



Roundtable on The Bush Administration's Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective (9/11 Roundtable), *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 29, Issue 3 (June 2005).

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- Arnold A. Offner, "Rogue President, Rogue Nation: Bush and US National Security," 433-435.
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To begin with, I would like to suggest that the title of the *Diplomatic History* forum was a tiny bit misleading -- rather like a forum entitled "Sarajevo and the Foreign Policy of Imperial Germany." Sarajevo triggered the First World War, but it did not determine the German decision to risk a world war in an effort to split or crush the Triple Entente and make Germany supreme in Europe. In the same way, I agree with Arnold Offner that the Bush Administration's policies, as embodied in the 2002 National Security Strategy, had already been put forward years before, and I think something like that document would have been promulgated in any case. 9/11 did, however, encourage the Administration to do what it had already hoped to do. But in any case, the forum rightly focuses on how new its policies are.

More than thirty years ago, the Vietnam War convinced many Americans (particularly inside universities) that there was something fundamentally imperialistic, dangerous and oppressive about American foreign policy. Such views led the way within the historical profession by the mid-1970s and they are still very strong. That is partly because they have at least a grain of truth. Being one of the world's leading powers offers many risky temptations, and history suggests that no nation can resist them indefinitely. Now however, my generation of Americans -- the Boom generation -- is faced, it seems to me, with an uncomfortable fact. Now that our contemporaries have actually taken power in the political realm, they have implemented an even more ambitious vision of American power and what it can and should do. The majority of contributors to this forum are resisting this conclusion, but the policies and strategies of the current Administration, in my opinion, are far more aggressive and dangerous to international order than anything that was ever attempted during the Cold War.

Having written about both European and American international politics, I have always believed that Americans could make more sense of our own predicament by comparing our behavior to other regionally or globally predominant nations, from ancient Athens to Imperial Germany. A broader perspective would, it seems to me, help this exchange. Melvin Leffler refers to ideals,

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interests, threat perception, and power as the basis of American foreign policy; I would suggest that those four categories summarize pretty effectively the elements of any nation's foreign policy. Similarly, I would suggest to Walter L. Hixson that violent emotional paroxysms that last for years, sometimes decades, seize every great nation at least once every eighty years or so, as shown with respect to the United States by William Strauss and Neil Howe, and by myself in a broader elaboration of their theories scheduled for publication in the journal *The Monist*.

I think, moreover, that Melvin Leffler's focus on principles and options that various Administrations considered obscures critical differences of emphasis during the 1947-89 period. Americans at least since Jefferson have regarded our values as universal, but they have differed fundamentally over whether and how to try to spread them. As late as 1917, many prominent Americans still thought we should promote them only by example, although they were losing that battle by then. More importantly, although drastic options were discussed during almost every period of the Cold War, the actual strategies of different administrations differed significantly. The Truman Administration decided to defend certain areas, but not others; the Eisenhower Administration eventually decided we would defend everything, with or without allies. Kennedy refused to begin a war in Southeast Asia partly because of a lack of allies and partly because he saw it as a terrible place to fight; Johnson did not share those inhibitions. Nixon believed that the US could have a relatively stable peace with the Soviet Union; Reagan did not, at least until the Soviet Union fundamentally changed.

One can also clearly divide the Cold War into periods in which the government believed it had to have clearly superior military forces, especially nuclear forces, and periods in which it thought--and, under Nixon, even said--that equality was enough. At any moment, an international system includes stronger powers -- sometimes just one strongest power. But there are very different ways to play that role, as shown, I think, by the history of the Cold War.

In my opinion, the current Bush Administration unquestionably represents a basic departure from many essential principles of American foreign policy, as laid down by Roosevelt and followed intermittently ever since. Arnold Offner is right -- the new policy was first laid down by Paul Wolfowitz in 1992 in response to the end of the Cold War (434), although James Baker, Colin Powell, and George H. W. Bush would not endorse it. It was a policy of worldwide, permanent American supremacy, based upon unequalled military power. It grew partly out of the fantasy (in my opinion, at least) that the defense build-up under Ronald Reagan and the threat of Star Wars had actually brought down the Soviet Union. It was most certainly not adopted by the Clinton Administration, although in retrospect I greatly regret the failure of that Administration to do anything about relics of the Cold War like our policy towards Cuba. But it was incorporated, in spades, in the 2002 National Security Strategy, which there is every reason to believe would have been issued in much the same form--and perhaps even applied--even if 9/11 had never taken place.

While no one seems to want to face it, the premise of that document is clear: it is the right and duty of the United States to rule the world because a kind of international Social Darwinism has proven our political and economic systems to be superior. According to the terms of that document, no nation that the US deems hostile to its values will be allowed to possess weapons of mass destruction. Should they defy us, we shall destroy their weapons and remove their

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regimes. That policy had already been advocated by leading figures in this Administration with respect to Iraq before they came into office. Their advocacy of missile defense, designed to allow us take the offensive against nuclear-armed states, also fits into it. And it is remarkable to me that no participant in the forum pointed this out, despite the testimony of Richard Clarke, Paul O'Neill, and others--they simply used 9/11 as an excuse to begin implementing it. There is plenty of evidence, too, that the "Axis of Evil" was designed as a hit list, and Administration officials hoped to deal with its other members as soon as the Iraqi situation was cleared up. The problems of subduing Iraq forced a change in plans.

The other real departure of this policy is its explicit rejection of ANY legal or international restraints upon the behavior of the United States. The US has already fought one war which the UN specifically refused to authorize. That is not totally unprecedented, of course--it never allowed Vietnam or Kosovo to come to a UN Security Council vote--but the Administration has also refused to adhere to the World Court, or to observe the Geneva Convention. It has totally repudiated the idea of arms control by treaty. The premise of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, although few people seem to know it, is that non-nuclear powers will avoid obtaining nuclear weapons, while nuclear powers will work to get rid of them. That premise has been replaced, under this Administration, by the idea that the United States will decide who should have them and who should not, and will enforce those decisions. Regarding Israel and Palestine, the Bush Administration broke thirty-five years of precedent by endorsing Israeli claims to large parts of the West Bank simply because the Israelis have established settlements there. This Administration, in many ways, is promoting international anarchy, in the belief that the proper combination of American weaponry and rhetoric will solve any problem.

The rest of the world seems to understand that the United States has changed. Allies and neutrals criticized many individual steps that Washington took during the Cold War, but by and large, they accepted the need for American power to confront Communism, partly because it was often judiciously applied, but essentially, it seems to me, because much of the world accepted US claims to stand for right and justice as something other than complete hypocrisy. As Prince Max of Baden wrote about Britain in 1918, the British had earned the respect of the world partly because their own opposition always criticized and tried to correct imperial excesses, and partly because there was some truth to their claim that subject peoples had derived some benefits from their rule. In the same way, Europe, Japan, and even parts of Latin America (under certain Administrations, anyway), accepted that US policy was protecting and helping them. They no longer do. Hardly a single nation still approves of American foreign policy. Is that not an indication that the US has made a fundamental change?

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