

Dangerous Revisionism: On the Founders, ‘Neocons’ and the Importance of History

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***Abstract:** Debates regarding the Bush Administration’s grand strategy began long before the forty-third president left office. A group of distinguished historians and political scientists have argued over the course of the last few years that the Administration’s grand strategy did not represent a major break with historical precedent, as is sometimes argued, but continued the evangelical support for liberty that has always made the United States a “dangerous nation” to tyrants. Along the way, this revisionism creates straw men, and co-opts or redefines terms that are central to the traditional understanding of U.S. foreign policy. It also seems to misunderstand grand strategy itself, focusing almost entirely on continuity of ends while ignoring the rather glaring discontinuities in the ways that generations of U.S. presidents have chosen to pursue them. Overall, the revisionist project fails in both of its tasks, which are: To make the case that the Bush administration took actions of which the Founding Fathers would have understood and approved; and by implication, to justify the unnecessary, tragic war in Iraq.*

As his administration was drawing to a close, George W. Bush deflected questions about his low approval ratings by saying that history would be the ultimate judge of his performance. “I tell people I’m still reading biographies of George Washington and analyses of his administration,” the president told Brit Hume during one of his many exit interviews. If the first president is still being evaluated, he explained, then the forty-third should not worry too much about current opinions.¹ Although Mr. Bush may be relying upon future historians to find some positive aspects to his presidency, the

¹ Remarks made to Brit Hume on Fox News, January 12, 2009. The president had been using the same line for almost three years, beginning soon after Hurricane Katrina, when asked about his legacy.

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battle for the meaning of his foreign policy is well underway, having begun in earnest before he even left office.

The defense has already presented its case. A group of distinguished historians and political scientists have argued over the course of the last few years that the Bush Administration did not deviate from traditional U.S. foreign policy priorities, as is sometimes alleged. In his influential *Dangerous Nation*, Robert Kagan argued that the United States never followed an isolationist path, and has, in fact, always based its evangelical foreign policy upon unwavering support for liberal virtues. The apparent restraint shown by the founding generation was tactical rather than strategic; it was a way to stall until sufficient power had been amassed to spread the gospel of democracy and freedom. Kagan traces a direct, unbroken path from the birth of the United States to the Bush Administration, whose policies represented less a deviation from the norm than its natural, logical extension. From the moment of its creation, the United States was involved in a “global ideological struggle” that “knew no natural, geographical boundaries.”² Its grand strategy has been more-or-less consistent from George W. to George W.

One of the main themes of both Kagan’s book and this revisionist project is that the expansion of U.S. vital interests was a natural result of its growing power. The war in Iraq, the justification of which was of course the book’s main subtext, was merely a logical combination of traditional U.S. goals and great relative power. “Even in the age of Seward,” argued Kagan, it was clear to all that the United States “would upset the status quo if and when Americans accumulated sufficient power and influence and the desire to use them to shape the world more to their liking.”³ It was limited power much more than deliberate choice that held the evangelical nature, and revolutionary impulses, of the United States in check.

More recently Kagan has taken his logic to its ultimate conclusion, arguing that not only were the Founding Fathers opponents of restraint, they were the first neoconservatives.⁴ Perhaps energized by mainstream historians’ criticism of his book, Kagan felt emboldened to state that “there has not been a single criticism leveled at neoconservatism in recent years that was not leveled at American foreign policy hundreds of times over the past two centuries.” Although to some the war in Iraq might have seemed to be a departure from what traditional U.S. principles, Kagan felt that “there is something in the American character which leads it in this direction”.⁵

Kagan may be the most prominent revisionist, but he is not alone. Historian John Lewis Gaddis has argued that the Founding Fathers saw

² Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America’s Foreign Policy from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006), p. 174.

³ Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, p. 300.

⁴ Robert Kagan, “Neocon Nation: Neoconservatism, c. 1776,” *World Affairs*, Spring 2008, pp. 13-35.

⁵ Kagan, “Neocon Nation.”

themselves as having created a “beachhead for liberty” in a world of tyranny, and “they knew that the beachhead would have to expand if it was to be secure.” The ultimate goal of U.S. leaders has always been “the overthrow of tyranny throughout the world,” in his view, this meant they had in effect devised the first “international revolutionary ideology.”⁶ The foreign policy of the Bush administration was just the latest manifestation of this traditional American approach, and its actions were made almost inevitable by the surprise attack on 9/11.⁷ Mackubin Thomas Owens agrees, arguing that the Bush Doctrine is “very much in keeping with the vision of America’s founding generation.”⁸ “The fundamental purposes of American foreign policy,” further explained Robert Kaufman, “have remained largely the same since the founding of the United States.”⁹ Taken together, these works present a version of history that is not only dangerous to the past but to the future. A few points deserve consideration before this revisionism successfully alters our collective memory and national identity.

This historiography commits at least three sins; while the first two may be venial, the third is close to mortal. First, the entire project argues against a past that few believe ever existed, constructing a straw man, labeling it the “conventional wisdom” and knocking it down. Revisionists point out that the United States has never been strictly isolationist, and convincingly demonstrate that to believe otherwise is mistaken; the trouble is, it is hard to identify just who thinks that to begin with. Second, those seeking to forge this history of the Bush Administration employ a common rhetorical strategy of co-opting and re-defining the terms used by their intellectual opposition. Perhaps the revisionists believe that if they can successfully blur the meaning of terms once central to U.S. foreign policy, like *prudence* and *realism*, they will rob critics of the language with which to strike back.

Finally, and most importantly, the revisionists exhibit a puzzling misunderstanding of grand strategy, which has always involved *means* as well as *ends*. They make a very convincing case that the United States has always maintained the goal of a democratic, free, tyranny-free world, but fail to mention that until recently it did not create serious national means to address that end. The Founders did not recommend that their new republic raise a large peacetime military establishment, nor did they consider it the responsibility of the United States to midwife a better world. They felt that the example was enough, that the birth of the idea would suffice. It was the social

⁶John Lewis Gaddis, “Ending Tyranny: The Past and Future of an Idea,” *The American Interest*, Autumn 2008, p. 11.

⁷John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁸Mackubin Thomas Owens, “The Bush Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of Republican Empire,” *Orbis*, Winter 2009, p. 23.

⁹Robert G. Kaufman, *In Defense of the Bush Doctrine* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), p. 3.

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and economic success of the United States, not its military power, that would inspire advocates of freedom everywhere. Over the course of the next 150 years, their successors generally followed that guidance, adhering to the famous advice from John Quincy Adams that is so disdained by the revisionists: to be the “well wisher” of freedom everywhere, but to go not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.

The Bush administration’s foreign policy indeed marked a major discontinuity in the trajectory of U.S. history, one that led the nation into strategic disaster. Hopefully the proper lessons can be learned in its wake, and better grand strategy employed to take her through the young century.

The Venial Sins: Straw Men and Redefinitions

If there is one point that unites all grand strategists, it is the sincere belief that their favored option represents mainstream U.S. public opinion. Each is convinced that once his or her strategic recommendations are properly explained to the American people, devoid of caricature, their support is likely to follow. Every grand strategist feels that he or she has a finger on the pulse of the national character, and understands its true nature.

Neoconservatives are no exception.¹⁰ In the face of a prevailing belief that the Bush Administration’s foreign policy—at least over the first four years—represented a departure from historical precedent, neoconservatives recognized far more continuity than change.¹¹ Many made the case that their favored grand strategy, which is sometimes referred to as *primacy*, taps into essential components of the American identity, in their view, and is a logical, natural reaction to the end of the Cold War. This interpretation, were it to prove victorious in the marketplace of ideas, would simultaneously bolster neoconservatism during what are likely to be dark times under President Obama and salvage the reputation of the younger Bush.

¹⁰ At its core, according to Kagan in “Neocon Nation,” neoconservatism has six main components: a “patient moralism and idealism in world affairs,” a belief in the potentially beneficial role of U.S. power in promoting liberty and democracy, support for continued U.S. primacy, a confidence in U.S. military power in achieving its objectives, a suspicion of international institutions and a “tendency toward unilateralism.” Its critics add two more parts to this definition, which are important to understand its role in U.S. foreign policy debate. First, neoconservatives inhabit the far-end of the threat perception spectrum, believing that danger that exists in the world is far higher than those from any other school of thought. Second, the moralism that Kagan speaks of leads to a Manichean worldview, in which the United States wears the white hats, and the other – whether it be the Soviets, the Iraqis or Al Qaeda – wear the black. See Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neoconservatives and the Global Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹¹ Among the more interesting review of that prevailing belief are Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: Brookings, 2003); and Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

The incorrect conventional historical wisdom, these revisionists hold, is that the United States followed an isolationist path for its first hundred and fifty years, oblivious to and apathetic about events abroad. It avoided entangling alliances and warned the Europeans to stay out of the Western Hemisphere. U.S. leaders constructed a foreign policy like that of Tokugawa Japan, aimed at severing almost all contact with the outside world. Not until the Cold War did the United States, having learned a series of hard lessons, begin to care about what was happening in the rest of the world. Once revisionists have constructed this strictly isolationist straw man, it is not difficult for them to knock it down. When he discovers that U.S. policymakers expressed the hope that revolutionists in Hungary and Greece could taste freedom and liberty, for example, Kagan can deal it another blow.

It is difficult, however, to identify exactly who believes in this version of history today. Few serious scholars maintain that the United States had no foreign policy in its first century-and-a-half, or that it did not have an active diplomatic presence, especially in the western hemisphere. Virtually no one believes that the United States tried to cut itself off entirely from the rest of the world, or even from the Old World, for its first two centuries.

What the Founding Fathers actually believed, and what they recommended to their successors, was that the United States should be *restrained* in its actions, not *isolated* from the rest of the world. They considered the United States fundamentally safe, and did not believe that the problems of the Old World demanded their attention. As a result, they counseled restraint, which differs from the isolationism of, say, the Chinese Middle Kingdom in ways well described the late Eric Nordlinger: Restraint means minimal effort in national security, but “moderately activist policies to advance our liberal ideas among and within states” and “a fully activist economic diplomacy on behalf of free trade.”¹² Restraint precludes neither support for liberty nor economic connections abroad, merely deep entanglement in the political and military affairs of other states. In his famous farewell address, Washington discussed his “great rule” of strategy, which was that the United States ought to extend its commercial relations with foreign nations, but have “as little political connection as possible” with them.¹³ Thomas Jefferson was “for free commerce with all nations, political connection with none, and little or no diplomatic establishment.”¹⁴ In his 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine wrote that although “Europe is our market for trade, we ought to form

¹² Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 4.

¹³ Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

¹⁴ From a letter to Elbridge Gerry in 1799. Albert Ellery Bergh and Andrew A. Lipscomb, eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. 10* (New York: Kessinger, 2006), p. 77.

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no partial connection with any part of it. It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions.”

The actual conventional wisdom, which the revisionists generally avoid engaging, holds that the United States pursued its two main interests – security and prosperity – quite aggressively during its early eras. It was commercial interests, after all, that propelled Jefferson to clash with the Barbary Pirates, and commercial interests that led to the increase in intervention in Latin America in the early 1900s. Freedom of the seas, or lack thereof, played the decisive role in convincing Woodrow Wilson to break his promise of keeping America out of the First World War. The United States sought contacts of all kinds during its early period, and expressed consistent support for liberty and freedom of all humanity.

Little would be gained by spending much time supporting this contention using revisionist methods, which involves “cherry picking” the historical record for statements that seem to support the argument and ignore the contradictory. Instead, one can be content to agree with many of Kagan’s main contentions. Of course the Founders believed that the United States would be a beacon of hope amid a sea of darkness. Of course they wanted to found a republic that would spread the ideas of liberty, freedom and justice around the world. But it is important to realize that they assumed that the example of the United States would be sufficient to support liberty abroad. They had no desire to police the world, or to bring about their vision by force.

The revisionists are quite convincing when they point out that, contrary to their straw man, the United States did indeed trade with the world, and wished national liberation movements well. It certainly sent ambassadors abroad and expressed concern when its interests were challenged. In other words, what the revisionists actually prove beyond a doubt is that *since its founding, the United States did indeed have a foreign policy*. It denounced tyrants. It expressed solidarity with democratic revolutions abroad. But when it came to action, the United States was prudently restrained. Grand strategy involves more than merely expressing opinions or hoping for outcomes; as Kagan admitted, over the years “Americans’ behavior in support of their universal principles abroad was irregular and haphazard.”¹⁵ This is an important understatement.

Isolationism is a dirty word in today’s climate. Internationalists of all stripes know this, and use the term to beat advocates of a prudent foreign policy into a defensive posture. As Andrew Bacevich has pointed out, the warnings about creeping isolationism that are routinely issued by U.S. policy-makers usually have little relation to anyone’s actual beliefs.¹⁶ Raising the

¹⁵ Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, p. 45.

¹⁶ Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), esp. pp. 75-76, 114.

specter of isolation is instead a rhetorical device intended to bolster the policy *du jour* being promoted by the executive branch. Today, very few strategists advocate strict isolationism, with its concomitant xenophobia and economic protectionism.¹⁷ The more realistic (in every sense of that term) alternative to internationalism remains restraint, or the closely related “offshore balancing.”¹⁸ It is restraint, not isolationism, that is the traditional grand strategy of the United States, and that its proponents (like all grand strategists) feel has intuitive appeal to many Americans.¹⁹ Rather than confront it on its merits, however, neoconservatives—and other internationalists—would rather employ emotionally loaded, empty rhetorical devices. In 1972 Robert Tucker observed that “so marked is this prejudice that in the American political vocabulary there are few terms carrying greater opprobrium than isolationism.”²⁰ That statement is even truer today.

It is ironic that neoconservatives lead the charge to create straw men. Neoconservatism itself, after all, commonly suffers from the similar misrepresentation and misinterpretation by critics. As a school of thought it has become the object of significant opprobrium by those who fundamentally misunderstand—or refuse to understand—what its members actually believe. It has in effect become the default term for anyone seeking to criticize U.S. foreign policy. When presented accurately and rather than caricatured, neoconservatism is more serious, interesting and compelling than when twisted by its many critics.

The Founders advocated and followed a grand strategy that closely resembles strategic restraint which, when presented devoid of caricature, is

¹⁷ One of the few exceptions, and the ubiquitous target for constructors of straw men, is Pat Buchanan. See his *A Republic, Not an Empire* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1999).

¹⁸ On restraint, in addition to Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured*, see Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security*, Spring 1997, pp. 5-48; and Barry R. Posen, “The Case for Restraint,” *The American Interest*, November/December 2007, pp. 6-17. On offshore balancing, see Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, Summer 1997, pp. 86-124; and *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). Other advocates include J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); and Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2005).

¹⁹ Evidence for the existence of a stable popular sympathy for restraint can be found in William Schneider, “The New Isolationism,” in Robert J. Lieber, *Eagle Adrift: American Foreign Policy at the End of the Century* (New York: Longman, 1997), pp. 26-38. Troglodytic political consultant Dick Morris reports in his memoir that throughout the 1990s, internal Clinton Administration polling revealed a consistent strain of about forty percent of the public that was “really isolationist, opposed to having much a foreign policy at all.” *Behind the Oval Office* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 247.

²⁰ Robert W. Tucker, *A New Isolationism: Threat or Promise?* (New York: Universe Books, 1972), p. 11.

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similarly more nuanced and compelling than the straw man presented by intellectual opponents. This article will return to this point later.

Rescuing Prudence and Realism

Few things in life are more tedious than academic arguments over definitions; still, the terms at the heart of any great debate matter deeply to its participants. The current generation of revisionists has attempted to adopt a pair of terms that have well-understood meanings in the vocabulary of U.S. grand strategy: *prudence* and *realism*. Their redefinition serves an important rhetorical purpose. If the definition of these terms were successfully diluted to the point where they become meaningless, potential critics would be robbed of the ammunition with which to strike back. The Bush administration cannot be accused of being imprudent or unrealistic if the concepts are broadened to cover nearly any policy choices. By co-opting the terms of their opponents, neoconservatives hope to deny them the means with which to respond.

Realists have long considered prudence to be, in Hans Morgenthau's words, "the supreme virtue in politics."²¹ Their conception of the term, and how it has traditionally been used in U.S. foreign policy debates, is similar to the dictionary definition: wisdom, cautiousness, circumspection, and "provident care in the management of resources."²² Prudence is the ability to weigh consequences of alternative political actions. Like realism it is hardly amoral, but merely demands a focus on the morality of *outcomes*, not *intentions*. Actions that produce bad results are imprudent, no matter how good the intent. On this, Morgenthau quotes Lincoln:

I do the very best I know, the very best I can, and I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.²³

A prudent foreign policy "minimizes risk and maximizes benefits."²⁴ It is rational, cautious and restrained; it does not waste national resources pursuing low-priority goals. It is keenly aware of the possible, and takes into account risk and likely reward. Prudence has, therefore, long been one of the essential qualities of the successful statesman.

This amoral, detached, utilitarian understanding of prudence is unacceptable to the revisionists. St. Thomas Aquinas had conceived of prudence in a way that Kaufman finds more applicable to the particular challenges of the twenty-first century. Aquinas, who was elaborating on a philosophical tradition

²¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 11.

²² Discussed by Robert Hariman, in *Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2003), p. vii.

²³ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 8.

of Aristotle and Cicero, felt that prudence was “the right reason about things to be done;” the right reason, of course, was morally and theologically determined.²⁵ Kaufman insists that the modern, rationalist understanding of prudence is incomplete, and that prudence “presupposes moral virtue.”²⁶ “In foreign affairs,” Owens writes, “prudence requires the statesman to adapt universal principles to particular circumstances in order to arrive at the means that are best given existing circumstances.”²⁷ In other words, according to the revisionists, prudence no longer counsels caution, but merely the choice of correct means to address morally virtuous, universal ends. So defined, prudence can justify nearly any policy choice by the forces of righteousness; it becomes Good’s tool in the battle against Evil. Intention, therefore, is at least as important as outcome, which turns the modern, realist understanding of prudence on its head.

Using the new definition, the invasion of Iraq appears to be a prudent use of force to address a potential threat in the attempt to bring about a morally just end. Saddam Hussein may not have had any super weapons or connections to al Qaeda, but policymakers did not know that. His overthrow may have led to a sustained guerrilla war and misery for the Iraqi people, but the architects of the war believed that it would be followed by rapid democratization. Although the war not only failed to spread liberal ideas throughout the Middle East but generated high levels of anti-Americanism the administration did not anticipate that, either. “The decision to remove Saddam,” explains Richard Perle, “stands or falls on one’s judgment *at the time the decision was made*, and with the information then available,” not on what has transpired since.²⁸ Overall, revisionists maintain that the fact that the outcome did not match the good intentions does not necessarily make the decision to invade imprudent. Criticism pre-empted.

A moment’s pause is in order before that preemption is allowed to succeed. Even if the intentions of the administration were good, it is hard to see how the outcome can be said to be worth the cost. Thomas Ricks quotes a “senior intelligence official” in Iraq as saying that the long-term American goal after the surge is “a stable Iraq that is unified, at peace with its neighbors, and is able to police its internal affairs, so it isn’t a sanctuary for al Qaeda. Preferably a friend to us, but it doesn’t have to be.”²⁹ Presumably one could add the

²⁵ See the essays in Hariman, in *Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2003); and Alberto R. Coll, “Normative Prudence as a Tradition of Statecraft,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, December 1991, pp. 33-51.

²⁶ Kaufman, *In Defense of the Bush Doctrine*, p. 4.

²⁷ Owens, “The Bush Doctrine,” p. 25.

²⁸ Richard Perle, “Ambushed on the Potomac,” *The National Interest*, January-February 2009, p. 40, emphasis in original.

²⁹ The official “pointedly noted that his list doesn’t include democracy or the observation of human rights.” Ricks goes on to point out that this is a “surprisingly common view among officials in Iraq, even if it hasn’t quite sunk in with many Americans.” Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), p. 316.

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absence of weapons of mass destruction to this scaled-back list of goals, and perhaps the continuation of the uninterrupted flow of oil from the Gulf. In other words, if all goes well over the next few years, and there is obviously no guarantee that it will, *the United States might be able to restore an Iraq that looks quite a bit like the one it found in 2003*, only with a dictator marginally more friendly to the United States. The cost of this restoration of the virtual status quo ante will be at least 4,500 American dead and some 30,000 wounded, somewhere around 100,000 Iraqis killed and millions more displaced, and three trillion U.S. taxpayer dollars spent (which is a conservative estimate once interest on the war debt and lifetime payments to disabled servicemen are taken into account).³⁰ Using the traditional meaning of the term, the decision to invade Iraq may well be the most imprudent action this country has ever taken.

More significant than the harm done to the concept of prudence is the attempt to co-opt *realism* itself. Part of the revisionist effort to demonstrate continuity in foreign policy seems to be to deny that neoconservatism actually exists; describing their strategic outlook using terms of those that came before provides the illusion of consistency. Rather than call himself a neoconservative, Charles Krauthammer is evidently a “democratic realist;” Robert Kaufman ascribes to “moral democratic realism;” Condoleezza Rice wrote in *Foreign Affairs* of the Bush Administration’s “American realism.”³¹ It seems that there are few actual neoconservatives left these days, since everyone has become a realist of one flavor or another.³²

Each of these new realists cling to some aspect of that school of thought to help deny that the first four years of the Bush administration represented anything particularly new. Krauthammer claims that since he does not advocate using military force to overthrow every tyrant everywhere simultaneously, his worldview exhibits an admirable amount of realism. Kaufman is more convinced of the utility of the geopolitics of Sir Halford Mackinder, the British geographer of fist half of the 20th century, than some other neoconservatives, which in his mind apparently makes him part realist. Rice affirms the importance of relationships with the other great powers, like any good realist would. Never mind that the core precepts of the strategies they describe are virtually the opposite of traditional *realpolitik*; the peripheral similarities are evidently enough to stake a partial claim to the term.

Upon closer inspection, these tenuous connections to realism quickly fall apart. When Rice argues that “we recognize that democratic state building

³⁰ Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict* (New York: WW Norton, 2008).

³¹ Charles Krauthammer, “In Defense of Democratic Realism,” *The National Interest*, Fall 2004, pp. 15-25; Kaufman, *In Defense of the Bush Doctrine*; Condoleezza Rice, “Rethinking the National Interest: American Realism for a New World,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2008, pp. 2-26.

³² Perle has explained that, contrary to evidence and logic, neoconservatives were not in fact terribly influential in the decision to go to war in Iraq. See his “Ambushed on the Potomac.”

is now an urgent component of our national interest,” and more importantly puts such an end as central to her grand strategy, she parts company with one of the truly seminal components of realism. Kaufman’s makes the same messy combination. And while Krauthammer may share the realist’s pessimism about human nature, he too feels that spreading democracy is a vital national interest, and that the United States is involved in an existential struggle against radical Islam.

This distinction is hardly peripheral to the debate between the schools of thought; it is instead its essence. There is probably little point in engaging in yet another review of the differences between realists and neoconservatives, especially when adequate explanations already exist.³³ Suffice to say, realists in general do not believe that the United States is engaged in an existential struggle against evil. They do not support expensive, risky crusades to rid the world of relatively minor threats. And while they certainly share the hope that all people everywhere could be free, they reject the means that neoconservatives favor. In other words, since they differ on perceptions of the level of threat, in both the priority of ends and selection of means realists and neoconservatives are often starkly opposed. The analyst gains little insight by lumping the two together into a hybrid grand strategy.

If every decision is prudent, then none is; if everyone is a realist, then no one is. While one can assume that the effort to define these concepts using an entirely new set of criteria is partly motivated by a sincere misunderstanding of their meanings, it is also a component of the revisionist attempt to weaken a potential alternative to the Bush approach. Neoconservatives know that these terms have intuitive appeal, for both policy professionals and the public alike. Strategies are always more palatable when they seem to be following the traditional American mixture of power and principle. Thus, despite the fact that none of these efforts to dress neoconservatism in realist clothing is convincing, the effort itself is instructive. Realism and prudence apparently have enough of a positive connotation to make those who are most unrealistic and imprudent seem more reasonable, or perhaps even sagacious.

The Mortal Sin: Grand Strategy

More egregious than the rhetorical strategies employed by the revisionists to support their case, and the area that in which their interpretation of history is the weakest, is their puzzling failure to discuss grand strategy in a coherent fashion. The concept has been defined in many ways over the years,

³³See for instance the debate between Joshua Muravchik and Stephen M. Walt, “The Neocons vs. the Realists,” *National Review Online*, September 3, 2008, available at <http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=19672>; and Brian C. Schmidt and Michael C. Williams, “Neo-Conservatism, Realism and the Bush Doctrine,” Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, August 2006.

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but a couple components remain central to the current understanding. First, grand strategy is the lens through which states define goals, interests and threats. It helps prioritize national concerns, separating the vital from the peripheral. The most basic of these concerns are generally security and prosperity, but the importance of secondary interests can vary from administration to administration. Second, grand strategy lays out the basic structure of the tools with which to pursue national goals, which can be drawn from all aspects of national power (military, economic, diplomatic, etc.).³⁴ In other words, it defines and prioritizes national *ends*, and prescribes the *means* with which to pursue them. Both are necessary components of any useful grand strategy.

The revisionists focus their analysis entirely on the first part of that definition. They conflate ends with grand strategy itself, ignoring means entirely, even though the latter is arguably the more crucial of the two. Their critique is correct in pointing out that the ends of U.S. foreign policy have been quite consistently a blend of idealism and interest, and that every administration has expressed support for democracy and freedom. But none prior to World War II was willing to build an enormous, expensive peacetime military to pursue those goals, and no president prior to George W. Bush was willing to initiate a war against a country that posed no real threat to U.S. interests to spread democracy and liberty by force.

There is no doubt that U.S. leaders, from the Founders through today, have always supported democratic movements abroad. They have always denounced tyranny, and sincerely hoped that liberty and freedom would spread around the world. It is no stretch to say that the vast majority of Americans that have ever lived – including, it deserves repeating, the much-maligned realists – harbor the belief that all people everywhere should be free. But for most of its existence, the United States was not prepared to do much to bring that freedom about. In other words, while it has always been activist in talk, it used to be restrained in action.³⁵

The proof of this is easy to find. Not only did the United States choose not to act during the many threats to liberty that occurred since its birth, it also chose not even *to prepare* to act. It wasn't until the Cold War that the young republic sustained anything more than a bare minimum military presence during peacetime, even as its economic strength (and potential military power) grew to surpass all others. It is worth recalling that the United States became an economic superpower in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its industrial production became the greatest in the world by surpassing that

³⁴ A very useful review of the various extant definitions of grand strategy can be found in Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 9-13.

³⁵ John Mearsheimer discusses this to some degree in "Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking," *University of Chicago Magazine*, February 2002, pp. 24-28.

of Great Britain around 1885.³⁶ At the outbreak of the Civil War, U.S. industrial production accounted for a quarter of the world's total; by 1914, the percentage was thirty-six, or as much as Great Britain, France and Germany (the next three richest countries) combined.³⁷ Yet it stubbornly refused to raise a military commensurate with its power. In fact, the United States never devoted more than one percent of its GDP to military spending in peacetime prior to the Cold War. If the founding generations truly wanted to set the nation on course for republican empire, then such choices were bizarre indeed.

Between 1815 and 1846, the United States maintained a large enough army to offer some protection for settlers and support continental expansion that displaced Native Americans, which required around 9,000 men.³⁸ Acts of Congress helped keep the end strength below 27,000 over the last quarter of the century, which was a limit that did not seem to cause great distress to the executive branch.³⁹ Compared to all other, less prosperous powers of the day, this was preposterously small.

Size of world peacetime armies, 1900⁴⁰

Russia	896,000
Germany	545,000
France	544,000
Austria-Hungary	350,000
Great Britain	236,000
Turkey	230,000
Italy	220,000
Japan	180,000
India	148,000
United States	25,000

Throughout the nineteenth century, the United States, one of the greatest economic powers in the world, maintained an army smaller than that of Denmark. The King of Belgium drafted half as many men into his army every single year. One of Kagan's own examples demonstrates that the story was much the same at sea: "During the 1860s and '70s, and well into the 1880s," he noted, "the Chilean navy was more powerful than that of the United States."⁴¹ Washington

³⁶ Ronald E. Seavoy, *An Economic History of the United States: From 1607 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 213.

³⁷ John M. Peterson and Ralph Gray, *Economic Development of the United States* (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin Inc., 1969), p. 247.

³⁸ David Woodward, *Armies of the World, 1854-1914* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1978).

³⁹ John Keegan, *World Armies*, 2nd ed. (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Co., 1983).

⁴⁰ Numbers compiled from David Woodward, *Armies of the World, 1854-1914* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1978).

⁴¹ Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, p. 320.

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undertook a naval build-up beginning in the early 1880s, which Kagan uses as proof that U.S. influence and aspirations grew naturally along with its power. But by 1896, the United States had not mustered the national will to build more than five battleships, though seven more were in production. By comparison, Great Britain had 45 (with 12 under construction), France 29 and Germany 21. Even Russia had ten, and was working on eight more. At the height of this meager “build-up,” planners in Washington “considered even the Haitian navy a potential rival.”⁴²

Kagan’s argument that this restraint was merely a temporary strategy, one that put the nation in a holding pattern until its power grew to the point that it could impose its will on the rest of the world, requires a substantial re-write of history. The United States has long had the potential to raise a first-class military and put it to use if indeed its grand strategy were really as expansive as the revisionists suggest. There should be no doubt that the decision to remain aloof from the world was made deliberately by, not thrust upon, U.S. leaders. Generations of presidents chose to remain restrained.

For most of its existence the United States relied on what Richard Betts today calls a “mobilization strategy.”⁴³ When crises arose, the United States raised its posture to address them. In 1860 the United States maintained a 16,000-man army. It ballooned rapidly to over a million by the Civil War’s end; between 1939 and 1945, more than thirteen million men and women answered their country’s call.⁴⁴ The cost to be paid in professionalism during war’s early moments, it was thought, was far outweighed by the benefits of not maintaining large standing militaries in times of peace.

Kaufman suggests that the United States did not build much of a military because it “could take the effective operation of the European balance of power for granted,” which is the most preposterous explanation of all.⁴⁵ The United States was in far more danger in the nineteenth century than it is today. The European powers all had larger, more professional militaries and connections to the new world. The Royal Navy dominated the Atlantic, and could at any time have cut off U.S. trade or deposited an army to burn its former colony’s capital. It is hard to imagine today’s neoconservatives remaining sanguine if the United States depended on the navy of another country to guarantee its basic security, no matter how benign Great Britain may appear in retrospect. In fact, it is only in retrospect, and with the knowledge of how history unfolded, that anyone can argue that a balance of power in Europe

⁴² Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, p. 346.

⁴³ Richard K. Betts, “A Disciplined Defense: How to Regain Strategic Solvency,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2007, pp. 67-80. A discussion of the mobilization strategy in US military history can be found in Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1984), pp. 117-153.

⁴⁴ See Williamson Murray and Alan R. Millett, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁴⁵ Kaufman, *In Defense of the Bush Doctrine*, p. 99.

kept the United States safer during its first 150 years than it is now, when the continent is entirely at peace. Such a conclusion was certainly not obvious to the strategists at the time. Still, U.S. leaders acted as if none of this was much concern.

Today the threats in the international system are much less dire than ever before. The fear of conquest, which was genuine during this nation's era of restraint, is obviously now relegated to the realm of the absurd. Major war is all but unthinkable, and the challenges of the twenty-first century, like terrorism, drugs and crime, are all better addressed through international intelligence sharing and police work than with large, forward-stationed military forces. It is not hard to kill terrorists, after all. The challenge comes in finding them.

Kagan begins a chapter with this quotation from Walter Q. Gresham, who was Grover Cleveland's Secretary of State:

Every nation, and especially every strong nation, must sometimes be conscious of an impulse to rush into difficulties that do not concern it, except in a highly imaginary way. To restrain the indulgence of such a propensity is not only the part of wisdom, but a duty we owe to the world as an example of the strength, the moderation, and the beneficence of popular government.⁴⁶

This quotation well describes the attitude of the Founding Fathers and of the generations that followed. None ever advocated abandoning traditional U.S. principles, of course; they merely differed on how to best promote them. Former Secretary of State Rice put her finger on this essential difference when she said that "the real question is not *whether* to pursue this course [the promotion of democracy] but *how*."⁴⁷ This difference over the choice of means provides one of the most important distinctions between neoconservatives and both modern realists and the Founding Fathers alike. While the pre-Cold War republic chose to spread freedom primarily by example, the Bush Administration sought to spread it by imposition. "The best way for a larger country to help smaller ones," argued George Kennan, echoing the traditional American belief, "is surely by the power of example."⁴⁸ The ultimate ends of U.S. foreign policy have never changed, only their priority, and the manner in which they were pursued.

Disagreements over means also separated the Bush Administration from its immediate predecessor. Both post-Cold War presidents supported similar ends – bringing about a liberal world order – but President Clinton felt that multilateralism, institutions and law were appropriate approaches. The Bush Administration, especially over the course of its first four years, disdained the UN and international law, abrogated every treaty possible and preferred to fight alone. And fight it did. In 2003, the United States went abroad and found a monster to destroy. Saddam Hussein was certainly a monster, especially to the Iraqi people, but his pathetically weak regime posed only imaginary threats to

⁴⁶ Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, p. 357.

⁴⁷ Rice, "Rethinking the National Interest," p. 11, emphasis added.

⁴⁸ George Kennan, "On American Principles," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1995, p. 125.

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the United States. Every U.S. president from Washington onward would have denounced Hussein's brutal rule, and expressed solidarity with the oppressed millions he held captive. But only one would have thought it was a good idea to send troops to topple him.

Unlike most of his predecessors, George W. Bush did much more than merely wish freedom well. His administration elevated the spread of democracy to the level of vital national interest, or that for which the country had to fight. His second inaugural address famously stated awkwardly that "America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one," and "the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands." The spread of liberty was given a major increase in priority, one that elevated it to the status of vital interest, or one for which the country would be prepared to fight. "The United States can be fully secure," explained Owens, "only in a world where everyone else is also secure."⁴⁹ True stability, in this calculation, comes only from democracy. Thus to achieve "full security," the United States had to be prepared to act much more aggressively on behalf of liberty abroad. Traditional means were no longer adequate. The suggestion that such reasoning does not represent a fundamental break with traditional American thinking, for better or for worse, is simply unsustainable.

Overall, the modern re-interpretations of the history of U.S. foreign policy cannot wash away the fact that for most of its existence, the United States defined threats, interests and opportunities quite narrowly, and maintained appropriately small militaries with which to address them. The affairs of the Old World in particular held little more than a passing interest to U.S. strategists, who felt that the oceans provided adequate buffer for most of the ills of the world. It was restraint rather than isolationism that guided this country for its first hundred and fifty years. During that time, the nation experienced steady economic growth and was unmolested by outside forces, eventually rising to become the strongest of the world's great powers. Strategic restraint seemed to serve the young nation quite well. It might well do so again.

Conclusion

The Founders believed that they lived in "normal" times, when the threats to the security and prosperity of the United States were minimal. As a consequence, their strategic recommendations were for normal times. They would have understood that the Cold War was abnormal, since a clear threat to the American way of life existed. In his famous warning about entangling alliances, Washington made exceptions for emergencies, arguing that temporary alignments sometimes will have to be made until storms pass.⁵⁰ Today that

⁴⁹ Owens, "The Bush Doctrine," p. 27.

⁵⁰ Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

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abnormal Cold War threat is obviously gone. “The United States performed heroically in a time when heroism was required,” as the late Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick argued. “With a return to ‘normal’ times, we can again become a normal nation – and take care of pressing problems of education, family, industry, and technology. We can be an independent nation in a world of independent nations.”⁵¹ The Founding Founders would recognize our situation today as one similar in many important ways to their own, and would no doubt recommend a restrained approach to dealing with the rest of the world.

Major revisions of standing historical opinion, even when preposterous, usually have some effect on the way historians view a subject. No matter how effectively devotees of the conventional wisdom defend their case, and no matter how obviously flawed the revisions, usually some minds will be changed, some perceptions altered, some shibboleths questioned. Such a process is in serious danger of occurring regarding the history of U.S. grand strategy.

Prudent grand strategy spends the least to gain the most; it minimizes costs and maximizes benefits. Activism is justified, therefore, only when there is clear necessity. In the midst of economic catastrophe, the United States cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past eight years. The first step toward righting the ship of state is to learn from those mistakes, and save the historical record from the efforts of preposterous revisionism.



⁵¹ Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, “A Normal Country in a Normal Time,” *The National Interest*, Fall 1990, p. 44.