

Apology for the Commander-in-Chief

George Walker Bush will take leave of office next January. If the merits of a presidency are to be judged by public opinion, then Mr. Bush faces grim prospects for his end-of-term evaluation. CNN has pronounced him “the most unpopular president in modern American history”¹, while domestic disapproval ratings consistently exceed 60%². The Clinton and Obama campaigns regularly evoke the Bush administration’s “failed policies” in an attempt to appeal to voter discontent, and even the Republican nominee seems to have been cautioned to keep his distance. Amidst all this negativity, perhaps the president himself feels a bit discouraged as he nears the final months of his last term in office. Fortunately, though, the judgement of History is not so superficial, nor does it issue so immediate a verdict. Before too many decades pass by, George W. Bush may come to be regarded as the most important and influential architect of United States national security strategy since Harry S. Truman, though most Americans (and European heads of state) are so far oblivious to the prospect. What follows is an apology, in the old sense of the word meaning a justification or defence, for our commander-in-chief. It was the Bush administration that first confronted the most alarming national security threat since the Cold War, dramatically redesigning America’s security strategy to defend against this new and unprecedented vulnerability. For many presidencies to come, Democrat or Republican, it will be the Bush national security strategy that serves as model and precedent. He was not Mr. Popular, but on the issue that mattered most, he was right.

We have had almost seven years’ time to step back and with the charm of distance observe the full historical significance of September 11, 2001. Yet many have missed the big picture, partaking instead in the illusion that 9/11 was merely an isolated national tragedy with no further implication. Luckily, the folks at the wheel understood soon enough the strategic importance of that fateful morning. For all of American history up to 2001, the principal threat to our security came from hostile states. United States national security strategy was therefore framed accordingly, as most recently with the strategies of containment and deterrence at the start of the Cold War. The principles of these strategies were mostly fixed and simple: despite its eccentricities, the Soviet Union always remained a legitimate state actor. As a state, it had definite interests, fears, and vulnerabilities. As a state, the Soviet Union could be effectively contained and deterred by American spheres of influence and credible threats of retaliation. First conceived by the administration of Harry S. Truman, containment and deterrence successfully preserved U.S. security throughout the Cold War and eventually led to the defeat of world communism. But the events of September 11 made it disturbingly clear that the strategies of the Cold War have since become outdated. By 2001, the principal threat to American security no longer came from aggressive states, but

¹“Poll: More disapprove of Bush than any other president” CNN. 1 May 2008, Accessed on 15 July 2008. <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/05/01/bush.poll/>

²“President Bush Job Approval” Accessed on 15 July 2008. <http://www.realclearpolitics.com/polls/>

from Islamist gangs feeding on the power vacuums of weak and failed states. In retrospect, the condition of government and state power in much of the Middle East since the Cold War should have been an obvious hint, but the attacks on September 11 were indeed without precedent, and it would take such an attack to shock the administration to action. “It was not just the Twin Towers that collapsed on the morning of September 11, 2001,” writes Yale historian John Gaddis. “So too did some of our most fundamental assumptions about international, national, and personal security.”³

The president and his advisers were not unaware. In a speech to graduates of the United States Military Academy nine months after the attacks, President Bush articulated clearly and with full historical consciousness that the circumstances of American security have changed:

“In defending the peace, we face a threat with no precedent. Enemies in the past needed great armies and great industrial capabilities to endanger the American people and our nation. The attacks of September the 11th required a few hundred thousand dollars in the hands of a few dozen evil and deluded men. All of the chaos and suffering they caused came at much less than the cost of a single tank.”⁴

Three months later in the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) statement, President Bush again acknowledged that the United States had entered a new era of national security strategy:

“For most of the twentieth century, the world was divided by a great struggle over ideas: destructive totalitarian visions versus freedom and equality. That great struggle is over. The militant visions of class, nation, and race which promised utopia and delivered misery have been defeated and discredited. America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones. We are menaced less by fleets and armies than by catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few.”⁵

Perhaps the single most defining document of the Bush administration, the 2002 NSS

³Gaddis, John Lewis. *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience*. Harvard University Press: March, 2004.

⁴“President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech at West Point” Office of the Press Secretary, The White House. June 1, 2002. Accessed on 15 July 2008. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>

⁵*The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Bush Administration, September 2002. Accessed on 15 July 2008. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2002/index.html>

statement also lays forth a redesigned security strategy for confronting these new vulnerabilities. Containment and deterrence won the Cold War, but as Yale historian John Gaddis writes, they are ineffective against terrorists: “How...do you contain a shadow? How do you deter someone who’s prepared to commit suicide?”⁶

The solution, as set forth in the 2002 NSS statement, has come to be known as the Bush Doctrine. It begins by recognizing that terrorism is in fact an indicator of a much deeper affliction taking place in the Middle East: the erosion of legitimate state authority. That affliction does not only threaten international security, but also the very means of preserving that security, namely the modern international system of states. States can negotiate peace agreements with one another. States will defend the human dignity of their citizens. States may even go to war with one another, but usually with the understanding of preserving a better peace afterward, as with the European balance of power struggles. For three and a half centuries, this system of legitimate state actors has been the primary means of preserving international security. Save for one major impediment, that system seems in good shape: “Today, the international community has the best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war. Today, the world’s great powers find ourselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos.”⁵ In fact, the international system is under attack. Terrorists do not play by the rules—when a gang of radicals with some box cutters can cause such catastrophe as 9/11, conventional methods of national and international security have clearly been undermined. The affliction in the Middle East is an accelerating feedback cycle. Weak states and power vacuums provide the discontent and anarchy that terrorist networks thrive on. Terrorism in turn seeks to further undermine the power of states and threaten the functionality of the international state system. Some governments may hope to seek the protection of distance and geography, but modern technology has made that impossible. The erosion of legitimate state authority and the resulting rise of terrorist cells will threaten the security of states on the other side of the globe. In this way, the security of all nations are inextricably linked to security in the Middle East.

It should be the policy of the United States to defend the international state system, because in doing so it acts in the best interest of its own security as well as the security of every nation. No policy would be practical that does not understand and pursue the source of the problem: state sponsors of terrorism and tyrants whose oppression creates the desperation necessary for terrorism to survive. Weak and illegitimate states tend also to be totalitarian states. They are a menace not only to international security, but also to basic principles of human liberty. It should be the policy of the United States to promote legitimate state authority and democratic government in the Middle East, using military strength as necessary. This is precisely the argument of the Bush Doctrine.

⁶Gaddis, John Lewis. “A Grand Strategy of Transformation” *Foreign Policy*, No. 133, 50-57. Nov. - Dec., 2002.

Such a policy implies a grander task at hand—that the Middle East as a region needs to be modernized as a contemporary actor in the international system. Just as post-WWII Europe required economic support under the Marshall Plan to prevent its fall to communism, so does the modern Middle East require aid in nation-building, lest it fall to Islamic radicalism. The authority of individual states must be strengthened and legitimized, so that no terrorist gang can undermine them. Human livelihood, liberty, and the rule of law must be promoted, so that none will feel the need to resort to terror to achieve an end. Terrorism will continue to threaten international security so long as tyrants and illegitimate states remain to support it. Such a large-scale task of nation-building can only be effectively achieved multilaterally. All states are threatened by terrorism, yet curiously, very few recognize and support what needs to be done in the Middle East. In this regard, diplomacy and alliance-building will be essential in any strategy. The defeat of terrorism, like the defeat of communism and fascism, will benefit every nation, just as its continued existence endangers every nation. Through diplomatic efforts and working with such alliances as NATO, we need only make this understood. Indeed, this is a rare instance in which all the great powers explicitly share a common interest—some just need time to realize what is obvious. We may look optimistically to the future for multilateral cooperation.

The wisdom of some Bush policies—such as the timing of the Iraqi invasion, the reliability of pre-war intelligence, and the handling of war prisoners—can be debatable. Critics of the president often point to these shortcomings when making their argument. But the American people must be careful not to mistake faulty execution for faulty strategy. In fact, behind all the Bush policies—some successful, others hampered by errors of judgement—lies a penetrating logic and keen understanding of cause and effect possessed by few presidents. In identifying the principal national security threats facing our country and taking the first steps to defending against them, Mr. Bush was spot on. Our under appreciated commander-in-chief assumed a historic role in reexamining and redesigning United States security strategy. He is to the current war on terrorism as Harry Truman was to the Cold War. With or without acknowledging it, future administrations will borrow the Bush strategy and build upon its example. With the luxury of hindsight and experience, they will make fewer mistakes in carrying out this monumental task in the Middle East. In time, they can also enjoy the relief of multilateral cooperation. President Bush need not be discouraged at the unflattering conclusion of his presidency. His administration has undertaken the most difficult part of the work toward international security, and the judgement of History will be fair.

I request this Essay to be published on the Lint Center for National Security Studies, Inc. website with my name published.

Tianchi Wu