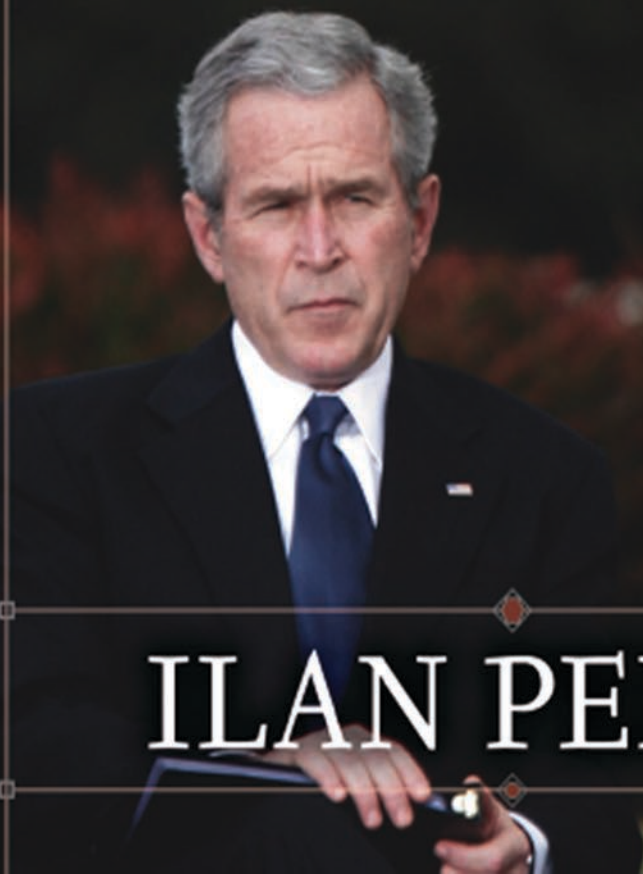


THE LEGACY OF GEORGE W. BUSH'S FOREIGN POLICY

Moving Beyond Neoconservatism



ILAN PELEG

The Legacy of
George W. Bush's
Foreign Policy



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Ilan Peleg



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TO MY DAUGHTER TALIA,
an idealist and a believer in civil and human rights



TO THE MEMORY OF MY FRIEND HOWARD MARBLESTONE
(1942–2008)
a scholar, a humanitarian, a mensch



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PREFACE

The last pages of this volume are being written as the administration of George W. Bush is coming to an end and Barack Obama is preparing to take office as the forty-fourth president of the United States. The worldwide reaction to the election of Senator Obama on November 4, 2008, was more enthusiastic than the reaction to the election of any other president in American history. To a very large extent this enthusiasm could be explained as the response of the world to Bush's foreign policy and as reflecting the widespread expectations that Obama will chart a substantially new international course for America and, indeed, for the world. In watching Obama's ascendance to the most powerful position in the world, we have witnessed a seismological change, a Richter scale "event" of 9.5 (or more) with potentially enormous consequences.¹

The foreign policy of George W. Bush, the forty-third president of the United States, was greatly impacted by the prolific writings on foreign policy by the group of American intellectuals that has become known as Neoconservatives. While the debate on exactly who is a Neoconservative and what precisely Neoconservatism stands for might continue for years to come, the general contours or tenets of the Neoconservative philosophy, persuasion, or movement are sufficiently clear to have it as a subject of analysis. The Neoconservatives have promoted for several decades a muscular, unilateralist, militaristic, and hegemonic American foreign policy. The foreign policy of the Bush administration followed, in many if not in all respects, this Neoconservative prescription.

If foreign policy prescription can be judged by its results, Neoconservatism, as the ideational basis for the foreign policy of George W. Bush, ought to be regarded as a huge failure, an unmitigated disaster of historic proportions (see chapter 1). Not only did Bush's foreign policy not relieve the dangers associated with international terrorism, it aggravated them, making them more acute. Not only did this foreign policy not result in strengthening America's standing in

the world, it diminished it significantly. The country's prestige, status, and legitimacy have never been lower than at the end of the Bush administration.

If Bush's years in the White House are not to be construed as a complete waste, they should serve as a historical laboratory, a testing ground for ideas that might produce a better and brighter future for America and the world. Those eight years ought to be examined empirically, and from as many perspectives as possible; then we should draw lessons for the future by better understanding the Bush years. This book does both.

While this volume focuses on the Bush years, 2001 through 2008, it is intensely interested in one fundamental, future-oriented question—what international role ought the United States play in the *post-Bush era*? Although some observers might believe that America's days as a world leader are numbered, chapter 6 of this book reflects a different perspective. By the sheer size of its economic and military power, the creative inventiveness and ingenuity of its people, the diversity of its population, and the openness of its culture (however constrained by prominent social forces within it), the United States is destined to be among the top world leaders and, in all probability, the single most prominent global leader in decades to come. However, to maintain its leadership position, to transfer it from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, America must not only leave the Bush legacy behind but also reinvent itself. It ought to be, and project itself as being, a thoughtful, deliberative, well-informed, moderate force on the world stage, not a unilateralist, militaristic, and nationalistic bully. In brief, the attitudinal prism described in this volume as Neoconservatism—present in and out of the Bush administration—ought to be relegated to the ash heap of history if the United States is to recover its traditional role as consensus-developer, institution-builder, and rights-promoter.

To move beyond Neoconservatism, we need to understand the essence and the core values of that persuasion, particularly as it was implemented by the Bush administration (see chapter 3). In many ways Neoconservatism presented to the world the ultimate unattractive model of US foreign policy, a combination of an exceptionalist America, militaristic and unilateralist in its modus operandi, imposing its will while dangling its values and promoting its narrow national interests (as perceived by the Bush administration) while presuming to represent universal ideals of democracy and freedom. No wonder that the policy inspired by Neoconservative ideas was met with rejection, resentment,

opposition, and eventually active resistance, and that the push back was stronger and more profound than ever. The foreign and security policy based on Neocon ideology simply lacked the wisdom and the balance of Realist nuance. While the toppling of Afghanistan's Taliban regime was considered a reasonable act of self-defense on the part of America, when the Bush administration and the Neocons turned to the liberation of Iraq and the democratization of the Middle East they lost almost all international support. The well-deserved worldwide sympathy toward America of the post-9/11 era withered away. The genuine goodwill of the world toward the United States was squandered.

This volume argues that Neoconservatism, despite its name, is one of the most revolutionary, nonconservative movements in the history of American foreign policy. While Neoconservatives have often appeared to the world as tough-minded "realists," in fact they have been prisoners of their own ideological, revolutionary illusions and delusions. Accepting uncritically Francis Fukuyama's triumphal idea (or at least the way it was interpreted by many) that Western democracy has won and that it is bound to spread all over the world, the Neocons and their allies in the Bush administration were resolutely intent on imposing their democratic dream abroad. The Iraq war was conceived as an exercise in spreading democracy, a litmus test for benevolent hegemony, a dress rehearsal for bigger and better things. It turned out to be a model of overoptimistic, shortsighted zealotry, accompanied by a set of rosy predictions on the flourishing of democracy in the authoritarian Middle East. America's dream of benevolent hegemony turned into America's nightmare of endless war accompanied by the loss of legitimacy in the eyes of most of the world's citizens.

This book is not merely about America and its foreign policy. Because of the centrality of the United States in the global society, this volume is about the world at large. It reflects the great concern of the author about the global future. Two realities inform that concern. First, we need to recognize that the world has become more and more dangerous and unstable with the spread of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism, environmental decay, the emerging competition for energy resources, and the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots; global society faces consequential challenges that are unprecedented in their complexity. Second, we need to recognize that the multidimensional global crisis is, for the most part, not inevitable; much of it is

the result of American actions (such as the Iraq war) or lack of actions (such as inaction on global climate change) over the past eight years. The net result of those actions and inaction has led to the dramatic decline of American power and influence and, more specifically, American legitimacy.

French foreign policy analyst Dominique Moïsi has captured the decline in US legitimacy rather well. He wrote recently about a 2008 West Berlin production of Beethoven's *Fidelio* that dressed the prisoners in orange jumpsuits resembling those used for prisoners in Guantanamo Bay detention center.² This vignette is an indication of how low America's reputation sunk during the Bush years. It is a measure of the ultimate decline in soft power of Bush's America—from a model of constitutionally protected human and civil rights to the ultimate "rogue superpower."

The 2008 election has the potential to change the situation in a significant way. Like most American elections since the end of the Cold War (e.g., the elections of 1992, 1996, and 2000), the 2008 election seemed to have been fought over and decided upon economic issues. Yet, the 2008 election was conducted against the background of not merely the troubled American economy but also the country's dramatic decline in the international arena. That decline benefited the candidacy of Barack Obama.

While Obama's victory opens the possibility for fundamental change in American foreign policy, the tasks of the new president are enormous. The Bush administration has left for its successor the most difficult situation since at least 1968, the height of the Vietnam War. The United States is facing a complicated situation in Iraq (since 2003), Afghanistan (since 2001), and increasingly in Pakistan. The so-called War on Terror, hostage to the definition given to it by Bush and the Neoconservatives (see chapter 1), remains inconclusive. The United States is facing an uncontrolled Iran with nuclear ambitions, an increasingly unstable and nuclearized Pakistan, difficult and strained relations with a resurgent Russia, and an emergent and competitive China. The dramatic decline in US prestige, standing, and legitimacy in the world (including among its closest European allies) makes a successful resolution to any of these problems difficult. While the Bush administration is not responsible for all those problems, this volume argues that it has significantly contributed to their development.

Barack Obama brings with him to the White House a set of characteristics that are quite promising in terms of the ability of the United States to recover

from the disastrous years of the Bush administration. Obama has a first-rate analytical mind rather than the blind belief in an “instinctive” response that characterized the forty-third president (see chapter 4); he has sensitivity to long-term social and political gaps that ought to be dealt with both inside the United States and in the world (his experience as a community organizer in Chicago could prove highly relevant in that respect); he is biracial and thus reflects in his person the diversity of the world population; his mental world was not formed by the Cold War and he will be, in fact, the first truly post-Cold War American president; he understands that as president he must improve the global image and the international standing of the United States and that America’s moral position is of critical importance for that task; and his campaign for the presidency seemed to show that he has absorbed the lessons from Bush’s critical mistakes (carefully analyzed in this book). Obama is a terrific communicator with great oratorical skills, especially in large settings, capabilities that should serve him well in the White House. His visit to Europe and the Middle East in the summer of 2008 demonstrated his global popularity.

Although the world is facing enormous challenges, the *timing* for change is not unpromising. The enormity of the challenges is, in fact, a positive factor from the perspective of the likelihood of introducing change. The interdependence of all the world’s economies is self-evidenced, accentuated by the threat of a long-term economic recession and even potentially a deep depression. The necessity of a unified action in which the United States will have to assume a leading role is clear. As the Bush administration draws to an end, there is a broad, albeit not universal, recognition of the fundamental mistakes committed by the departing president over the past eight years and the need to change course. The political trauma of the Iraq war is fading from memory and the rawness of the resentment toward the United States is gone; most European governments have resumed their traditional pro-American stance (especially important in this regard are the changes in governments in France and Germany, and the continuity of the pro-US position of the British government). The diplomatic efforts of the Realists under Condoleezza Rice during the second Bush term and in regard to Iran, North Korea, and Israel/Palestine have created a more positive atmosphere than the poisonous feeling produced by the 2003 Iraq invasion.

The issues on the agenda are many, and a sense of priority, as well as pragmatism, on the part of the new president will be essential. Here is a tentative list of

possible priorities, over and above the stabilization of the American and the world economy: (1) initiate the early departure of American forces from Iraq, while focusing more on the challenges of terrorism in Afghanistan and particularly in Pakistan; (2) close Guantanamo Bay detention center as a symbolic act and declare an end to torture; (3) convene an international conference for dealing with global climate change and energy needs as a worldwide issue of the utmost urgency; (4) refocus American diplomatic efforts on “intractable” regional conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, Darfur, Somalia, and Cyprus; (5) reduce significantly the nuclear stockpiles of the United States and Russia as a reaffirmation of the American and global commitment to a new and invigorated nonproliferation regime; (6) strengthen international institutions, including the UN, NATO, and the G-8, while opposing ideas for exclusivist organizations such as a new “League of Democracies” (John McCain) that will undermine the UN and usher in a new Cold War; (7) work toward a comprehensive understanding with Russia that will include a commitment not to expand NATO in return for Russian acceptance of the boundaries of all states, including all former Soviet republics, and public commitment to nonintervention in the internal affairs of those states (a similar deal to the one we have had with the People’s Republic of China in regard to Taiwan).

Most important, in the wake of the Bush years, the United States under Barack Obama must quickly restore its legitimacy in the eyes of the world, regain the confidence of other countries in the quality of its leadership, and get back the respect of people and governments around the globe. It must desert what many have conceived as its bully attitude, reaffirm its commitment to the rule of law and to civil and human rights, and join the world in an effort to deal with fundamental socioeconomic problems, including climate change, the energy challenge, and structural poverty. Soft power ought to complement and as much as possible replace hard power, but soft power, it must be remembered, requires the respect of the rest of the world and the legitimacy of the user of such power.

This book is dedicated to two individuals who have played an important, although quite different, role in my life. First, Talia Peleg, an idealistic young woman and my daughter, who shares my most fundamental values as few other people do. She will understand the heart from which my words have sprung.

This book is also dedicated to the memory of my dear friend Dr. Howard Marblestone (1942–2008). Howard was the most decent and generous person I have ever met; we were close friends and academic colleagues for thirty-four years, from the moment we met at Lafayette College until his premature death in January 2008.

Other individuals ought to be mentioned with appreciation. I had long and fruitful discussions with my son, Gil Peleg, on the subject dealt with in this book, as well as with my wife, Sima. Thanks are also due to my loyal and efficient assistants, Richard Krebs (who worked with me in the early stages of this project) and Matthew Goldstein (who assisted me in the final stages). More collectively, I have learned a lot from my students in the senior seminar on US foreign policy, offered during the tense but hopeful fall semester of 2008.

Thanks are also extended to others with whom I discussed this project from time to time, including Bob Freedman, Holmes Miller, Jonathan Mendilow, Paul Scham, Dov Waxman, and Eric Ziolkowski.

Ilan Peleg
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THE BUSH LEGACY

Controversial Policy and Uncertain Future

The purpose of this introductory chapter, written during the last months of the administration of George W. Bush, is dual. The first goal is to present a general thesis in regard to the foreign policy of the forty-third president of the United States, its consequences, and its implications for the future of America and the world; this thesis is explored in full detail throughout the volume. The second goal here is to briefly describe the structure of the volume as a whole and that of each of its six individual chapters to facilitate a relatively easy, painless reading for experts and laymen alike.

The past eight years of American foreign policy were among the most dramatic, rocky, and consequential in decades. It was a period that defied simple, univariate, reductionist explanations. A unique and complex combination of factors shaped American foreign policy. Among them, five are of particular importance: the personality of President George W. Bush, the foreign policy decision-making process established by his administration, the impact of the extremely traumatic events of September 11, 2001, the challenge to the United States' unipolar supremacy within an ever-changing international system, and the influence of a determined intellectual elite often referred to as Neoconservative.¹ Each is analyzed in detail in chapters 2 through 5 of this volume.

The thesis of the book is that the controversial foreign policy of the Bush administration, reflected in the sharp decline of America's legitimacy in the world and the increase in threats to its security, was a result of the manner in which President Bush, a small number of his advisers, and ideologues outside

of his administration defined and responded to the events of September 11, 2001, and to the international challenges faced by the United States in general. The “power of definition”² enabled the president to shape reality and lead the United States toward a new, indeed revolutionary, foreign policy and to adopt, in effect, the overall ideational framework and many of the specific proposals offered by a group of Neoconservative intellectuals and policy advisers. While it cannot be denied that President Bush’s policies often reflected American traditions, institutions, and ideologies,³ he pushed many of those further than any president before him ever had.

Bush’s definition of the situation after 9/11, the adoption of policies based on this definition, and the response to these policies on the part of others in the international political system produced a new and, in general, highly negative reality. Because the initial definition by the president and his Neoconservative supporters was erroneous and misleading, it has led to a significant deterioration in America’s global standing, a process extensively described and analyzed in this volume.

Bush’s misguided leadership can be better understood through the lens of a fundamental sociopsychological phenomenon first described over forty years ago by Columbia University sociologist Robert K. Merton. The concept offered by Merton was the “self-fulfilling prophecy.” Wrote Merton,

The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation, evoking a new behavior which makes the original false conception come “true.” The specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy *perpetuates a reign of error* [emphasis added].⁴

In the high-stakes area of international politics, the extreme behavior of a very powerful actor who adopts what Merton calls “a false definition of the situation” could potentially lead to catastrophic results. The more catastrophic the results, the more perpetual the “reign of error” and the deeper the belief of the perpetrator that his initial actions were, in fact, right. This belief does not allow the perpetrator and most of his supporters to liberate themselves from the initial action.

In a self-fulfilling situation in international politics, as in other fields, the very prediction (or prophecy) causes itself to become reality *via the behavior of*

the party making the prediction. Put differently, the “prediction” is continuously validated by the perpetrator, regardless of how deceptive and misleading it may be in reality. The key in a self-fulfilling behavior is the three-stage relationship between the way a situation is initially defined by an actor, the behavior it causes this actor to adopt, and the new situation resulting from that behavior.

The systematic application of the notion of “self-fulfilling prophecy” to the foreign policy of the Bush administration is carried out in this book on several levels of analysis, starting with the international system. In chapter 2 (“The Challenge to America and the World”), international factors contributing to the development of the “false conception” are identified. The Bush administration arrived at the White House in a time of post–Cold War instability, with America challenged by the emergence of new or “rogue” nations (e.g., China, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea) and the continuous instability in several of the world’s most volatile regions (e.g., the Middle East and the Balkans). From the beginning, the approach of the new administration was to act unilaterally and militaristically to tame and control the world. This attitude received great “validation” in the eyes of its supporters by the events of September 11, 2001. Thus, what began in the Bush administration as a hesitant, ill-defined prescription for a unilateralist and hegemonic foreign policy became a full-fledged elaborate interventionist ideology, with the actual implementation of several remarkable doctrinal innovations emphasizing preemption and prevention. On the international level, the self-fulfilling prophecy resulted from an overly pessimistic perspective, which transformed into an aggressive policy and led eventually to a much worse global situation.

A deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the specific self-fulfilling behavior associated with the foreign policy of the Bush administration must penetrate, beyond everything else, the ideological assumptions adopted by that administration. Chapter 3 attempts to offer such an understanding by focusing on what it calls the Neoconservative revolution. It examines the proposition that the Bush doctrine has been organically linked to Neoconservatism, the hypothesis being that the Neoconservatives produced the “prophecy” that gave the rationale for the foreign policy of the Bush administration.⁵ Neoconservatism is a right-of-center nationalist ideology that emphasizes American exceptionalism and calls upon the United States to act, even militarily and unilaterally, in order to establish hegemonic control

abroad. While not all so-called Neocons endorse all elements of this definition with equal vigor, those are some of the core ideas of Neoconservatism as promoted by members of the movement, particularly following the traumatic events of September 11, 2001.

Chapter 4 focuses on the personality of George W. Bush as the man at the very center of the foreign policy from 2001 to 2008. While many observers have perceived President Bush as merely a puppet of other policy makers, particularly Vice President Richard Cheney, that position is rejected in this volume as fundamentally unsubstantiated. Chapter 4 argues that, in fact, Bush seems to have guided his own foreign policy, although he was deeply influenced by others. In this volume, it is also maintained that the Bush personality showed an *inclination* to adopt self-fulfilling prophecies and potentially self-fulfilling disasters. By his own admission and by the testimony of many others, Bush's reactions to different situations tended to be nonanalytical, "gut" responses (that is, reactions that could have easily produced "false definitions of a situation"). More important, Bush had an openly Manichean worldview; he defined the world as a stage for the struggle between good and evil.⁶ The president tended to be utterly inflexible in pursuing his foreign policy goals,⁷ thus perpetuating what Merton has called "a reign of error."

Chapter 5 assesses the impact of the decision-making process in the Bush White House on the establishment and perpetuation of the self-fulfilling behavior. It examines the argument that the worst inclinations of the president and the ideological impact of the Neoconservatives were exacerbated by a decision-making process in which some of the most hawkish members of the administration, particularly Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, were in full control or were at least disproportionately influential. The decision-making process lacked self-criticism and intellectual openness.⁸

Chapter 6 ("Lessons for Future Presidents: America and the World beyond Bush and Neoconservatism") reflects on how the United States might deal with its current and future challenges, some produced by the self-fulfilling mechanisms of the foreign policy of the past few years. Chapter 6 also offers and analyzes a new agenda for the next presidency. Among the ideas analyzed in this comprehensive chapter are demilitarizing American foreign policy, re-instituting "the diplomacy of consultation," refocusing the United States on serious regional conflicts, emphasizing multilateralism and globalism, avoid-

ing overreaching via clearer prioritization, and, above all, preventing self-fulfilling disasters by limiting ideological blindness.

THE LEGACY

While foreign policy is invariably the result of numerous factors—and the function of the analyst is to identify the factors that are most significant—it is the particular relationships between the factors (e.g., the extent to which they reinforce each other) that often determine the actual result of the foreign policy adopted by a particular administration. In the case of the Bush administration, the ultimate result of the multifactor constellation (which includes the president's personality, the Neoconservative ideology, the international challenges to America's supremacy, and the White House decision-making process) has been a genuine, far-reaching *revolution* in American foreign policy.⁹ The dimensions of this revolution are comprehensively assessed in this study.

In promoting its revolutionary program, the Bush administration has adopted what could be described as an ideology-based rather than fact-driven foreign policy, an attitudinal prism somewhat detached from the reality of the international system. In historical terms, the new policy has amounted to a dramatic shift from the traditional principles of American foreign and security policy, particularly the strong American tendency toward pragmatism. Many observers have come to believe that this shift threatens not only the long-term interests of the United States but also, given the prominence of America in the global system, the well-being of the world community at large. It is argued in this volume that more important than any other factor, the United States *lost legitimacy* between 2001 and 2008.

While Bush's foreign policy was sometimes perceived as "hard-nosed," the fundamental problem in both its conception and implementation has been not its tough pursuit of realpolitik but precisely the opposite—its lack of realism. The policy had excessive utopian ideological commitment to unilateral American hegemony;¹⁰ in the minds of its supporters it reflected both the interests of the United States and of those dominated by it. Notions such as *benevolent hegemony* (assuming that even those controlled by the United States could benefit from its hegemony or would even appreciate it) were introduced into the lexicon in order to justify the new policy. The problem has