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The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy

**By
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Thank you, Bill. I appreciate the kind introduction.

It is a pleasure and an honor to be here tonight to give the Mary Belknap Lecture. The Foreign Policy Association has done wonderful work over the years in improving what Americans know about foreign policy and promoting public understanding of foreign affairs. I, as a professor, am particularly a fan of the Great Decisions Series, and I we all owe a debt of gratitude to Mary for all she has done for the Association.

I am also grateful to Noel Lateef for inviting me to speak tonight and to all of you for coming out this evening rather than tuning in to Fox to find out who will be the next to be eliminated from *American Idol*. I'm also glad to know that there are so many people who do not wait until the last moment to file their taxes.

Tonight I would like to talk to you about *America Unbound*, the recent book that Ivo Daalder and I wrote. I cannot do that without first acknowledging my deep debt that I owe Ivo. He is a wonderful person and scholar.

Our reason for writing *America Unbound* was simple: We wanted to explain to Americans and to people outside of the United States the worldview driving American foreign policy today. Our argument is straightforward: You cannot understand international affairs today without understanding that George W. Bush, a man once depicted as an amiable dunce "ambling through history," as one book title put it, has unleashed a revolution in American foreign policy.

That revolution is not one in the *ends* of American foreign policy. George Bush's aspirations for America abroad—peace, prosperity, security—are all indistinguishable from those of Truman or Kennedy or Clinton. Rather, it is a revolution in the *means* of American foreign policy.

In *America Unbound*, we argue that this revolution is not an accident, and it does not reflect political expediency. It wasn't something gemmed up after September 11th. It is about principle. Bush brought to the Oval Office a deeply felt, consistent and coherent set of foreign policy beliefs. Bush's critics missed it at the time — and continue to miss it — because they focus on how little they think he knows about the world rather than how intensely he believes. They argue—wrongly—that because he does not fit their stereotype of a leader that he must be being led by his advisers rather than leading them. Our argument in *America Unbound* is that both arguments are wrong.

What precisely is the Bush revolution? At its broadest level, it embraces one fundamental pillar of the foreign policy vision that Woodrow Wilson laid out nearly a century ago even as it rejects another.

When Wilson called for a League of Nations after WWI, he rejected the idea that the United States would harm its interests or its values by being continually engaged in the world. He rejected a philosophy that had been a cardinal tenet in American foreign policy during the 19th century, best expressed by the then Secretary of State John Quincy Adams when he said that America does not go abroad “in search of monsters to destroy.” Wilson argued that America had to go abroad “in search of monsters to destroy” because of its interest and because of its values.. For Wilson, the danger lay in not acting. So, too, for Bush. “Time is not on our side,” he warned in his “Axis-of-Evil” speech. “I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons.”

Where Bush departs from Wilson, and from much of the practice of American foreign policy over the past half century, is on the value of international law and international institutions. Wilsonians see them as essential to creating a more just and secure world. They were part of what American foreign policy had to be about. For Woodrow Wilson it was the League of Nations, for Harry Truman and for others it was the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system. Bush sees these international institutions are either irrelevant or an impediment to achieving American aims abroad

He and his advisers believe that in a dangerous world the best — if not the only — way to ensure America's security is to shed the constraints imposed by others. They believe that power, and especially military power, is the coin of the realm in world affairs. Because America is a uniquely just great power—and is seen by others as such—it can wield its enormous military might unsentimentally. If we lead, others will follow. Formal arrangements — be they alliances or other multilateral security institutions — inevitably impede Washington's ability to make the most of its unrivaled power. In that sense, by working to create international institutions, Gulliver is helping the Lilliputians

tie himself down. Only an America unbound can maximize the security of the American people.

These fundamental beliefs about how America should act in the world have three consequences for Bush's conduct of foreign policy.

First, Bush prefers to act unilaterally. I have to be careful here because the debate can be easily caricatured. This is not to say the president flatly opposes working with others. But his preferred form of multilateralism — to be indulged when unilateral action is impossible or politically unwise — involves ad hoc coalitions of the willing, willing that is to follow Washington's direction. On occasion he has turned to international institutions—think of his approach in fall 2002 to the United Nations demanding renewed inspections in Iraq or his recent talk of giving the United Nations a role in Iraq in managing the transition. Yet he has done so not out of an obligation to these institutions but because they can help solve his immediate problems. What Bob Keagan has called instrumental multilateralism.

As we begin to think about this revolution, it is important to consider why it has occurred, and why now? Ivo and I offer three reasons. One is that it recalls older themes and currents in American foreign policy. Distaste for tying America's fortunes to the fortunes of others is as old as the Republic. The guiding principle of American foreign policy for its first 150 years was to avoid "entangling alliances." The original rationale for this was that a small, weak country would be destroyed if it allowed itself to become caught up in the passions of others. But it persisted even as the United States emerged as a great power. The Treaty of Versailles was defeated not because of isolationists but because of internationalists who were opposed to tying America's hands abroad.

The second reason why the Bush revolution has taken hold is because of changes in world power. The desire to pursue the policy of the free hand did not die with World War II. It persisted in the rhetoric of hardline conservatives during the late 40's and early 50's who urged the administration to go out and do what it needed to do, regardless of how it would affect others. But at the end of the day, there was always a reason not to follow that course of action and that reason was a nuclear armed Soviet Union. A policy that sounded appealing where the United States had no local challenger or commensurate power all of a sudden looked reckless, in a world in which such calculations could lead to nuclear war. It never got beyond rhetoric because most people recognized that in a bipolar world the policy of the free hand posed an uncomfortable risk of nuclear war. The disappearance of the Soviet Union meant the disappearance of the external governor on American behavior. What was once dismissed as reckless now looks doable.

The final reason is that many international institutions never lived up to their promise. Partly that had to do with cold war rivalries, and partly it had to do with the failure of Wilsonians to honestly confront the shortcomings of the institutions they so heartily endorsed. By ignoring organizational pathologies, they ceded the debate to critics who gleefully pointed to the yawning gap between word and deed. That helped undermine public confidence in the institutions and made it easier for Bush to argue that we can circumvent them.

How well has Bush's Revolution fared? We completed *America Unbound* in the afterglow of Bush's triumphant landing aboard the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln and the banner hailing "Mission Accomplished." At the time, we argued then that the revolution would not turn out well. Subsequent events appear to have borne out our prediction, although I must confess that things have gotten rockier even faster than either of us have anticipated. The reasons have to do with both style and substance.

First, the question of style. "If we are an arrogant nation, they'll resent us," Bush observed about other countries during the presidential debates "If we're a humble nation, but strong, they'll welcome us." Bush ignored this advice once in office.

Whatever one thinks about the substance of the president's foreign policies, his administration has consistently failed to launch diplomatic efforts to soften differences and emphasize shared interests. Whether it has been Bush refusing to place congratulatory phone calls to other heads of state, Condoleezza Rice presumptuously declaring the Kyoto protocol "dead," or Donald Rumsfeld equating Gerhard Schröder's Germany with Fidel Castro's Cuba, on the diplomatic front the Bush team has been all sharp elbows.

One consequence has been resentment, not respect, for the United States. Consider the latest poll results from the Pew Center for the People and the Press. Only in Britain does a majority (58%) have a favorable view of the United States; in France and Germany more people have an unfavorable than a favorable view; in key Muslim allied countries (Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco, and Jordan) America's favorability rating ranges from 30% in Turkey to 5% in Jordan.

What the poll numbers tell us is that in many parts of the world the United States is seen as the "SUV of nations," to borrow Mary McGrory's phrase, "hogging the road and guzzling gas, and occasionally running over something — like another nation — on its way to the Middle East filling station." And the problem is not limited to the person in the street. It extends to the governments of even America's closest allies. Many of them now see their role not as America's partner but as a brake on the improvident exercise of its power.

The casualty in all this has been America's ability to lead—to the point that the White House resorted to touting Micronesia and Palau as members of the coalition in Iraq because so many of its major allies have refused to participate, and I think this is something that should give us reason to pause.

But the problems with Bush's Revolution are not just stylistic, they are above all, substantive. To be sure, Bush would be wiser to show what the Declaration of Independence called "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind." But graciousness alone is not enough. The deeper problem is that the fundamental premise of the Bush revolution—that America's security rests on an America unbound—is mistaken.

For all the talk of the United States as a hyperpower, the world at the start of the twenty-first century is beyond the ability of any one country to control. The fact that we are in a moment of American primacy should not lead us to fall into the fallacy of thinking this is a moment of American omnipotence. All the most important challenges America faces overseas — defeating terrorism and countering weapons proliferation, promoting economic prosperity and safeguarding political liberty, sustaining the global environment and halting the spread of killer diseases — can be tackled successfully only with the active cooperation of others. More guards, more guns, more gates, aren't going to protect us.

How can such cooperation best be secured? Bush in his unsentimental view of world politics believes that other countries will tackle these challenges because it is in their national interest to do so. Countries that object to Washington's direction will ultimately fall in line once they see the benefits of American action. When the United States leads, or so Bush argues, others will naturally follow.

Iraq illuminates the flaw in this thinking. No doubt many countries, including all the members of the UN Security Council, shared an interest in seeing that Iraq did not possess nuclear and other horrific weapons. But that common interest did not automatically translate into participation in a war to oust Saddam Hussein from power — or even into support for such a war. Nor did the common interest in ensuring that what emerges in Iraq is a stable, secure, and hopefully democratic country lead to widespread support for the American occupation effort. Today, more than 80% of the troops in Iraq are American; more than 90% of the foreign casualties are American; and more than 95% of the reconstruction dollars spent in Iraq this year come courtesy of the American taxpayer.

In short, an America normally intent on sharing burdens with others now seems intent on assuming burdens for itself.

This, ultimately, is the real danger of the Bush revolution, or the Bush approach to foreign policy. America's friends and allies might not be able to stop Washington from doing as it wishes, but neither are they not necessarily obligated to come to its aid when their help is wanted or needed. The more others question America's power, purpose, and priorities, the less influence America will have and the more effort it will have to exert to reach the same desired end—assuming it can reach its objective at all. It ultimately brings us to the question of whether this policy revolution will be politically sustainable.

The American public, wary of being played for a sucker, is likely to balk at paying the price of unilateralism. I think if you look at rumblings by both the Democratic party and the Republican party, there is a great deal of concern about the cost, both in blood and treasure, of what's happening in Iraq. They could rightly ask, if others were not willing to bear the burdens of meeting tough challenges, why should they? That could jeopardize domestic support for the very necessary task of engaging the world. Again, if you look at American History, public opinion tends not to move in small increments, but it tends to move in much greater swings.

In that respect, I would like to finish by saying that an unbound America would be a less secure America.

Bush's way is not America's only choice. In fact, Washington has chosen differently before. America emerged from World War II as the world's predominant power. It could have imposed an imperium commensurate with its power. Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman were certainly comfortable wielding America's military might. But they wisely recognized that American power is more acceptable and thus more effective and lasting if it is folded into alliances and multilateral institutions that serve the interests and purposes of many countries. So they created the United Nations to help ensure international peace and security, set up the Bretton Woods system to help stabilize international economic interactions, and spent vast sums of money to help rebuild countries (including vanquished foes) that had been devastated by the war. Rather than hobbling American power, these efforts legitimated and sustained it, building up a reservoir of goodwill that made it easier for the United States to act unilaterally, as on occasion it inevitably had to do.

Bush has chosen not to take this course. From the first day he entered office, Bush has pursued a revolution whose motto has been "foreign policy done my way." For all the feints and seeming tactical changes in policy — yes to a UN resolution one day, no to sharing real power the next — that sentiment will no doubt continue throughout the remainder of his presidency. And so, no doubt, will continued frustration and anger abroad at the arrogance of American power. The final bill, unfortunately, will be America's to pay.