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Getting beyond the Bush Doctrine

Occasional Paper 5

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Most now agree that the Bush Doctrine of unilateral pre-emptive/preventive war to defeat terrorism, stop nuclear proliferation, and democratize global politics, starting with Afghanistan and Iraq, is bankrupt.

Informed critics and partisans of the Iraq gamble also agree that inept planning, notably in preparing for the aftermath of “Mission Accomplished,” and an incompetently administered occupation largely account for the debacle.

This assessment, however relevant, won’t get us very far in understanding the root sources of the Bush Doctrine’s abject failure or in charting new and effective directions in American security and foreign policy. The problem with the Bush Doctrine lies less at the surface in its demonstrably flawed execution than in the fatal defects of its material and moral assumptions: that the United States is a superpower, capable of inducing allies and compelling adversaries to submit to American preferences for world order — views shared by proponents *and* opponents of the war.

Jettisoning the Bush Doctrine will require discarding this triumphalist conceit. Creating a new global order unilaterally is beyond the reach of the United States, or any state, within a world of multiplying and increasingly interdependent but diffused and decentralized centers of power, state and nonstate, which will have a say in how the world is governed — or not.

The perverse genius of the Bush Doctrine is its success in fusing American exceptionalism, a widely and deeply held public virtue by liberals and conservatives alike, to the superpower claim. This inspired stroke at once mobilized domestic support for the Bush Doctrine and transformed American exceptionalism, hitherto the privileged preserve of Americans, into a collective good deliverable by the United States to all states and peoples.

President Bush’s speech to the graduating class of West Point on June 1, 2002, which foreshadowed the formal announcement of the Bush Doctrine in the *National Security Strategy* document issued by the White House in September 2002, stipulated the material and moral superiority of the United States. America as the world’s sole superpower presented an opportunity for world peace unprecedented in the evolution of the state system, since no state or coalition could match U.S. military power and the

1 This Occasional Paper summarizes the findings and argument of an edited volume that is projected to be published in 2007 by the University of Georgia Press as its lead study in a new series on contemporary issues in global politics, entitled *From Superpower to Besieged Global Power: Implications for American Foreign Policy and Global Order*.

United States would outspend any state which tried, “As we defend the peace, we also have an historic opportunity to preserve the peace,” asserted the President. “We have our best chance since the rise of the nation state in the 17th century to build a world where the great powers compete in peace instead of prepare for war.”

The moral superiority of the American superpower clinched domestic support for the Bush Doctrine. States, concluded the President, “are . . . increasingly united by common values, instead of divided by conflicting ideologies. . . The tide of liberty is rising.” What was once exceptional about Americas, their love of freedom, was now attributed as the driving desire of all peoples, if only they were given a free choice. America and Americans could deliver not only world order, defeating global terrorism and deterring threats to international security, but also assure its legitimate rule through coercively created free societies around the globe.

A tour of the principal regions of the globe, laboratory tests of the Bush Doctrine, falsifies the proposition that the United States is a superpower. The Iraqi invasion and the subsequent disastrous occupation illustrate but scarcely reveal the scope of the overextension of American power. The catalogue of disastrous outcomes in Iraq grows daily: American forces caught in the cross-fire of a civil war; mounting casualties; thousands of Iraqis killed each month; the multiplication of insurgents and Jihadist terrorists where none were before; a Shi’ite sectarian regime to which Washington is now hostage; Iran’s rise as a regional, nuclear wannabe, with more influence over the Shi’ite government than the United States; Israel’s defeat by Hezbollah, which conspires with Iran and Syria to topple the western-leaning Lebanese government; humiliating U.S. reliance on a weak UN Secretary General to preserve the cease fire between Hezbollah and Israel; and Washington’s abdication of its balancing role in managing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The results of the November elections evidence that this grim catalogue of reverses is now obvious to a majority of Americans, if not the President. Less obvious is just how vulnerable American power and purpose are around the world.

In Northeast Asia, the United States has outsourced its efforts to stop North Korea from going nuclear to China. Beijing, concerned about its client’s stability, resists applying effective pressures on the Pyongyang regime to halt the nuclearization of Northeast Asia. Nor can much help be expected from China to impose sanctions on Tehran to abide by the Non-Proliferation Treaty, since its ravenous appetite for oil equals that of the United States. China’s economic leverage over the United States — over \$1 trillion in foreign reserves, hundreds of billions of dollars in trade surpluses, and a quarter of the U.S. foreign debt under the control of the Chinese central bank — nullify any pressure Washington might exert to induce greater Chinese respect for human rights or to elicit Chinese support for ending the genocidal conflict in oil-exporting Sudan.

The story’s the same in South, Southwest, and Southeast Asia. The United States banks on a vulnerable, nuclear Pakistan, beset by ethnic divisions and rising Muslim fundamentalist pressures, to support the global war on terror. Washington cravenly

bribes an ascendant India to balance rising Chinese influence by undermining the NonProliferation Treaty in agreeing to supply a non-signatory to the NPT with nuclear materials and know-how, an accord that a Democratic controlled Congress is expected to uphold. The attempt to create a coalition of the willing to contain expanding Chinese influence, in an arc anchored by Japan, Indonesia, and India, has yielded no tangible results; quite the reverse. Japan's rising nationalism inflames its regional neighbors. The states of Southeast Asia are drawn increasingly into the Chinese economic orbit and calmed by Beijing's charm diplomacy. Delhi, meanwhile, rejects the role Washington has cast for it, as a counterweight to Beijing, by increasing its political and economic cooperation with Beijing.

Latin and Central America are no less resistant to U.S. preferences. The Leftist drift in Latin America falls loosely under the influence of Venezuela's incendiary Hugo Chavez or Brazil's more moderate Luiz Inácio Lula Da Silva, while most states south of the border thumb their noses at American leadership as never before. We should have no illusion that the deep split in Mexican politics between the Right and Left will produce help any time soon in addressing the problem of over 11 million illegal Latinos in the United States whose emigration and billions of dollars in return transfers relax pressures on their governments to create jobs and economic opportunities for their citizens.

In Africa, the United States is a no show. It has had no appreciable effect on stopping genocidal depredations from Rwanda in 1994 through the Congo since the turn of the century until now or in Sudan today. Millions have lost their lives in these Hobbesian endgames. The Bush administration has also reneged on its UN Millennium promise to increase assistance to Africa. The United States is at the bottom of the list of donors at an assistance level of less than two-tenths of one percent of GDP.

To acknowledge the limits of American power is not to return to the discredited declinist debate of the late 1980s. There is no doubt that the United States is a global power, however much it may be bogged down in the Iraqi quagmire, isolated diplomatically, increasingly deep in debt, and challenged in world markets. It is the only state capable of projecting its military power around the globe. American economic power and technological leadership remain world class. Its \$11 trillion dollar economy dwarfs all others. American culture, whose creative fashions, music, television, media, and movies impacts on peoples around the world, especially the young, is an important soft power asset. America's open system of governance and respect and support for civil liberties and human rights commanded, at least until recently, worldwide admiration and emulation.

In cutting the United States down to the still formidable size as a global power, ample hard and soft power remains, or can be rehabilitated, to shape the world to favor American interests and those of free peoples everywhere. These guidelines for the effective projection of American power are apt. First, scrap the Bush Doctrine and superpower presumptions and scale U.S. security interests and aims to its real or potential power.

Second, actively and creatively engage American power around the world but in concert with other like-minded peoples, dedicated to open, transparent, and accountable government, to free market practices, and to the protection of civil liberties and human rights. Either the democracies of the world hang together or they will hang separately, if they fail to construct a world order that is safer, more prosperous, and legitimate for their citizens and as a legacy for other peoples around the world.

Third, focus on rebuilding the nation's domestic material power to ensure its continued economic and technological leadership. That imperative generates equally compelling priorities for improving the quality of education at all levels, for renewal of the nation's neglected infrastructure, for the protection of the environment — nationally and globally, and for the repair, maintenance, and expansion of the nation's social welfare safety nets that are prerequisites for forging unity across its diverse and diverging populations, the creative human resource that is indispensable for domestic revival and for successful global engagement.

Fourth, re-affirm respect for the rule of law, domestically and internationally, and for globally recognized moral norms and practices. The defections of the Bush administration from traditional American practices have incurred widespread condemnation, isolated the United States in the world community, delegitimized the exercise of American power and, worse, generated incentives for other states to do likewise.

Shedding the reassuring notion of the United States as a superpower on which reluctant friends and resolute foes must bandwagon will not be easy. This adaptation to a complex world society will take time, upwards of a generation to change the thinking of Americans and their leaders about the real prospects and promise of the United States as a great, global power. American exceptionalism in its form as the first modern nation that has welded peoples of every race, religion, culture, linguistic, and ethnic affiliation into a more perfect union is a positive good — an inspiring ideal that is no less a collective good than security or material progress. Exceptionalism that dons either a conservative or liberal dress in the misguided and mischievous belief that the United States is a superpower, capable of dominating others, will fail like all other empires, which destroyed themselves because their reach was beyond their grasp.

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