

## The Myth of the Bush Doctrine

By Jon Perr  
March 9, 2005

These are pretty heady days for the White House and its fellow travelers. In Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Ukraine, Egypt and even Saudi Arabia, movements for popular, democratic change seem to rule the day. The wisdom, rightness and prescience of the Bush Doctrine, they say, have been vindicated.



In triumphant and self-congratulatory tones, the President and his allies are taking credit for the sweeping reform throughout the Middle East. [President Bush](#) proclaimed, "Freedom is on the march." The National Review's [Rich Lowry](#) crowed "Bush has put the United States in the right position to encourage and take advantage of democratic irruptions in the region." And in [Time](#), while "history has yet to yield a verdict on the final outcome", [Charles Krauthammer](#) was not so cautious: "three cheers for the Bush Doctrine."

It's too bad there's no such thing.

For conservatives, the Bush Doctrine is the Rorschach Test as foreign policy paradigm; apparently, it is whatever you see in it. Unfortunately, what the Bush Doctrine has become in the popular imagination is not what how it started life, and certainly not anything that its neoconservative champions would recognize as their own.

The Bush Doctrine has come to have three central tenets. First, "No Safe Havens" states the United States will equate terrorist groups with the states that sponsor, shelter or provide them safe haven. Second is the concept of preemption. The United States will attack nations or groups posing an immediate threat to America, its citizens or interests. Last, the expansion of democracy worldwide is critical to winning the war against terrorism. Freeing the repressed from the yoke of despotic regimes, the argument goes, removes the root cause of terrorism. Besides, democracies never attack each other.

Those three ingredients – no safe havens, preemption and democracy promotion – represent a stunning evolution of Republican foreign policy and an impressive feat of historical revisionism.

### **Whither Democracy?**

The transformation of George Bush is the most striking. In 2000, candidate Bush decried the role of nation building in American foreign policy. In the [October 12, 2000](#) presidential debate with Al Gore, Bush sounded a cautious tone about American unilateralism and its role as global policeman, "If we're an arrogant nation they'll resent us. If we're a humble nation but strong they'll welcome us."

After the September 11 attacks, Bush's worldview changed dramatically. In his [September 20, 2001 address to Congress](#), Bush declared the first principle of the Bush Doctrine.

*We will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.*

The full articulation of Bush's second pillar of national security strategy, preemption, did not come until later. On [June 1, 2002](#), President Bush addressed the cadets at West Point and made clear the role preemptive action would play in the future of American foreign policy and national defense:

*We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systemically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long...Our security will require transforming the military you will lead -- a military that must be ready to strike at a moment's notice in any dark corner of the world. And our security will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives.*

The U.S. claim of right to preemption, with its Pearl Harbor Harbor connotations that so worried Robert F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis, quickly became entrenched in American defense doctrine. Preemption was codified in September with the release of [The National Security Strategy of the United States of America \(2002\)](#). The [Brookings Institution](#) was quick to highlight the sea change for both American security strategy and international law:

*Preemption, defined as the anticipatory use of force in the face of an imminent attack, has long been accepted as legitimate and appropriate under international law. In the new NSS, however, the administration is broadening the meaning to encompass preventive war as well, in which force may be used even without evidence of an imminent attack to ensure that a serious threat to the United States does not "gather" or grow over time. The strategy also elevates preemption in importance, and visibility, within the tool kit of U.S. foreign policy.*

The global promotion of democracy, however, was nowhere to be found in administration thinking prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003. This third pillar, currently equated with the Bush Doctrine, played only a bit part in the 2002 NSS. The document declares an American "war of ideas" that includes "supporting moderate and modern government, especially in the Muslim world, to ensure that the conditions and ideologies that promote terrorism do not find fertile ground in any nation." The President also dedicates a section on "building the infrastructure" of democracy, but the discussion is essentially confined to the context of foreign aid. Aside from admonishments of China and Russia regarding the need for democratic reforms, that's it.

In fact, the word "democracy" is for all intents and purposes missing from the Bush administration's rhetoric regarding the War on Terror prior to the invasion of Iraq. There is no mention of "democracy" in President Bush's address to Congress and the nation on September 20, 2001. Aside from a reference to Russia, it cannot be found in the [June 2002 West Point speech](#). Democracy was absent from [Bush's September 12, 2002 address to the](#)

[UN](#) and his [October 7, 2002 Iraq war justification](#) in Cincinnati. And in the run-up to the invasion, democracy promotion remained essentially invisible in the [2003 State of the Union](#) (ironically, it is mentioned regarding Iran), [March 17 press conference](#), and even during Bush's [March 19 address to the nation](#) declaring the commencement of hostilities. The closest the President could come was one of his favorite platitudes:

*Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity.*

In 2003, God's gift simply had not become an American national security requirement.

### **Better Lucky Than Good**

The Bush administration's conflation of American national security with the expansion of democracy in the Middle East does not come until much later, when evaporating war justifications and conditions on the ground in Iraq required serious attitude adjustment. President Bush, the man who as a candidate called for a "humble" America face to the world, backed into freedom as his calling. With Saddam's [weapons of mass destruction](#), his supposed [9/11 link](#), his [Al Qaeda partnership](#) and all other rationales for the Iraq conflict refuted, democracy promotion was left as the ex post facto causus belli. We did not invade Iraq to promote democracy; we promote democracy because we invaded Iraq.

Fast forward to 2005. [President Bush shows it is better to be lucky than good](#). In Iraq, Ayatollah Sistani saved Bush from himself, insisting on direct national elections rather than U.S. controlled regional caucuses. In Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai is elected president of greater Kabul. Despite the administration's inaction, the situation in the Palestinian territories is transformed with the death of Arafat and the election of Abu Mazen. In Ukraine, Bush ally Vladimir Putin's heavy hand, and possibly poisoned soup, helps lead to the Orange Revolution that makes Viktor Yushchenko a global hero. And in Lebanon, it is Syrian bungling in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, not American policy, which ushers in the Cedar Revolution and the possibility of democracy in Beirut.

All of which brings us to George Bush, born-again democrat, Wilsonian idealist on steroids. His [Second Inaugural](#), [2005 State of the Union](#) address, and [March 8 speech](#) describe a new American vision that is "determined to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." Whether viewed as transformation, revisionism, opportunism or sheer hypocrisy, the Second Inaugural offers perhaps the clearest statement of the third pillar of the latest incarnation of the Bush Doctrine:

*The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.*

### **The Amen Corner**

Like President Bush himself, conservative pundits, propagandists and academics have been transformed into born-again advocates of democratic expansionism. Their history shows that democracy, like fine scotch or caviar, is an acquired taste.

Take neoconservative doyenne Jeane Kirkpatrick. No friend of democracy promotion, it was Reagan's UN ambassador who in 1979 drew the distinction between totalitarian states like the Soviet Union and merely authoritarian states, which included a host of U.S. allies. In

articles like "Dictatorships & Double Standards" (Commentary, November 1979), Kirkpatrick justified American support of repressive, dictatorial regimes as part of the larger struggle against the Soviets and global communism. [John Negroponte](#), Bush's nominee for the post of National Intelligence Director, was clearly an adherent, turning a blind eye to Honduran death squads while serving as American ambassador there in the early 1980's.

Much of the neocon brain trust showed little interest in prioritizing the expansion of democracy prior to our difficulties in Iraq. Paul Wolfowitz's famous redacted and retracted [draft 1992 Defense Planning Guidance](#) (DPG) was a blueprint for American unilateralism that set as its first objective "to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival." On January 26, 1998, the best and brightest of the team at the [Project for a New American Century](#) (including Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, William Kristol, Elliott Abrams and William Bennett) sent a letter to President Clinton calling for regime change in Iraq. Their mission certainly was not to bring democracy to the Iraqi people:

*We urge you to seize that opportunity, and to enunciate a new strategy that would secure the interests of the U.S. and our friends and allies around the world. That strategy should aim, above all, at the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power... We urge you to act decisively. If you act now to end the threat of weapons of mass destruction against the U.S. or its allies, you will be acting in the most fundamental national security interests of the country.*

And where did the conservative punditocracy stand on democracy promotion? [Charles Krauthammer in October 1993](#) defended Mubarak's crackdown in Egypt and the Algerians' attempts to crush the FIS, "It would be not just expedient but right to support undemocratic measures undertaken to avert a far more anti-democratic outcome." And in July 2003, Charles Krauthammer didn't even give one cheer for the Bush Doctrine. In his July 21, 2003 piece, "[Why Did Bush Go to War?](#)", Krauthammer cited the "grave and gathering threat", one that "had not yet even fully emerged, Bush was asserting, but nonetheless it had to be faced because it would only get worse."

As for [Rich Lowry](#), he poignantly expressed his concern for the freedom and democratic aspirations of the people of the Muslim world on September 12, 2001, a day after the attacks on the twin towers:

*The American response should be closer to something along these lines: identifying the one or two nations most closely associated with our enemies, giving them 24-hours notice to evacuate their capitals (in keeping with our desire to wage war as morally as possible), then systematically destroying every significant piece of military, financial, and political infrastructure in those cities.*

## **Hedonism as Foreign Policy**

The short and happy life of the Bush Doctrine, then, is one of political expediency, intellectual dishonesty, and strategic confusion. The United States will punish states providing safe haven to terrorists, except in those countries like Lebanon where we don't. The U.S. will act preemptively against gathering threats from rogue states possessing weapons of mass destruction, especially if they don't in fact have them, as in Iraq, but not when they shortly will, as in Iran and North Korea. And the U.S. will not merely protect free, democratic states as it has in the past. America will spread democracy around the globe,

and end tyranny in our world, unless the world includes China, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, and a host of others.

In a nutshell, there is no "Bush Doctrine." Or more accurately, there are many Bush Doctrines. It is whatever you need to it to be. It is the foreign policy hedonism of President Bush and the conservative ascendancy: if it feels good, do it.

*Also available online at:*

<http://www.perspectives.com/blog/archives/000128.htm>