September 11 in Retrospect

George W. Bush’s Grand Strategy, Reconsidered

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Ten years after 9/11, we can begin to gain some perspective on the impact of that day's terrorist attacks on U.S. foreign policy. There was, and there remains, a natural tendency to say that the attacks changed everything. But a decade on, such conclusions seem unjustified. September 11 did alter the focus and foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration. But the administration's new approach, one that garnered so much praise and so much criticism, was less transformative than contemporaries thought. Much of it was consistent with long-term trends in U.S. foreign policy, and much has been continued by President Barack Obama. Some aspects merit the scorn often heaped on them; other aspects merit praise that was only grudging in the moment. Wherever one positions oneself, it is time to place the era in context and assess it as judiciously as possible.

BEFORE AND AFTER

Before 9/11, the Bush administration had focused its foreign policy attention on China and Russia; on determining whether a Middle East peace settlement was in the cards; on building a ballistic missile defense system; and on contemplating how to deal with "rogue" states such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea. At many meetings of the National Security Council, officials debated the pros and cons of a new sanctions regime against Saddam Hussein's dictatorial government in Baghdad; they also discussed what would be done if U.S. planes enforcing the no-fly zones over Iraq were shot down. Little was agreed on.

Top officials did not consider terrorism or radical Islamism a high priority. Richard Clarke, the chief counterterrorism expert on the National Security Council staff, might hector them relentlessly about the imminence of the threat, and CIA Director George Tenet might say the lights were blinking red. But Secretary of State Colin Powell, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice were not convinced. Nor was Bush. In August 2001, he went to his ranch for a long vacation. Osama bin Laden was not his overriding concern.

Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld did not invent preemptive and preventive war; they have a long history in U.S. foreign policy.

Bush's foreign policy and defense advisers were trying to define a strategic framework and adapt U.S. armed forces to the so-called revolution in military affairs. The president himself was beginning to speak more about free trade and remaking U.S. foreign aid. During the presidential campaign, he had talked about both a humbler foreign policy and a reinvigorated defense establishment; how he was going to reconcile those goals was still unclear. But in truth, the president's focus was elsewhere, on the domestic arena -- tax cuts, education reform, faith-based voluntarism, energy policy. And then, suddenly, disaster struck.

In response to the attacks, the administration launched a "global war on terror." It chose to focus not on al Qaeda alone but on the worldwide terrorist threat more generally. And it targeted not only deadly nonstate actors but also the regimes that harbored and succored them. To extract actionable intelligence, it resorted to detention, rendition, and, in a few cases, torture.

The administration announced that it was adopting a policy of anticipatory self-defense -- essentially, preventive warfare. Bush declared that he would take action to preclude not only imminent threats but also
gathering ones, and would act alone if necessary. This approach led eventually to war not only in Afghanistan but in Iraq as well.

The administration also emphasized democratization and the notion of a democratic peace. These became key ingredients of the Bush doctrine, especially after weapons of mass destruction (WMD) were not found in Iraq. "We are led by events and common sense to one conclusion," Bush said in his second inaugural address, in January 2005. "The survival of liberty in our land depends on the success of liberty in other lands." Three years after that, as she was about to leave office, Rice also presented this position, saying that she and her colleagues had come to recognize "that democratic state-building is now an urgent component of our national interest."

After 9/11, there was an accelerated buildup of U.S. military and intelligence capabilities. Defense expenditures skyrocketed; counterinsurgency initiatives proliferated; new bases were constructed throughout Central and Southwest Asia; a new military command in Africa was established. The war on terror became the preoccupation of the Bush administration's national security policy.

Alongside its security policies, the administration embraced free markets, trade liberalization, and economic development. It reconfigured and hugely augmented the United States' foreign aid commitments, increasing economic assistance, for example, from about $13 billion in 2000 to about $34 billion in 2008. The administration fought disease, becoming the largest donor to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. It negotiated a deal reducing strategic warheads with Russia, reconfigured the United States' relationship with India, and smoothed over its rocky start with China. And it continued to try to thwart the proliferation of WMD while forging ahead with its work on a ballistic missile defense system. These efforts complemented each other, as the administration was intent on not allowing the proliferation of WMD to stymie its freedom of action in regions deemed important. Nor did it wish to risk the possibility that rogue states might give or sell WMD to terrorists.

Most of these policies -- preemption (really prevention), unilateralism, military supremacy, democratization, free trade, economic growth, alliance cohesion, and great-power partnerships -- were outlined in the administration's 2002 National Security Strategy, a document composed not in the Office of the Vice President or the Pentagon by neoconservatives but in the office of then National Security Adviser Rice, largely by Philip Zelikow, an outside consultant, and revised by Rice and her aides before being edited by Bush himself.

September 11, in short, galvanized the Bush administration and prompted it to shift its focus. Fear inspired action, as did a sense of U.S. power, a pride in national institutions and values, a feeling of responsibility for the safety of the public, and a sense of guilt over having allowed the country to be struck. As the White House adviser Karl Rove would write, "We worked to numb ourselves to the fact of an attack on American soil that involved the death of thousands." Reshaping U.S. policy after 9/11 meant resolving the ambiguities and shattering the paralysis that had marked the first nine months of the administration. Before 9/11, the United States' primacy and security had been taken for granted; after 9/11, Washington had to make clear that it could protect the U.S. homeland, defend its allies, oversee an open world economy, and propagate its institutions.

AMERICA'S QUEST FOR PRIMACY

Some observers have compared the impact of 9/11 on U.S. policy to the impact on U.S. policy of North Korea's attack on South Korea in June 1950. Back then, the Truman administration had also been stunned. It had been pondering new initiatives, but the president was still waffling. He had approved the National Security Council report known as NSC-68 but was not quite ready to implement it. The dimensions of a coming U.S. military buildup were uncertain; the global nature of the Cold War still unclear; the ideological crusade still somewhat inchoate. But Dean Acheson, the secretary of state, and Paul Nitze, the director of policy planning at the State Department, knew they had to reconfirm the United States' preponderance of power, recently shattered by the Soviets' first nuclear test. They knew they had to
increase the United States' military capabilities, regain the country's self-confidence, and avoid being self-deterred. They knew they had to take responsibility for the operation of global free trade and the reconstruction of the West German and Japanese economies (their successful resuscitation was still uncertain). They knew the United States' supremacy was being contested by a brutal and formidable rival with an ideology that had considerable appeal to impoverished peoples beginning to yearn for autonomy, equality, independence, and nationhood. In this context, the North Korean attack not only led to the Korean War but also unleashed a major expansion of U.S. global policy more generally.

The long-term significance of 9/11 for U.S. foreign policy should not be overestimated. Whether or not one thinks that such analogies are appropriate, it is incontestable that Bush and his advisers saw themselves as being locked in a similar struggle. And they, too, sought to preserve and reassert the primacy of the United States while they struggled to thwart any follow-up attacks on U.S. citizens or U.S. territory. Like Acheson and Nitze, they were certain that they were protecting a way of life, that the configuration of power in the international arena and the mitigation of threats abroad were vital to the preservation of freedom at home.

More than Acheson and Nitze, Bush's advisers had trouble weaving the elements of their policy into a coherent strategy that could address the challenges they considered most urgent. It seems clear now that many of their foreign policy initiatives, along with their tax cuts and unwillingness to call for domestic sacrifices, undercut the very goals they were designed to achieve.

Thus, U.S. primacy was ultimately damaged by the failure to execute the occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq effectively and by the anti-Americanism that these flawed enterprises helped magnify. U.S. officials might declare the universal appeal of freedom and proclaim that history has demonstrated the viability of only one form of political economy, but opinion polls throughout the Muslim world have shown that the United States' actions in Iraq and support of Israel were a toxic combination. As liberation turned into occupation and counterinsurgency, the United States and its power were thrown into disrepute.

U.S. primacy was also damaged by the unexpected cost of the protracted wars, recently estimated by the Congressional Research Service to be $1.3 trillion dollars and mounting. It was eroded by the debts that accrued as a result of tax cuts and increased domestic expenditures. Defense spending climbed from $304 billion in 2001 to $616 billion in 2008, even as the U.S. budget went from a surplus of $128 billion to a deficit of $458 billion. Federal debt as a percentage of GDP rose from 32.5 percent in 2001 to 53.5 percent in 2009. Meanwhile, the U.S. debt held by foreign governments climbed steadily, from about 13 percent at the end of the Cold War to close to 30 percent at the end of the Bush years. U.S. financial strength and flexibility had been seriously eroded.

Rather than preventing peer competitors from rising, the United States' interventions abroad and budgetary and economic woes at home put Washington at a growing disadvantage vis-à-vis its rivals, most notably Beijing. While U.S. forces were bogged down in Southwest Asia, China's growing military capabilities, especially its new class of submarines and its new cruise and ballistic missiles, endangered the United States' supremacy in East and Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the U.S. trade deficit with China rose from $83 billion in 2001 to $273 billion in 2010, and total U.S. indebtedness to China rose from $78 billion in 2001 to over $1.1 trillion in 2011.

Rather than preserving regional balances, U.S. actions upset the balance in the region that U.S. officials cared most about, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East more generally. The United States' credibility in the region withered, Iraq was largely eliminated as a counterbalance to Iran, Iran's ability to meddle beyond its borders increased, and the United States' ability to mediate Israeli-Palestinian negotiations declined.

Rather than thwarting proliferation, U.S. interventions on behalf of regime change provided additional incentives for rogue nations to pursue WMD. Iranian and North Korean leaders seem to have calculated that, more than ever before, their countries' survival depended on possessing a WMD deterrent (a message
that has probably been reinforced by the Obama administration's decision to intervene in Libya in 2011 following Libya's renunciation of its nuclear capability several years earlier).

Rather than promoting free markets, U.S. economic woes spurred protectionist impulses at home and complicated trade negotiations abroad. Efforts to expedite the Doha Round of trade talks faltered, and bilateral trade agreements with Colombia and South Korea stalled.

Rather than promoting liberty, the war on terror coexisted with democratic backsliding globally (at least until the recent Arab Spring). U.S. war fighting and counterterrorism nurtured Washington's unsavory relationships with some of the world's most illiberal regimes, such as those in Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. According to Freedom House's 2010 annual report on the state of global political rights and civil liberties, "2009 was the fourth straight year in which more countries saw declines in freedom than saw improvements, the longest continuous period of deterioration in the nearly forty year history of the report."

And rather than thwarting terrorism and radical Islamism, U.S. actions encouraged them. During the war on terror, the number of terrorist incidents rose, and possibly so did the number of jihadists. The U.S. government's own National Intelligence Estimate in 2007 acknowledged that the country lived in a heightened threat environment. A 2008 report on counterterrorism from a respected nonpartisan think tank, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, concluded, "Since 2002-3, the overall US position in the GWOT [global war on terror] has slipped." Although the United States had captured and killed terrorist leaders and operatives, disrupted terrorist networks, seized assets, and built constructive partnerships with counterterrorist agencies abroad, it noted, the gains had been "offset by the metastasis of the al Qaeda organization into a global movement, the spread and intensification of Salafi-Jihadi ideology, the resurgence of Iranian regional influence, and the growth in the number and political influence of Islamic fundamentalist political parties throughout the world." It is possible that the recent killing of bin Laden will reverse these trends, but many leading experts are skeptical.

Criticism is, of course, easy in hindsight. After 9/11, U.S. officials confronted agonizing challenges and choices. In an atmosphere of extreme fear and real danger, their record included important accomplishments and admirable initiatives. They kept pressure on al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations and may well have prevented other attacks on U.S. soil and citizens. They pulled off a major nonproliferation success in getting Libya to abandon its nuclear program, formed a strong relationship with rising powers such as India, and kept relations with China and Russia from boiling over. They reformed and reinvigorated foreign aid, exerted global leadership in the fight against infectious diseases, tried to keep the Doha Round of trade talks moving forward, and raised the profile of democracy promotion and political reform in ways that may have resonated deeply and contributed to the current ferment across the Middle East.

These successes were outweighed by the administration's failure to achieve many of its most important goals. But critics are wrong to say that the policies that failed were radically new or surprising. They were rooted in the past.

9/11 IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Preemptive and preventive actions were not invented by Bush; his vice president, Dick Cheney; and Rumsfeld; they have a long history in the annals of U.S. foreign policy. A century earlier, President Theodore Roosevelt's "corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine was a policy of preventive intervention in the Americas, as were the subsequent U.S. military occupations of countries such as Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Later, President Franklin Roosevelt justified his resort to anticipatory self-defense against German ships in the Atlantic prior to the United States' entry into World War II by saying, "When you see a rattlesnake poised to strike, you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him." Some 20 years on, President John F. Kennedy determined that he could not allow a Soviet deployment of offensive weapons about 90 miles from U.S. shores, and he unilaterally imposed a quarantine -- essentially a blockade and an act of belligerency -- around Cuba during the missile crisis. In Kennedy's view, this was a legitimate
preventive step, notwithstanding the fact that it brought the country to the brink of nuclear war. Responding to the threat of terrorism in the mid-1990s, President Bill Clinton signed a national security directive declaring that "the United States shall pursue vigorously efforts to deter and preempt, apprehend and prosecute ... individuals who perpetrate or plan to perpetrate such attacks." The Roosevelts, Kennedy, and Clinton, along with most of their presidential colleagues, would have agreed with the statement in Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy, which could have been referring to any impending threat, that "history will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action."

Bush and his advisers, moreover, were hardly alone in seeking regime change abroad in the wake of 9/11. Two weeks after the president's "axis of evil" speech in January 2002, former Vice President Al Gore declared, "There really is something to be said for occasionally putting diplomacy aside and laying one's cards on the table. There is value in calling evil by its name." He continued, "Even if we give first priority to the destruction of terrorist networks, and even if we succeed, there are still governments that could bring great harm. And there is a clear case that one of those governments in particular represents a virulent threat in a class to itself: Iraq. . . . A final reckoning with that government should be on the table." A few days later, then Senator Joe Biden interrupted Powell as he was testifying before Congress. "One way or another," Biden said, "Saddam has got to go, and it is likely to be required to have U.S. force to have him go, and the question is how to do it in my view, not if to do it." Two days later, Sandy Berger, who had been Clinton's national security adviser, insisted in his own testimony that although each part of the axis of evil was an unmistakable danger, Saddam was especially pernicious and ominous, saying that he "was, is, and continues to be a menace to his people, to the region, and to us." Berger continued: "He cannot be accommodated. Our goal should be regime change. The question is not whether, but how and when." And Clinton himself subsequently explained why he supported his successor's decision to invade Iraq: "There was a lot of stuff [WMD] unaccounted for. . . . You couldn't responsibly ignore [the possibility that] a tyrant had these stocks. I never really thought he'd [use them]. What I was far more worried about was that he he'd sell this stuff or give it away."

Conventional wisdom says that Democratic officials might have acted differently after 9/11, and it seems likely that they would have worked more diligently to cooperate with allies in Europe. But the Bush administration's use of force to bring about regime change in countries perceived to be threatening in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks comported with what most Americans believed to be desirable at the time. The administration's military buildup, meanwhile, was neither especially bold nor unprecedented. Its quest to avoid peer competitors resembled the U.S. effort to preserve an atomic monopoly after World War II, achieve military preponderance in the wake of the Korean War, preserve military superiority during the Kennedy years, regain superiority during the Reagan years, and nurture unipolarity after the Soviet Union's collapse. Clinton's Joint Chiefs of Staff embraced the term "full-spectrum superiority" to describe the country's strategic intentions. It was during the Clinton years, not the Bush years, that the United States started spending more money on defense than virtually all other nations combined. Scholars and practitioners as varied as Andrew Bacevich, Eric Edelman, John Mearsheimer, and Paul Wolfowitz see more continuity than difference in the strategic goals and military practices of all the post-Cold War administrations.

The similarities extend to rhetorical tropes and ideological aspirations as well. It has become fashionable in some circles to excoriate the ideological fervor of the Bush team. But the affirmation of democratic values was hardly new. It was integral to the Wilsonian and Achesonian visions of the world, if not that of Henry Kissinger and President Richard Nixon. One should recall Kennedy addressing the people of Berlin or launching the Alliance for Progress, President Lyndon Johnson explaining U.S. actions in Vietnam, President Jimmy Carter talking about human rights, and President Ronald Reagan extolling the U.S. role in the world. Their rhetorical tropes resemble Bush's, as do Obama's in his recent speeches. And like his predecessors (and his successor), Bush had little trouble deviating from this message when it suited his administration's strategic or material interests.

Many argue that U.S. policy after 9/11 was distinguished by its unilateralism. But the instinct to act independently, and to lead the world while doing so, is consonant with the long history of U.S. diplomacy,
dating back to President George Washington's Farewell Address and President Thomas Jefferson's first
inaugural speech. During the Cold War, U.S. officials always reserved the right to act unilaterally, even
while they nurtured alliances. Clinton's last National Security Strategy, and Obama's first, explicitly did the
same. There is little doubt that Bush's advisers, inspired by fear and hubris as well as a sense of
responsibility and pangs of guilt, had a greater propensity to act unilaterally than did their Democratic
predecessors or successors. But at the same time, they also articulated a desire to strengthen alliances, a
goal that was pursued to some good effect after 2005.

Bush is linked even more closely to those who came before and after by his embrace of the open door
policy and global free trade. His 2002 National Security Strategy, famous for jettisoning containment and
deterrence and embracing anticipatory self-defense, also contained long sections dealing with promoting
global economic growth, nurturing free markets, opening societies, and building the infrastructure of
democracy. These U.S. policies have a long heritage, dating back to the "open door notes" of Secretary of
State John Hay, President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, and Franklin Roosevelt's Atlantic Charter,
and they have been a staple of many more recent, if less memorable, statements by Clinton and Obama.

GRAPPLING WITH TRAGEDY

The long-term significance of 9/11 for U.S. foreign policy, therefore, should not be overestimated. The
attacks that day were a terrible tragedy, an unwarranted assault on innocent civilians, and a provocation of
monumental proportions. But they did not change the world or transform the long-term trajectory of U.S.
grand strategy. The United States' quest for primacy, its desire to lead the world, its preference for an open
door and free markets, its concern with military supremacy, its readiness to act unilaterally when deemed
necessary, its eclectic merger of interests and values, its sense of indispensability -- all these remained, and
remain, unchanged.

What the attacks did do was alter the United States' threat perception and highlight the global significance
of nonstate actors and radical Islamism. They alerted the country to the fragility of its security and the
anger, bitterness, and resentment toward the United States residing elsewhere, particularly in parts of the
Islamic world. But if 9/11 highlighted vulnerabilities, its aftermath illustrated how the mobilization of U.S.
power, unless disciplined, calibrated, and done in conjunction with allies, has the potential to undermine the
global commons as well as to protect them.

Rather than heaping blame or casting praise on the Bush administration, ten years after 9/11 it is time for
Americans to reflect more deeply about their history and their values. Americans can affirm their core
values yet recognize the hubris that inheres in them. They can identify the wanton brutality of others yet
acknowledge that they themselves are the source of rage in many parts of the Arab world. Americans can
agree that terrorism is a threat that must be addressed but realize that it is not an existential menace akin to
the military and ideological challenges posed by German Nazism and Soviet communism. They can
acknowledge that the practice of projecting solutions to their problems onto the outside world means that
they seek to avoid difficult choices at home, such as paying higher taxes, accepting universal conscription,
or implementing a realistic energy policy. Americans can recognize that there is evil in the world, as
Obama reminded his Nobel audience in December 2009, and they can admit, as he did, that force has a
vital role to play in the affairs of humankind. But they can also recognize that the exercise of power can
grieviously injure those whom they wish to help and can undercut the very goals they seek to achieve.
Americans can acknowledge the continuities in their interests and values yet wrestle with the judgments
and tradeoffs that are required to design a strategy that works in a post-Cold War era, where the threats are
more varied, the enemies more elusive, and power more fungible.

The bitterness that has poisoned American public discourse in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the wars
they triggered should be turned into sorrowful reflection about how fear, guilt, hubris, and power can do so
much harm in the quest to do good. This remains the tragedy of American diplomacy that William
Appleman Williams, the prominent historian, instructed Americans to confront a half century ago.