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Philip H. Gordon

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The End of the Bush Revolution

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A RETURN TO REALISM

READING OVER President George W. Bush's March 2006 National Security Strategy, one would be hard-pressed to find much evidence that the president has backed away from what has become known as the Bush doctrine. "America is at war," says the document; we will "fight our enemies abroad instead of waiting for them to arrive in our country" and "support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture," with the ultimate goal of "ending tyranny in our world."

Talk to any senior administration official, and he or she will tell you that the president is as committed as ever to the "revolutionary" foreign policy principles he spelled out after 9/11: the United States is fighting a war on terror and must remain on the offensive and ready to act alone, U.S. power is the foundation of global order, and the spread of democracy and freedom is the key to a safer and more peaceful world. Bush reiterated such thinking in his 2006 State of the Union address, insisting that the United States will "act boldly in freedom's cause" and "never surrender to evil."

But if the rhetoric of the Bush revolution lives on, the revolution itself is over. The question is not whether the president and most of his team still hold to the basic tenets of the Bush doctrine—they do—but whether they can sustain it. They cannot. Although the

PHILIP H. GORDON is a Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution and a co-author, with Jeremy Shapiro, of *Allies at War: America, Europe, and the Crisis Over Iraq*.

administration does not like to admit it, U.S. foreign policy is already on a very different trajectory than it was in Bush's first term. The budgetary, political, and diplomatic realities that the first Bush team tried to ignore have begun to set in.

The reversal of the Bush revolution is a good thing. By overreaching in Iraq, alienating important allies, and allowing the war on terrorism to overshadow all other national priorities, Bush has gotten the United States bogged down in an unsuccessful war, overstretched the military, and broken the domestic bank. Washington now lacks the reservoir of international legitimacy, resources, and domestic support necessary to pursue other key national interests.

It is not too late to put U.S. foreign policy back on a more sustainable course, and Bush has already begun to do so. But these new, mostly positive trends are no less reversible than the old ones were. Another terrorist attack on the United States, a major challenge from Iran, or a fresh burst of misplaced optimism about Iraq could entice the administration to return to its revolutionary course—with potentially disastrous consequences.

THE ACCIDENTAL REVOLUTION

IT IS NO small irony that Bush's foreign policy ended up on the idealistic end of the U.S. foreign policy spectrum. Contrary to the notion, common on the left and overseas, that the Bush team was hawkish and interventionist from the start, the administration was in fact deeply divided in its first months. If anything, it leaned toward the realist view that the United States should avoid meddling in the domestic affairs of other nations. In his campaign, Bush famously called for a "humble" foreign policy, meant to contrast with the interventionism of Bill Clinton's presidency, and promised to focus on "enduring national interests" rather than idealistic humanitarian goals. Candidate Bush warned against the notion that "our military is the answer to every difficult foreign policy situation—a substitute for strategy."

To be sure, the administration included major players from the neoconservative camp—including Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith, and

Undersecretary of State John Bolton—who believed in the forceful promotion of democracy in other countries. But the more central players appeared to be closer to the realism of Bush’s father. Vice President Dick Cheney, a key player in the George H. W. Bush administration, had opposed using U.S. forces to overthrow Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War (“How long would we have had to stay in Baghdad?”) and had lobbied against sanctions on Iran as CEO of Halliburton in the late 1990s. Secretary of State Colin Powell was famously cautious about the use of force to pursue foreign policy goals and emphasized the value of allies. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice—who insisted that the role of the 82nd Airborne was not to “escort kids to kindergarten”—was a protégé of the realist icon Brent Scowcroft. In her Republican Party foreign policy manifesto, published in *Foreign Affairs* in January/February 2000, Rice wrote that regimes such as those in Iraq and North Korea were “living on borrowed time, so there need be no sense of panic about them.” She called for the first line of defense to be “a clear and classical statement of deterrence—if they do acquire WMD [weapons of mass destruction], their weapons will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration.” Powell had also questioned whether Iraq posed a serious threat and had suggested in his January 2001 confirmation hearings that U.S. policy would be to “keep [the Iraqis] in the rather broken condition they are in now.”

How, then, did the United States go from this cautious realism to the invasion of Iraq and a foreign policy focused on ending tyranny throughout the world? The answer is to be found in the unique combination of two factors.

The first was the sudden sense of vulnerability Americans felt following 9/11. The attacks profoundly altered the American worldview—not only because they took place on U.S. soil, but also because of Americans’ low tolerance, born of their country’s relatively blessed history, for insecurity. Not since the Cuban missile crisis had Americans felt anything remotely as threatening to their homeland as this, which made the public highly receptive to calls to “do something” about terrorism. When anthrax attacks killed five Americans and terrorized the general population later that fall, many concluded that only a dramatic change in U.S. foreign policy—even if it meant military

action to transform the world, starting with the Middle East—could make the homeland safe again. Europeans and others might be resigned to living with the dangers of terrorism, but Americans, so long protected by oceans and friendly neighbors, were not.

The second factor that led to the revolution in U.S. foreign policy was a feeling of tremendous power. It may have been a sense of vulnerability that convinced Americans that they had to do something to transform the world, but it was a sense of unprecedented power that convinced them that they could. After the preoccupation

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with national “decline” in the deficit-ridden late 1980s, a decade of fantastic economic growth, technological progress, and military successes led Americans to conclude by 2001 that transformation was possible, if only the country’s leaders committed to that goal. Naysayers at home and abroad might warn about overreach, but that was because they did not appreciate what a determined

United States could accomplish. (A similar feeling of power has been a determining factor in all instances of an activist U.S. foreign policy since World War II: economic growth under presidents Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Clinton tended to push the United States toward confidence and expansionism, whereas concerns about deficits and stagnation sent it in the opposite direction under Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and George H. W. Bush.)

The combination of these two factors—a feeling of vulnerability and a feeling of power—tipped the balance within the administration in favor of the idealists and put the president and the vice president firmly in that camp. Gone was the aversion to interventionism and gone was caution; in their place was an unwavering determination to make the homeland safe, first by using U.S. military power to eliminate threats such as Saddam Hussein and then by spreading freedom and democracy around the world.

Whether Washington’s European allies, or anyone else, for that matter, accepted the administration’s logic was thought largely immaterial. According to the administration, success in Iraq, which few top officials doubted, would have a positive spillover effect elsewhere

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in the Middle East, at which point U.S. allies would start to come on board. U.S. leadership, the thinking went, consisted not of endlessly consulting pessimistic allies to see what they had to say, but of setting out a bold course, decisively following it, and winning over allies through victory rather than persuasion.

REVOLUTION MEETS REALITY

NEEDLESS TO SAY, everything has not turned out as planned. Far from producing the rapid liberation, stabilization, and democratization of Iraq, the U.S. invasion has led to a protracted insurgency, significant Iraqi civilian and U.S. military casualties, and a high risk of civil war. At the time of the fall of Baghdad, in the spring of 2003, polls showed that more than 70 percent of Americans supported the war; by early 2006, polls indicated that a majority had concluded that the war was a mistake. The allied support that success was supposed to bring also failed to materialize. The absence of the WMD that had provided the official pretext for the war—and the widespread impression that the administration had exaggerated the threat in order to sell the war and had violated international law by waging it—raised serious questions about the legitimacy of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq and elsewhere.

The consequences of the war in Iraq—and of other U.S. policies on issues ranging from the Middle East to climate change, prisoner treatment, and the International Criminal Court (ICC)—have taken their toll on the United States' popularity in the world and thus on its ability to win over allies. Far from producing the expected “bandwagoning,” the exercise of unilateral U.S. power has led to widespread hostility toward the Bush administration and, in many cases, the United States itself. According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, between 2002 and 2005 the percentage of people with a “favorable opinion” of the United States fell from 72 percent to 59 percent in Canada, 63 percent to 43 percent in France, 61 percent to 41 percent in Germany, 61 percent to 38 percent in Indonesia, 25 percent to 21 percent in Jordan, 79 percent to 62 percent in Poland, 61 percent to 52 percent in Russia, 30 percent to 23 percent in Turkey, and 75 percent to 55 percent in the United Kingdom. According to the same polls, the percentage of those who believed that the United States took their country's

interests into account was 19 percent in Canada, 18 percent in France, 38 percent in Germany, 59 percent in Indonesia, 17 percent in Jordan, 20 percent in the Netherlands, 13 percent in Poland, 21 percent in Russia, 19 percent in Spain, 14 percent in Turkey, and 32 percent in the United Kingdom. Global support for U.S. policies has never been a prerequisite for U.S. activism, but it sure does not hurt.

On top of failure in Iraq and a decline in legitimacy and popularity abroad, the feeling and the reality of U.S. power needed for a foreign policy of transforming the world have also been evaporating. When Bush took office in 2001, he inherited an annual budgetary surplus of over \$200 billion and many additional years' worth of projected surpluses. Under those circumstances, it was not surprising that Americans regained confidence in their ability to change the world for the better, even if that meant supporting military interventions abroad and vastly expanding the defense budget. But after the terrorist attacks, a recession, two wars, and several massive tax cuts, the sense that the United States can afford "whatever it takes" is gone. By the start of 2006, the \$200 billion annual surplus had turned into a more than \$400 billion annual deficit, and the national debt that Washington had started paying off in 1999 was up to more than \$8 trillion and was rising.

Domestic support for the administration—another prerequisite for a revolutionary foreign policy in a democracy—is also on the wane. After a slew of scandals, bad news from Iraq, and the poor handling of Hurricane Katrina and of the controversy over Dubai Ports World's managing U.S. ports, Bush's approval rating has fallen to under 35 percent and Cheney's to just 20 percent. By early 2006, 55 percent of Americans surveyed said that the invasion of Iraq had not been "worth it," and more Americans thought the United States should "mind [its] own business" than at any time since Vietnam. In a 2006 Public Agenda poll, only 20 percent of respondents agreed that spreading democracy to other countries was a "very important goal" for U.S. foreign policy, representing the lowest support for any goal asked about in the survey. A blind spot in the neoconservative case for democracy promotion and unilateral military action has always been that it overlooks the limits on the American public's willingness to tolerate the costs.

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These developments have inevitably had a major impact on the administration's ability to pursue the transformative foreign policy that was its hallmark in Bush's first term. Although the president's rhetoric and core beliefs may not have changed, the realities of a difficult world are clearly sinking in.

THE COUNTERREVOLUTION

THE MODIFIED approach to foreign policy was immediately apparent in the new tone and style adopted at the start of Bush's second term. Newly appointed Secretary of State Rice stated in her confirmation hearing that "the time for diplomacy is now" and immediately set off on a fence-mending trip to Europe, where the costs of U.S. unilateralism had become most apparent. A few weeks later, the president himself went to Europe, where he reached out to allies in a way that sharply contrasted with the unilateralism of his first term. On Bush's first two trips to Europe in the summer of 2001, he made visits to Poland, Spain (then still led by the pro-American José María Aznar), the United Kingdom, and Italy, signaling that the United States would work closely with its friends but snub its critics. On his 2005 trip, he spent a full day visiting the headquarters of NATO and the European Union, in Brussels, and had long meetings with French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Rice's travel schedule also indicated a greater effort to reach out to allies than that of the supposedly multilateralist Powell did. In her first year as secretary of state, Rice took 19 trips to 49 countries, compared with Powell's 12 trips to 37 countries in his first year. Nearly 70 percent of Rice's time abroad in 2005 was spent in Europe.

The new tone and style was also reflected in the foreign policy team Bush and Rice put together. The president, the vice president, and the secretary of defense were obviously still in place and in charge, but many of those most closely associated with the ideology of the first term were not. Gone from the halls of power were the neoconservatives Wolfowitz, Feith, and Bolton (the last was sent to the United Nations, an important post but not a policymaking job). The new team instead featured pragmatists such as Deputy Secretary

of State Robert Zoellick, Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, and North Korea negotiator Christopher Hill.

What is more important than the new tone or new personnel, policies have also started to shift during the Bush administration's second term. After criticizing European engagement with Iran for years and insisting that the United States would not "reward bad behavior," the president returned from his February 2005 trip and announced that the United States would support the "EU-3" negotiations being conducted by France, Germany, and the United Kingdom and even throw some of its own "carrots"—airplane spare parts and support for World Trade Organization accession negotiations—into the mix. When, in late 2005, Iran threatened to break off negotiations with the Europeans and resume nuclear enrichment, the United States insisted there was plenty of time to take the issue to the UN Security Council, leaving some of its European partners wondering if it was going "wobbly." In March 2006, the administration announced that it had offered to open up a dialogue with Tehran about Iraq, a dramatic departure from its earlier insistence that such a step would legitimize the Iranian regime, and it bowed to Russia's refusal to accept anything stronger than a critical "presidential statement" when the nuclear issue was reported to the Security Council. Bush's declaration, in his 2006 State of the Union speech, that the United States would "continue to rally the world" to confront the Iranian threat was a far cry from earlier suggestions of how the United States might deal with a charter member of "the axis of evil."

There was also a significant change in policy toward the other outstanding member of that club, North Korea. Having denounced the Clinton administration's 1994 Agreed Framework and having insisted it would never agree to anything similar, the Bush administration accepted an arrangement with Pyongyang in September 2005 that would have provided North Korea with energy aid, security guarantees, and the gradual normalization of relations in exchange for North Korea's abandoning its nuclear weapons programs. Such an agreement could almost certainly have been reached years before, but it was anathema to the first Bush team. Although the September 2005 deal has effectively collapsed, it is telling that the Bush administration was willing to reach it in the first place.

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The second Bush team has also made modest changes in its stances on foreign aid and climate change, in an effort to reverse the United States' negative image in the world. In the run-up to the G-8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, Bush announced his intention to double U.S. aid to Africa by 2010 and to commit \$1.2 billion for a five-year plan to combat malaria in sub-Saharan Africa. At the summit itself, Bush acknowledged that global climate change was a "serious, urgent, and largely man-made problem" and agreed to join other countries in discussions of what to do about it. Critics naturally wanted the administration to go much further on both issues, but there is no doubt that Bush was at least trying to take a step in the direction of world opinion—something that the administration in his first term had deemed unnecessary.

The new Bush team has even modified its stance toward certain international organizations. In Bush's first term, the administration displayed unmitigated hostility toward the ICC—to the point of cutting off financial aid to anyone, even key allies, who refused to grant U.S. citizens a blanket exemption from its provisions. During Bush's second term, in contrast, the administration has supported a UN resolution that would refer war crimes suspects from Sudan's Darfur region to the ICC and has agreed to the use of ICC facilities in The Hague for the war crimes trial of former Liberian President Charles Taylor. In February 2006, Bush pledged support for a UN mission to help end the killing in Darfur, something the administration resisted throughout its first term. And when, in March 2006, UN members agreed to set up a Human Rights Council (to replace the UN Commission on Human Rights) that was not to Washington's liking, the administration did not vote for it but at the same time pledged to support it and work with it—instead of delegitimizing it, as Washington initially had the ICC.

Finally, the administration has shown signs of backing away from a core tenet of the foreign policy of its first term by deciding, in the summer of 2005, that the "global war on terror" (GWOT) would henceforth be known as the "global struggle against violent extremism" (GSAVE). The president himself let it be known that he still believed the United States was fighting a "war" and repudiated the new rhetoric, but the fact that the administration was even pondering such a change—

and that even Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was using the new language—was a sure sign that it had acknowledged some of the excesses of Bush's first term. The administration now goes out of its way to emphasize that it knows it is in a "generational" struggle and that it must do more to win global hearts, minds, and sympathy—a task recently put under the control of one of Bush's most trusted advisers, Karen Hughes.

THE RISK OF RELAPSE

THE STALLING of the Bush revolution is not really surprising. U.S. foreign policy has historically been marked by regular and sometimes wild swings between internationalism and isolationism, and those swings have been influenced by changes in threat perceptions, the amount of available resources, and the level of domestic political support, just as they are today.

Accordingly, the new direction of Bush's foreign policy is far from irreversible. Although the Bush team has been forced by reality to work more closely with allies and to set aside the doctrine of regime change by military intervention, many in the administration still believe that the threat of terrorism allows—or even requires—the United States to operate under different international rules from everyone else, limiting the degree to which the administration can continue to adapt. Moreover, powerful figures within the administration—not least the vice president—will continue to argue against the new pragmatism. Indeed, part of the "revolutionary" premise of the foreign policy of Bush's first term was the notion, harking back to the Reagan administration, that determination, optimism, and U.S. power would eventually prevail, regardless of what Democrats and foreign critics might assert. It is a convenient thesis, but one that does not allow for self-correction; it paints any lack of domestic or international support as a badge of honor and apparent failures as only temporary setbacks rather than as reasons to change course.

What could cause Bush to reconsider his new approach and put U.S. foreign policy back on a more revolutionary path? Certainly, another major terrorist attack on the United States, which remains possible, could do so. If a U.S. city were hit by a chemical or biological

terrorist attack leading to mass casualties, more Americans might come around to the view that the United States is in fact “at war” and that the administration’s aggressive efforts to “change the world” are “worth it.” Bombing Iran in order to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons would probably seem rash and counterproductive to most Americans today, but in the wake of a nuclear or even a “dirty bomb” attack that killed large numbers of Americans, the calculation about the risks of nuclear proliferation might look very different. A WMD attack might even provide retrospective justification for the Iraq war, reinforcing the notion that the United States cannot risk not acting in the face of a potential threat of proliferation.

Even in the absence of another terrorist attack, Iran—which the new National Security Strategy says poses the greatest challenge to the United States of any single country—could provoke a reversion to the original Bush doctrine. For the past two years, the trend in the administration has been to emphasize diplomacy and international consensus, the opposite of the approach that characterized the administration’s Iraq policy in 2002–3. But if that approach manifestly fails—for example, if evidence emerges that Iran is actually closer to a nuclear weapons capability than previously thought—Bush may be faced sooner rather than later with a choice between acquiescing to a nuclear Iran or resorting to the unilateral use of force. For now, the administration’s clear preference is to avoid a confrontation and keep the international community on its side. But what if that requires direct engagement with the radical regime of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and an end to U.S. efforts to promote regime change? That might be a bridge too far for this team, and Bush might conclude that military force—or accelerated efforts to destabilize the Iranian regime—is the only way to uphold his 2002 State of the Union pledge not to allow “the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.”

Finally, it is always possible that new developments will be taken as evidence that the Bush doctrine has actually been working. For example, the formation of a viable Iraqi government followed by an

Round two of the Bush revolution would be no more successful than round one.

ebbing of the insurgency and progress toward democratization elsewhere in the Middle East could lead the administration back in the direction of foreign policy assertiveness. After all, it was not that long ago that successful elections in Iraq and Afghanistan, a revolution in Lebanon followed by Syrian withdrawal, nuclear disarmament in Libya, and steps toward democracy elsewhere in the Arab world were leading administration enthusiasts to crow about their success; even some skeptical observers were concluding that Bush might actually be right. Renewed progress in these areas, especially if it allows for a military withdrawal from Iraq and coincides with a burst of growth in the U.S. economy, could give new force to the idea that a determined United States can transform the world and new arguments to those who believe that Bush should not waver in the promotion of his doctrine.

The more likely course is that global realities and resource constraints will continue to force the administration toward pragmatism, modesty, and cooperation with allies. Even serious new challenges and threats would be unlikely to persuade chastened Americans to get back on board for the types of policies they have been coming to doubt; the scenario whereby dictatorships start falling like dominoes and the United States feels rich, powerful, and right is highly desirable but unlikely to unfold anytime soon.

Still, it would be rash to exclude a return to a more radical approach, especially from a president who believes he is on a mission and who has time and again proved willing to take massive risks and surprise his critics. If such a return happens, brace yourself—because there is no reason to believe that round two of the Bush revolution would be more successful than round one. Indeed, without the resources, international legitimacy, and degree of political support Bush had the first time around, it might be considerably worse. 🌐