



WHAT'S READING AT ASPEN

■ The future of the United States demands a new foreign-policy model: ethical realism. To get there requires a civil war on the American right – and a defeat of the neo-conservatives who have so damaged the country.

A PERSONAL PREAMBLE. I have long been a Thomas Jefferson fanatic. While, like all sensible Americans, I have a sneaking respect for Alexander Hamilton, Jefferson for me was always the poetry of the American revolution, if Hamilton was the prose. Politically, Jefferson seemed to stand for what I, as a republican in the Dwight Eisenhower tradition, believed in: a limited role for a small but accountable and effective government, the primacy of individual liberty over the nanny state, balanced budgets, local control of as much as possible (what Europeans call “subsidiarity”), and the promise that an educated people would safeguard the republic, forcing an inherently overly-secret institution to divulge what it was doing, so that free men could vote, knowing what their government was up to.

This poetic vision of what America should stand for has stayed with me all my life. I even placed the famous Houdon bust of Jefferson in my library: owning that bust was a way of keeping faith with my ancestors, with the things they believed in, with the ideas that inspired the world.

Then one Sunday morning I looked at my copy of the *Washington Post* and saw the pictures of Abu Ghraib. I stared at them with a kind of unbelieving horror. For, as Thomas E. Ricks has made clear in his excellent book, *Fiasco: the American military adventure in Iraq*, if we honestly think that this is the work of three or four very confused corporals, then we are sadly mistaken. I began talking to my bust of Jefferson that day, saying: “We will do better.” We must not let the terrorists imperil – as the George W. Bush administration has – the very things that make us different, special, or as Abraham Lincoln said, “the last, best, hope of earth.” By declaring to the world that we are going to continue to stand for the things that Jefferson embodied, Americans can make humanity a far better place. Indeed, though we may never reach such

lofty goals, just by setting them for ourselves and for the rest of the world, we can improve things in the striving. That is not hypocrisy. What the Bush administration has been doing – with warrantless wiretaps, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, secret prisons, renditions, and an almost limitless view of the powers of the presidency – is. Now is the time to end the utopian neoconservative experiment, with American conservatives leading the way. Because we on the American right are patriotic, because we feel such a pride and kinship with what America has been and what it has stood for, because we connect with the vast interior of the continent through these qualities – for these reasons and more – we simply have to be better than this.

THE MOMENT FOR ACTION. Neoconservative thinking has never existed comfortably in the republican party. Some of its founders started as Trotskyists (which explains the continued neoconservative belief in permanent revolution, though this time for democracy), were betrayed by Stalin, and became ardent Cold Warriors in the democratic party.

In the mid-1960s, when the neocons left the democrats, they continued to share a certain Rousseau-like utopian view of the planet. What the neocons could not stomach was cultural hippy elements in the party. The patent lack of seriousness in the latter terrified neocons – meaning that, in their view, at least the republicans were serious about the most important issue, fighting communism, even if they were wrong to restrict the role of the state. Republicans were grown-ups, which beat working with a bunch of “flower children” who had alienated most of moderate America.

This was the crucial break, and it gives me hope today. The neocon Gaullist agenda – big government (President Bush has spent more money per capita than Lyndon B. Johnson, and the meter is still running), a big presidency, and a corresponding decrease in civil liberties, all in the service of running an empire – is, in ideological terms, deeply troubling to many in the republican base.

One of my favorite exercises is to leave the hothouse environment of Washington and to talk with traditional republican voters around the country. I often say something like this: “Well, at least the neocons are honest. They want to run an empire which, to do well, will lead to massive increases in government spending, budget deficits, a further rise in the power of the federal government, especially the presidency, and the possible reinstatement of a draft if things get tough.” After a few seconds of stunned silence, someone in the crowd invariably asks if they heard me correctly, followed by someone politely asking if I’ve lost my mind.

This corrective power at the grassroots level mirrors the fact that, while no doubt bureaucratically successful, the neocons have never been a good fit for the Grand Old Party. They were tolerated by many republicans (though with private but profound misgivings) and indeed by the majority of democrats during the immediate aftermath of 9/11. But as GOP strategist Ed Rollins put it: “Iraq is 90% of the administration’s problem in the polls.”

Neither the realists in the republican party nor the democrats opposed the president over Afghanistan or the “war on terror” (rightly I still think) when his approval rating was 80% or more. With it now below 30%, and Iraq an undoubted mess, the political vultures in both parties are gathering around a very wounded administration. After Iraq, saying “trust me” just does not work, for both ideological and political reasons. For those of us on the right in the political world, the time will never be better to rise up.

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A VERY UNACADEMIC ARGUMENT. A number of years ago a leading and very intelligent neocon said something to me (off the record) that I’ve thought about a great deal since. When I asked what would happen to his movement if Iraq did not go according to plan, he said chillingly: “Well, then I will say it’s all the president’s fault – that it was the execution and not the premises of the neocon agenda that let us down, that all we need is a more competent president and team, and that we will regroup around John McCain, who many of us favored in the first place.”

I responded by noting that he sounded like a certain kind of very tired European intellectual, who was forever mouthing the mantra that communism was a great idea, just badly executed, rather than hitting upon the truth that it was a god-awful idea and poorly executed. The problem with the neocons is not that they are dumb, but rather that, like the Kennedy inner circle during the time of Vietnam, they are smart and so very wrong.

In terms of political analysis, the above conversation cannot be bettered. These two competing narratives will be played out through the republican presidential primaries, which (regardless of the final electoral outcome) will be the most important since Eisenhower bested Senator Robert Taft, ensuring that Harry Truman’s view of containment would be adopted by the majority of both parties.

A victory by a neocon candidate in the republican primaries would force the realist right to either accept its minority status in the party, join with the democrats as the lesser of two evils (much as the neocons once bolted the democratic party), or try to

organize - with like-minded democrats in terms of foreign policy - a viable third party challenge. The stakes simply could not be higher.

THE GRAND ALTERNATIVE: ETHICAL REALISM. Last year, with my friend and colleague **Anatol Lieven**, I published a book – **Ethical realism: a vision for America’s role in the world**. One reason for writing this book was to provide a coherent intellectual alternative to neoconservatism. Anatol and I went back to the bipartisan days of the Truman-Eisenhower presidencies, when the left – under former vice president Henry Wallace (who wished to appease Stalin) – was seen off, just as the right – under General Douglas MacArthur (who wished to use nuclear weapons in Manchuria during the Korean war) – was similarly discredited, politically and intellectually.

That moderate, bipartisan grouping, which lasted until the dying days of the Cold War, is lacking today. Instead, a sort of “Alice in Wonderland” version of this earlier high point in American foreign policy history has wretchedly played itself out. This current version has five disabling flaws, which Anatol and I dissect in our book.

First, many democrats echo my neocon friend’s line, saying President Bush is to blame, rather than the state-building agenda that he has propounded - at the barrel of a gun. In other words, many democrats fault republicans for not going to as good colleges as they did, while not questioning the overall philosophical thrust of the neo-conservative democracy-promotion agenda. Our book looks at what happened in the late 1940s and early 1950s for both political and ideological inspiration, as a toolkit for resurrecting a sensible bipartisan foreign policy.

Second, the neoconservatives have tried to say that they are the true heirs of Truman. This is simply not the case, and we wish to stop them from rewriting history. The key point here concerns preventive war – the Bush administration’s tool of choice in Iraq. For, contrary to the obfuscations of the administration (and it is shameful that the press have not held them accountable on this point), the Bush administration has not indulged in pre-emption, but rather advocated preventive war in Iraq, in line with failed politicians like General MacArthur and Senator Taft.

Given how the Truman-Eisenhower team was proven largely right about the Cold War, and the MacArthurs of this world were proven wrong, it is easy to see why the Bush administration and democratic hawks would not want us to see this intellectual sleight of hand. But see it we do.

No one is questioning that pre-emption is part of a state’s right to self-defense, en-

shrined in the United Nations charter. But nor can anyone prove that Saddam Hussein, in his weakened state, was about to strike anyone.

Preventive wars are wars of choice. If the United States can take out Saddam, what is to stop the Indians and the Pakistanis settling scores over Kashmir, the Russians regaining territory and influence in the Caucasus, or the Chinese lunging for Taiwan? All these nuclear states might just take the risk, justifying their actions in terms of the American adventure in Iraq. This heedless obsession with tactics rather than with strategy is what separated Truman from MacArthur in Korea.

Third, our alternate philosophy of ethical realism concentrates on the thinking of Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and George Kennan, as well as the teachings of Edmund Burke, Thomas Aquinas, and Max Weber. Five core principles – humility, prudence, study, “a decent respect for the opinions of mankind”, and patriotism – are at the core of the ethical realist creed. Following such a different philosophical course leads, inevitably, to a very different foreign policy.

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Fourth, as we look to the Truman-Eisenhower era for a recent political example of what to do, we also look to the nineteenth century British empire – and the “great capitalist peace” that underlay its success – for a successful historical precedent. Britain then, like the US today, was first among equals in the world, but it certainly was not alone. Other great powers – Germany, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Japan – all came to nip at London’s heels at different times. And yet for a century, from the fields of Waterloo in 1815 until the Great War of 1914 (the Crimean war excepted), there was no general European conflict.

The British achieved this outcome by creating common goods that benefited them, yes, but that also benefited the other great powers: they protected the sea lanes, shared the benefits of trade, built the largest navy and the most vibrant economy for much of the period, and used “soft power” (having Indian princes sent to be educated in England, and winning respect for British cultural norms as well as the inevitable resentment).

These attributes are curiously similar to America’s position in the world today. It is precisely such a great capitalist peace (now that all the major powers have embraced the capitalist system) that must be reconstructed today, using many of the same tools. Fifth, we turn to where the rubber hits the road – policy-making. Almost all critiques of neoconservatism – from both left and right – fail to offer a viable alternative. As we all discovered after 9/11, the neocons won because a bad plan beat no plan at all; while realists and Wilsonians (in America and Europe alike) searched for esoteric an-

swers, the neocons were making concrete, practical (and utterly disastrous) policy proposals. We must never let that happen again.

An ethical realist strategy, adopted by committed, brave people who are sick of the disastrous sameness of so much of recent American foreign policy, at last provides a real alternative.

THE BALANCE OF FORCES ON THE RIGHT. There is no doubt that conventional wisdom is at least partially correct: the second Bush term is far less dominated by neoconservatives than the first. In the first term, neocons around Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz sided with Vice President Dick Cheney's office to overrule the realist Colin Powell at the State Department (with Condoleezza Rice, national security advisor, frantically trying to keep everyone singing from the same hymnal); by contrast, the second term has been far more of an evenly matched battle.

A more powerful (and still realist) State Department has had the momentum. It is the Department of Defense which has seen its bureaucratic stock suffer: Wolfowitz has been exiled to the land of international organizations; Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (not a neocon, though he certainly aided and abetted them in the first term) was forced to answer countless questions about Iraq. Only the vice president's office, seemingly impervious to outside events, continues to rival State's dominance. So if the first term was dominated by the neoconservatives, the second is characterized by a much better balance of power.

Unfortunately, while the administration has grown more cautious after the disaster in Iraq, it has certainly not grown much wiser: no insider talks about abandoning what is routinely called the "freedom project", nor does he snarl any less at Russia (perhaps genuine engagement – what we used to call diplomacy – is called for here?), nor is he likely to reveal qualms about making the false link between Saddam and al Qaeda, a link that only became real after American actions in Iraq.

However, their rhetoric is smarter. For example, the administration (unlike in the first term) no longer calls for immediate elections as though they were a panacea for all that ails undemocratic states. Sensibly, they propose that the institutions bolstering the development of democracy should be a priority (rule of law, pluralism, a free press, an independent judiciary). Too bad that they never say how and where this can be done, why it should be done, what the local building blocks are, or how to make the people directly involved stakeholders in this process.

In other words, having been burned by their simplistic approach to democracy in the

first term, the administration has adapted its rhetoric to acknowledge that the problem might just be a little more complicated than it had earlier let on. However, the absence of a programmatic strategy coupled with a continued recitation of the “freedom agenda” mantra reveal the fact that in reality the Bush White House has not changed its beliefs or policies very much. The neoconservatives are far from dead. Things look far better outside the executive branch. The republican-dominated Supreme Court and Congress, encouraged by the president’s dismal showing, have at last rediscovered their backbones. The court, in a courageous decision, struck down the president’s justification of having almost limitless powers in wartime, forcing the White House to acknowledge prisoner rights. At the same time, the president ran into trouble over the wiretap program.

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The Bush administration has experienced monumental difficulties in getting new legislation pertaining to these issues through Congress. This detail has sometimes obscured the fact that it is not the hapless democrats but the right – that is, the republican party in the persons of Senators McCain, Lindsey Graham, and John Warner – that has questioned interrogation methods which border on torture. The worried and unsympathetic base of the republican party is the first corrective to the neocons. Our second hope (as Jefferson’s friend Madison would have understood) is that the legislative and judicial branches of government – co-equals to the executive – seem to be awakening from a deep sleep.

It is now high time – with no domestic agenda left (remember social security and tax reform?), with Bush’s chief allies under intensive, unprecedented congressional scrutiny, with Iraq in a shambles, with Iran the dominant power in the Gulf, with radical Islam more popular than ever, with a scary situation in North Korea, and with Osama bin Laden still in hiding – for non-utopian republicans to rise up and denounce this unfriendly neoconservative takeover of the party.

The corrective powers of the American republic have proved marvelous over the decades, and are in many ways the envy of the world. But today that world is a serious and dangerous place: if we are going to preach about moral courage, now is the time to show some.

There is another, slightly more far-fetched but not implausible reason that it is time for the right to rise up against the neoconservatives. I do not think it likely, but part of being a Burkean is gloomily relishing worst-case scenarios – and there is one here: a mortally wounded Bush administration – having lost the Congress, with the war in Iraq grinding on in a sort of Lebanon of the 1980s stage, with no elections left to wor-

ry about – may go for broke. In particular, it may turn up the pressure on Iran, hoping that a miscalculation by Tehran will once again rally world (and American) opinion to its side for the tough military action that some neocons have been craving for many years.

To be fair, I hear this kind of thing more in Europe, and more from people who do not know all that much about American politics (and certainly know almost nothing about Americans right of Edward Kennedy). However, even in Washington, a little voice does occasionally creep into my head, suggesting that they may “not go gentle into that good night.” To avoid even worse calamities befalling the US, American foreign policy, and the world at large, the American right needs to commence a civil war against those who might act out this scenario.

OUR LIVES, OUR FORTUNES, OUR HONOR. And so I end where I began, with Thomas Jefferson. While Anatol and I were working on our book, we became aware that the political atmosphere in Washington was becoming ever more toxic. And we could not afford to look on with detachment: our livelihood was on the line; we had real world consequences to consider. Nevertheless, we were determined to write our book, as an important intellectual alternative to the disastrous prevailing winds in Washington. At one particularly low point, we soberly assessed what might happen to us. I replied instinctively, with the words that end our Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortune, and our sacred honor.” We grinned weakly at each other and went our separate ways; we have repeated the vow at the end of countless other conversations.

In ethical realism, we have updated a noble part of the American tradition, and espouse a philosophy that offers a real and better alternative to what we see around us. That is the first big step. But the second is just as important, and is ten times harder to do. In the tradition of the founders of this country – a tradition that still gives me succor – we must risk all that we have for the ideas we believe in. It is past time talking, now is the time to act politically. It is time for the right in America to rise up.

Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman, *Ethical realism: a vision for America's role in the world*, Pantheon, 2006.

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reader's notes

