

The Ideology of American Empire

by Claes G. Ryn

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The president of the United States has committed his country to goals that will require world hegemony, not to say supremacy. In numerous speeches and statements since September 2001, President Bush has vowed to wage an exhaustive, final war on terror and to advance the cause of a better world. "Our responsibility to history is clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."¹ In the president's opinion, the United States represents universal principles. He summarizes them in the word "freedom." As mankind's beacon of political right, the United States must, he believes, remove obstacles to freedom around the world. Accomplishing this task is associated in the president's mind with using American military might. Even before 9/11/01, in June 2001, he informed the Congress that the "Department of Defense has become the most powerful force for freedom the world has ever seen."² Since 9/11, the U.S. government has relentlessly mobilized and deployed that force far and wide, with effects that remain to be seen.

What had happened? In his 2000 presidential campaign, President Bush had repeatedly called for a more "humble" U.S. foreign policy and expressed strong reservations about America's undertaking nation building and following a generally interventionist foreign policy. A cynic might suggest that, having won the presidency partly by appealing to Americans' weariness of international over-extension, President Bush had now seized an opportunity greatly to extend his power. A less cynical observer would note that the 9/11 attacks outraged the president. They aroused nationalistic feelings in him and shifted his focus to world affairs. Since then he has also gained a new sense of the military and other power at his command.

¹ Remarks, National Cathedral, Sept. 14, 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09.

² Statement to the U.S. Congress, June 18, 2001, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/06.

Yet it is not likely that George W. Bush would have changed his stated approach to foreign policy so drastically had he not been affected by a way of thinking about America's role in the world that has acquired strong influence in recent decades, not least in the American foreign policy establishment inside and outside of government. A large number of American political intellectuals, including many writers on American foreign policy, have been promoting what may be called an ideology of empire. Many of them are in universities; some are leading media commentators. Today some of the most articulate and strong-willed have the president's ear.

When the 9/11 terrorists struck, the time had long been ripe for systematically implementing an ideology of empire, but in his election campaign George W. Bush had seemed an obstacle to such a course. He advocated a more restrictive use of American power. If he had done so out of genuine conviction, 9/11 brought a profound change of heart. The already available ideology of empire helped remove any inhibitions the president might have had about an activist foreign policy and helped shape his reaction to the attack. It can be debated to what extent his advisors and speechwriters, who were to varying degrees attracted to the ideology, along with numerous media commentators of the same orientation, were able to channel the president's anger. In any case, President Bush moved to embrace the idea of armed world hegemony. The attack on America could have elicited a much different reaction, such as a surgical and limited response; it became instead the occasion and justification for something grandiose.

In spite of its great influence, the ideology of empire is unfamiliar to most Americans, except in segments that appear disparate but are in fact closely connected. Drawing these connections is essential to assessing the import and ramifications of the evolving Bush Doctrine.

Though heavily slanted in the direction of international affairs, the ideology of American empire constitutes an entire world view. It includes perspectives on human nature, society, and politics, and it sets forth distinctive conceptions of its central ideas, notably what it calls "democracy," "freedom," "equality," and "capitalism." It regards America as founded on universal principles and assigns to the United States the role of supervising the remaking of the world. Its adherents have the intense dogmatic commitment of true believers and are highly prone to moralistic rhetoric. They demand, among other things, "moral clarity" in dealing with regimes that stand in the way of America's universal purpose. They see themselves as champions of "virtue." In some form, this ideology has been present for a long time.

There are similarities between the advocates of the ideology of American empire and the ideologues who inspired and led the French Revolution of 1789. The Jacobins, too, claimed to represent universal principles, which they summed up in the slogan "*liberté, égalité, et fraternité*." The dominant Jacobins also wanted greater economic freedom. They thought of themselves as fighting on the side of good against evil and called themselves

“the virtuous.” They wanted a world much different from the one they had inherited. The result was protracted war and turbulence in Europe and elsewhere. Those who embody the Jacobin spirit today in America have explicitly global ambitions. It is crucial to understand what they believe, for potentially they have the military might of the United States at their complete disposal.

The philosopher who most influenced the old Jacobins was Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), who asserted in *The Social Contract* (1762) that “man was born free, but he is everywhere in chains.”³ The Jacobins set out to liberate man. The notion that America’s military might is the greatest force for freedom in human history recalls Rousseau’s famous statement that those who are not on the side of political right may have to be “forced to be free.”

The new Jacobins have taken full advantage of the nation’s outrage over 9/11 to advance their already fully formed drive for empire. They have helped rekindle America’s long-standing propensity for global involvement. Knowingly or unknowingly, President Bush has become the new Jacobins’ leading spokesman, and he is receiving their very strong support. Reflexes developed by American politicians and commentators during the Cold War have boosted the imperialistic impulse. Many cold warriors, now lacking the old enemy of communism, see in the goal of a better world for mankind another justification for continued extensive use of American power. President Bush’s moralistic interventionism gains additional support and credibility from a number of antecedents in modern American politics. Woodrow Wilson comes immediately to mind. But the current ideology of empire goes well beyond an earlier, more tentative and hesitant pursuit of world hegemony, and it has acquired great power at a new, formative juncture in history.

The most conspicuous and salient feature of the neo-Jacobin approach to international affairs is its universalistic and monopolistic claims. The University of Chicago’s Allan Bloom (1930–92) argued in his best-selling *The Closing of the American Mind* that what he called “the American project” was not just for Americans. “When we Americans speak seriously about politics, we mean that our principles of freedom and equality and the rights based on them are rational and everywhere applicable.” World War II was for Bloom not simply a struggle to defeat a dangerous enemy. It was “really an educational project undertaken to force those who did not accept these principles to do so.”⁴ If America is the instrument of universal right, the cause of all humanity, it is only proper that it should be diligent and insistent in imposing its will.

The new Jacobins typically use “democracy” as an umbrella term for the kind of political regime that they would like to see installed all over the

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), *Social Contract*, Bk. I, Ch. I, p. 141.

⁴ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 153.

world. In their view, only democracy, as they define it, answers to a universal moral imperative and is legitimate. Bringing democracy to countries that do not yet have it ought to be the defining purpose of U.S. foreign policy. One may call this part of neo-Jacobin ideology “democratism.” It has been espoused by many academics, Duke University political scientist James David Barber prominent among them. “The United States should stand up and lead the world democracy movement,” he wrote in 1990. “We have made democracy work here; now we ought to make it work everywhere we can, with whatever tough and expensive action that takes.”⁵

Numerous American intellectual activists, journalists, and columnists, many of them taught by professors like Bloom and Barber, sound the same theme. It has become so common in the major media, newspapers, and intellectual magazines and has been so often echoed by politicians that, to some, it seems to express a self-evident truth.

Not all who speak about an American global mission to spread democracy are neo-Jacobins in the strict sense of the term. Some use neo-Jacobin rhetoric not out of ideological conviction, but because such language is in the air and appears somehow expected, or because war is thought to require it. Many combine Jacobin ideas with other elements of thought and imagination: rarely, if ever, is an individual all of a piece. Contradictory ideas often compete within one and the same person. The purpose here is not to classify particular persons but to elucidate an ideological pattern, showing how certain ideas form a coherent, if ethically and philosophically questionable, ideology.

New Nationalism

Two writers with considerable media visibility, William Kristol and David Brooks, who label themselves conservatives, have led complaints that the long-standing prejudice among American conservatives against a larger federal government is paranoid and foolish. Big government is needed, Kristol and Brooks contend, because the United States is based on “universal principles.” Its special moral status gives it a great mission in the world. In order to pursue its global task, the American government must be muscular and “energetic,” especially with regard to military power. Kristol and Brooks call for a “national-greatness conservatism,” which would include “a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of national strength and moral assertiveness abroad.”⁶

Similarly, foreign policy expert Robert Kagan writes of his fellow Americans: “As good children of the Enlightenment, Americans believe in human perfectibility. But Americans . . . also believe . . . that global security

⁵ James David Barber, “. . . And Democracy Needs Help,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 25, 1990.

⁶ William Kristol and David Brooks, “What Ails Conservatism,” *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 15, 1997.

and a liberal order depend on the United States—that ‘indispensable nation’—wielding its power.”⁷

International adventurism has often served to distract nations from pressing domestic difficulties, but in America today, expansionism is often fueled also by intense moral-ideological passion. Since the principles for which America stands are portrayed as ultimately supranational (for Bloom they are actually opposed to traditional national identity), “nationalism” may not be quite the right term for this new missionary zeal. The new Jacobins believe that as America spearheads the cause of universal principles, it should progressively shed its own historical distinctiveness except insofar as that distinctiveness is directly related to those principles. Though countries confronted by this power are likely to see it as little more than a manifestation of nationalistic ambition and arrogance, it is nationalistic only in a special sense. Like revolutionary France, neo-Jacobin America casts itself as a savior nation. Ideological and national zeal become indistinguishable. “Our nationalism,” write Kristol and Brooks about America’s world mission, “is that of an exceptional nation founded on a universal principle, on what Lincoln called ‘an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.’”⁸

This view of America’s role can hardly be called patriotic in the old sense of that word. Neo-Jacobinism is not characterized by devotion to America’s concrete historical identity with its origins in Greek, Roman, Christian, European, and English civilization. Neo-Jacobins are attached in the end to ahistorical, supranational principles that they believe should supplant the traditions of particular societies. The new Jacobins see themselves as on the side of right and fighting evil and are not prone to respecting or looking for common ground with countries that do not share their democratic preferences.

Traditionally, the patriot’s pride of country has been understood to encompass moral self-restraint and a sense of his own country’s flaws. By contrast, neo-Jacobinism is perhaps best described as a kind of ideological nationalism. Its proponents are not precisely uncritical of today’s American democracy; Bloom complained that American democracy was too relativistic and insufficiently faithful to the principles of its own founding. But it should be noted that he regarded those principles as “rational and everywhere applicable” and thus as monopolistic. Greater dedication to “American principles” would by definition increase, not reduce, the wish to dictate terms to others.

New Universalism

Having been nurtured for many years in pockets of the academy, American neo-Jacobinism started to acquire journalistic and political critical

⁷ Robert Kagan, “The U.S.-Europe Divide,” *Washington Post*, May 26, 2002.

⁸ Kristol and Brooks, “What Ails,” *Sept.* 15, 1997.

mass in the 1980s. It was well-represented in the national security and foreign policy councils of the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations. As Soviet communism was crumbling, it seemed to people of this orientation increasingly realistic to expect an era in which the United States would be able to dominate the world on behalf of universal principles. Missionary zeal and the desire to use American power began to flood the media, the government, and the public policy debate. Columnist and TV commentator Ben Wattenberg offered a particularly good example of this frame of mind when he wrote in 1988 that the prospects for exporting American values were highly propitious. “Never has the culture of one nation been so far-flung and potent.” Wattenberg pointed out that “there is, at last, a global language, American.”⁹

After the Cold War, American culture could only spread, he continued, with global sales of American TV shows, movies, and music. “Important newsstands around the world now sell three American daily newspapers. There is now a near-global television news station: Cable News Network.” Not mentioned by Wattenberg was that the content being transmitted to the world might be of dubious value and a poor reflection on America and democracy. What intrigued him was the potential to expand American influence by exporting America’s culture.

Behind the argument that the United States and its values are models for all peoples lurked the will to power, which was sometimes barely able to keep up ideological appearances. Again by way of example, Wattenberg desired nothing less than world dominance: “It’s pretty clear what the global community needs: probably a top cop, but surely a powerful global organizer. Somebody’s got to do it. We’re the only ones who can.” He called “visionary” the idea of “spreading democratic and American values around the world.” As if not to appear immodest, he wrote: “Our goal in the global game is not to conquer the world, only to influence it so that it is hospitable to our values.”¹⁰ Later he urged, “Remember this about American Purpose: A unipolar world is fine, if America is the uni.”¹¹

In the major media, one of the early and most persistent advocates of an assertive American foreign policy was the columnist and TV commentator Charles Krauthammer. In 1991, for example, he urged “a robust interventionism.” “We are living in a unipolar world,” he wrote. “We Americans should like it—and exploit it.” “Where our cause is just and interests are threatened, we should act—even if . . . we must act unilaterally.”¹² This point of view would eventually become a commonplace.

The idea of spreading democracy sometimes took on a religious ardor. In a Christmas column published in 1988, Michael Novak said about

⁹ Ben Wattenberg, “Chance to Champion Freedom,” *Washington Times*, Dec. 1, 1988.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; “Showdown Time . . . Wake-up Slap,” Aug. 8, 1990; and “To Sow Seeds of Freedom,” Aug. 1, 1990 (emphasis added).

¹¹ Ben Wattenberg, “Peddling ‘Son of Manifest Destiny,’ ” *Washington Times*, Mar. 21, 1990.

¹² Charles Krauthammer, “Bless Our Pax Americana,” *Washington Post*, Mar. 22, 1991.

the Judeo-Christian tradition that it “instructs the human race to make constant progress. . . . It insists that societies must continually be reshaped, until each meets the measure the Creator has in mind for a just, truthful, free, and creative civilization.” All over the world people were “crying out against abuses of their God-given rights to self-determination.” The spread of democracy was for Novak a great religious development that he compared to God’s Incarnation. The “citizens of the world . . . demand the birth of democracy in history, in physical institutions: as physical as the birth at Bethlehem.”¹³ The enthusiasm of the Christmas season may have inclined Novak to overstatement, but he was clearly eager to have his readers associate democracy with divine intent.

This mode of thinking is in marked contrast to the old Christian tradition. Christianity has always stressed the imperfect, sinful nature of man and warned against placing too much faith in manmade political institutions and measures. Augustine (354–430) is only one of the earliest and least sanguine of many Christian thinkers over the centuries who would have rejected out of hand the idea that mankind is destined for great progress and political perfection, to say nothing about the possibility of salvation through politics. Although Christianity has stressed that rulers must serve the common good and behave in a humane manner, it has been reluctant to endorse any particular form of government as suited to all peoples and all historical circumstances. Here Christianity agreed with the Aristotelian view.

The New Democratism

Democratism has long had more than a foothold in American government. A look back in modern history is appropriate. President Woodrow Wilson, with his belief in America’s special role and his missionary zeal, gave it a strong push. Harvard professor Irving Babbitt (1865–1933), perhaps America’s most incisive and prescient student of modern Western and American culture, commented in the early years of the twentieth century on the imperialistic trend in U.S. foreign policy. Babbitt, the founder of what has been called the New Humanism or American Humanism, was formally a professor of French and comparative literature, but he was also a highly perceptive as well as prophetic observer of social and political developments. He noted that the United States was setting itself up as the great guardian and beneficiary of mankind. “We are rapidly becoming a nation of humanitarian crusaders,” Babbitt wrote in 1924. Leaders like Wilson viewed America as abjuring selfish motives and as being, therefore, above all other nations. Babbitt commented:

We are willing to admit that all other nations are self-seeking, but as for ourselves, we hold that we act only on the most disinterested motives. We have not as yet set up, like revolutionary France, as the Christ of Nations, but during the late war we liked to look on ourselves as at least the Sir Galahad of Nations. If the American thus

¹³ Michael Novak, “Human Rights at Christmas,” *Washington Times*, Dec. 23, 1988.

regards himself as an idealist at the same time that the foreigner looks on him as a dollar-chaser, the explanation may be due partly to the fact that the American judges himself by the way he feels, whereas the foreigner judges him by what he does.¹⁴

By the time of President Wilson the idea had long been common in America that in old Europe conceited and callous elites oppressed the common man. There and elsewhere things needed to be set right. Thomas Jefferson had been a pioneer for this outlook. But from the time of George Washington's warning of the danger of entangling alliances, a desire for heavy American involvement abroad had for the most part been held in check. By the time of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, it was clear that the wish for American prominence and activism in international affairs had thrown off earlier restraints. Woodrow Wilson reinforced the interventionist impulse, not, of course, to advance selfish American national motives but, as he said, to "serve mankind." Because America has a special moral status, Wilson proclaimed, it is called to do good in the world. In 1914, even before the outbreak of the European war, Wilson stated in a Fourth of July address that America's role was to serve "the rights of humanity." The flag of the United States, he declared, is "the flag, not only of America, but of humanity."¹⁵

Babbitt pointed out that those who would not go along with Wilson's "humanitarian crusading" were warned that they would "break the heart of the world." Babbitt retorted: "If the tough old world had ever had a heart in the Wilsonian sense, it would have been broken long ago." He added that Wilson's rhetoric, which was at the same time abstract and sentimental, revealed "a temper at the opposite pole from that of the genuine statesman." Wilson's humanitarian idealism made him "inflexible and uncompromising."¹⁶

The Post-Cold War Imperative

The notion that America had a mandate to help rid the world, not least Europe, of the bad old ways of traditional societies with their undemocratic political arrangements has remained a strong influence on American foreign policy. In World War II, FDR's sense of American mission may have been as strong as Wilson's.

¹⁴Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979 [1924]), pp. 337, 295. It is a national misfortune that Americans have paid less attention to one of their truly great thinkers than to a number of lesser European lights who impress by their denser, more technical, less essayistic philosophical style.

¹⁵Woodrow Wilson, Thanksgiving Proclamation, Nov. 7, 1917, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Arthur S. Link, et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966–93), pp. 44, 525; and Address at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, *Papers*, pp. 30, 254. For an in-depth study of Woodrow Wilson and his notion of America as servant of mankind, see Richard M. Gamble, "Savior Nation: Woodrow Wilson and the Gospel of Service," *Humanitas*, Vol. XIV, No. 1 (2001).

¹⁶Babbitt, *Democracy*, p. 314.

For a long time during the Cold War, most policy makers and commentators saw that war as a defensive struggle to protect freedom or liberty against totalitarian tyranny. But some of the most dedicated cold warriors were also democratists. They had a vision for remaking the world that differed in substance from that of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes but that was equally universalistic. With the disintegration and collapse of the Soviet Union, these cold warriors did not argue for substantially reducing the American military or the United States' involvement in international affairs. On the contrary, they believed that America should continue to play a large and, in some respects, expanded role in the world; that, as the only remaining superpower, America had a historic opportunity to advance the cause of democracy and human rights. This language had long been gaining currency in the centers of public debate and political power, and soon government officials and politicians in both of the major parties spoke routinely of the need to promote democracy. Many did so in just the manner here associated with neo-Jacobinism. It seemed to them that the American ideology had not only survived the challenge from the other universalist ideology, but had prevailed in a contest that validated the American ideal as applicable in all societies.

The first President Bush thought of himself as a competent pragmatist, but, as is often the case with persons who lack philosophically grounded convictions of their own, he was susceptible to adopting the language and ideas of intellectually more focused and ideological individuals. The rhetoric in his administration about a New World Order often had a distinctly democratist ring, in considerable part probably because of the ideological leanings of speechwriters. In 1991 James Baker, President Bush's secretary of state, echoed a neo-Jacobin refrain when he declared that U.S. foreign policy should serve not specifically American interests but "enlightenment ideals of universal applicability." Whether such formulations originated with Mr. Baker or his speechwriters, the Secretary clearly liked the sound of them. He advocated a "Euro-Atlantic community that extends east from Vancouver to Vladivostok." This "community," he said, "can only be achieved on a democratic basis." The enormous size and political and cultural diversity of the region he described did not give him pause or make him question the United States' willingness or ability to take charge of such a daunting cause. No, the United States should promote "common . . . universal values" in those parts of the world, he said, and "indeed, elsewhere on the globe."¹⁷ American power was there to be used. It seemed appropriate in cases such as these to talk of virtually unlimited political ambition.

The surge of globalist political-ideological aspirations was even more blatantly and pointedly expressed by the Bush Sr. administration in a draft Pentagon planning document that was leaked to the *New York Times*.

¹⁷ Secretary of State James A. Baker, speech to the Aspen Institute in Berlin, Germany, June 18, 1991.

It had been produced under the supervision of then Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. The draft plan dealt with the United States' military needs in the post-Cold War era, setting forth the goal of a world in which the United States would be the sole and uncontested superpower. The draft plan assigned to the United States "the pre-eminent responsibility" for dealing with "those wrongs which threaten not only our interests, but those of our allies or friends, or which could seriously unsettle international relations." The goal of American world dominance was presented as serving the spread of democracy and open economic systems. American military power was to be so overwhelming that it would not even occur to the United States' competitors to challenge its will.¹⁸ This vision of the future might have seemed the expression of an inordinate, open-ended desire for power and control, uninhibited by the fact that the world is, after all, rather large. But significantly, many commentators considered the vision entirely plausible. The *Wall Street Journal* praised the draft plan in a lead editorial favoring "Pax Americana."¹⁹

Bill Clinton made clear in his 1992 presidential campaign that he would pursue a foreign policy similar to, if not more expansive than, the Bush administration's. In 1993 his Secretary of State-designate Warren Christopher addressed a group of neoconservative Democrats, including Penn Kimball, Joshua Muravchik, Peter Rosenblatt, Albert Shanker, and Max Kampelman, to assure them that he would fully back the president's commitments to making promotion of democracy a central tenet of U.S. foreign policy.²⁰ Christopher's successor, Madeleine Albright, was even more comfortable with this stance. Democratist ideology was by now clearly dominant in top policy-making circles in Washington and elsewhere. It both generated and sanctioned an assertive, expansive use of American power.

When running for president, George W. Bush appeared to have substantial qualms about this broad use of American might. He questioned the desire to impose solutions to problems in all regional and local trouble spots around the world, seeming to recognize that such efforts betrayed arrogance and an undue will to power that other countries might resent. His adoption of a wholly different, far more assertive tone after the 9/11 attacks was surely induced in large part by war-like conditions. Although the change was probably motivated more by pragmatic than by ideological considerations, President Bush's rhetoric began to take on a neo-Jacobin coloring, as when he spoke of the "axis of evil," a phrase coined by neoconservative speechwriter David Frum.

In subsequent speeches, the president has often come to resemble Woodrow Wilson in assigning to the United States, the exceptional country,

¹⁸ Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop," *New York Times*, Mar. 8, 1992.

¹⁹ *Wall Street Journal*, lead editorial, Mar. 16, 1992.

²⁰ *Washington Post*, Jan. 9, 1993. The designation "neoconservative" for the mentioned individuals is taken from this article.

an exceptional mission in the world. He has asserted that an attack upon the United States was an attack upon freedom: “A lot of young people say, well, why America? Why would anybody want to come after us? Why would anybody want to fight a war with this nation? And the answer is because we love freedom. That’s why. And they hate freedom.”²¹ Identifying America with the universal cause of freedom, Bush has even adopted Wilsonian imagery. Echoing Wilson in 1917, he said that the American flag stands “not only for our power, but for freedom.”²² Although the president used the term “freedom” rather than “democracy,” which is the one favored by the new Jacobins, he seemed to agree with the notion that any enemy or critic of the United States is an opponent of universal principle. “They have attacked America,” he said three days after 9/11, “because we are freedom’s home and defender.”²³

Proponents of American empire had moved with great speed to head off any reluctance on the part of a devastated and disoriented American public to deal quickly and comprehensively with terrorism around the globe. Already on the morning after the attacks, when it was still not clear who was responsible, the *Washington Post* carried an article by Robert Kagan calling for sweeping countermeasures. The U.S. Congress should, Kagan insisted, declare war immediately on the terrorists and any nation that might have assisted them. The situation required that America act with “moral clarity and courage as our grandfathers did [responding to the attack on Pearl Harbor]. Not by asking what we have done to bring on the wrath of inhuman murderers. Not by figuring out ways to reason with, or try to appease those who have spilled our blood.”²⁴ On the same day William Bennett, Jack Kemp and Jeane Kirkpatrick issued a statement calling for war against the “entire” Islamic terrorist network.²⁵

If the president thought that American actions might have contributed to the hostility to the United States in the world, he did not, and in the circumstances perhaps could not, say so publicly. What he did say and has said repeatedly is that the United States must be diligent, active, and forceful—preemptive even—in dealing with present or potential threats of terrorism. Paradoxically, given his earlier calls for American humility, he has presided over a massive push for greater American involvement in the world and for a

²¹ Remarks of President to United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America 2002 Legislative Conference, June 19, 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06; Peter Slevin, “The Word at the White House: Bush Formulates His Brand of Foreign Policy,” *Washington Post*, June 23, 2002.

²² Remarks of President to West Point Commencement, June 1, 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06. The same kind of imagery had been used by General George C. Marshall at the Commencement exercises in 1942, and the president began his speech by quoting Marshall, who had expressed the hope that “our flag will be recognized throughout the world as a symbol of freedom on the one hand, and of overwhelming power on the other.”

²³ Remarks, National Cathedral, Sept. 14, 2001.

²⁴ Robert Kagan, “We Must Fight this War,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 12, 2001.

²⁵ Statement of three of the co-directors of Empower America, Sept. 12, 2001.

vastly more intrusive role for government in the daily lives of U.S. citizens. In fairness to a politician who is not also an intellectual and a historian, war has its own logic, and it may be premature to draw definitive conclusions about the president's statements and actions in the wake of 9/11, which was an act of war. But the fact is that President Bush's assertive approach and universalistic rhetoric has been seized on by American democratists who have been preparing the ground for a war and for a wider pursuit of empire. Charles Krauthammer praised the president for applying "the fundamental principle of American foreign policy—the promotion of democracy."²⁶ Political activist and writer Midge Decter pointed out that after 9/11 America could do something to clean up the world. She urged her countrymen "to hang onto what is most important to remember: that our country, the strongest on earth, has been pressed by circumstance—I would say, has been granted the opportunity—to rid the world of some goodly measure of its cruelty and pestilence."²⁷

In mid-September 2002, President Bush sent to the U.S. Congress the president's annual statement on strategy, the National Security Strategy, which gave clear evidence that he was abandoning his earlier calls for a more "humble" U.S. foreign policy. Though the report was framed as a strategy for combating terrorism, the stated objectives supererogated any need to respond to acute external or internal threats. The report defined what amounted to a new and highly ambitious role for America in the world. Released the day after the president asked the Congress to authorize the use of preemptive military force against Iraq, it provided justifications for American intervention against potential security threats, while also formulating a new and much broader international agenda. The report in effect set forth a doctrine of American armed hegemony. The president justified this ascendancy as serving both America's security needs and its efforts to promote freedom, democracy, and free trade. The *Washington Post* said that the Strategy gave the United States "a nearly messianic role." It meant not only acceptance but also extension of the old Wolfowitz draft plan. Indeed, Wolfowitz is now Deputy Secretary of Defense and a highly vocal and assertive proponent of American activism around the world. According to the report, America's strength and influence in the world is "unprecedented" and "unequaled." The United States, "sustained by faith in the principles of liberty and the value of a free society," also has "unparalleled responsibilities, obligations, and opportunities" beyond its borders. The report calls for possessing such overwhelming military power as to discourage any other power from challenging American hegemony or developing weapons of mass destruction. It overturns the old doctrines of deterrence and containment. Committing the United States to a much expanded understanding of security, it argues that the United States must reserve the right to act preemptively and

²⁶ Charles Krauthammer, "Peace Through Democracy," *Washington Post*, June 28, 2002.

²⁷ Midge Decter, "Unnecessary Wars," *Imprimis*, Sept. 2002, p. 5.

unilaterally against potentially threatening states or organizations. But the president approved an even wider goal. The Strategy commits the United States to making the world “not just safer but better.” In explaining the report, a senior administration official said that besides leading the world in the war against terrorists and “aggressive regimes seeking weapons of mass destruction,” the United States should preserve the peace, “extend the benefits of liberty and prosperity through the spread of American values,” and promote “good governance.” In familiar-sounding words, the report describes America’s strategy as a “distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests.”²⁸

A New Kind of War

The foreign policy of George W. Bush’s immediate two predecessors, Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton, had a strong Wilsonian tilt. But neither president followed any sustained, consistent strategy. By contrast, the Bush Doctrine as set forth in the National Security Strategy and other places commits the United States to a bold, comprehensive, and elaborate foreign policy. The publicly and formally stated U.S. goal, in sum, is to establish global supremacy. The United States would set itself up as the arbiter of good and evil in the world and, if necessary, enforce its judgments unilaterally.

Reservations expressed in Europe and elsewhere about American unilateralism and global aspirations have been scorned and dismissed by proponents of empire as a failure to recognize the need to combat evil in the world. Kenneth Adelman, a former deputy ambassador to the UN and a highly placed advisor on defense to the U.S. government, couched his advocacy of imperial designs in terms of fighting terrorism. “I don’t think Europeans should cooperate with the United States as a favor to the United States. They should be very grateful to the United States and cooperate because we have a common enemy—terrorism. In my mind, it’s a decisive moment in the conflict between civilization and barbarism.”²⁹

Since America is at war it is, in a way, not surprising that some of its leaders should be portraying America as being on the side of good and those not eager to follow America’s lead as aiding and abetting evil. Stark rhetoric has been used before to get Americans to support or sustain war, but the war aims spoken of today are derived from a consciously universalistic and imperialistic ideology. Therein lies an important difference, and a great danger.

The belief in American moral superiority knows no party lines. In an article critical of the George W. Bush administration’s way of preparing for

²⁸ National Security Strategy of the United States of America, Sept. 17, 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>, and Karen DeYoung and Mike Allen, “Bush Shifts Strategy From Deterrence to Dominance,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 21, 2002.

²⁹ “Six Degrees of Preemption,” *Washington Post*, Outlook section, Sept. 29, 2002.

war against Iraq, Richard C. Holbrooke, ambassador to the UN under President Clinton, expressed a view ubiquitous in the American foreign policy establishment: “Over the past 60 years, the United States has consistently combined its military superiority with moral and political leadership.”³⁰ The word “consistently” is telling. The notion that, unlike other nations, America is above moral suspicion, provides the best possible justification for the desire to exercise American power.

It seems to the proponents of the ideology of American empire that, surely, America the virtuous is entitled to dominate the world. Some of them have worked long and hard to make this point of view dominant in American foreign policy. President Bush was merely echoing what others had been saying when he stated: “There is a value system that cannot be compromised, and that is the values we praise. And if the values are good enough for our people, they ought to be good enough for others.”³¹

Many members of the so-called Christian right share the view that America has a special mission, but give this notion a triumphalist religious cast beyond the moralism typical of neo-Jacobin ideology. They believe that the United States, as led by a man of God, has a virtually messianic role to play, especially in the Middle East, where God’s chosen people, Israel, must be supported by the United States against their enemies. Breaking sharply with the mainstream of traditional Christianity, which has made a distinction between the things of God and the things of Caesar, this form of religion identifies a particular political power, America, with God’s will. George W. Bush’s rhetoric has sometimes suggested that he is drawn to such thinking. “Evangelical” Christianity of this kind may rest on rather simplistic theological, biblical, and historical assumptions and arguably have virtually no influence over America’s dominant national culture, but it provides considerable political support for neo-Jacobinism, which does have such influence. In its practical effects on United States foreign policy, this religious triumphalism puts a religious gloss on neo-Jacobinism. It does not Christianize U.S. foreign policy, but makes it less humble and more belligerent.

Both in domestic and international affairs the new Jacobins are strongly prejudiced against the traditions of old, historically evolved nations and groups. These only retard the emergence of a new order based on what they consider universal principles. In their view, the distinctive traits of different societies and cultures should yield to the homogeneity of virtuous democracy.

The new Jacobins are trying to clear away obstacles to the triumph of their ideology and of their own will to power. They exhibit a revolutionary mindset that will inexorably lead to disaster. Alongside what President Bush

³⁰ Richard C. Holbrooke, “It Did Not Have to Be This Way,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 23, 2003.

³¹ Remarks by President George W. Bush, in taped interview with Bob Woodward, *Washington Post*, Nov. 19, 2002; excerpted from Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

called “history’s unmarked graves of discarded lies”³² lie the graves of the self-righteous, the people whose moralism concealed, even from themselves, their importunate will to power. As Ronald Reagan preached, the idealistic utopians and the well meaning are responsible for some of the world’s worst evils. Self-righteousness blinds one to one’s own sins.

Even if the opinions examined in this article are assessed in the most generous and charitable spirit, their element of political-ideological imperialism is hard to miss. A philosophically and historically inclined observer is reminded of the terrible and large-scale suffering that has been inflicted on mankind by power-seeking sanctioned or inspired by one or another kind of Jacobin moral and intellectual conceit. Communism, one of the most radical and pernicious manifestations of the Jacobin spirit, has disintegrated, at least as a major political force. But another panacea for the world is taking its place. The neo-Jacobin vision for how to redeem humanity may be less obviously utopian than that of communism. It may strike some as admirably idealistic, as did communism. But the spirit of the two movements is similar, and utopian thinking is utopian thinking, fairly innocuous perhaps if restricted to isolated dreamers and theoreticians but dangerous to the extent that it inspires action in the real world. The concern voiced here is that neo-Jacobinism has come to permeate American public debate and is finally within reach of controlling the military might of the United States.

Prudence, realism, compromise, and self-restraint are indispensable qualities in politics. They have been reflected in traditional American institutions, in great decisions made by American statesmen, and sometimes in American public opinion. They have constituted the first line of defense against all manner of foreign and domestic threats, including surges of passion and eruptions of extremism. Given the atrocities of 9/11 and the need for a firm American response, the prominence of crusaders in the Bush administration is perhaps not surprising. But it is also a sign that needed old American virtues are weakening or disappearing. The continued ascendancy of neo-Jacobinism would have disastrous consequences. By acting under its influence America’s leaders may be setting in motion fateful developments that they and their successors will not be able to control.



³² Address to Congress, Sept. 20, 2001.