

Political Division in the White House

By Jerry Harris

From the beginning the George W. Bush administration intended to assert US power as hegemonic and unilateralist, turning its back on the globalist policies of Bill Clinton. But the administration has been politically split between neoconservatives and geopolitical realists. The resulting policy battles have pulled the White House in different directions over how best to accomplish its goals. Although the policy positions of the major players converge and depart on different questions of strategy, together they represent the most nationalist wing of the military/industrial complex.

The saga of the Bush family is closely related to the national security state and oil wealth. In the Washington Post Jonathan Yardley wrote, "It is an extraordinary record. If there are other families who more fully epitomized and risen alongside the hundred-year emergence of the US military-industrial complex ...no one has identified them." (1) Although coming from this background George W. Bush had almost no foreign policy experience. In fact, during the presidential campaign when asked to name the prime ministers of several countries, including Pakistan and India, he was unable to do so. What determines Bush's world vision is his Christian fundamentalism and a belief in good and evil. This was perhaps the perfect president for the ideologically driven neoconservatives. Bush was a blank page on which to write a foreign policy that divides the world into two simple camps, the US and everybody else. As the president stated, "You either with us or against us." For Bush the US represents Western civilization and everything good and the terrorists are "evil-doers." It's a simplistic view that serves the strategy of US hegemony. After all, globalism and multilateralism are complex and messy and don't fit nicely into a black and white world. With family ties to the realist tradition of the national security state and his own conversion to religious fundamentalism Bush is influenced by both political camps in the White House.

Geopolitical realism has long been a major trend in US foreign policy circles. Its viewpoint sees the international system based on competitive nation states where no long-term friends exist, only economic, political and security interests. From this nation centric worldview the merging of a borderless global economy threatens the loss of national control and state based power. But military strength can forcibly reestablish US security and economic leadership. This hard edge nationalism is represented by Vice-President Dick Cheney, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. This drive for preeminence by the realists connects strongly to the neoconservative thesis that with the fall of the Soviet Union the US has the opportunity to become the sole hegemonic power in the world. This drive by necessity is unilateralist with the US determining the direction and goals of all major world policies. The United Nations, multilateral entanglements and globalist's consensus are obstacles to building a pax Americana.

Former UN representative Jeannie Kirkpatrick expressed a common concern shared by neoconservatives and hard power realists when she argued that, "Foreign governments and their leaders, and more than a few activists here at home, seek to constrain and control American power by means of elaborate multilateral processes, global arrangements and UN treaties that limit both our capacity to govern ourselves and act abroad." (2)

There is also a somewhat softer version of the realist foreign policy approach and this is where Secretary of State Colin Powell finds his niche. Powell actually represents the majority viewpoint among realists in Republican foreign policy circles. Although it may seem at times he is isolated in the Bush White House this broader base of support provides Powell with significant clout. Here we can see the influence of George Bush Senior, his National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, and former secretaries of state James Baker, Lawrence Eagleburger and others. These realists see a world of competitive states but believe that the US can best achieve its aims through leadership of a multilateral international system. This is the preferable, although not essential, method of global leadership. In this strategy the soft power of US culture, political democratic history and economic might can be used to influence and lead, relegating military power to one choice among others. Most globalists can live with this approach because it opens the door to their concerns and transnational viewpoint.

Powell's push for a US led multilateral effort against Iraq follows from his experience in the first Gulf War under George Bush. Desert Storm was backed by a very impressive international coalition working with UN sanctions. Powell's attempt to win UN support for a new invasion was backed by just about every major Republican foreign policy figure. There was an extraordinary period in September 2002 when Scowcroft, Baker, Eagleburger and Henry Kissinger hit every major media outlet insisting the White House appeal to the UN for support. This was a very consciously organized effort against Cheney, Rumsfeld and the neoconservatives who were openly calling the UN an irrelevant and bankrupt organization. Failing to convince, bribe and threaten other countries into support Powell accepted the "coalition of the willing" as the only way forward to achieve their aims in the Middle East.

Powell and Rumsfeld have clashed in another important arena, over the nature and composition of the US military. Rumsfeld is a strong advocate for the "revolution in military affairs." This is a widely debated structural change in the organization and technological base of the military. Rumsfeld wants a smaller more flexible and integrated military using information technology to transform every service branch. Such a force could react more quickly to security threats throughout the world, rely less on messy alliances and leave a smaller footprint inside invaded countries. Having a smaller but more effective force would also lower the casualty rates and lower political costs at home. This also means expanding missile programs, space based weapon systems and computer directed weapons such as drones. For Rumsfeld and the neoconservatives this is the surest path to achieve military hegemony. The strategy uses America's technological lead to stay far ahead of any competitor and increases the rapid reaction time and reach of military forces. US hegemonists foresee military involvement in an array of countries stretching from the horn of Africa through the Middle East, beyond Southeast Asia and out into the Pacific. This stretch is not achievable with a military bogged down by heavy weapon systems and an impossibly large force of soldiers. The economic and political costs are just too great. Therefore the revolution in military affairs becomes an essential ingredient for their strategy. This military doctrine was first tried in Afghanistan where it was a spectacular success.

The Powell Doctrine developed with Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberg under President Ronald Reagan was a reaction to the US defeat in Viet-Nam. This strategy calls for overwhelming initial military force, political support at home, international agreement abroad and a clear exit plan. None of this was achieved in the Iraq War. In terms of military organization the force size became a hotly debated point. It was openly known that Rumsfeld rejected General Frank's plan for up to 300,000 troops to enter Iraq. This was in-line with the overwhelming force doctrine but contradicted

Rumsfeld's desire to use the invasion to push the changes he believed necessary. During the first ten days of the war as the long US supply lines were subjected to guerrilla attacks criticism quickly surfaced that not enough troops had been sent. With the rapid fall of Baghdad the debate swung towards Rumsfeld, but unable to control post-war security the debate has continued and became more bitter. Another important aspect of the debate is the need for international support to provide troops to relieve US forces. This cuts against the unilateral hubris of Rumsfeld even as tours of duty are extended and the retirement of 30,000 troops halted forcing an extension of their service because of the shortage of soldiers.

The state of the US military today leaves both Powell and Rumsfeld in difficult positions. In a report by Minqi Li he states: "Out of the US Army's thirty-three brigades, sixteen are now in Iraq, two are in Afghanistan, two are in South Korea, and one is in Kosovo. Of the twelve brigades in the United States, three are in modernization training, three are in reserve for possible war in Korea, and two are going to relieve the troops in Afghanistan. There are only four brigades left to relieve the sixteen brigades in Iraq. In effect, the United States has exhausted its entire regular army just to occupy such totally impoverished third world countries as Afghanistan and Iraq." (3) It seems Powell's overwhelming force doctrine is good for only one war at a time while Rumsfeld's smaller military is too small for the task on hand.

Lastly we need to consider the band of neoconservative cadre that is most responsible for the hegemonic direction of US international strategy. The neoconservatives have their own particular history coming out of certain academic circles and the right wing of the Democratic Party during the Viet-Nam War. They coalesced in a number of think tanks and journals with strong links to the Likud Party in Israel and began to occupy influential posts in the Reagan administration. Although the realists obtained the senior positions in the Bush White House, neoconservatives were given the number two and three spots in important areas. Among the most influential are Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense; Douglas Feith, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy; John Bolton, Under Secretary of State; Lewis Libby, Chief of Staff for the Vice President; Elliot Abrams, Special Assistant to the President; and Richard Perle, ex-chair of the Defense Policy Board.

Neoconservatives saw the fall of the Soviet Union as a golden opportunity to assert US hegemony. This was conceived as a unilateral project that would extend over the next century, allowing no rivals to gather the strength to challenge US domination. Similar to the realists, neoconservatives see a Hobbsian world of chaos and competition. But unlike the realists who are driven primarily by security concerns, the neoconservatives attach greater importance to ideas and values. It was their emphasis on ideology that allowed them to produce the most clearly stated and strongly argued position for US preeminence. For neoconservatives the US must assume the task of promoting free market capitalism, Judeo-Christian ethics and the culture and politics of Western civilization. This can be done best under US tutelage not globalist guidance which is tainted with European socialism and weak moral values. To the neoconservatives globalism at best is a fantasy in a world beset by dictators and weapons of mass destruction, at worst it's a surrender of US interests and a betrayal of American cultural values. For US unilateralists only America has the will and strength to maintain security, acting as the thin blue line in a world ghetto filled with barbarians.

As part of this project the US should assume the task of nation building, not unlike Rudyard Kipling's "white man's burden" propagated during the British Empire. It is from this viewpoint that we hear the discourse about bringing democracy to the Middle East and Iraq. As Wolfowitz once commented, "Nothing could be less realistic than the version of the realist view of foreign

policy that dismisses human rights as an important tool of American foreign policy.” (4) But for neoconservatives democracy is synonymous with free markets and neo-liberal economics, so the privatization of statist Middle East oil and energy interests define their nation building vision while direct elections are debated as an expedient tactical question.

It's this attention to ideology and nation building that separates the neoconservatives from the realists of both the Rumsfeld and Powell camps. Realists believe in pursuing US vital interests. Their disagreement with Clinton was that Kosovo, Somali and Haiti were not vital interests and a waste of time, money and resources. Nation building was criticized as globalists over extension. The job in both Afghanistan and Iraq is simply to make them secure and guard against their use as terrorists base camps or threats to US interests. Both neoconservatives and realists agree that oil is vital to US interests. But setting up governments, opening schools, building highways and providing jobs are all secondary concerns to the realists. As Dr. Rice stated, “The president must remember that the military is a special instrument. It is lethal and it is meant to be. It is not a civilian police force. It is not a political referee. And it is most certainly not designed to build a civilian society.” (5)

Given the realist rejection of nation building it's no small wonder that they find the task so difficult in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their failure to plan for post-war Iraq is directly related to their political rejection of globalist nation building. Neoconservatives may have advocated more attention but their disdain for the UN, the one institution with the most experience in civil restoration, undercut their ability to devise a reasonable plan of action. Blinded by their cultural arrogance and their political ignorance of Iraqi realities they believed their own propaganda that US troops would be received by flowers, kisses and oil contract. Both camps are now caught in a situation neither was prepared for. As the US occupation deteriorates they lurch back and forth in their dogmas unable to devise a plan to stabilize Iraq and unable to declare a clear victory. As the goal of world hegemony sinks into the desert sands US imperialism once again appears as a paper tiger. As in Viet Nam the human toll is tremendous but global dominance has become impossible.

1. Yardley, Jonathan. “The Ruling Class, a family saga of secrecy, oil money and privilege.” Washington Post. (January 11, 2004) p. TO1.
2. Kilpatrick, Jeanne. “American Power – for what?” Commentary (January 2000)
3. Li, Minqi. “After Neoliberalism, Empire, Social Democracy, or Socialism?” Monthly Review (January 2004) pp. 21 – 36.
4. Desch, Michael. “Liberals, neocons, and realcons.” Orbis, V. 45, No. 4. (Fall) p. 25.
5. Harding, James. “Comments and Analysis: Weakness in the White House.” Financial Times, (Sept. 15, 2003) p. 13.