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**The Rise of the ‘Neocons’ and the  
Evolution of American Foreign Policy**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Powerful countries have always had the capacity and the desire to influence the international system of which they are a part (Watson 1992). What is remarkable about the contemporary era is that one country – the United States – is far more influential in this regard than any other. The US has a unique potential to shape both the rules and regulations that govern the increasingly interconnected international system, and the behaviour of the other states and non-state actors that effectively constitute it. Consequently, in an era of ‘unipolarity’, America’s foreign and domestic policies have assumed an unprecedented prominence in the affairs of other nations and regions as they seek to accommodate, and where possible benefit from, the evolution of American hegemony.

That America was ‘hegemonic’ became clear in the aftermath of World War II, when, the formidable presence of the former Soviet Union notwithstanding, the US was revealed to be the most powerful country on the planet. However that power was measured – military, economic, political or even ‘cultural’ – the US outstripped its rivals and dominated international affairs. Nothing has happened in the interim to change this basic position, despite widespread concerns in the 1980s about the supposed decline in America’s hegemonic position (Keohane 1984; Kennedy 1989). Indeed, the end of the Cold War and the US’s apparent economic renaissance during the late 1990s consolidated its pre-eminent position and appeared to lock-in its dominance for the foreseeable future. And yet the events of September 11, and the subsequent ‘war on terror’ provided a dramatic reminder of both the US’s continuing vulnerability, and about the extent of antipathy toward the US generally and its foreign policy in particular (Sardar and Davies 2002).

To make sense of the extent and impact of American power, we need to place the development of American hegemony in its specific historical context. Before doing that, however, it is important to clarify just what hegemony is and how it differs from the currently more fashionable notion of ‘empire’, which is increasingly used to describe the US’s present global position. Consequently, the first part of this paper provides a theoretical justification for the use of hegemony to describe American power and influence, before going on to trace briefly the evolution of American power over the last fifty years or so. This analysis reveals not only the evolving nature of American power, but also the different ways it has affected Western Europe and East Asia. This provides the basis in the second part of the paper for a more detailed examination of the contemporary period and the rise of the so-called ‘neocons’, some of whom have plainly exerted a powerful influence over recent American foreign policy. An historically informed analysis also has the merit of highlighting some important continuities in

American policy that have structural, rather than contingent or ideological bases. As we shall see, however, agency continues to matter in international affairs, and the neocons have been able to profoundly influence the course and content of contemporary American foreign policy, initially though proselytising and more recently by the accession to power of key neocon thinkers and activists. The central conclusion of this paper is that America's remarkable military, economic and political power provided it with the opportunity to profoundly influence the development of the international system, but the precise way this has happened has owed a great deal to the efforts and ideas of a surprisingly small coterie of intellectuals, the inauguration of a political regime in Washington that was sympathetic to their ideas, and the paradoxical impact of a significantly reconfigured security and geopolitical environment.

### **THEORISING AND HISTORICIZING AMERICAN POWER**

Before we can begin to think about how changes in American foreign policy in particular and 'American' power more generally might affect East Asia, it is important to be as clear as possible about the nature of that power and possible ways of conceptualising it. This section of the paper is intended to provide such a schema. The major contention here is that only a theoretical framework that captures the ideational and agential dimensions of American policy and dominance can help us to understand the potential impact of changes in its foreign policy.

#### *Empire or hegemony?*

The declinist literature of the 1980s has given way to celebratory or alarmist accounts of America's unparalleled, unipolar position. No longer are scholarly treatises primarily concerned about the impact of a decline in American power; now the concern is with the implications of its expansion. Consequently, and in marked contrast to the 1980s and early 1990s, there are numerous analyses that seek to detail the development and consolidation of an 'American empire'. Some of these analyses are unapologetically supportive of such a development, on the grounds that, in an increasingly fractious and chaotic world, only the US has the capacity to impose order and the requisite stability within which economic and political development can occur (Kagan 1998; Mallaby 2002; Boot 2001). As we shall see, this kind of thinking, and the assumptions about both the essentially benign nature of American power and the capacity the US has to assert itself abroad, has profoundly influenced the strategic thinking of the administration of George W. Bush. However, even those observers who take a far more sceptical or critical view about the impact of American foreign policy and the capacity of the Bush administration to implement it, invariably describe these processes in imperial terms

(Harvey 2003; Mann 2003; Johnson 2004; Hardt and Negri 2000). I think this is a mistake that misses something distinctive and important about the nature of contemporary American power, something which sets it apart the sort of political structures that existed in imperial Rome, with which it is frequently compared (Bell 1999; Bacevich 2002).

One of the problems with the use of the term empire is that it is frequently invoked as shorthand for a generally ill-defined form of domination or authority, frequently with pejorative overtones. But the idea of empire or an imperial relationship is quite specific, and if it is to retain its distinctive – and very useful – meaning, it is important to be clear about what it is. Adam Watson (1992: 16) suggested that empire refers to the ‘...direct administration of different communities from an imperial centre’. Even if we extend this definition to include Michael Doyle’s (1986: 45 [emphasis added]) claim that empire ‘...is a relationship, *formal or informal*, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society’, we are still talking about a high degree of direct intervention in the affairs of another state or society. True, Doyle’s formulation captures something interesting about the contemporary era and the way relationships between dominant and subordinate powers are both hierarchical – contrary to what much mainstream international relations scholarship might lead us to believe – and are also frequently maintained through more subtle processes than the simple application of superior coercive power. In this context, current US-led attempts to pacify Iraq and establish a congenial, pro-American regime not only highlight the difficulties of establishing imperial relations, but they may ultimately be the exceptions that prove a more general rule: American power has generally been exercised – and most effectively – when exercised through hegemonic rather than imperial structures and relationships.

Even considering empire as constituted by a continuum that runs from an ‘imperial core’, through dominion, suzerainty, and ultimately hegemony, in which the latter represents the loosest, most indirect, form of control, is not entirely satisfactory (see Buzan and Little 2000: 176-82). This relegates the idea of hegemony to a simply a less intense form of domination, which again misses something about the nature contemporary patterns of dominance and subordination. Unfortunately, this confusion is not made any clearer by the fact that a number of observers operating within a broadly realist tradition use hegemony to describe ‘a state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system’ (Mearsheimer 2001: 40). In this formulation, hegemony is simply a synonym for domination, and the principal measures of this are material resources and military power. More usefully, liberal theorists like John Ikenberry have drawn attention to the particular quality of American hegemony in the post-war period, and the complex array of institutions established in this period,

which Ikenberry argues both define and constrain American power (Ikenberry 2001b; see also Ruggie 1993). Whether one agrees with Ikenberry's essentially benign and positive view of American hegemony or not, he does recognise the historically contingent and distinctive nature of the contemporary order, and the important role norms, values and legitimacy have played in maintaining American dominance. Indeed, Ikenberry is highly sceptical about, and critical of, the neo-conservative foreign policy agenda I shall consider shortly precisely because it is likely to undermine the legitimacy of American power (Ikenberry 2004). Before considering the basis for this claim in any detail, however, it is important briefly to outline the Marxist-derived, Gramscian perspective on hegemony, as a concern with the normative, ideational or ideological dimensions of hegemony is central.

Although there is still some debate about precisely how Gramsci's ideas might be applied to the contemporary era (Germain and Kenny 1998), the potential utility of this approach was spelled out by Robert Cox in a seminal article in the early 1980s. The key insight that emerged from Cox's reading of Gramsci was that:

To become hegemonic, a state would have to found and protect a world order which was universal in conception, *i.e.*, not an order in which one state directly exploits others but an order which most other states (or at least those within reach of the hegemony [sic]) could find compatible with their interests...World hegemony is describable as a social structure, an economic structure, and a political structure; and it simply cannot be one of these things but must be all three. World hegemony, furthermore, is expressed in universal norms, institutions and mechanisms which lay down general rules of behaviour for states and for those forces of civil society that act across national boundaries – rules which support the dominant mode of production (Cox 1983: 171-72).

As we shall see, it has been the US's ability to shape the post-war international order and the specific norms, values and rules promoted by the international financial institutions (IFIs) that has been at the centre American power over the last fifty years or so. It is precisely this more diffuse form of ideational power that is frequently missing from non-Gramscian accounts of hegemony which focus primarily on states and material assets. While this emphasis on the role of ideas, norms and values is an important and increasingly mainstream part in International Relations theory (see, for example, Ruggie 1998; Wendt 1999), it is also guilty of neglecting factors that have assumed renewed prominence in international relations practice. The growing preoccupation with security in the aftermath of September 11 and the Bush administration's more unilateral, pre-emptive policy agenda, serve as salutary reminders that in addition to Cox's political, economic and social elements, hegemony also has an enduring and potentially crucial military component. Before considering how this has become such a major part of the Bush administration's approach and its potential implications, it is useful to consider the nature of the hegemonic order that preceded it. For if the Gramscian approach highlights one thing it is

that US dominance and the specific characteristics of American power are not the inevitable structurally or functionally determined consequences a bi-polar or unipolar order, but reflect a complex interplay of the material and the ideational. In such circumstances the purposes to which particular administrations wish to put America's latent power are critical variables that shape hegemonic outcomes.

### *The ancien régime*

The post-war order created under the auspices of American hegemony had a number of distinctive features. Significantly, however, some of the institutional structures, ideas and practices that are synonymous with the early phase of US dominance generally, and the establishment of the Bretton Woods regime in particular, have either already evolved into something quite different from what their original architects intended, or are likely to be transformed by recent policy initiatives from the current Bush administration. Having said that, it is also important to recognise that economic and security issues have different logics or dynamics, despite the fact that they have - until fairly recently, at least - been a relatively integrated part of the US's overarching geopolitical orientation to the rest of the world (Mastanduno 1998). To make sense of recent policy innovations under Bush II, it is necessary to disentangle the broadly economic and strategic aspects of American policy.

The Bretton Woods institutions - the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) - are the most important expressions of America's post-war dominance and the US's desire to create an institutionalised international order that embodied its norms and values, and which was explicitly designed to avoid the 'mistakes' of the inter-war period when the world's economies collapsed into Depression and autarky (Latham 1997; Leffler 1992). Even if the US has arguably been the principal beneficiary of the liberal economic order it helped create, there is no doubt that others benefited, too. Indeed, the period in which the US provided the aid and investment that facilitated post-war reconstruction in Western Europe and Japan is rightly regarded as the high-water mark of enlightened American diplomacy (Kunz 1997), and provides a telling counterpoint to contemporary policy. By contrast with current policy, the architects of America's post-war policies were keen to ensure that the new international order should be multilateral, and that the sort of bilateralism that was associated with the inter-war period should be actively discouraged (Pollard 1985: 65). Significantly, the design of Europe's nascent security architecture also had a multilateral basis (Weber 1993), something that has subsequently facilitated European integration and given a degree of equality to US-European

relations as a consequence. The situation in East Asia has been very different: US perceptions of the region and its capacity to participate effectively in the emerging transnational institutional architecture led it to develop the distinctive bilateral security framework across the region that persists to this day (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002).

Although American policy toward East Asia has been and remains different to its European-oriented position, this is not to say that some parts of East Asia have not benefited from American hegemony. On the contrary, the earlier phase of American hegemony not only created the general conditions within which the ‘Golden Age’ of capitalist development occurred across much of the world (Glyn et al. 1990), but it also provided a permissive environment within which many of East Asia’s export-oriented, frequently mercantilist regimes were able to prosper: the US provided the crucial markets which underpinned much of East Asia’s post-war industrialisation and turned a blind eye to political practises and economic structures of which it might otherwise have disapproved (Beeson 2004). The US also provided, either directly through aid and investment, or indirectly through the stimulatory impact of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the critical catalyst to underpin development in the non-communist parts of East Asia (Stubbs 1999).

A number of points are worth highlighting about the nature of American hegemony and its differential impact in East Asia. First, American hegemony has always been shaped by the complex interplay of structure and agency, economic and strategic factors, and the contingent and the universal. Consequently, its impact has been quite different in different parts of the world. The political-economies of Western Europe were historically more developed and closely aligned to the American model than were the emerging economies of East Asia, significantly altering the trajectory of post-war development. Crucially, Western Europe has been less reliant on American markets to underpin its development than East Asia. Similarly, while the Cold War may have provided the universal geopolitical backdrop against which development everywhere unfolded, the predilection for bilateral security relations in East Asia mean that the prospects for a process of Western European-style economic, political and – especially – strategic integration were always much more remote. The second point to make, therefore, is that American hegemony has a pronounced regional accent that continues to influence the distinctive course development in East Asia to this day (Beeson 2003).

The third aspect of American hegemony that emerges from this highly truncated consideration of the post-war international order is that the US’s relationship with the world is a two-way street: the fact that the US took upon itself the leadership of the ‘free world’ in the aftermath of World War II, when its pre-eminent position was increasingly apparent, not only

had a powerful impact on the rest of the world, it also profoundly affected and reflected the US's domestic position. The emergence of the American 'security state', and the concomitant influence of what Eisenhower famously described as the 'military-industrial complex', remains a powerful force in US policy-making and has influenced the development and relative strength of America's own domestic political institutions and relationships (Hogan 1998). The emergence of the 'war on terror' has already had a similarly transformative impact on the structure of domestic institutions in the US (Eccleston 2002). The relative importance of strategic issues and the domestic lobbies that attempt to shape public policy in this area will clearly be a function of the wider geopolitical context. It is no coincidence, for example, that the US began to behave more like a 'normal' state as far as foreign policy generally and trade policy in particular were concerned in the aftermath of the Cold War's ending and the waning importance of geo-strategic issues. America's relationship with Japan epitomises the shifting priorities of various American administrations as they sought to reconfigure critical bilateral economic relationships through direct political leverage (Pempel 2004; Schoppa 1997).

The geo-strategic context in which particular relationships are embedded is a potentially critical determinant of the nature of that relationship – bilateral, multilateral, or even unilateral – and of the nature and relative importance of the accompanying ideological or ideational discourse that accompanies it. Clearly, at the height of the Cold War such discourses were a major component of superpower rivalries and the struggle to shape the post-war international order. In the 1990s, when the spectre of inter-state war of any sort became rather more remote, and when economic competition dominated the agenda of policymakers everywhere, ideological contestation became less important (Luttwak 1998). To understand the nature of contemporary hegemony, therefore, when strategic issues are back at the top of the policy-making agenda, we need to combine both the Gramscian emphasis on the role of ideas, institutions and interests, with a recognition of the continuing importance of strategic factors. Hegemony, in other words, is a complex of, and realised within, an amalgam of institutionalised power, dominant ideas and the wider geo-strategic context within which they are embedded. Different hegemonic periods will be shaped by the interplay of these factors, none of which is determinant, but all of which are constraining. To understand American hegemony under Bush II, and the prospects for this administration's distinctive vision, we need to look more closely at the background and development of some of the administration's key players.



## **BUSH II AND THE RISE OF THE ‘NEOCONS’**

An historically-informed analysis of contemporary American foreign policy reveals a number of important continuities with earlier periods, as well as some surprising differences that distinguish the administration of Bush II. Before we can make sense of the latter, however, and recognise how much of a departure *some* aspects of recent policy are, it is helpful to sketch briefly some of more general historical influences on US foreign policy-making.

### *American exceptionalism and the legacy of history*

America’s unique historical development, especially the distinctive social traditions and conditions that emerged from its revolutionary origins, have underpinned the idea of ‘American exceptionalism’. While outsiders may regard the American attachment to liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez faire - which Lipset claims embody the ‘American creed’ - with varying degrees of admiration, incredulity or bafflement, we should not underestimate how powerful a force such ideas have been in defining a sense of national identity and, by extension, American foreign policy. Indeed, unless we recognise how important the moral dimension of both America’s domestic life and its foreign policy remain, we shall not be able to understand why the characterisation of the Bush regime’s post-September 11 policy stance as a ‘war against evil’ resonated so powerfully with so many Americans. As Lipset (1996: 20) points out:

To endorse a war and call on people to kill others and die for the country, Americans must define their role in a conflict as being on God’s side against Satan - for morality against evil, not, in its self-perception, to defend national interests.

Gramscians, critical theorists and the temperamentally sceptical may regard the legitimating discourse that emerged around the ‘war on terror’ with a good deal of suspicion, but in a country where well over 90 per cent of the population profess a belief in God, it is difficult to overestimate the continuing importance of religion generally and Christianity in particular as a source of identity, belief and political mobilisation. Indeed, so powerful does religion remain in American life that some observers question whether the US is a secular state at all (Gray 1998).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, this sense of exceptionalism, and the belief that the US is a unique country with a possibly God-given historical mission, has shaped US foreign policy and given rise to the idea that America and American values must provide a beacon for the world (McDougall 1997). Crucially, however, this is a vision that needs to be actively exported: assumptions about the presumed superiority, universality and desirability of American values, in combination with a growing economic, political and strategic power to impose such a

morally-informed model on other countries, meant that America's increasing engagement with the world would be overlaid with distinctive American norms on the one hand, and inescapable structural dominance on the other. Consequently, the key question has always been about how, rather than if, such an engagement would occur. As Lake (1999) points out, the central story of American foreign policy in the twentieth century when America became hegemonic was not about a conflict between isolationists and internationalists, but between unilateralists and multilateralists. The experience of the catastrophic, unilateralist inter-war period, and the contrast with the decisive role the US played in creating the post-war order appeared to have permanently resolved this tension in favour of the multilateralists. Recent events serve as a reminder that policy is not structurally determined or inescapably path-dependent, but is susceptible to reconstruction by those with an alternative vision, ideology or grand strategy. In other words, what Susan Strange (1994) described as America's 'structural power' in the international system may inevitably make it the dominant power of the era, but this does not determine either the content of its foreign policy or the precise nature of its engagement with the world.

While the specific content of American foreign policy at any given moment may reflect agency more than structure, foreign policy itself has provided an important domestic ideological coherence and underpinned a sense of national identity for an increasingly diverse population (Hunt 1987). National identity and foreign policy exist in a mutually constitutive, dialectical relationship in which – in American, at least - the discursive privileging of democracy occupies a central place (Smith 1994), something which helps to account for the powerful continuities in American foreign policy from the Truman policy of containment to the Bush doctrine of pre-emption. Although the means by which American goals are achieved are contingently determined, and the 'other' in opposition to which an American identity is defined may be very different, key elements of America's sense of itself and the role of its foreign policy display remarkable continuity. Making the world a better place by defending and, where possible, exporting democratic ideals and liberal capitalism have been the recurring leitmotifs of American foreign policy. However, the current generations of neocon thinkers differ from earlier Wilsonian idealists because 'their promotion of democracy is not for the sake of democracy and human rights in and of themselves. Rather, democracy promotion is meant to bolster America's security and to further world pre-eminence' (Wolfson 2004: 46). This creates a potential contradiction and tension in American foreign policy, because there is a presumption about the superiority of America's domestic values and political practices, and a concomitant assumption about and need for its foreign policy and its power to be legitimate

(Nau 2002). It is precisely this domestically-legitimated aspect of American power that is being eroded by current policy: America's image of itself as a champion of freedom and democracy, and the powerful tradition of anti-imperialism in American foreign policy (Smith 1994: 143), is profoundly undercut by the current conflict in Iraq, the rising tide of anti-Americanism world-wide, and the alienation of formerly stalwart democratic allies.

This is arguably the most distinctive and misconceived aspect of contemporary American policy: not only is the war in Iraq, like the war in Vietnam before it, likely to prove divisive in America itself, but it will undermine America's claims to legitimately lead the post-Cold War world and embody its putative moral order. As a number of scholars have observed (Smith 2000; Ikenberry 2001a), American values and the very structures of the US economy and polity seem uniquely in accord with long-run transformations in the international system, structural changes that ought to confirm the centrality and legitimacy of American power. And yet it is precisely these aspects of American primacy that are presently being eroded by the influence of that tight coterie of advisors and ideologues that have come to be known as the neocons. Despite their rapid and recent rise to prominence under Bush II, as with America's overall foreign policy tradition, there are surprising continuities and contradictions hidden beneath the neocon label.

#### *The evolution of neoconservative strategic thinking*

To describe the group of advisers who currently exert such an influence over both Bush II and American foreign policy more generally as neoconservative is something of a misnomer. The label was originally applied to a group of largely Jewish left-wing intellectuals who became increasingly disenchanted with socialism, and who ultimately became prominent opponents of Communism. This grounding in the ideological struggles of the 1950s and 1960s helps to explain the importance attached to influencing the ideational milieu within which policy is shaped, and the prominent role played in American policy debates by journals like *Commentary*, *The Public Interest*, *The National Interest*, and more recently *The Weekly Standard*. Although elements of 'neoconservative' thought can be traced back to seminal policy interventions by George Keenan and Paul Nitze<sup>1</sup> in the late 1940s and early 1950s, figures who did more than anyone else to shape the overall parameters of American grand strategy in the post-war period (Gaddis 1982), 'neoconservatism's first main faction' was led by Irving Kristol and Jeanne Kirkpatrick, former Regan Cabinet member and US representative to the United Nations (Dorrien 1993: 124).

Kristol is frequently considered to be the ‘godfather’ of contemporary neoconservatism, having played a crucial role in promulgating neoconservative ideas through key outlets like *The Public Interest* – a tradition continued by his son William, the current editor of the highly influential *Weekly Standard* and chairman of the Project for the New American Century. Kristol the elder argues that neoconservatism is a ‘persuasion’ rather than a movement, and one grounded in ‘attitudes derived from historical experience’. It is their particularly Manichean reading of history which underpins neoconservatives’ distinctive attitude to state power, an attitude that is fundamentally at odds with America’s more liberal traditions. As Kristol (2003: 24) puts it:

Neocons do not feel that [Hayekian] kind of alarm or anxiety about the growth of the state in the past century, seeing it as natural, indeed inevitable...People have always preferred strong government to weak government ...Neocons feel at home in today’s America to a degree that more traditional conservatives do not.

It is this recognition of the potential importance of American power and the – overstated, as we now know – prospect of its relative diminution that concerned the likes of Kristol and other prominent neoconservatives like Norman Podhoretz (1980), a former editor of *Commentary*. Significantly, it is precisely this aspect of American foreign policy – the nature of American power and the purposes to which it ought to be put – that has so exercised the minds of the current generation of neocons that are presently shaping American foreign policy.

Charles Krauthammer has been one of the key influences on contemporary neocons, and a powerful advocate of a more assertive American foreign policy. The pivotal events for Krauthammer were the Presidency of Ronald Regan during the 1980s, the ‘defeat’ of the Soviet Union during this period, and the emergence of the US as the sole-superpower as a consequence at the beginning of the 1990s (Winik 1996).

Krauthammer (1990-1991: 25) was amongst the first to recognise that the end of the Cold War had created a new era of unipolarity in which the old multilateral order was being replaced by a form of ‘pseudo-multilateralism’, in which America would pay lip service to collective security while acting ‘essentially alone’. In a world of new, emerging threats to stability, there was only one answer:

Our best hope for safety in such times, as in difficult times past, is in American strength and will - the strength and will to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them (Krauthammer 1990-1991: 33).

The presumptions that multilateralism is ineffective and unworkable, that ‘for all the bleating about hegemony, no nation wants genuine multipolarity’, and that the ‘benevolent hegemony exercised by the United States is good for a vast portion of the world’s population’(Kagan

1998: 26 & 31), underpin the sense of ‘realism’, moral righteousness and certitude that inform neocon policy prescriptions. While the neocons may not be the first political clique to fall under the spell of its own rhetoric, what really distinguishes the neocons is the way these ideas crystallised in specific policy proposals and ultimately shaped foreign policy itself.

Like the earlier generation of right-wing activists in Britain that underpinned Margaret Thatcher’s rise to power and her conversion to neoliberal ideas (see Cockett 1994), neocons in the US continue to promulgate their ideas through influential journals and key think tanks like the aforementioned PNAC,<sup>2</sup> the American Enterprise Institute, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, the Hudson Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Center for Security Policy. What is distinctive about the American movement, however, is the current prominence of neocon intellectuals and policy activists within the ranks of the current Bush administration. However, it is important to recognise that neocons were influencing the course of American foreign policy even before their recent accession to power. Present Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, for example, who is widely considered to be the intellectual driving force behind the more unilateral, pre-emptive policy orientation of the current Bush administration, achieved a degree of notoriety as the author of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance.<sup>3</sup> Although the report was deemed too shocking for widespread consumption at the time and subsequently re-written, then Under-Secretary of Defense Policy Wolfowitz outlined a number of the policies – especially the active pursuit of American military dominance and the unilateral application of power – that have become the centre-piece of foreign policy under Bush II and are now widely regarded as mainstream policy positions. This discursive transformation is indicative of just how much the debate has shifted, and just how influential neocon ideas have become.

Richard Perle, former Assistant Secretary of Defense during the Regan era, founder of Center for Security Policy, Fellow of the American Enterprise Institute and advocate of the forceful reordering of the Middle East, has been another prominent neocon intellectual who has helped redefine American foreign policy. Like Wolfowitz, Perle is Jewish. While this shouldn’t matter, it may. It is hardly anti-Semitic to observe that Perle has close links to Israel’s right-wing Likud party and was the architect of a commissioned report - *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*<sup>4</sup> – which called for the abandonment of negotiating land for peace with the Palestinians and advocated Israel’s right to use pre-emptive force where necessary. Similarly, Wolfowitz was widely considered to have been Israel’s strongest supporter in the Reagan administration (Mann 2004). The point to make is that the long-standing pro-Israelii stance in the US, which has become such an apparently non-negotiable

part of American foreign policy, can be traced, in part at least, to neocon influences and thinking. Indeed, this pro-Israeli bias has been consolidated by the appointment of Elliott Abrams to head the National Security Council. Abrams is a prominent advocate of 'regime change' in the Middle East and, despite having been indicted for lying to Congress about his role in the Iran-Contra scandal, exerts a powerful influence over current policy (Lobe 2002 - online version).

There is, then, a decades-long tradition of neoconservative thinking that has advocated a more forceful utilisation of American power, a less inhibited championing of 'American values', and a concomitant recalibration of American foreign policy priorities - of which support of Israel has become a crucial, non-negotiable component. The ending of the Cold War, the increased concern with radical Islam, and the election of a foreign policy ingénue like Bush the younger created the preconditions within which the neocon agenda could be unambiguously be realised.

#### *Grand strategy, Bush II, and the 'war on terror'*

If US foreign policy is informed by a grand strategy, the present era is clearly one based on the development and application of American primacy (Posen and Ross 1996-97). The pursuit of 'full spectrum dominance', or permanent, overwhelming military superiority in every sphere (see Klare 2002), the repudiation or selective use of multilateralism (Martin 2003), and the desire to contain challenges to American hegemony are not simply characteristic of contemporary policy under Bush II, as we have seen, such ideas have been in circulation for more than a decade. What they required to become the basis of policy was a favourable conjuncture of international and domestic circumstances. The installation of influential neocon thinkers and activists in the Bush administration was the key domestic precondition for the recalibration of American foreign policy. In addition to Wolfowitz, Perle and Abrams, other key neocon figures to obtain powerful positions included: Michael Ledeen<sup>5</sup> (principal advisor to Karl Rove – Bush's own key advisor); Lewis 'Scooter' Libby, chief of staff and national security advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney; and John Bolton, Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security and former vice president of the American Enterprise Institute. The critical international factor that allowed the neocons to consolidate their influence on American foreign policy was, paradoxically, enough, September 11.

Despite the furore currently swirling around the question of what the Bush administration could or should have known or done before S11 (Clarke 2004; Woodward 2004), it is important to recognise that in the immediate aftermath of the original attacks, S11

was seen by key Bush administration figures like Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld as an opportunity to more aggressively expand American hegemony and pursue long-term goals that might have been difficult to justify otherwise (Bacevich 2002: 227; Daadler and Lindsay 2003: 13). In this context, it is useful to distinguish between long-term strategic goals like regime change in Iraq and the desire to use American power to reshape the Middle East (Gordon 2003), with the ad hoc and occasionally inept tactical conduct of the ‘war on terror’ (Woodward 2003; Clarke 2004). Consequently, the major significance of the ‘war on terror’ was to give a strategic rationale and ideological gloss to both a major shift in the US’s own strategic doctrine, and to a profound change in the status and operation of the multilateral order that had prevailed for the preceding fifty years or so (Martin 2003). The new order was captured in the so-called doctrine of pre-emption, in which the US claimed the right to act unilaterally and pre-emptively - in defiance of international law and principle - to counter perceived threats to its own security (Bush 2002; White-House 2002).

Even if Daadler and Lindsay (2003: 15) are correct to claim that Cheney and Rumsfeld are ‘assertive nationalists’ rather than neocons, and that their actions have been informed more by realpolitik than ideology, the salient point is that their actions have been congruent with and influenced by neocon views about grand strategy and the appropriate use of American power. Indeed, if Rumsfeld and Cheney were simply un-reconstructed realists they should have been far less enthusiastic about the invading Iraq, for as two prominent realist scholars have pointed out, Iraq and Saddam Hussein were susceptible to traditional forms of inter-state containment (Mearsheimer and Walt 2003). To understand the priority attached to regime change in Iraq, and the egregious exaggeration of the threat Iraq posed, we need to recognise that the ‘essence of the Bush strategy’ was part of a much more long-standing desire to ‘use America’s unprecedented power to remake the world in America’s image’ (Daadler and Lindsay 2003: 123).

In part, then, recent US policy is an extension of an older tradition of American exceptionalism and a desire to export the democratic and liberal values which accompany it. While the linking of American foreign policy to such lofty objectives may provide a convenient ideological smoke-screen for, and consolidate the grip of, an economic order which disproportionately benefits the US (Robinson 1996), it is also true that such expansive ideals are taken seriously in an American nation that remains ideologically, culturally and temperamentally different from even its closest allies (Kagan 2003). In short, there are powerful ideational forces that help explain the shape of current American policy. There are also more prosaic and tangible ones: as the *National Energy Policy* (NEPDG 2001) report

(which Vice President Cheney chaired) made clear, US dependence of foreign oil increased from 35 to over 50 per cent between 1973 and 2000, a situation that will get worse, and see the US increasingly dependent on the Middle East for future oil supplies. It is not necessary to be a conspiracy theorist or argue that the Iraq invasion was ‘all about oil’ to recognise that the stability of the Middle East has a far greater importance for America’s long-term strategic, economic and domestic political position than, say, Africa, whose citizens might have equally compelling claims to American attention on the grounds of human rights abuses and predatory despotism. Certainly the Middle East’s strategic importance was clear to an ex-oil company executive like Cheney who argued that Iraq’s unpredictability and potential hostility meant that there might be a ‘need for military intervention’ (quoted in Mann 2003: 208). The increased importance of Central Asia – and the US’s willingness to tolerate Iraq-like human rights abuses by the leaders of a number of Central Asian republics (see, Johnson 2004) – is further evidence of the strategic importance of oil, the increasingly global reach of American grand strategy, and the selective nature of the Bush administration’s moral outrage.

While America’s more assertive, unilateral, pre-emptive and militaristic grand strategy may have been decades in the making and owe a great deal to the influence of successive generations of broadly neoconservative thinkers and policy activists, it is unlikely to survive for long in its current form. Nation-building and the establishment of stability is plainly a far more challenging, longer and expensive process than winning military victories against vastly inferior foes (Rhodes 2003). Empires are expensive, and it is as much this as any other factor that is likely to undermine the hopes of the neo-imperialists: the rapidly deteriorating budgetary position in the US means that it simply cannot afford such foreign adventures despite the scale of the American economy (Ferguson and Kotlikoff 2003). More fundamentally, perhaps, not only is US imperialism especially difficult for Americans to justify normatively, it doesn’t have a good track record: as Schwenninger (2003: 36) points out, those areas where the US has intervened most directly and enjoyed the greatest dominance – the Middle East, and Central and South America – have also been the most troubled and unstable. It is becoming painfully clear that utilising America’s undoubted power is a good deal more complex than the ideologically driven views of the neocon strategists would have us believe. It will be interesting to see whether a group that prides itself on its hard-headedness and realism can address the problems of mundane reality that are becoming so apparent in the Middle East.

## **CONCLUSION**



Security issues look set to dominate the foreign policy agenda of the Bush regime for the foreseeable future. And yet, containing, let alone defeating, terrorism would seem to require a long-term, multifaceted effort that encompasses long-term economic and political reform, and a major re-thinking of the way America's international relations are conducted (Cronin 2002). It is increasingly uncontroversial to suggest that America's coercive, militaristic strategy since September 11 is actually more likely to generate resentment, opposition and terrorist actions than it is to eliminate them (Mann 2001). Even if we put to one side the fact that the entire rationale for the attack on Iraq was debateable at best, fraudulent at worst, recent events have highlighted just how ill-conceived the strategy was and how open-ended the commitment remains. The intention of this paper has not been to assess the efficacy of America's response to terrorism or perceived threats to domestic security, however. Rather, I have attempted to describe the way an influential coterie of ideologues came to exert such a powerful influence over the construction of American foreign policy. By way of conclusion, therefore, I want to highlight a number of implications that flow from the rise of the neocons and the reconfiguration of American foreign policy.

First, it makes a difference who runs America. The major part of American power is undoubtedly structural and based on its overwhelming strategic dominance, economic weight and political leverage. However, the actions of the Bush administration and their preconceived determination to implement regime change in the Middle East, pursue even greater military dominance, and overturn the existent multilateral order, serve as powerful reminders that agency continues to matter. The contrast with the Clinton administration, which showed a greater willingness to cultivate allies, act multilaterally and to avoid foreign entanglements where possible, is a telling one; as is the disdainful view of the neocons which characterise such earlier policies as vacillation. And yet as Chalmers Johnson (2004: 255) perceptively points out, in many ways 'Clinton was actually a much more effective imperialist than George W. Bush': because American power was less coercive, and operated more indirectly through the international institutional architecture the US was instrumental in creating, and over which it continues to exert a dominant influence (Woods 2003), it was able to achieve its goals at less cost and with less resistance. The situation now could hardly be more different, as formerly stalwart allies like Germany and France distance themselves from the policies of the Bush regime, and as hostility to the US around the world grows rapidly (PRC 2004).

Consequently, the second point to make is both practical and theoretical: 'American interests' may be rather more diverse than this label implies, but they are likely to be better served when American power is institutionalised and perceived as legitimate. Put differently,

those models of hegemony that take the ideational aspect of American power seriously, and which recognise the US's historical capacity to legitimately play a dominant role in creating the rules, regulations, and institutions that pass for global governance, not only provide a more complete understanding of the way American power has operated over the last fifty years or so, they may provide a more durable blue-print for its continuing application and rehabilitation. For a group of intellectuals that were initially so alive to the importance of ideas in winning policy debates and re-shaping the conventional wisdom in America, it is striking and revealing that this insight seems to have been forgotten or – more accurately – not applied widely enough. Recent events remind us that to be effective and durable, ideas, policies and even grand strategies need to have a purchase beyond the political elites that shape policy in Washington, but must also have some sort of wider national and even transnational institutional and societal embedding.

The third point that emerges from a consideration of contemporary foreign policy is that for all the attention paid to America's 'soft power' and the undoubted attraction of many aspects of American lifestyles and living standards (Nye 2002), the legitimacy of American ideas and policies is being systematically eroded by a highly doctrinaire, ideologically-driven and nationalistic administration. This is an especially egregious failing given that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the Cold War ended and with no rivals for global leadership, the US found itself in a unique, unipolar position. As David Armstrong (2002: 78) perceptively points out:

With the Soviet Union gone, the United States had a choice. It could capitalize on the euphoria of the moment by nurturing cooperative relations and developing multilateral structures to help guide the global realignment taking place; or it could consolidate its power and pursue a strategy of unilateralism and global dominance. It chose the latter course.

Given the US's unprecedented global dominance, we must all live with the consequences of that choice. If nothing else it is a reminder that agency matters at moments of historical fluidity. Unlike an earlier generation of American policymakers in the aftermath of World War II (Beeson and Higgott 2003), however, the US has used its hegemonic position to pursue - unilaterally and militarily – narrowly, nationally conceived goals that are not only generally misconceived and corrosive of the established international order, but which – unlike the previous era - offer little to the majority of the world's population. It may be that some testing of the limits of, and possibilities inherent in, American unipolarity was an inevitable

consequence of the unique geopolitical circumstances that become more apparent as the 1990s wore on. America's remarkable structurally embedded dominance means that whoever is in power in the US they will inevitably exercise a profound impact on the rest of the world. What the rise of the neocons demonstrates is that this latent potential can be bent to ideological ends that may profoundly undermine the existent international system and the complex relationships, political structures and normative values that have underpinned it for some fifty years. Thus one of the great ironies of the rise of the neocons is that they have proved to be anything but conservative, and may yet have a more destructive impact on the old order than Osama Bin Laden could ever hope to have.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Nitze in particular was a mentor for both Wolfowitz and Perle in the early stages of their respective careers. See Mann (2004).

<sup>2</sup> The Project for the American Century has been an especially influential institution, not least for publishing Kagan and Kristol's (2000) edited collection *Present Dangers*, which included many of the leading neocon strategists like Perle, Wolfowitz and Abrams, and which has provided a blueprint for the Bush Administration's foreign policy.

<sup>3</sup> While this document was initially highly restricted and actively suppressed before being substantially re-written, it is now available in edited form. See *Frontline*, at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/iraq/etc/wolf.html>

<sup>4</sup> A copy of this report may be read at: <http://www.israeleconomy.org/strat1.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Ledeen is especially notorious for his views about the supposed basis of relations between nations, his strong support for Israel, and his contempt for the Oslo peace process as a consequence. He is quoted as saying that 'I don't know of a case in history where peace has been accomplished in any way other than one side winning a war and imposing terms on the other side'. Cited in Lobe (2003).

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