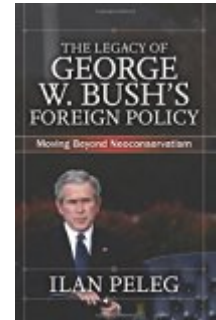


Ilan Peleg. *The Legacy of George W. Bush's Foreign Policy: Moving beyond Neoconservatism.* Boulder: Westview Press, 2009. xv + 202 pp. \$24.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8133-4446-1.



Reviewed by Inderjeet Parmar

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Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball (DePaul University)

Ilan Peleg has written a well-argued and accessible book criticizing the national security and foreign policies of the George W. Bush administrations (2001-9) and their underlying neoconservative ideology. Peleg also criticizes Bush's personality and the character of the top-down loyalty-based decision-making process that Bush developed and operated as America's first "MBA president" (p. 103). Peleg holds Bush's personality and his adoption of neoconservative ideology responsible for what are widely held to be major U.S. foreign policy disasters--particularly the war on Iraq. To Peleg, the United States must remain globally hegemonic, by which he means it ought to try consensually, sensitively, and multilaterally to recapture the levels of popularity, legitimacy, and effectiveness it enjoyed during the 1990s and even the Cold War. Well structured and organized, this book is ideally suited to students' use--indeed, I can see myself recommending the book to my upper-level students.

This book is one of many that examine the policies and legacies of the Bush presidency. In

one sense, however, this book stands out: it provides a most robust argument for the discontinuities of the Bush administration's policies with practically all previous Republican and Democratic administrations, and the more or less complete separation of neoconservatism from American conservatism, liberalism, and realism alike. In short, Bush and the neoconservatives are to blame for the disastrous war on Iraq, the faltering war in Afghanistan, and so on. Peleg follows this argument throughout the book thus providing coherence to the whole volume. It also makes the book read a little more polemically than he may have intended, but, I suspect, it will make very comfortable reading for Democrats--whether or not they supported the Iraq war of 2003.

At one level, of course, it can hardly be denied that President Bush was responsible--he was, after all, in charge. It is also the case that the neoconservatives were highly influential within the Bush administration. At another level, however, there are difficulties associated with arguments that assign too much of the blame (or success) to particu-

lar presidents and belief systems. To Peleg's credit, he does empirically step back from such strong positions from time to time; indeed, it is necessary to his argument that he does so, as all political actors have a past, often in previous administrations, where clues to the causes of their behavior may sometimes be found. This is the case, for example, when Peleg traces the role of certain influential Bush appointees, such as Paul Wolfowitz, to the George H. W. Bush administration.

Peleg's argument is weakest on the degree to which Bush and the neoconservatives are actually separate, even alien, from previous administrations and from conservatism, liberalism, and realism, for that matter. For example, Peleg suggests several times that Bush and the neoconservatives were democracy crusaders due to their attachment to democratic peace theory (DPT), the idea that democracies do not wage wars against each other. He cites Francis Fukuyama, in effect, as the source of such views, especially in his triumphalist "end of history" messages at the end of the Cold War (p. 128). Yet, to imply thereby that the democratic peace thesis is sourced in neoconservative thought is a little misleading; as Peleg will know, the likes of Michael Doyle, Jack Levy, Jack Snyder, and Bruce Russett, none of them neocons, were fundamental to the development of DPT and its testing and refinement. It is also clear that the Bill Clinton administrations--with their development of strategies of democratic enlargement and engagement (the latter most clearly influenced by some of the aforementioned scholars' work)--were highly influenced by DPT. In Clinton's case, Larry Diamond (labelled by many a neocon but certainly a militant democracy promoter) played a key role in the adoption of DPT through his work with the Democrats' Progressive Policy Institute in the early 1990s and through his *Journal of Democracy*. It was also during Clinton's presidency that "regime change" in Iraq was established, with bipartisan support, as desirable, though through supporting anti-Saddam Hussein opponents, such as Ahmed Chalabi of the Iraqi Nation-

al Congress (p. 77). Chalabi, as Peleg notes, remained a key U.S. ally and a supplier of misleadingly optimistic scenarios in a post-U.S.-invasion Iraq.

The liberal internationalists' culpability in the Iraq war is explored in Tony Smith's *A Pact with the Devil* (2007), a volume missing from Peleg's bibliography. Smith shows, very convincingly, that liberals, mainly after the Cold War, were increasingly interventionist, casting off their reticence about military interventions overseas and less burdened by the fall out of the Vietnam War. He explores how liberal internationalist scholars developed DPT, along with arguments about the relative ease with which states could be democratized (on this aspect, Nicolas Guilhot's *The Democracy Makers* [2005] is excellent), and the necessity of loosening the protective power of the concept of national sovereignty to ease military intervention. That is, the intellectual building blocks of the Bush doctrine were not the work of neocons but of liberals who wished to use American power in a Soviet-free world in order to improve it and to spread democracy and freedom. According to President Clinton's national security adviser, Tony Lake, the idea was to expand the zone of liberal market democracies, thereby to expand the zone of peace.

It is certainly the case that the Bush administration took the implications of the DPT agenda far further, mainly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It would have been interesting to see, had the Al Gore-Joe Lieberman ticket been allowed to take office after the 2000 presidential elections, how a supporter of rendition (Gore) and a neocon (Lieberman) would have reacted to 9/11. Of course, this is speculation, but interesting all the same to see whether a Democratic administration--always seen as weak on national security--could have weathered the Republican storm, principally a conservative-nationalist Republican storm, after 9/11. As it is, Vice President Joe Biden was an early supporter of the Iraq war,

as was the current secretary of state, and many other appointees of President Barack Obama's administration. Once again, there are many continuities between the politics of one administration and another, across party divides.

It is also the case that neocons' think tank affiliations were not exclusively in the watertight, neocon think tank world, but ranged across liberal and conservative divides, wherein reside all manner of realists. For example, George Shultz, President Ronald Reagan's secretary of state (1982-89), was a supporter of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq (a militant pro-war neocon grouping) and of the Project for the New American Century, as well as a member of the conservative Hoover Institution and the "liberal" Council on Foreign Relations, and cochair of the liberal internationalist Princeton Project on National Security. Detailed analysis of the interconnections and overlapping membership of "neocon," "liberal," and "conservative" think tanks—even among George W. Bush's appointees—makes this point rather forcefully, once again confirming the degree of consensus across political-ideological groupings on goals and policy objectives, if not details of timing and tactics.[1] Unfortunately, Peleg devotes just one paragraph to the role of think tanks in the run up to the Iraq war (pp.124-125).

Having isolated neocons and Bush from liberalism and conservatism and from previous and current administrations, Peleg sees clear daylight between his own positions and those of Bush and others. Yet, his own approach, in some degree, bears resemblance to the aims of American power animating the Bush administration. He sees America as the "natural leader" of the capitalist-democratic world, especially the "West" (p. 131). He sees American global leadership as essential, and as essentially well meant and for the world's general good. A great deal of Peleg's criticism of the Bush administration relates to the excessive attachment to military means ("overuse of the military option backfired"), excessive nationalism,

excessive insensitivity to other states, and so on, rather than fundamental rejection of the administration's goals (p. 132). At other times, Peleg appears more concerned with the disastrous effects of Bush policies rather than the policies themselves. That is, a case may be made for some overlaps between the objects of Peleg's critique and his own fundamental beliefs.

This is further underlined by the author's general support of a number of neocons' core beliefs—which are really American core beliefs, such as exceptionalism, "imperial universalism," evangelism, and unilateralism—or, at least, practices of several traditions in U.S. foreign policy (p. 51). Peleg calls for a return to the Cold War values and norms of the U.S. foreign policy establishment—moderation, "incrementalism, compromise, gradualism, [and] pragmatism," although it was the practice of such values that led to the Vietnam War (p. 131).[2]

Peleg will be optimistic about the current Obama administration, which, up to now, has exhibited the language of diplomacy, consensus, and moderation, in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Peleg recommends that America aim at consensus-based hegemony rather than global domination, that it work through international organizations and with allies, especially in Europe and the "West." It is the world's "natural leader" after all. Yet, Obama's appointments show significant continuity with both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, as well as a strongly militarist character. That is, the case for continuity between administrations—Republican and Democratic, liberal and conservative—remains strong, suggesting that radical, as opposed to stylistic, changes in U.S. foreign policy are unlikely. Indeed, Peleg recognizes that Bush's second administration inaugurated several changes in its attitude to Iran, North Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, effectively paving the way to continuity with the administration of President Obama.

Peleg's book is stimulating and refreshing: he takes a stand and makes a very strong case. I am not sure that the analysis will stand the test of time but it does provide a strongly argued case that puts the presidency of George W. Bush in the dock and finds it guilty of many crimes. This is thoroughly justified.

Notes

[1]. Donald Abelson, *A Capitol Idea: Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006); and Inderjeet Parmar, "Foreign Policy Fusion: Liberal Interventionists, Conservative Nationalists and Neoconservatives--The New Alliance Dominating the US Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Politics* 46 (2009): 177-209.

[2]. Richard J. Barnett, *Roots of War* (New York: Atheneum, 1972); and Geoffrey Hodgson, "The Establishment," *Foreign Policy* 9 (1972-73): 3-40.

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