

James Chace, a former editor of this magazine, is the Paul W. Williams Professor of Government and Public Law at Bard College and the director of the Bard/NYC Program on Globalization and International Affairs. He is completing a book on the consequences of the presidential election of 1912.



Present at the Destruction The Death of American Internationalism *James Chace*

No matter what the ultimate outcome of the war with Iraq, the assault on international institutions and the bullying language leveled at America's allies by the president and his closest advisers signaled a robust rebirth of American unilateralism. This reverses the American internationalist commitment that came out of the Second World War and that lasted throughout the 45 years of the Cold War. It is surely the most significant detour in U.S. foreign policy since Franklin D. Roosevelt met with Winston Churchill on the British battleship *Prince of Wales* near the harbor of Argentia, Newfoundland, in August 1941. The result of that meeting was the commitment of the United States to a policy of collective security, freedom of the seas, and liberal trading practices—the Atlantic Charter. The Americans, in particular, insisted on a statement calling for “access, on equal terms, to the trade and to the raw materials of the world which are needed for...economic prosperity.” By accepting “the establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security,” Roosevelt laid the ground for the founding of the United Nations that was to vest in the great powers—Britain, China, Russia, and America (and later France)—the responsibility for keeping the peace.

It was FDR, the president who best combined the idealistic aspirations of the Founders to create a republic of virtue with their realist appraisal of the need to accept temporary alliances, who provided the post-war vision for the Western world. With the world war still underway, a series of conferences, mostly initiated by Washington, be-

gan to shape the international environment we have lived in for the past half century—Bretton Woods (which, through the establishment of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, provided for currency stabilization); Dumbarton Oaks (where plans for the United Nations were drawn up); Hot Springs (for food and agriculture); Washington (for relief and rehabilitation); and Chicago (for civil aviation).

With the advent of the Cold War, Harry Truman, George Marshall, and Dean Acheson deepened and extended the new internationalism—with the Truman Doctrine to contain the expansion of the Soviet Union in the eastern Mediterranean, the economic rebuilding of Europe spurred on by the Marshall Plan, and the creation of NATO.

The Bush administration, even before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, had already begun to dismantle or reject treaties that would bind the United States to a larger international community. The United States rejected the Kyoto Protocol to curb the emission of noxious gases in the atmosphere, withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, scuttled the Land Mine Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and refused to back the International Criminal Court.

As the rifts between America and Europe deepened in the months and weeks prior to the American-led attack on Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld referred to France and Germany, the most vocal opponents of military action against Iraq without U.N. endorsement, as “old Europe,” and

the newer potential members of the European Union, such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, as “new Europe.” In thus choosing to divide Europe, Rumsfeld may well have succeeded in exacerbating the tensions within the European Union, as well as straining to a breaking point the ties of a more unified Europe to America. (His most egregious remark in this context was to bracket Germany with Cuba and Libya for refusing to support the use of force against Iraq.¹)

All this points to a renewal of the unilateralist behavior that had so often marked the United States during much of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. This impulse carried with it an implicit, though absolute, goal: to prevent America’s security from being undermined by constraints imposed by other powers, including—and perhaps most especially—those of America’s traditional allies. Americans have never shied away from using force unilaterally, either in defense of their own borders or on behalf of foreign regimes whose security Washington viewed as vital. In this respect, the United States has never been truly isolationist. We fought or threatened wars against Britain, Spain, and Mexico to enable us to expand across a continent. In the twentieth century, even putting aside the two world wars, we intervened militarily in Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Haiti, Grenada, and Panama. But apart from the Korean and Vietnam Wars, we have been reluctant to use military force outside the Western Hemisphere without allies, as witness Bush senior’s insistence on putting together a substantial coalition to fight the Gulf War, and Clinton’s hesitation to use force unilaterally in Bosnia and Kosovo.

A Different Approach

With the end of the Cold War, however, the neoconservatives, who were already coming to the fore during the first Bush administration, proposed a different approach to the

world. In 1992, a draft of a Pentagon planning document that has been called “Dick Cheney’s masterwork” (it appeared when Cheney was secretary of defense) argued that the United States must “discourage the advanced industrial nations from challenging our leadership or even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.” Instead, America should “retain the preeminent responsibility for addressing...those wrongs which threaten not only our interests, but those of our allies or friends, or which could seriously unsettle international relations.”²

A second document, written ten years later, the now-famous National Security Strategy issued by the White House in September 2002, echoes in somewhat more muted language the previous one. It promises to maintain whatever military capability is needed to defeat any attempt by *any* state to oppose the will of the United States or its allies, and to discourage or prevent any potential adversaries from building up their own forces to equal or surpass ours. Together, these two documents assert a doctrine of U.S. global domination.³

No power will be allowed to challenge American leadership or, to repeat, even “to aspire to a larger regional or global role”—surely this is the authentic voice of American neo-imperialism. Under this reading, America seeks satellites, not allies. We are to be imperialists with good intentions, the benevolent hegemon who is prepared to wage preventive wars, or launch preemptive strikes at any presumed enemy.

When George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney talk of a preventive war against Iraq, this recalls a very different period in American history when, in the early years of the Cold War, cries for preventive military action against the Soviet Union reverberated—not in the White House, but in the press and Congress. Unlike George W., however, Truman and Acheson stood firmly against the idea of a preventive war.

This was no easy task in the winter and spring of 1950. The shocks of the preceding

year—the successful testing of a Soviet atomic bomb in August 1949, years ahead of the predictions of many scientists and military advisers, and the victory of Mao Zedong’s Communists over the Chinese Nationalists in October—along with Moscow’s military strength on the ground as well as its program of building an atomic force capable of striking the United States, led to calls for a preemptive attack against Stalinist Russia while America still possessed an overwhelming lead in atomic weaponry.

On a number of occasions in early 1950, in press conferences, at universities, and before business groups, Acheson spoke out strongly against the notion of any unprovoked military action against Russia. The secretary of state argued instead that “the only way to deal with the Soviet Union,” was “to create situations of strength.” Negotiating from strength meant, in this period, building up America’s conventional forces in order to avoid having no other choice but to respond to a Soviet attack with U.S. atomic weapons. Echoing his predecessor at State, General Marshall, Acheson declared that it was the policy of the United States to be the “first to attend international conferences and the last to retire.”⁴ Today, such a statement seems inconceivable coming from any member of the foreign policy inner circle of the Bush administration (except perhaps from Colin Powell).

In 1950, the ability of the Soviet air force to target the United States with atomic weapons was far greater than Iraq’s ability to launch an intercontinental missile against the United States today. Containing the Soviet Union aggressively through a coalition of European states and Canada (which later became NATO) effectively stopped the Soviet Union from expanding on the ground or thinking of launching a nuclear attack against the United States.

Robert Byrd, the dean of the Senate, declared from the Senate floor on February 12, 2003, that the “doctrine of preemption—the idea that the United States or any other

nation can legitimately attack a nation that is not imminently threatening but may be threatening in the future—is a radical new twist on the traditional idea of self-defense. It appears in contravention of international law and the U.N. Charter.”⁵ Most bizarre of all, as Harvard’s Stanley Hoffmann has pointed out, is the claim put forth by American neo-imperialists that “the United States Constitution allows no bowing to a superior law, such as international law, and no transfer, pooling or delegation of sovereignty to any international organization.”⁶

Overstretch and Hubris

One can understand any U.S. administration’s disgust with a United Nations whose Human Rights Commission is headed by Libya and in which Iraq was until recently supposed to chair its Conference on Disarmament. But this begs the question: Is the United States prepared to work with the international organizations it did so much to create? Or does it expect to act as a global policeman simply because Washington believes it has the power to do so?

We may have massive military might, but it is nearly impossible to fight terrorism without the cooperation of other nations (most notably France and Germany). In addition, there is the danger of what the historian Paul Kennedy has called “imperial overstretch.” According to Senator Byrd, the “war in Afghanistan has cost us \$37 billion so far, yet there is evidence that terrorism may already be starting to regain its hold on that region.”⁷ We are now not only training Filipino soldiers to root out Muslim insurgents, but we may also be preparing to send our own troops into that conflict—and this in addition to expenditures that might total \$95 billion for the war against Iraq.⁸

According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, the government shortfall for fiscal year 2003 could rise to \$287 billion, and for fiscal year 2004 to \$338 billion. The budget office calculates that over the next five years Bush’s economic program

would raise the deficit by about \$800 billion. In addition to the budget deficit, America is also running massive current account deficits—by importing more than it exports—that have now reached an annual rate of \$500 billion. To cover this debt, America borrows from foreign lenders. The profligacy of these policies will almost certainly lead to the weakening of the dollar, higher taxes, and reductions in domestic social programs, or an inflated currency that will have to be contained by high interest rates. This will then likely result in economic stagnation at best, or a severe recession at worst. In short, the costs of unilateralism could prove devastating.⁹

One of the reasons the Bush administration put forth for military action against Iraq is the favorable demonstration effect this is likely to have in the Middle East. In a revealing interview with Nicholas Lemann in the *New Yorker*, Douglas Feith, the under secretary of defense for policy, said, “If we help the Iraqis, and if the Iraqis show an ability to create a humane representative government for themselves—will that have beneficial spillover effects on the politics of the whole region? The answer, I think is yes.”¹⁰ President Bush made somewhat the same point on at least two occasions. In June 2002, he argued that “a new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region.”¹¹ And in a speech at the American Enterprise Institute this past February, he defined an ambitious role for America and (as he put it) “the civilized world” in the transformation of the Middle East.¹²

Feith’s words are in line with Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz’s expressed belief that the war in Iraq could help to bring about democracy to the Arab Middle East. President Bush, in his 2003 State of the Union address, made somewhat the same point when he said that “all people have a right to choose their own government, and determine their own destiny—

and the United States supports their aspirations to live in freedom.”

The neo-Wilsonian ring to these statements points to the crusader mentality that now inhabits the minds of some of the closest advisers to the president. The realist perspective is apparently being supplanted by a more evangelical approach to replacing tyrannical regimes with democratic ones. America’s values are thus seen as universal values. In this respect, it is dangerous to compare the Bush administration’s plan to “democratize” Iraq and other parts of the Middle East with the remaking of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan after the traumatic carnage of the Second World War. Both countries had had democratic norms and practices in the 1920s; just as their industrial capacity could be fully restored in a relatively short time through American aid, so, too, could the United States hope to resuscitate their democratic traditions. In the Arab Middle East, such a task would be Herculean, and, I suspect, quixotic. But it is a task that the crusader often welcomes, and, if necessary, is willing to do alone.

While it is true that the United States cannot pursue a successful foreign policy without a moral component, as Franklin Roosevelt well understood, that component today needs to be linked to a range of international institutions. To seek to promote the common good implies respect for the concerns of the larger international community. It is in fact the height of realism not only to advance the nation’s interests, but also to seek allies among other governments and peoples who share those interests.

As Americans we would do well to heed Alexander Hamilton, who urged nations to avoid policies that were “absolutely selfish” and rather to pursue “a policy regulated by their own interest, as far as justice and good faith permit.”¹³ These are not evangelical concepts nor are they those of a lone crusader. They require a commitment to internationalism, not a rejection of it.

They are the practical goals of a realistic American foreign policy for the twenty-first century. ●

Notes

1. See Gerard Baker, "Tartuffe and the Shock-Jock Gird for War," *Financial Times*, February 13, 2003.

2. See Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992.

3. See Stanley Hoffmann, "The High and the Mighty," *American Prospect*, January 23, 2003.

4. See James Chace, *Acheson: The Secretary of State Who Created the American World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), pp. 270–71.

5. Senator Byrd's remarks are available at www.commondreams.org.

6. Hoffmann, "The High and the Mighty."

7. See note 5.

8. Eric Schmitt, "Military Spending: Pentagon Contradicts General on Iraq Occupation Force's

Size," *New York Times*, February 28, 2003; and Seth Mydans, "Asian Front: Filipinos Awaiting U.S. Troops with Skepticism," *New York Times*, February 28, 2003.

9. See Paul Krugman, "On the Second Day, Atlas Waffled," *New York Times*, February 14, 2003; Edmund L. Andrews, "U.S. Budget Deficit Seen Rising Fast," *New York Times*, March 5, 2003; David E. Rosenbaum, "Cost of War: Troop Movement Alone Could Cost \$25 Billion, Congressional Office Finds," *New York Times*, March 8, 2003; and Clyde V. Prestowitz, Jr., "The Unmighty Dollar," *International Newsweek*, March 24, 2003.

10. Nicholas Lemann, "After Iraq," *New Yorker*, February 17–24, 2003.

11. As quoted in "Birth of a Bush Doctrine?" *The Economist*, March 1, 2003.

12. "In the President's Words: 'Free People Will Keep the Peace of the World,'" *New York Times*, February 27, 2003.

13. Alexander Hamilton, *Pacificus*, no. 4, July 10, 1793.