen whose legacies have profoundly affected the development of today’s policy’s ideological premises: Theodore Roosevelt (TR) and Woodrow Wilson.

This author would seek to claim only limited expertise in advanced theory as it pertains to foreign-policy-making. Hence, in as much as such an enquiry as this inevitably makes theoretical assumptions which demand clarification, they

can be stated briefly and in simple terms. They are: that the avowed strategy of the administration bears passable resemblance to the strategy actually pursued (i.e., there is little in the way of conspiratorial divergence between professed and actual intent); that ideology—that is, the visionary intellectual simplifications via which policy makers interpret the environment in which their nation operates—matters in the study of foreign policy; and that, at the national level, the ideas of the past affect the development of ideas in the present. There is inadequate space for elaborate development of these premises here, but they will not, in all likelihood, seem outrageous suppositions to most readers. To those who are doubters regarding any or all of these points, however, I can only offer here the hope that the argument which follows may serve as an effort at persuasion through example.

### **The Vision Thing: Bush's National Security Strategy**

#### *A Balance of Power That Favors Freedom*

The key document in which the Bush administration set out its vision of American relations with the world was the National Security Strategy (NSS) (National Security Council 2002). Received with a blaze of media interest on its release, much attention focused on a single word, which was to become the document's public signature: pre-emption. The United States, the document asserted, needed to do everything in its power to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) via rogue states and to disrupt the operation of terrorist groups seeking to acquire them. If necessary, this would include pre-emptive military action. Owing to widespread suspicion that the administration intended to go after Saddam Hussein's head, "pre-emption" was widely perceived as the cornerstone of new administration policy. Indeed, though the term itself was used few times in the NSS, and not emphasized in the introduction or conclusion, its proclamation was widely depicted as a revolutionary policy shift, overturning the base platform of international order and potentially inaugurating a new era of unilateral American militarism.

Yet despite the rhetorical tornado which arose in response to the "doctrine of pre-emption," it was clear both from the NSS itself, and accompanying texts published by Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell, that a different point of emphasis was envisaged initially, at least by some. This was the concept of "a balance of power that favors freedom." That this was the intended focus of the document can be inferred from the use of the phrase twice in the president's foreword, as well as several times in opening paragraphs of sections. It was also the headline of the article and lecture by Rice accompanying the Strategy's launch (Rice 2002). These facts are important not merely as a diverting retrospective on the vagaries of media coverage; if we grant the concept due attention, the "balance of power that favors freedom" in fact gives a broader insight into the ideological "worldview" of the administration than the narrower issue of pre-emptive war.

Before the 9/11 attacks, a Bush presidency had been expected to place new emphasis on the concept of "national interest," turning renewed attention to Great-Power politics and perhaps the rise of China. Such impressions were fed by Rice's noted *Foreign Affairs* article during the campaign of 2000 (Rice 2000), which defended interest as a basis for policy and spoke dismissively of such ideas as "nation-building" and "the international community." Whatever its initial plans may have been, however, the terrorist outrages of September 2001 profoundly affected the administration's focus. The problems of terrorism and WMD assumed a more urgent character. In addition, moral values gained new relevance to the foreign policy debate: post-Cold War shades of grey gave way to

a more striking black and white tableau, in which freedom's champions were confronted by Islamist angels of death. In this context, primary focus on Great Powers vying for advantage in the state system came to seem, for a while at least, like a strategic museum piece; resembling a discourse on optimal horse cavalry formation after the emergence of the advanced machine gun. Instead, America's enemies of priority appeared to be the planners, executors, and ideologists of terrorism and the "evil" states—none "Great Powers" by any usual definition—who combined weapons programs with terrorist sympathies.

The NSS, which emerged from this period of urgent adaptation, contained several important planks. First, it underlined the perceived importance of tackling the newly urgent and intertwined threats of terrorism and WMD proliferation via rogue regimes. Second, it reaffirmed forcefully the American government's belief in the universal righteousness of certain values and practices, broadly encompassing both democratic liberty and economic liberalism, and restated America's commitment to their universal realization. Third, it asserted that there was unprecedented potential for all of the Great Powers in the international system to cooperate to achieve progress in advancing such goals. The first point—which encompassed the declaration as explicit policy of what had previously only been implicit, namely that the nation reserved the right to strike at enemies pre-emptively—received, perhaps understandably, most attention in the public debate. Yet in understanding the comprehensive thrust of administration strategy, the other two points merit equal attention.

The NSS made it clear that the administration premised its policy on the conviction that certain values were universally valid and could form the basis of new cooperation with other powers—cooperation which would be vital to the long-term success of any effort to defeat threats to world order. Many states, in the administration's view, such as most of those in Europe, were already closely aligned with the values and practices the United States wished to promote. Others, meanwhile, such as Russia and China, might not be there yet, but were at least, it was imagined, moving towards them. The Strategy portrayed American victory in the Cold War as a watershed moment, after which only one model of political organization remained functional and legitimate:

The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise. ...People everywhere want to be able to speak freely; choose who will govern them; worship as they please; educate their children—male and female—own property; and enjoy the benefits of their labor. Those values of freedom are right and true for every person in every society—and a duty of protecting these values against their enemies is the common calling of freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages. (National Security Council 2002: foreword)

This awakening of the peoples of the world to their common desires, combined with the common threats now so clearly presented by terrorism and weapons proliferation, ought, it was suggested, to lay the basis in terms of common interest for cooperation between all the world's Great Powers. It should be noted, however, that a parallel assumption was ever-present throughout the document: that progress towards a cooperative agenda would rest on the embrace by other powers of those values and practices identified as good by the administration—essentially an idealized version of values America was assumed already to embody. It was nowhere anticipated that movement or compromise would be necessary on America's part to forge consensus. Likewise, though "common interests" would mandate cooperation to address the threats posed by terrorism and WMD, it was taken as the assumed prerogative of the United States to

identify the nature of such “common interests” and to interpret what their pursuit required in the way of specific policy. Thus, in practice, the pursuit of common interests would amount to an expectation that others should fall in line with American identification of such ends and prescriptions for their attainment. Only with these sizeable assumptions in the bag was the Bush Strategy able to make its central proposition that all Great Powers could be united by common desires, providing the basis for concert.

In her article accompanying the NSS, Rice played down the significance of the “pre-emption doctrine” (Rice 2002:3). The centerpiece, she outlined, was instead the administration’s conviction that the argument between “realists” and “idealists” in terms of U.S. policy was irrelevant: “In real life, power and values are married completely.” That is to say, living up to the demands of universal values and fulfilling America’s national interests amounted in practice to the same thing, or at least to complementary goals. With the end of the Cold War, the world was moving inexorably towards the universal values of which America served as guardian; and with the fights against terror and WMD proliferation to the fore, the interests of the Great Powers coincided. Thus:

This confluence of common interests and increasingly common values creates a moment of enormous opportunities. Instead of repeating the historic pattern where great power rivalry exacerbates local conflicts, we can use great power cooperation to solve local conflicts... Great power cooperation also creates an opportunity for multilateral institutions to prove their worth... And great power cooperation can be the basis for moving forward on problems that require multilateral solutions—from terror to the environment. (Rice 2002:5)

At the beginning of 2004, amid the ideological smoke and fumes arising from the occupation of Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell took to the pages of *Foreign Affairs* with the aim of clarifying what he took to be the key points of the NSS, and rebutting the charge that the United States was hostile to the principle of international cooperation (Powell 2004). First, he played down the significance of pre-emption in the clearest terms yet: “As to being central, it isn’t,” he insisted. “The discussion of pre-emption in the NSS takes up just two sentences in one of the document’s eight sections.” Then, like Bush and Rice before him, he insistently maintained that the strategic vision of the administration was not of American unilateralism but of concert between the Great Powers based on common values and common interests. The president, he noted, had declared in the NSS that, today, for the first time, all the Great Powers could be on the same side:

This development is not just good news; it is revolutionary news... An insight of the Enlightenment and a deep belief of the American Founders—that politics need not always be a zero-sum competition—has at last been adopted by enough people worldwide to promise a qualitative difference in the character of international relations. If, instead of wasting lives and treasure by opposing each other as in the past, today’s powers can pull in the same direction to solve problems common to all, we will begin to redeem history from much human folly. (Powell 2004)

From the perspective of many analysts all this amounted to mere chatter distracting from the one true point of importance: America’s assertion of a right to wage unilateral pre-emptive war. The genuine significance of pre-emption notwithstanding, however, if one is disposed to take the efforts of political actors to explain their own policies at all seriously, then one must see the broader themes raised by Bush, Rice, and Powell as illuminating of the administration’s ideological self-perception. At the very least, they clearly tell us how the administration wished to be seen. As portrayed in its own terms, its headline strategy was not the overthrow of

accepted order in favor of militant American unilateralism. Rather, it saw itself as issuing a clarion call for the cooperation of all the Great Powers, guided by common values, fighting common threats, in defense of common interests. To be sure, it was rather transparent that under this notionally cooperative order the commonality of the interests and the universality of the values in question were to be decided at America's discretion, under the label of "leadership." Nevertheless, if one is to understand a strategy, one must appreciate how its proponents justify it, to themselves and to the people they seek to mobilize.

To that end, there is one feature of the strategy's central concept—the "balance of power that favors freedom"—which is perhaps both more important to note and yet in a way more obvious than any other: the fact that, analyzed under the terms of usual international relations discourse, the term does not really describe a "balance of power" at all. Rather it is superficially Realist-sounding terminology for a decidedly liberal notion: the coalition of all major powers in furtherance of some notional common good.

Connected to this, and also of great significance, is the Strategy's frank statement that the cooperative system it envisions must exist under conditions of overwhelming and perpetual strategic superiority on the part of the United States. Hence Rice's frank declaration that:

To support all these means of defending the peace, the United States will build and maintain 21st century military forces that are beyond challenge. We will seek to dissuade any potential adversary from pursuing a military build-up in the hope of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States and our allies.  
(Rice 2002)

Given that the NSS supposed that all the Great Powers would be America's "allies," this might not seem such a bold aim. However, it is quite evident that, notwithstanding some mild encouragement for friendly countries such as the Europeans to increase their strength, the Strategy entails the United States remaining alone at the pinnacle of military strength. Such assumed military primacy underlies all the other provisions of the strategy, not least the United States' place at the head of the imagined concert of all powers rather than simply as a coequal member. In this regard, the NSS represents a charter for unchallengeable military hegemony on the part of the United States, albeit justified by reference to a supposedly shared program of values and interests.

Most international relations (IR) theories concerned with power balancing would suggest that such a vision for the future—universal Great-Power cooperation under the auspices of American hegemonic power—is ideologically confused and impracticable. The Bush strategy seems to suggest that common interests and values will overcome any temptation other powers have to balance against America. Yet the disputatious nature of the administration's relations with most other powers throughout the implementation of its policy illustrates the vulnerability of any plan based on such an assumption.

In the case of its invasion and occupation of Iraq, for example, the United States appealed to arguments which suggested its actions, by addressing a real threat centering on WMD and terrorism, furthered the common interest of all the Great Powers. In practice, however, almost all those powers lined up to criticize and obstruct American efforts to assemble a coalition for invasion. This highlighted an age-old, perhaps inherent, problem at the heart of any agenda based on the pursuit of assumedly common interests: that national interests, while they may be asserted, in the language of generalities, to be common, cannot be defined with sufficient objectivity to guarantee agreement on policy in concrete cases. Hence a nation may find itself unilaterally acting to defend, as it argues it, the interests of other powers, through actions which those very same powers themselves oppose.

As U.S. policy twisted itself into this precarious ideological poise, the Iraq debate inevitably became concentrated not on the shared values and interests of all nations but on the undesirable qualities of American hegemony.

The NSS makes clear the administration's view that that:

In exercising our leadership, we will respect the values, judgments, and interests of our friends and partners. Still, we will be prepared to act apart when our interests and unique responsibilities require. When we disagree on particulars, we will explain forthrightly the grounds for our concerns and strive to forge viable alternatives. We will not allow such disagreements to obscure our determination to secure together, with our allies and friends, our shared fundamental interests and values. (National Security Council 2002:31)

This thinking implies ideas somewhat in tension: common interests are supposed to bring the Great Powers together, but it is conceded that they may nevertheless not agree on the "particulars" of where their interests direct them. In such cases, the United States reserves the right to act alone, without approval, justified by its "unique responsibilities": in effect, to act to defend the common interest even when others do not agree that their interests will be served by American actions.

Taken as a whole, the Bush NSS represents an updated variant of a strand with a long tradition in American internationalist thinking: an ideological creed which states that the balance of power, rather than being a fixture in the operation of the international system, can be abolished through successful appeal to common values and common interests. With this strategic outlook as the embedded compass of his foreign policy, no one can justly attribute to George W. Bush his father's confessed inability to do "the vision thing." Indeed, as time has passed and problems have mounted, the president's ideological journey has been ever more determinedly towards the principles of an idealist grand strategy. In his second inaugural address of January 2006, an updated version of the NSS for his second term, the theme of securing America's interests, and the world's, through the universalization of liberal values emerged more dominant than even before (Bush 2005; National Security Council 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Once the president had become convinced, he was not to be shaken by apparent international disunity. According to the ideological perspective he embraced, the grand coalition would require a leader, and the natural occupier of that role was America. With interests ultimately common and American values universally righteous, superficial disagreements among nations were just that: superficial; in time, strong leadership would produce willing followers. As Bob Woodward, the outsider who had closest access to the administration, put it:

When it came to fighting terrorism, the president...wanted world leaders to equate their national interests with American interests. Some would go along with him when their interests and goals coincided roughly with his, but go their own way when they did not. Bush didn't like that when it happened and at times he took it personally. (Woodward 2003:327)

### **Roosevelt, Wilson, and the American Internationalist Tradition**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States was emerging from a foreign policy tradition of detachment from non-American affairs. Founded as

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher Layne (2006) also highlights the hegemonic, and hence to his mind unduly interventionist, drift of post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy, attributing it in part to similar historical ideological factors to those one which I base my own arguments.

a unified nation to exclude the European “balance of power” from North America, the United States had subsequently broadened the scope of its foreign policy to erect an ideological wall between the Americas and Europe, positing separate systems of values and interests. The Monroe Doctrine had warned European powers that America would resist interference in the politics of post-colonial states to its south. It also upheld as sacrosanct the Washington–Jefferson principle that the United States should reciprocally shun political and military entanglements in Europe. With the occasional inevitable bump and inconsistency in the practice, the United States made it through the nineteenth century with this ideological framework intact.

In the dying years of that century, however, a newly outward-looking sentiment swept over U.S. politics, manifested in a surge in explicitly imperialist thought. In 1898, the United States dealt the deathblow to the Spanish empire, by means of a war which left it in possession of Cuba (temporarily), Puerto Rico, Guam, and, more substantially, the Philippines. The horrors and inconveniences of a nasty insurgency against American control in the latter territory soon combined with the long-standing American ideological hostility to colonialism to render the idea of a formal American empire a political pipe dream. Nevertheless, 1898 marked the irrevocable emergence of the United States onto the global stage as a major world power, both in its own eyes and those of others. What remained to be decided was the role it would play, and how it would reconcile its new status with the dominant ideological tradition of hemispheric separation.

*The TR Way: Military Power, National Greatness, and the Progress of “Civilization”<sup>2</sup>*

The politician, soon to be statesman, who inherited responsibility for this transitional moment was TR, who assumed office in the autumn of 1901 following the assassination of William McKinley. The striking difference between TR—who had begun his life in national politics a whole-hearted member of the imperialist tendency—and his predecessors lay in his determination to go beyond the reactive posture and parochial triviality which had dominated the bulk of nineteenth century foreign policy. It was his fervent desire that the United States should be an active power, playing a world role befitting its increasingly mighty capabilities. He was also different from his predecessors in the value he attributed to developing a substantial peacetime military establishment. Indeed, taken as a whole, one might fairly observe that his political career amounted to an extended sermon on the importance of American military strength.

Theodore Roosevelt viewed international life as a sort of grand test-cum-opportunity for able nations to win a place in history. In the past, he thought, the mightiest and best nations had earned posterity’s regard through great achievement on the world stage, in the service of what he unselfconsciously termed “civilization.” The United States had by his time, he thought, come to the moment where it could choose to be such a nation. Nations blessed with the resources and accomplishments of the United States, he feared and warned, were apt to become soft, concerning themselves with narrow self-interest and the accumulation of mere treasure, the baubles of wealth. Unless it retained the

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<sup>2</sup>The observations I make on TR, as with the subsequent section on Wilson, amount to a brief summary of longer and more detailed analysis, supported by extensive quotation, in my as yet unpublished doctoral thesis. This article being by necessity brief, these sections on TR and Wilson are not substantially footnoted in the way that the same material might be in a longer and more detailed piece. Brevity has no doubt done some violence to historical nuances, but with the compensation, I hope, of enabling some enlightening exposition and comparison. Biographical information on Roosevelt originated mainly, in the first instance, with Edmund Morris (2001a,b) and my direct analysis of his thinking chiefly from Theodore Roosevelt (2003, 2004), supplemented by Nathan Miller (1994), Kathleen Dalton (2002), Howard K. Beale (1956), Frederick W. Marks (1979), and John Milton Cooper (1983).

“soldierly virtues,” unless it built up a military apparatus befitting a world power and developed the national character to make use of it when called upon, America would cruise toward destruction at the hands of stronger powers, and consequently into purposeless historical oblivion.

It was the desperate desire to avoid this fate, and to exhort his countrymen to mobilize to avoid it, which moved TR’s career and presidency. He was only ever partly successful, but he did succeed in making a difference. For one thing, he did manage to boost the nation’s military capacity, most especially that of his beloved navy. The extent to which America had upped its naval game was revealed most dramatically to other leaders after the fact, when, in a public relations triumph, he dispatched his “Great White Fleet” on a round-the-world voyage. While the United States was still leagues away from the levels of power and mobilization it would achieve later in the twentieth century, TR did use his “bully pulpit” to extract some stirrings of belief in the merits of military investment from a nation which had seemed uninterested, sometimes even pacifistically hostile, to such ideas for decades.

In the Americas, TR substantially expanded the scope of the Monroe Doctrine to secure U.S. primacy in the region. His “Roosevelt Corollary” declared that the United States would exercise a “police power” over its neighbors, ensuring their good behavior and fiscal rectitude. Thus the United States could act preventively to avert the occurrence of any legitimate justification for European creditor-states’ intervention, potentially a pretext for land-grabbing. This pronouncement would provide the ideological basis for multiple Latin American interventions, under several administrations, over subsequent decades.

The Roosevelt presidency also saw America involve itself more beyond its own geographical sphere. In an unprecedented venture for an American leader, TR took the initiative to oversee negotiations ending the Russo–Japanese War, earning himself a Nobel Peace Prize in the process. And in 1906, the United States participated in the Algeiras conference on foreign interests in Morocco, adding an American voice to the discussion of matters traditionally considered beyond its provenance. Such episodes by no means represented the destruction of the embedded American tradition of detachment from the non-American sphere of interests, but they did suggest something new both in America’s status and in the attitude of other powers to it.

It is not hard to identify the features of TR’s record which have generated the perception, in Henry Kissinger (1995) among others, that he was a hard-nosed Realist operating with a balance-of-power mindset. He connected national status with military strength and sought to increase it. He made use of growing U.S. strength to extend American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, and he could show steely resolve in disregarding the ethical niceties of respect for the sovereignty of weaker powers when chances arose further the U.S. interest.<sup>3</sup> In negotiating the deal between Russia and Japan he displayed a keen eye for national advantage in preserving a strategic balance in Asia. In entering into the Moroccan talks, he showed a nose for opportunities to raise America’s status, and made it apparent that he was interested in bringing the United States out of its international detachment and into the broader global system which had previously been left to the European powers. However, there is more to the picture than this, and those who would wish to tout TR as an American exemplar of pure *realpolitik* face insurmountable obstacles. On closer study one finds him

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<sup>3</sup>Most spectacularly in the case of Panama, when his administration colluded in that republic’s breakaway from Colombia to secure an isthmian canal deal. Instant U.S. recognition and the funds guaranteed by the canal treaty made a decisive difference to the separatist project’s prospects.

to be too much a moralist, and even too much a believer in “progressive” notions about the international arena to fit Realist billing.

For one thing, TR did not in reality subscribe to the view, attributed to him by Kissinger for one, that the ethics of the international arena and those of domestic politics and individual morality were separate. Quite the contrary: it was his explicit assertion that the moral standards incumbent upon the good nation and the good man were one and the same. He was also emphatic that he believed himself to be chiefly a moralist in his political thought, not a cold calculator of interest. His most prominent views, concerning the importance of military strength and a struggle for national greatness, were based on an ideology which emphasized forgoing material self-indulgence in favor of a striving ethic of martial values and self-improvement, aimed ultimately at a place in history. He saw this as a direct extension of his philosophy of the good life for an individual man, popularized in his writings as “the Strenuous Life.”

In his attitude to other powers, the appearance of “balance of power” thinking is perhaps more deceptive than it is illuminating. An approach to international relations genuinely founded in balance of power thinking involves an acceptance of the legitimate rival interests of other states, competing in the international system with one’s own, most likely perpetually. Though TR did make occasional remarks suggesting a limited respect for other nations’ assessment of their own interests, his ideological portfolio contains greater evidence of continuity from his background as a liberal sort of imperialist. He held strong ideas about the reality of progress both domestically and internationally and had an objectivist notion of “civilization” towards which nations, and the world, could and should move. His interference with Latin American nations was aimed, to be sure, both at warning off European security threats and at opening up economic opportunities for the United States. But it was also, in its intentions at least, a program of imposed reform, societal uplift, and liberation.

Theodore Roosevelt believed that the interests of the nations of the Americas, if properly interpreted, were identical, and that they would be furthered by the policies he pursued. Though riding roughshod at times over what many citizens of the subject states themselves thought of as their national interests, TR never conceived of himself as imposing a self-interested U.S. agenda. Rather, he thought of himself as, and persuaded many people in the United States that he was, serving the common interest by educating Latin nations in the benefits of proper government, furthering “civilization” in the process. Hence, a sort of unilateral and hegemonic intrusiveness was justified ideologically as service of the common interest, into which the United States, because of its advanced state, had insight beyond the capacity of others.

This peculiarly objectivist and unilateral notion of “common interest” could take shape in U.S. thinking in part because TR assumed, along with many other American “progressives,” including Woodrow Wilson, that a truly free nation would by definition choose to become a certain kind of society, based on the adoption of at least the most fundamental of American principles. Under such an outlook, it might be admitted in theory that free societies could contain many variations, but these were necessarily assumed to be superficial. On the foundational issues of politics they could be expected to share the same principles and practices, which could pave the way in turn for a network of essentially harmonious interests in the international system. Thus, liberty was not, from the progressive American perspective, merely a condition or process allowing for any number of developmental paths. Rather, liberty was taken to contain within itself a fixed outcome, or at least narrow parameters limiting acceptable outcomes within which free nations would develop. To put it more pithily, it was assumed by American thinkers that *liberty* for a state must produce *liberalism within* that state, for such was “progress.” If for any reason it did not, then it was axiomatic

that the nation in question had not truly become “free,” opening the door to any amount of intervention justified by reference to liberation.

The broader global canvas of TR’s thought also bore the tint of progressivism. While he was eminently sober in seeing that the day of war’s abolition was far from imminent, he did not believe the international system was fixed in its mode of operation. He believed it was open to change, albeit only over time, and that change should be oriented towards the reduction of warfare as a method of practicing international politics between the powers. Though he was always suspicious of “paper agreements” as guarantors of peace, his administration did participate in efforts at The Hague to increase the legal architecture providing for arbitration to settle international disputes. The chief reason for his circumspection regarding such treaties was his sense, ultimately spectacularly proven correct of course, that the world’s major powers were not yet ready to give up war as a tool of advantage.

By the time the First World War broke out, with its revolutionizing consequences for the international order, TR had already been out of office for over five years. Nevertheless, he was no subscriber to the view that a president’s predecessors should mute their views. After a brief wobble at the outset, he became one of the earliest converts to the view that American intervention against Germany was essential. In the years before U.S. war entry in 1917, he battered Wilson’s administration with charges of pacifism, cowardice, and buffoonery for its failure to take up arms in what he saw as the defense of right against wrong.

Theodore Roosevelt’s reasons for wanting Germany defeated by American arms were not to be explained simply by reference to the motive, which Realism might project onto him, of “maintaining a balance of power in Europe.” Certainly he was aware that a victorious Germany, hegemonic in Europe, would signal nothing good for the United States. Wilson was equally concerned about that strategic angle, though few would accuse him of “Realist” tendencies. Alongside such concerns, however, TR identified Germany, most especially due to its invasion and harsh occupation of Belgium, as having breached the standards he set for “civilized” conduct. The war, he was vocal in observing, was a fight to defend civilization—not so very far from Wilson’s claim that it was a war to make the world “safe for democracy,” a claim of which TR disapproved only to the extent he suspected Wilson of speaking without full intent to back up words with deeds.

Roosevelt died with unexpected suddenness in early 1919, aged only 60, and did not live to see the full debate within America over post-war order and the League of Nations. However, in his discussion of the subject during the final years of his life, it is striking that the international structures he advocated were not at all dissimilar to those Wilson in fact sought to negotiate. He suggested that the only way to secure lasting peace would be to assemble a standing coalition of the world’s greatest powers to resist any assault on the peace by a nation seeking unjustly to aggrandize itself. In its essentials, this proposal bore resemblance to the concept behind the League: an alliance of all in defense of the peace.

Roosevelt’s chief area of divergence from Wilson’s vision was not the desirability of international cooperation but the role of arms. As already outlined, TR regarded military strength as ethical as well as strategic in its benefits, and thus shared few of the concerns of other American statesmen regarding the dangers of permanent military establishments. In addition, his greatest fear for the post-war period was that a misguided impulse to disarmament would render the compliant “good” nations of the world defenseless, while leaving the most noxious self-aggrandizing belligerents armed and dangerous. On this basis TR was inclined to dismiss visions of widespread disarmament from post-war planning. In their place he wanted to see a permanent commitment from all the world’s “civilized” nations (i.e., the United States and its allies) to retain their joint capacity to check any threat. The security of his preferred new order would rest

on the presence of arms in the service of civilization, not on an effort to weaken all powers, civilized and barbarous alike. He believed that the world could move towards a more cooperative, less violent order based on common interests, heavily influenced by the United States, which could show the way to civilization. But he was quite sure that only overwhelming military might could ultimately be relied upon to uphold such a system, and the more of that might that could lie in American hands the better.

*Woodrow Wilson: American Internationalism, Universal Values, and "The Deal"*<sup>4</sup>

Woodrow Wilson was a contrasting figure to TR, from his starchier, more academic appearance to his faith in international disarmament, institutionalism, and the determining power of moral force. Certainly, he has been passed down to us through literature as a sort of human counterpoint to Roosevelt's bullish will-to-power. In truth, however, there are similarities between their ideas at least as important as their differences, and only by understanding their combined influence can we hope to understand American internationalism as it unfolded after their time.

Between his inauguration in 1913 and American embroilment in World War I, the main arena for Wilson's foreign policy, like that of his predecessors, was Latin America. Critical of the "dollar diplomacy" practiced by his predecessor William Taft, he defined his regional agenda by, in his terms, prioritizing "human rights" over "property rights." This did not, however, mean curtailing the interventionism pioneered by TR; in fact, it meant its escalation. During the first years of his presidency, Wilson oversaw the extension of U.S. control over state affairs in Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic, as well as a lengthy and multi-faceted entanglement in the revolutionary civil conflict in Mexico. In all of these cases, especially the largest and most difficult just across the border, Wilson managed to sustain a somewhat tortured ideological edifice whereby his interventions did not truly amount to interference on the grounds that all he sought was to provide the preconditions for the nations in question to decide their own destinies. This was in essence a more developed version of TR's idea that all the states in the region had a common interest in progressive development towards what the American government conceived as political and economic liberty. Based on the assumption that the interests of other states were indistinguishable from those of the United States, and that civilizational progress involved predetermined outcomes, intervention could somewhat paradoxically be claimed to further self-government and independence in subject nations.

The grander, more global features of Wilson's foreign policy arose from opportunities presented by the Great War. When it first broke out, war seemed to do little to break down ideological taboos against U.S. involvement in European affairs. Indeed, the conflict appeared to confirm American prejudices about the convoluted, self-interested, and dangerously unstable nature of the European order. As the war's rampant destruction progressed, however, it became apparent both that it might draw the United States in inexorably and that its implications for world order might present an opportunity for global reform which grabbed the imagination of internationally minded Americans.

There were manifold mutually reinforcing considerations justifying U.S. war entry, which eventually came in the spring of 1917. Legally and politically, the spark was German approval of unrestricted submarine attacks on American ship-

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<sup>4</sup>My chief primary sources for the representations of Wilson's ideas which follow are drawn from Woodrow Wilson (2002). The chief secondary sources on which I have relied are Ambrosius (1987, 2002), Buehrig (1955, 1957), Pierce (2003), Notter (1937), Link (1971), Clements (1992), Bell (1972), and Dawley (2003).

ping. In the bigger strategic picture, Wilson and his advisers had become concerned that an all-too plausible German triumph would produce a dangerous enemy, bestriding Europe, with which America would later be compelled to cross swords under less advantageous circumstances. On top of these more cold-blooded calculations, there was an ideological argument that the nature of the German state, a *de facto* military autocracy, represented a threat to civilized values and hopes for international progress. If Germany were victorious, the principle of “might makes right” would govern international affairs, with nations obliged to pursue narrow national interests in an almost rule-free environment. If Germany were defeated, however, it seemed that the other powers of Europe, chastened by war, might be willing to submit to the guidance of the United States in instituting a more enlightened and cooperative order. Within this new order, all powers would identify their common interest in preserving the peace, in effect forming an alliance of all in defense of all to put down future aggressive threats to international peace.

If such an order were created, it would allow the United States to engage with the world in a way it had never done before, for two reasons. The first was that, as Wilson noted on many occasions, it was quite certain that the United States would be the leading nation in the new order: its financial strength and political capital at war’s end would be such as to ensure American primacy, and hence a comforting degree of control over the process. Second, the ideological taboo against U.S. entanglement with Europe arose from the premise that Europe (and the rest of the world controlled by Europe) and the Americas operated in spheres of total separateness when it came to both interests and values. Europe operated on a “balance of power,” a degenerate concept of order excluded from the Americas and incompatible with any successful U.S. policy. If the European system of order were destroyed, however, and a cooperative system based on commonality, rather than competition, of interests were established in its place, then the root cause of ideological U.S. resistance to engagement would be removed, and a new internationalism could be born. The traditional prohibition against entangling and permanent alliances with Europeans had been based, he argued, on the assumption that these would be limited alliances within a balance of power game incompatible with America’s values and interests. The new order, on the other hand, would be based on an alliance of all powers in a cooperative order based on American principles. Hence this new alliance would not be entangling, but liberating, and America had a positive duty to enter into it.

This Wilsonian vision’s feasibility rested on a crucial link in Wilson’s chain of reasoning as to why a more cooperative order would become newly possible after the war: his conviction that liberal democratic values and practices were about to be universalized. Wilson had long drawn an ideological distinction between governments and “peoples.” The peoples of the world, he believed, had been steadily progressing towards greater understanding of one another, a collective sense that their interests were more in common than they were conflicting. Governments, however, were not always representative of their nations’ peoples, and the true interest of a nation was what was in the interests of its people, not simply what its government happened to declare the national interest to be. This distinction allowed Wilson to believe he made perfect sense when he accused other governments, at times, of failing to act in their own proper national interests.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>This Wilsonian claim of special insight into the will of peoples was not something entirely confined to dealings with autocrats. In the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, Wilson caused a diplomatic incident by accusing Italian leaders, in laying claim to the disputed port of Fiume, of failing to represent their own people’s views properly.

One of Wilson's absolute preconditions for the ending of the war, and later for German participation in the League, was that the Kaiser be deposed and a system of liberal self-government instituted. The war having been fought to "make the world safe for democracy," Wilson imagined that the states of Europe, old as well as new, would be self-governing nations on a track towards liberality and democracy. The war, he believed, had been caused by the self-centered, misguided policies of autocratic powers operating within the inadequacies of the balance of power system. With free peoples thus placed in charge of their states, the drives which had led Germany to launch war would no longer be in place. Hence the world's major powers could now be relied upon to correctly perceive their common interest in peace and to cooperate in its preservation through the new international architecture of the League. Wilson never doubted that the values and practices relevant to self-government, like the "human rights" he had claimed to further in Latin America, were in origin not American but universal. Hence it was morally uncomplicated for him to couple his agenda for world peace with a belief in the need for international uniformity on certain basic political principles.

The insight that Wilson's vision of the new world order amounted to an internationalization of the Monroe Doctrine was one of which he himself was conscious, though believing as he did that he had shaped Monroe into a more liberal and mutually congenial system of order, he did not see negative connotations in that. In his conception the Doctrine was a cooperative system whereby, instead of operating with an internecine balance of power, the states of the Americas cooperated under benign U.S. leadership and oversight. Within that framework, states could develop progressively towards U.S. standards of self-government and freedom. Should any government appear inclined to buck that system, it could be attributed to some defect in its interpretation of its own interests, and possibly a defect in its political system. Thus, in serious cases, intervention could justly take place, in the common interest, to restore order.<sup>6</sup>

The global order proposed by Wilson after World War I was conceptually very similar. All nations were supposed to extend a mutual guarantee of security to one another, and a cooperative order would ensue, made possible by the universalization of appropriate forms of government. Contained within this projected order was the assumption that there would not be legitimate discord over genuine clashes of national interest. All had common interests at a fundamental level, so long as they were properly interpreted. This was assumed to be a one-way process: the United States would be in a position of primacy and might judge that others had failed to meet their international obligations or interpret their interests correctly, but the prospect was not seriously entertained that the United States might, justly or unjustly, be accused of the same thing. When Wilson's domestic critics raised fears over the power of international institutions to make judgments on the United States, he endeavored to cast them as unpatriotic for implicitly hypothesizing that the United States might find itself in breach of any just international standard. This certainty that America would always find itself on the side of the angels in matters of international law and ethics arose because Wilsonianism regarded putative new international standards as a mere internationalization of existing American ones. Wilson never seemed concerned that by virtue of the process of internationalization the United States would lose the ability to decide its own cases with legitimacy.

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<sup>6</sup>Indeed, prior to his foray into matters of global order, Wilson had attempted to turn the Monroe Doctrine into a more formal and superficially mutual arrangement via a "Pan-American Pact" universally guaranteeing security and sovereignty in the region. This plan never came to fruition, but he later saw it as the blueprint for the League.

Wilson laid the framework for an ideological transition on the part of American society from an attitude of separateness from the non-American world to one of global international entanglement. But, crucially, he did not achieve this by acquiring American popular acceptance, or even acceptance within his own mind, for the idea of the United States entering the world system as it had actually existed at any previous time. An international order based on a competitive balance of power in Europe remained anathema to Wilson and the political culture of U.S. foreign policy. What Wilson did achieve was a surge in American internationalism based on a kind of imagined “deal.” The United States would set aside its taboos concerning global entanglements, but this would be conditional on the reform of the international order in line with American values and practices. The balance of power, which had previously prohibited U.S. involvement, would be abolished and replaced with a cooperative order founded in common interest, and this would occur under U.S. leadership. Yet for this order to function, nations needed to operate on the principles of liberal self-government. Hence, at the same time as the United States committed itself to international engagement, it also committed itself to the creation and preservation of a new kind of international order which in turn depended on other societies functioning in “appropriate” ways domestically. In coming out of its ideology of separation through Wilsonianism, America was thus taking on a potentially bottomless set of concerns and responsibilities beyond its own borders and within those of other nations.

Wilson’s own career ended in spectacular setback and disappointment, as the Senate used concerns over collective security’s burdens to justify turning down the League treaty. Throughout his ultimately doomed efforts to justify the commitments to which he wished the United States to subscribe, Wilson emphasized one point with which TR would never have agreed: he believed the likelihood of needing actual force to preserve world order was negligible, and a standing military force of any great size was not part of his plan. Instead, he had faith that the simple “moral force” of a collective mutual guarantee would push nations into peaceful dispute resolution. Despite the charges TR sometimes leveled early in the war, Wilson was not a pacifist—his calls for “force, force to the utmost, force without stint or limit” in response to the German threat amply demonstrate that. But he never saw it as part of his vision that the United States’ leadership of the world, or the new American-built order, should rest on mighty establishments of arms.

### TR, WW, and GWB

The potential intellectual links between these brief historical portraits and present policies have in all likelihood begun to take shape in readers’ minds even before being drawn explicitly in this final section. George Bush’s “balance of power that favors freedom,” being quite misleadingly named, rejects the idea that the world might be organized by the competitive balancing of nations, each nation accepted as having equally legitimate interests of its own devising. Rather, it foresees a system where all the major powers will be in concert, pursuing a set of common interests under a U.S. leadership resting in part on military hegemony. Intertwined with this agenda of common interests, there is an intimately connected agenda positing universal values, towards which it is imagined all other societies must progress if they are not to be considered aberrant.

Within this strategy we see prominent traces of ideological inheritance from America’s particular internationalist tradition. We see this most fundamentally in the administration’s assumption that “the deal” implicitly posited by Wilsonianism remains valid. This means its strategic perspective starts from the conviction, derived from Wilson’s method of bridging the gap between America’s ideological

past and its modern global role, that the United States can make its willingness to adopt an engaged international policy conditional on its entitlement to reform the world in line with its own values and practices.

The Bush administration demands that the world's major powers relate on a cooperative basis under U.S. leadership, not a competitive one of power balancing. It insists that all the powers have common interests, as in the case of fighting terrorism, but crucially insists that America's special insights into what those common interests require entitle it to act in their furtherance with or without the consent of other powers. This provides for a peculiar ideological posture which is highly unilateral in the freedom of action assumed by the United States, but which nevertheless sees U.S. action as legitimated by reference to the good of the world, and the collective interests of all.

The Wilsonian philosophy of the liberal democratic peace, with its implication that American ideas of political liberty and democracy must be implemented universally, is one which the administration has embraced ever tighter over time. It attributes its problems with hostile regimes not to any genuine, fundamental clash of national interests but to the illegitimacy of the governments in question. In a way strikingly similar to Wilson, Bush has based his policy on the conviction that the "peoples" of other nations embrace the agenda of common interests and universal values which form the basis of U.S. world leadership.<sup>7</sup> If only all peoples can be liberated from the undemocratic and illiberal regimes which warp the foreign policy of their nations, it is imagined, then they can be absorbed into the cooperative, American-led international system.

This Wilsonian inheritance has profound policy implications. It makes the administration prone to acting unilaterally, yet with all the strident righteousness that comes from firm belief that it is acting for the good of the world. It makes it impatient with other powers' objections that their interests are being trespassed upon, because policy is based on the idea that there is a common interest into which the United States has special insight and that other governments must be mistaken in their interpretation of their interests if they perceive a fundamental clash with U.S. policy. The Wilsonian inheritance also draws the United States into a commitment, moral and political, to monitoring and reforming the political structures within all the nations of the world, because it is convinced both that certain forms of political order are mandated by a universal civilized morality and that they are essential to the emergence and maintenance of a peaceful international order.

Most fundamentally, the Wilsonian inheritance has the same effect on the Bush administration as it has had on almost every administration since that of Wilson himself: it makes it impossible for the United States to adopt a policy that is internationalist without also being wedded to a radical agenda of global reform. Unlike states socialized early within a balance of power state system, and hence accustomed from the off to the rivalry of multiple states with incompatible interests, the history of the United States turned on the exclusion of the balance of power and its associated ways of thinking from debates about foreign affairs. When the United States finally did emerge from behind the ideological wall of detachment, it did so because Wilsonian ideology had made the case that America was not entering the international system as it already existed but that the world system and the powers within it were reforming to be in line with U.S. values and practices. Because the United States entered the world on these terms, the ideological assumption has remained fixedly in place, despite

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<sup>7</sup>For example, see Condoleezza Rice's testimony to the Senate that: "We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran... We do not have a problem with the Iranian people. We want the Iranian people to be free. Our problem is with the Iranian regime" (Washington Post 2006).

occasional efforts to displace it, that America can press demands on the world in terms of universal-values-based reforms as the “price” of America’s international engagement. This makes the political culture of U.S. foreign-policy-making highly resistant to most of what is usually thought of as “Realism” in IR.

The Wilsonian inheritance is not the full picture, which is why this article has chosen to highlight simultaneously the role and perspective of TR. In many ways it is the legacy of TR’s ideas which fills the gaps between straight Wilsonianism and the “Bushism” (for want of a better word) of today. Most obviously, the Bush strategy is premised on massive military superiority on the part of the United States, with a little help from allies, while TR’s model for the preservation of world order similarly involved the amassing of overwhelming physical force in the hands of “good” nations to deter the bad. Wilson, who feared the effects of long-term military establishments on domestic politics, and who had faith in the power of moral force alone to preserve the peace, would not have been comfortable with the Goliath-like national security state apparatus central to today’s planning. While the Cold War after World War II revived Wilsonian ideas about political universalism, it also saw them merged with TR-style ideas about the necessity of “backing right with might,” a legacy prominent today.

It is important, however, not to take on board without question a caricature of TR’s foreign policy which erroneously casts his “walk softly and carry a big stick” philosophy as synonymous with an amoral Realism. TR shared assumptions with Wilson concerning the legitimate pursuit of the common interest through unilateral U.S. action and had a highly morally charged ethic of international affairs setting it as the duty of the United States to earn greatness by striving to spread “civilization.” He also believed in progress towards a more cooperative and less violent international order, albeit one still grounded in military strength on the part of the good guys. In studying the example of this school of thought, we can see how it is that even those members of the Bush administration, such as Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, who cast themselves more as bullish nationalists than theologically pure neoconservatives, are not necessarily to be judged practitioners of amoral Realist power-politics. Rather, they are the modern standard-bearers for a morally charged, if decidedly chauvinistic, Rooseveltian ethos which says American strength is essential to world order, and which conflates the interests of the United States with those of civilization and the world.

If we wish to understand the policy perspective of America today, it is essential to understand its deepest assumptions and how they derive, in significant part, from the historical tradition of American internationalism. It is hoped that this essay has made some contribution to clarifying both. The Bush administration has been defined by its brusque, unilateral anti-diplomacy, yet also for its persistent calls for others to follow and its repeatedly disappointed expectation that they will. It has been notable for its assertion of the American interest, but also for placing universal political values and the quest for a comprehensive liberal democratic world peace at the heart of its policy. These apparent tensions make more sense when seen as the long-term ideological residue of America’s emergence from strategic detachment to world power status. This has meant that this administration, like many predecessor administrations and indeed the mainstream political culture of the nation, has tended to view unilateralism as compatible with serving the common interest, armed intervention in other nations’ domestic politics as compatible with furthering their freedom and independence, and unparalleled U.S. military armament as the cornerstone of a more peaceful world. Most fundamentally, American leaders see the engagement of the United States with international politics as conditional on its right to pursue a demanding program of global reform, seeking to produce a cooperative order of all nations under American leadership by promoting the adoption by all nations of an idealized version of America’s core political principles. Wilson and

Roosevelt may be long gone, but their legacy, it seems clear, continues to walk tall in the corridors of power.

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