The United States in the World Arena: Two Opposing Views

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In the following commentary I want to pose this question to the readers of *Modern Age*: What is the proper role of the United States in world affairs? My answer is that it must be what it has always been: To serve liberty and justice as best we can while defending our security and national interests. None of these terms is susceptible of tidy definition, of course.

**Foreign policy.** The avoidance of entangling alliances, despite abiding appeal to isolationists, xenophobes, and pacifists, did not take us very far. It was effectively repudiated with the Louisiana Purchase which paved the way for Manifest Destiny. After the lessons taught by the War of 1812, the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 asserted the enduring principle that the United States is to be active in the world arena and that it stood against colonialism or lesser use of force within its sphere of influence then understood primarily as North and South America—but not forgetting the Barbary pirates and their ilk. This drawing of a line in the sand and daring anybody to cross it without suffering consequences has characterized foreign policy since that time. Speak softly and carry a big stick became explicit in the Theodore Roosevelt corollary. With the collapse of British power, the interest sphere expanded to encompass the rest of the free world during the Cold War, only so long as vital American interests are implicated. This included communist expansion or potential expansion (the Truman doctrine later elaborated by Walt Rostow) or any threat to vital national security interests judged sufficient to warrant diplomatic or military action. “Containment” positively meant keeping the world safe for democracy and out of the hands of totalitarian and especially communist despots—as first demonstrated on a large scale in the Korean conflict where major United States military assets were deployed with beneficial lasting results from 1950 until today.

**The Bush Doctrine.** From the time of the Founding there has been a moralistic if not plainly religious tinge to these poli-
cies, grounded like the country itself on the “laws of Nature and nature’s God” as “self-evident truths,” and felt to be an “almost chosen people” blessed by Providence, a light unto the nations. America did not have to wait for Woodrow Wilson to become righteous. It understood and represented itself as a force for good against palpable evil and tyranny from its beginning. Thus also in the wars of the twentieth century, whose rich rhetoric is familiar to all of us—with varying degrees of public acceptance of this overriding justification for action from the high ground while still attending to mundane military, economic, and geopolitical threats. A moral justification in addition to calculated rationality and interests has been judged essential in this country, if public support is to be marshaled and sustained for any period of time. The failure or the inability for various reasons to do so (a potent Left and biased media among others) ultimately doomed the Vietnam policy of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

**Post 9/11.** The trauma of this malicious Islamist attack engendered a shift in policy emphasis, from sturdy deterrence and containment to proactive diplomatic and military initiative. *Preemption* as a dimension of Just War theory, and of the universal right to self-defence, is not new with the current Bush administration (*e.g.*, Bay of Pigs, Grenada), nor does it signal imperialistic designs much less eschatological intoxication—as the loud Left and our more excitable citizens clamorously assert. But it takes on sober importance (to include preventive war) as an option of last resort in an era of lethal danger of Weapons of Mass Destruction when absorbing the first punch could involve wholly unacceptable risk or a knockout. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in 2002, “the risks of waiting must far outweigh the risks of action.”

This is not completely new—think of post-Civil War Reconstruction, the Open Door to China, and the Marshall Plan for instance—but more novel and ambitious is the express and energetic pursuit of *transformative* policies. These are calculated to foster by all available means the move of nations to liberal market economies and democratic free governments worldwide as the *primary prophylaxis* against hostility and deadly threat from regimes or from the fanatical enclaves they may finance or harbor.

**Core Current Policy.** This is different in tone and perhaps of more dubious validity. It rests on the convictions (as formulated on March 16, 2006) that: “The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.... To protect our Nation and honor our values, the United States seeks to extend freedom across the globe by leading an international effort to end tyranny and to promote effective democracy. We will employ the full array of political, economic, diplomatic, and other tools at our disposal [to that end].... We have a responsibility to promote human freedom. Yet freedom cannot be imposed; it must be chosen. The form that freedom and democracy take in any land will reflect the history, culture, and habits unique to its people.... The advance of freedom and human dignity through democracy is the long-term solution to the transnational terrorism of today.... There are four steps we will take in the short term: We will 1) prevent attacks by terrorist networks before they occur; 2) deny WMD to rogue states and to terrorist allies who would use them without hesitation; 3) deny terrorist groups the support and sanctuary of rogue states; and 4) deny the terrorists control of any nation that they would use as a base and launching pad for terror.” (Quoted from “The President’s National Security Strategy,” March 16, 2006, released by the White House.)
Pragmatism and Politics. Davy Crockett’s motto was “Figure out what’s right and go ahead!” This maxim well expresses the spirit of the Bush foreign policy in the war on terrorism: it is simple, honest, and moralistic. It is pure Texas (and Methodist) Sunday school, one might even say—and we have to take President Bush’s religious convictions seriously because he takes them seriously himself. It leads with the American trump card by transforming American exceptionalism into a universal movement: one invoking a universal human nature and identifying individual liberty as natural to all human beings—a defining God-given attribute and inalienable right. Relatedly, it favors free market global economics and fosters an international community of sovereign free democratic states. On the key point President Bush remarked at a press conference on April 13, 2004: “I have this belief, strong belief, that freedom is not this country’s gift to the world. Freedom is the Almighty’s gift to every man and woman in this world.”

Can such policy also be realistic? Perhaps as realistic as drawing to an inside straight, if you play poker. However: Better a bold policy than a timid one, or no policy at all, in an ineluctable high stakes game where losing is no option. Besides: God takes care of children, drunks, and the United States of America, we cheerfully remember.

Potholes in the Road to Peace. Nobody said this would be easy, and criticism abounds. For instance:

- Woodrow Wilson could not do it and neither can George W. Bush. But the United States was not then the preeminent world leader, hegemonic or superpower, and economy.
- The whole endeavor has a destabilizing effect on global politics: safe and friendly authoritarian regimes are better than hostile pseudo-democratic ones in the hands of terrorist entities like Hamas. This is madness we hear. (Bring Saddam back?)
- The other nations of the world will never accede to such blatant Westernization/Americanization and/or secularization. Even (especially?) Europe is skeptical. It is either too religious or too secular. Perhaps. The American public—listening the incessant clamor of the hollow men composing the world’s ideologized self-anointed “elites”—has no stomach for the kind of dissensus or for the protracted conflict and carnage before us. Isolation and pacifism are too strong to sustain the effort essential to even modest success. Anyway, we do not like imperialism, so bring the boys and girls home, and set up a perimeter around San Francisco, our last bastion of resolute true blue patriotism.
- In the media age of information overload, deculturation, manipulation of public opinion, and vitriolic politics, blood on the TV screens 24/7 dramatizing the horrors of war makes the whole effort patently un-American not to mention plain distasteful. Too many casualties! Where’s the good news? The price is too high! And for what?
- We will go broke in the process: Iraq may now be costing roughly a billion dollars per week, we are told; the deficit is soaring, the national debt threatens the economic foundations of the Republic; we cannot afford the war on terrorism. Embrace peace in our time.
- The Soviets could not afford the Cold War; how can we afford this one? By making the tax cuts permanent?
- Rampant anti-Americanism has exploded both at home and abroad because of Bush policy. We have lost all our friends and politics has seldom been more polarized. Nobody remembers or cares that we saved the world from Adolf Hitler, Tojo Hideki, and later on from the Sino-Soviet evil empire in Central Europe and in Korea. Class-struggle fanatics, having mastered only
one flawed text, monotonously decry a dark geopolitical capitalist plot. Peaceniks incapable of constructive action burn our flag in indignation that we seek to foster regimes devoted to honesty, justice, and individual liberty. Pass the soma. Give us the peace of secure serfdom is the cry!—like those oppressed by Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor for whom hated freedom was the ultimate tyranny, personal responsibility. Away with all your principles! We want to be loved!

**Reality check.**

- The world has gone from 20 to some 120 democratic nations since the Second World War: if there is a wave of the future in global affairs this is plainly it.
- If Indonesia and Turkey can democratize ("rowdy" or not) there is some reasonable hope for the rest of the Islamic world, even if not in accordance with Western models of free governments—a fact explicitly recognized by current Bush policy. Do not expect uniform results but amelioration of traditional systems. Politics is the art of the possible some sage once said. Economic freedom may induce political freedom. It is worth a try in any case since it brings better lives to all men and women—as can be seen everywhere it exists.
- Battle casualties is a painful subject. Every life is precious and cherished, yet some perspective beyond if-it-bleeds-it-leads sensationalist journalism and the howls of peacenik movements is mandatory: 140 miles west of where we are meeting today 51,000 American soldiers died in a 3-day battle in July 1863 at Gettysburg. Some 2,400 Allied men died on D-Day (June 6, 1944) and another 7,900 were WIA; over 6,500 Marines and 21,000 Japanese soldiers died in five weeks on Iwo Jima; the 82-day battle of Okinawa cost more lives (about a quarter of a million) than were lost through both atomic bombs dropped on Japan—one reason these horrific weapons were used to end the war. The great 1950 Chosin Reservoir 70-mile fighting retreat from entrapment by 100,000 Chinese troops, in 18 days cost 3,400 American (1st Marine Division and the 7th Infantry Division) and over 25,000 Chinese soldiers' lives during combat. But it helped secure democracy in South Korea for the next fifty years, where it still thrives. That war is hell is more than merely a cliché. The 3,200 American military dead in three years in Iraq is grievous cost, to be sure, and in no way to be minimized. But it does not compare with troop losses suffered in many of our previous military actions.

**Conclusion.** If we can not “afford” current policy, what can we afford? What is your plan? World politics is not like a philosophy seminar or a college debate—all hypothetical or just for fun. Something has to happen, has to be done—right or wrong—sometimes with life or death consequences. Not long after U. S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk retired from office to become a law professor at the University of Georgia, I heard him say: "At last I can have an opinion!"

Thomas B. Macaulay once sniffily complained that the United States government under the Constitution is all sail and no anchor. However that may be, the wind is surely at our backs, and the sail is up. That sail is the Bush Doctrine.
In Summer 2004 Modern Age published my case for a realistic American foreign policy grounded in pursuit of the national interest. The essay had a long gestation—about twenty-five years. At the time this essay was prepared for publication I hoped that President Bush was pursuing a foreign policy aimed at preserving the national interest of the United States. If not, I argued, “this country may become something other than it is now,” a revolutionary nation (not unlike the French nation of Napoleon), and a disruptive influence on the world stage, a threat to itself and to the stability and the order of traditional cultures, and world politics. President Bush’s Second Inaugural and subsequent statements by him and his Secretary of State and other Administration spokesmen are clearer evidence that Wilsonian liberalism has been renewed and American foreign policy is in a steep spiral from which there is no escape.

At stake in the contest between Wilsonian Idealism and a reality-oriented foreign policy that pursues the American interest is whether individual political freedoms will be protected by traditional constitutional limits on federal government power or whether those freedoms will be displaced by obligations to the interests of an imperial power. A reality-oriented foreign policy is critical for the survival of limited government because the United States has had imperial obligations thrust upon it at precisely the moment that its Constitutional law is written by judicial activists, and the executive branch is guided by Presidents who are insensitive to the limitations of state power. The foundations of a nation-state primed to become an imperial power were laid during the Great Depression, cemented during World War II, and buttressed during the Cold War. It is all too clear that the democratic idealism of American foreign policy in the present Bush Administration, fueled by war hysteria and the Administration’s “war on terror,” have engendered national security policies, and institutions such as the Department of Homeland Security, that threaten the future freedom of American citizens. When future generations reflect on their enslavement to the administrative state, they may trace their predicament to two American presidents: Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush.

Though the details of this potential threat to American freedom were not clear to me twenty-five years ago, the need to speak out against previous foreign policies guided by the cause of a New World Order began to become clear during the Reagan Administration when the Cold War elicited a rationale and public diplomacy for advancing democracy. That rationale stated that because the United States was a democracy, it could not allow itself to be surrounded...
by non-democratic regimes. In the context of the Cold War, this secular rationale for defeating Communism was a tolerable addition to the arsenal of intellectual defenses made in dealing with an ideology that sought to destroy anyone opposed to it. But we should notice also that Communism was an atheist life-force that threatened the religious foundations of every traditional culture with which it came in contact. As such, Communism and Democracy are "modernizing" movements that attain similar results: the secularization of society.

Let me, therefore, trace the development of my argument in Modern Age to its beginning. The substance of my Modern Age essay on the New World Order was presented in a speech to the Philadelphia Society in New York City immediately after the election of President Ronald Wilson Reagan and later published in The Hillsdale Review. The speech itself was well received—except by fellow-panelist Norman Podhoretz—who expressed disdain for this criticism of Richard Nixon: "American foreign policy exists in tension between two poles: realism without virtue and idealism without prudence." "Realism without virtue," or what I called a "vicious realism" was an appropriate description of the foreign policy of Richard Nixon.

There was more, however, to my motivation for presenting a strategy for American foreign policy to members of the Philadelphia Society than criticism of Nixonian realism. I am a child of the World War II generation that dominated American politics through the administration of George Herbert Walker Bush. I had joined the conservative movement in rebellion against policies that the World War II generation celebrated, especially its idealism. Their idealism (not the idealism of my generation) placed the burden of a growing federal government, indebtedness, welfare entitlements, and violent death in foreign wars upon my generation. To add insult to injury, they had fewer children than their parents, and stayed in power longer than previous generations because, thanks to breakthroughs in medical science, they lived longer. They dominated an America into which I was born until President Clinton defeated World War II hero, George Herbert Walker Bush.

It was my naive hope in 1980 that the election of Ronald Reagan would commence a reform of "World War II" thinking about government, including a rejection of Wilsonian idealism and the influence of secular Evangelism on American foreign policy. In 1980 we young movement conservatives eagerly waited a call to service in what we expected to be the "Reagan Revolution." But, the Reagan administration was an old man’s administration.

Colin Powell observes in his autobiography that "the World War II generation was back in the saddle." Political conservatives of my generation were shaped by the defeat of Richard Nixon by John F. Kennedy in 1960, the socialism of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, the failure of the President’s will in Vietnam, and the 1964 presidential nomination fight against the Eastern Establishment by Barry Goldwater. That was our defining experience.

At the White House in 1980, and throughout the Reagan Administration, the President’s men remembered the Great Depression, World War II, and, especially, D-Day, and they recruited key staff from the failed administrations of Presidents Nixon and Ford. Contrary to popular opinion, young movement conservatives were not actively recruited to serve in the Reagan Administration, and those who somehow managed to secure an appointment, were not invited to stay around for a second term. That left a vacuum which today deprives Republican administrations of conservative leaders, particularly those with experience in foreign
policy. In this regard, the Reagan Administration was a complete and utter failure.

A “Statement of Principles” issued by the Project for the New American Century could criticize traditional conservatives who, literally, had been blocked from influence in the Reagan Administration:8

...conservatives have not confidently advanced a strategic vision of America’s role in the world. They have not set forth guiding principles for American foreign policy. They have allowed differences over tactics to obscure potential agreement on strategic objectives. And they have not fought for a defense budget that would maintain American security and advance American interests in the new century.

The reason for the failure of traditional conservatives to advance “a strategic vision of America’s role in the world” is not because they did not have strategic foreign policy vision, but because none were advanced in foreign policy appointments by the Reagan White House.

Young conservatives interested in foreign policy were “off” the radar screen of the President’s men who looked for advice and appointments from past presidential administrations and were rejected by the President’s first Director of White House Personnel if they had strategic ideas, but lacked government experience. Those that did appear on political radar were shaped by careers that began in the Democratic Party, service to Democrat members of Congress, governors and presidents and who were to be found on the side of Hubert Humphrey and Scoop Jackson in the 1960s.

Their influence today is seen in President George W. Bush’s Second Inaugural (written by presidential speechwriter Michael Gerson)9 and two so-called “principles” declared in the manifesto of Project for the New American Century:

we need to strengthen our ties to democratic allies and to challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values; we need to promote the cause of political and economic freedom abroad.

Compare these words with the Bush-Gerson statement in the President’s Second Inaugural address:

So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending the tyranny in our world.10

Readers of Modern Age will recognize that the June 1997 Project for the New American Century’s “Statement of Principle” and President Bush’s Second Inaugural are characteristic of leftist manifestoes in the arts, literature, and, of course, politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Manifestoes are not grounded in reason but in propositional reasoning motivated by the appetite for a “cause.” In my Modern Age essay I trace the origins of this mode of thinking to Marx’s “call for a revolution in permanence and Vladimir Lenin’s program of communist revolution…”11 That is a prescription for pursuing a policy of idealism absent of prudence. The primary feature of this thinking, and President Bush-Gerson’s Second Inaugural, is the absence of analysis of the national interest of the United States, and the assertion that “true stability depends on the freedom of others.”

This Gospel of Democratic Idealism is an important influence in American life because, even today, instead of disposing of the idealism of Woodrow Wilson the President of the United States has embraced it. This brings me to the error of Professor Mordecai Roshwald’s response to my essay.12

There is a mode of thought that pursues answers to questions in a spirit of openness. From that perspective it is clear that nation-states exist in relationship to one another, and something called “balance” between them is preferable to im-
balances or disequilibria that can lead to conflict and war. Presidents of the United States and their advisors should be guided by serious and skilled analysis of conditions that shape the national interest. That interest includes concern for morality and justice, but not, as Roshwald suggests, putting “an end to the chaos of history.”

How far have we fallen when a longtime contributor to *Modern Age* such as Professor Roshwald can refer to historical experience as “a complex problem” that is to be overcome by seeking “an end to the chaos of history.” Roshwald seeks a world in which “the use of force is banned and likens a realistic approach to the law of the jungle! Academics like Roshwald may count how many lambs may lie down with lions, but Presidents are obliged to count the fattened lions and keep them at bay. Unfortunately, President Bush (and Michael Gerson) has been looking at the lambs, not the lions.

In his Second Inaugural, President Bush said:

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

On May 7, 2005, in Latvia, President Bush stated:

We will not repeat the mistakes of other generations—appeasing or excusing tyranny, and sacrificing freedom in the vain pursuit of... We have learned our lesson. No one’s liberty is expendable. In the long run, our security, and true stability, depend on the freedom of others.

Under the influence of Wilsonian Idealism the President announced in 2005 that the United States aspires to make the world democratic. That should be of concern to every American citizen because a President of the United States has announced that he seeks to pursue democratic revolt “in all the world.”

Some day, perhaps, a truly conservative American President may articulate a viable foreign policy that seeks to preserve the national interest of the United States, and the American people will no longer be aroused by the hope that they may be redeemed by the actions of the U.S. Government. Salvation is not collective. And redemptive foreign policies that reflect the mindset of ideologues, not statesmen, will cut down in their youth the best of yet another generation of young Americans.

1. “Origins and End of the New World Order,” *Modern Age*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Summer 2004), 195-205 (hereinafter referred to as “Origins”). 2. See my essay, “Croly, Wilson, and the American Civil Religion,” *Modern Age*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Winter 1979). 3. “Origins,” 199. 4. “Civil Religion and American Foreign Policy” in *The Hillsdale Review* (Spring, 1981), Vol. III, No. 1, 3-11. 5. Colin Powell writes of this period in time. “One thing soon became apparent about the Reagan administration: the World War II generation was back in the saddle. ...the war was defining experience for him.” My *American Journey* (New York, 1995), 257. In 1980 we hopeful young conservatives had forgotten that Ronald Reagan was born in 1911. 6. The much vaunted “ideological” purity of Reagan Administration appointments is a myth. President Reagan’s Office of Presidential Personnel was led by “headhunter” Pendleton James who installed an apolitical system that gave preference to administrative experience, not philosophical commitment. See my book review titled “The Reagan Flaw?” *Review of Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1987), 435-437. I argue that the scandals of Reagan’s term can be traced to the “administrative system created during the transition period.” 7. Dr. Donald Devine and Tom Pauken were given important appointments in the Reagan Administration, and then junked by the White House when their principled conservatism conflicted with the liberal views of senior White House staff. At USICA (later USIA), movement conservatives Phil Nicolaides, Robert Reilly, Les Lenkowski, Ken Tomlinson, and the author, were sacrificed to the whims of President Reagan’s appointee whose only claim to competence was the friendship between his wife and
Nancy Reagan. Examples at the U.S. Department of Education and other Agencies where movement conservatives were removed from their appointments make up what I call “the dark side of the Reagan Administration” (in a book in progress on the future of conservatism and the damage done to America by the World War II generation). 8. The website of this organization is located at http://www.newamericancentury.org. 9. Gerson, a graduate of Evangelical Christian Wheaton College, apparently became enamored at Wheaton with ideas usually associated with Christian heresies that seek collective redemption and modern ideologies that seek worldly salvation. 10. Compare the words of President Bush to the statement of Ukraine’s new president at his Inauguration on January 23, 2005: “We are ready to respect the interests of other states. Nevertheless, for me as well as for you, national interests are above all!” /wu2.yuschenko.COM.ua/eng/Press centre/168/2167/. 11. “Origins,” 200. 12. Mordecai Roshwald, “A Response to Richard J. Bishirjian,” Modern Age, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Winter 2005). 13. Ibid., 84. 14. Dmitri Simes’s response to Bush’s Second Inaugural is similar: “If Bush means it literally, then it means we have an extremist in the White House. I hope and pray that he didn’t mean it [and] that it was merely an inspirational speech, not practical guidance for