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Does the so-called 'Bush Doctrine' of 2002 Represent a Radical Shift in the US Government's Attitude Towards Foreign Policy?

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OLIVER LEWIS, DEC 3 2007

American foreign policy has been a widely debated area of diplomatic history and international relations for most of the last century, and President George W. Bush's latest reincarnation has stimulated no less debate: Indeed, as Leffler recognises, there is enormous controversy surrounding the manifestation of contemporary US foreign policy – known colloquially as the 'Bush Doctrine' – *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*(NSS).

Much of the discourse surrounds arguments of continuity and change; critics and supporters of the doctrine argue that US foreign policy since September 11th 2001 is a radical departure from conventional attitudes towards America's place and responsibilities in the world. Supporters, wish to identify the policy as revolutionary to suggest that "policymakers are bold, creative, and imaginative in response to what they allege are unprecedented threats" while opposition voices "claim that the administration is adventurous, provocative, and imprudent"[1]. Both camps see identification with a departure from the established norms as evidence for their partisan predispositions. However, this essay will argue that the 'Bush Doctrine' does not mark a radical shift in the US government's attitude towards foreign policy, but must be posited within a long tradition of American foreign policy, marking a clear line of continuity through four centuries of American intellectual and political history. I will argue that the four primary components of the Bush doctrine – a willingness to act unilaterally, the belief that there is an opportunity to transform international politics, the recognition of new threats that must be countered with new and vigorous policies (preventive war) and the importance of a state's domestic regime in formulating its foreign policy[2]– are all rooted in American intellectualism, particularly the enduring framework of vindicationism, within which the active (even coercive) spread of democracy is the central tenant of a US 'Grand Strategy'. Within this essay I will briefly explain what policies are included in the 2002 *National Security Strategy*, followed by an examination of whether the individual policies are different from previous manifestations of foreign policy, or if there can be identified examples and causes within American history that show they are not new, and that, consequently, the doctrine does not mark a radical shift.

The 'Bush Doctrine' is the foreign policy direction of the United States espoused by President George W. Bush in the wake of the September 11th 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre. The central tenant of the doctrine, and that which has aroused the most debate, concerns the declarative statement that the United States is willing to pursue pre-emptive or preventive war against potential aggressors – who may not pose an *immediate* threat – before they are capable of launching attacks against the United States or its interests. Furthermore, that the United States is willing to pursue such military actions (and political, diplomatic or economic action) unilaterally; that is without the support of traditional alliance structures or within the framework of the United Nations. As many commentators have asserted, the overarching aim of the NSS is the promotion of American values; freedom, a liberal free market economy, guarantees of human rights and, crucially, the spread of democracy to those states that are perceived as undemocratic. As Jervis identifies, it is the Bush administration's belief in the importance that the domestic regime has on the way in which it conducts itself on the international stage[3], which underpins its belief in the absolute necessity of the spread of the democratic political system to all states. States with undemocratic systems of rule

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(totalitarian, authoritarian &c.) therefore pose a potential threat to American national security; in that they could harbour groups or promote activities that are terrorist in nature, and that they could produce Weapons of Mass Destruction that could be used against America or its allies, or could be made available to other hostile actors (particularly terrorist organisations). Kagan supports this theory, claiming that the Bush administration "believes the promotion of democracy in the Middle East is not only an expression of idealism but is also in American interests [because] it believes that dictatorship in the Arab world has helped give rise to Islamic terrorism and that reducing the security threat to America requires promoting democratic reform"[4]. The vocal desire for the spread of democratic principles can be seen in the strategies of the Clinton and Carter administrations, and has been present in the policy goals of most US Presidents throughout history. Furthermore, the Bush strategy does not depart significantly from the national security strategies of his predecessors, much of the rhetorical framing and many of the objectives are highly traditional in nature: Goals are identified as "political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity"[5]. Nelson supports this assertion, commenting that strategies "as far back as the Eisenhower administration do tend to share the same approach", that moral platitudes and phrases concerning the defence of liberty are "invariably called upon in such papers"[6]. Therefore, the strategy, as Leffler asserts, "first affirms very traditional objectives" in which the "overriding goal is to promote an international order that favours freedom"[7]. In this regard, the majority of the NSS document shows continuity with the published strategies of his predecessors of the last several decades, with changes as a response to the specific nature of the contemporary, post-9/11 environment.

Therefore, Leffler argues that change "does not constitute a revolution [but] a recalibration in the complicated interaction between the assessment of threat, the calculation of interest, the enunciation of values, and the mobilisation of power"[8]. He argues that these variables are in constant motion, therefore American foreign policy adapts to different circumstances and interactions between them. Furthermore, Leffler sees the ability to "recalibrate the relationships between these variables" and to alter policy to accommodate the difference, as the "genius of American foreign policy"[9]. The Bush strategy is a set of policies that have adapted to respond to an existential terrorist threat, a widening of national interest and a belief in the supremacy and necessity of exporting American values to the world, within a situation where American power is unchallenged. Lixon supports Leffler's assessment of the doctrine, claiming that the "diplomatic record suggests [that] Bush's foreign policy is not revolutionary; it is merely the latest example of perceived 'existential' threats provoking a fervid discourse of good versus evil, followed by war, and deeply rooted in Euro-American modernity"[10]. Consequently, the doctrine has followed the traditional route that the American government has followed in formulating its foreign policy, and therefore cannot mark a radical shift in its thinking. Bose identifies similarities between President Bush's declaration that other states must decide between the United States or 'terrorists', and President Eisenhower's "demand that Middle Eastern states choose between freedom and communism"[11]. Deterministic decisions following moral absolutes have long been a feature of American foreign policy; it was a precondition of the Cold War bipolar system, it was the ideological clash of the Second World War and even the framing of the 1898 Spanish-American war. As LeFeber, Yaqub and Kuklick all contend, "Americans always have fights that are about moral absolutes"[12] at the state level, and that foreign policy is often determined by this. Furthermore, they identify that state-centric 'moral' warfare is not perceived as being against the people of the state because America is ostensibly committed to 'nation-building' in the post-war environment (as witnessed in post-Second World War Germany and Japan, and post-Second Gulf War Iraq). The rhetoric of George W. Bush's firm assurance that the 'War on Terror' is not against "our Muslim friends" supports these claims. However, Leffler identifies what commentators claim represents a radical shift in US foreign policy not as the reaction to a threat or the pursuit of traditional values within a mindset of morality, but as the "alleged dismissal of deterrence, alliance formation, multilateralism, and containment in favour of a strategy of pre-emption, prevention, unilateralism, and hegemony"[13].

"The United States has long maintained the option of preemptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security"[14] states the NSS and is supported by an examination of the Clinton administration. Presidential Decision Directive 39, covering counter-terrorism, discusses the policy of the United States as to deter, defeat and 'vigorously respond' to all terrorist actions within the United States or against its citizens or interests abroad, and although much of the document remains classified, there is general speculation that it includes the option of preemptive action. Such a claim is supported, argues Leffler, by Clinton's advisors who stressed that "there have been, and will be, times when [conventional law enforcement, diplomatic and economic tools] are not enough [to avert terrorism]... we reserve

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the right to act in self-defence by striking at their bases and those who sponsor, assist, or actively support them”[15]and that it was only logistical problems and the difficulty of timely intelligence that dictated Clinton could not take such action against the whereabouts of bin Laden in Pakistan in 2000, not concerns of a global political fallout. Since 2002, the Bush administration have carried out preemptive strikes with a stark continuity from the Clinton scenario, indeed, in 2005 US forces controversially fired across the border at supposed al-Qaeda targets in Pakistan without the prior approval of the Pakistani authorities: It could be argued that President Bush possessed the logistical and intelligence capabilities that Clinton lacked. The NSS also emphasises, Heisbourg comments, the “role that determining an imminent threat plays in the decision to use preemptive force”[16]and calls for a reconsideration of what constitutes an ‘imminent threat’ but without issuing a new definition. The document does make reference to preventive action from emerging threats, which is not a new concept for American foreign policy or the international community. Deployment of United Nations peacekeepers in Macedonia in the 1990’s was intended to prevent the emergence of a threat in the Balkans. However, critics of the doctrine such as Heisbourg claim that such peacekeeping missions are the “polar opposite of the prevalent interpretation of the Bush doctrine, which assumes that the United States may use lethal force in cold blood to accomplish its objectives”[17]. Leffler does not agree with Heisbourg’s assessment, instead claiming that preemptive *military* action is not new. Sourcing historical examples to support his argument, he claims that Roosevelt’s intervention in the Caribbean and Central America “was explicitly a preemptive form of intervention”, intended to establish order and “preclude European powers from having any excuse for inserting their forces on America’s periphery”[18]. Furthermore, because there was no imminent threat to national security, Roosevelt’s action was in the form of explicitly preventative preemption that is referenced in the 2002 Bush strategy. Moreover, Roosevelt’s analogy that “When you see a rattlesnake posed to strike, you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him” is argued to apply to the President’s perception of the future threat to American security from Hitler and his decision to take preventative action; an ‘active defence’[19]. There are many more examples of previous American preemptive or preventative military operations, and even in the Cold War – when large-scale active military operations were impossible if one wished to prevent annihilation – such military actions were not foresworn. As Leffler provides, “at the very same time that he was confirming that preventative war against Soviet Russia was suicidal, President Kennedy and his top advisors pondered preventative military action against the emerging Chinese nuclear threat”[20]. Although this did not materialise, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson did adopt preventative measures in relation to other perceived threats: The 1962 blockade of Cuba, Johnson’s deployment of troops to Indochina and the Dominican Republic, and even the Vietnam War can be said to have intended to ‘prevent dominos falling’. Nevertheless, as Eisenberg argues, it has been the singling out of individual states as the ‘candidates’ for preemptive war that is where the Bush administration differs from most others; “targeting nations which had neither the plans nor the capability of engaging” in attacks against the United States[21]. Similarly, preventive (not preemptive) action is highly problematic when the threat is more difficult to assess temporally: The Israeli strike against Iraq’s Osirak reactor was intended to prevent the possibility of Iraq gaining a nuclear capability at an unknown juncture in the future – preventing a possible threat – but the UN Security Council and the United States rejected Israel’s right to use military action through the justification of self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter[22]. Therefore, while many argue that the Bush doctrine’s affirmation of the validity of preventive war has historical precedent, it is the issue of the specific nature of the threat that will judge whether any such action is legally or morally accepted by the international community.

Nevertheless, the Bush strategy has dictated that America is prepared to act unilaterally without the approval of the international community if necessary. Many observe this as a radical shift in American policy away from the traditional alliance structures that typified US interaction in world affairs throughout two World Wars and the Cold War. President Bush is “leading a revolution in American foreign policy”, poses Greenstein, in which Bush “believes that the best – if not the only – way to ensure America’s security is to jettison the constraints imposed by friends, allies, and international institutions”[23]. Hammond argues that US foreign policy “is neither the engaged multilateralism of the second half of the 20th Century nor the isolationism of the previous decades” and speculates that it is a form of ‘aggressive unilateralism’ that rejects the “tradition of bargaining and mutual respect among allies and of a stable balance of deterrence with enemies”[24]. Furthermore, Hammond rebukes the Bush administration for explicitly “repudiate[ing] deterrence, the strategic assumption that governed our country’s international relations during more than four decades of the Cold War”[25]. But such a simplistic opposition belays the reality of the changing nature of the threat facing the United States and the international system, as many have argued, terrorists cannot be deterred in the same manner which could the Soviet Union. Moreover, some claim that to perceive terrorist

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groups as a possible actor to deter against is impossible, as active deterrence would require a rational actor that has something to fear. Terrorists need not be rational, and certain groups – such as al-Qaeda – do not fear conventional US retaliation. Consequently, the adoption of unilateralism rather than alliance-based deterrence follows the traditional evolution of American foreign policy in that it is responding actively to a new, emerging threat that requires a different mindset to that of the Cold War. Again, Leffler provides historical examples to argue that American unilateralism is not a new phenomenon: Eisenhower and Dulles may have recognised the importance of solidarity with allies and even codified guidelines in their national security strategy, “but they also emphasised that the United States should ‘act independently of its major allies’ [and] Allied reluctance to act should not inhibit the United States from taking action, including the use of nuclear weapons, to prevent Communist territorial gains”[26]. Furthermore, Eisenhower remarked that the United States “must be determined to take, unilaterally if necessary, whatever action is security requires, even to the extent of general war”[27]. President Kennedy’s actions to blockade Cuba in the face of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis are a further example of American’s preparedness to undertake significant operations unilaterally. Therefore, Hammond’s argument that unilateralism did not feature in the Cold War is flawed, as is the belief that modern usage of unilateral action is an entirely new feature of foreign policy specific to the Bush doctrine. That is not to say that the new manifestation of unilateral action has not received criticism. The Second Gulf War, undertaken almost unilaterally and only with the support of a rotating coalition, received heavy international and domestic opposition. US Senator Tom Daschle criticised President Bush’s unilateralism, asserting that “in so isolating ourselves, I think we are minimising ourselves” and supporting Dunn’s claim that such contemporary isolation is not ‘isolationism’ in the traditional sense; for the US, “its isolation from international opinion is not often the result of its international actions rather than its inaction, as the recent invasion of Iraq demonstrates”[28].

A vocal critic of the Bush doctrine, Hammond admonishes the present administration for “openly asserting that the US has the right and the power to pursue any course in world affairs that it chooses”. Leffler justifies this, commenting that a heightened threat perception tempts US officials “to stake their policy on the universality and superiority of American values”[29]. Nevertheless, critics condemn the Bush doctrine as pernicious and abusive, that the ‘traditional values’ that Bush espouses are, as Soros asserts, “unattainable and in contradiction with the principles that America has traditionally stood for”[30]. McCartney proposes that the Bush administration resolved that the only way to prevent future atrocities was to “change the global context that had made them possible” and that globally enforcing American values to reinforce American security “has always been an implicit component of American nationalism”[31]. Furthermore, McCartney provides compelling arguments for the long-standing nature of American foreign policy, asserting that policy represents the ingrained belief that the “United States enjoys universal significance because it is an archetype of virtue and the locomotive of human progress”.

Accordingly, the ‘Bush Doctrine’ does not represent a radical shift in the US government’s attitude towards foreign policy. American interaction in the international sphere reflects cultural-ideological interpretations of the domestic state and its perceived place in the world: The Bush strategy reflects this, its willingness to follow policies unilaterally betray a strong belief in the certainty of its will and its mission, and to pursue military action preemptively and preventatively illustrates a confidence that the decisions policy-makers undertake are both acceptable and permissible on some higher level. Furthermore, to ascribe a transcendent value to the American nation and its pursuits reflects the intellectual and religious history of the state, in which America sees itself as prepared to serve as an example of social and political possibility and more than willing to take up an active role in changing the shape of the world, so that it is more like that of the United States.

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[11]Bose, M. (2002), 'Defining U.S. Foreign Policy in the Post-9/11 World'. *Diplomatic History* 26 (4): 622

[12]*Ibid*: 623

[13]Leffler, *American Foreign Policy*: 396

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[15]Leffler, *American Foreign Policy*: 405

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[17]*Ibid*: 78

[18]Leffler, *American Foreign Policy*: 398

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[19]*Ibid*

[20]*Ibid*: 400

[21]Eisenberg, C. (2005), 'The New Cold War'. *Diplomatic History* 29 (3): 424

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[25]*Ibid*: 101

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