Review article

Neo-conservatives and their American critics

DAVID WEDGWOOD BENN


On 28 July 1945, after a long and largely forgotten debate, the US Senate voted to ratify the United Nations Charter. It won bipartisan support including a crucial endorsement from the Republican minority leader, Senator Arthur Vandenberg, who rejected any suggestion that the Charter contravened American sovereignty. ‘We have not’, he said, ‘hauled down the Stars and Stripes from the dome of the Capitol’. But he did regard the Charter as having a binding force. When asked whether, in his view, America could withdraw from the UN ‘at its own unrestricted option’, he replied in the affirmative, but added: ‘We are subject to the organisation’s discipline if we threaten the peace’. In the event, the Senate supported ratification by an overwhelming 89 votes to two.¹

This debate is a sharp reminder of the enormous sea change in America between 1945 and the present. Today, American ‘unilateralism’ and ‘neo-conservatism’

¹ The debate is summarized in Keesings Contemporary Archives, 1943-6, pp. 7581-2. Vandenberg’s speech, referring to hauling down the Stars and Stripes, is reported in The New York Times, 30 June 1945. The final Senate vote is reported in The New York Times, 29 July 1945.
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(the terms are not identical) are the subject of a growing literature. And the books under review, each from a very different perspective, all shed light on these policies. They have been partly overtaken by events but they deserve a good shelf life because of the background information they provide and also because several of the authors write as ‘insiders’ who have served in American government.

David Frum and Richard Perle both served under President George W. Bush, Frum as a speechwriter and Perle as a Chairman of the Defense Policy Board. Although they may not totally reflect official policies, they certainly convey the flavour of debates in the Bush White House. The ultimate cause of the failure to defeat terrorism lies, they say, in ‘weak-willed’ leadership (p. 195). To remedy this failing they advance a whole series of robust policy prescriptions. They have no regrets whatever about the invasion of Iraq, even though it was, they admit, ‘an enormous risk’ (p. 36). It taught a compelling lesson to America’s enemies; and in any case, why let an enemy grow stronger unhindered? They strongly insist on the nuclear disarmament of both Iran and North Korea; the present Iranian regime should not be treated as legitimate and America should give full support to Iranian dissidents. If unwilling to give up its nuclear arsenal, North Korea should be threatened with a blockade by the outside world and, possibly, a pre-emptive air strike. The authors think this might persuade China to put pressure on Pyongyang.

For other potentially uncooperative countries, the authors also propose penalties. For example, France would be penalized if NATO business were all transferred to the organization’s military council, to which France does not belong. American–Russian relations, according to the authors, are ‘not an alliance, not even a friendship, but rather a series of transactions’ where it is important not to be cheated (p. 265). Should Russia be uncooperative, it might be time to exclude it from NATO meetings and say more about the Chechen war. Saudi Arabia might be pressured by an American threat to back independence for the country’s oil-producing Eastern Province, where the Shi’ite population might well demand this.

Frum and Perle say they are not against ‘a Palestinian mini-state, disarmed and neutralized’ with a non-extremist president (p. 182). But they reject any suggestion that such a state could help end terrorism. Rather the opposite: terrorism must be crushed before such a state can come into being. They do have a good deal to say about the need for Arab democracy (which they define in terms of, for example, representative institutions rather than elections. Elections carry the risk of producing an Islamic victory). But again, they reject the claim that democracy cannot be achieved by force. They quote, among others, the example of postwar Japan to argue the opposite and add that democracy often has no chance if not aided from outside.

The authors have an evidently low regard for the UN which Americans do not see as a ‘force in itself’ (p. 266). America should reject its jurisdiction unless the Charter is amended or reinterpreted to make it clear that harbouring terrorists itself constitutes an act of aggression. If a law-governed world ever
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does come about it will only be the result of US armed might. And America’s
claim to leadership, they say, rests not just on wealth and power but on ‘moral
authority’ (p. 268).

Supporters of US unilateralism are, of course, numerous, but not totally
homogeneous. This is illustrated in the book by Max Boot, a features editor of
the Wall Street Journal. Boot is an avowed defender of ‘Pax Americana’: in his
view, US decision-makers when deploying American power should be ‘less
apologetic, less hesitant, less humble’; and the dangers of imperial overstretch or
hubris are equalled if not outweighed by the danger of undercommitment (p. 352).

Boot’s central argument is that in American history, small wars have been
just as significant as big ones. He reminds his readers that between 1800 and
1934, US marines staged 180 landings abroad. Boot recalls some of these
forgotten conflicts, which were by no means confined to Central or South
America. As far back as 1804, the US navy fought engagements against local
rulers on the coast of North Africa. In 1900 US troops helped suppress the
Boxer uprising. From then until the Second World War, American (and other
foreign) troops were stationed in several Chinese cities, including Shanghai.

All these episodes, according to Boot, do have a relevance to the present
day; and here the author perceptibly differs from some of the Pentagon hawks.
He questions, at least by implication, the use of the heavy-handed methods or
‘shock and awe’ techniques with which the Iraq war became associated. Con-
trary to what is often claimed in the Bush White House, soldiers do, at least
sometimes, have a humanitarian as opposed to a purely war-fighting function.
He quotes from a Small wars manual compiled by the US marines in the 1930s
stressing the importance of ‘toleration, sympathy and kindness’ on the part of
soldiers (p. 284). He particularly applies this argument to the Vietnam war,
asking why the US was unable to defeat a ‘tiny, pre-industrial society’. He is
unsure whether the war was ever ‘winnable’, despite the huge American
military presence, but argues that a ‘small war’ might have had a better chance
of success. Criticizing the management of the campaign, he remarks that ‘If
you’re trying to win the hearts and minds of the peasants, you don’t want to
napalm their huts’ (pp. 307–8). As for the use of force to impose democracy,
the US record, Boot notes, is mixed. Despite its success in Germany and Japan,
the forcible imposition of democracy, so he believes, is less likely to succeed in
Third World countries. As a survey of different kinds of military operation, this
book has an evident topicality. Few people oppose them if they take place within
the framework of international law, a subject that Boot does not address.

Ivo Daalder, of the Brookings Institution, served in the Clinton administra-
tion in the 1990s. His co-author James Lindsay holds a chair at the Council on
Foreign Relations. Although they do not hide their disagreement with Bush’s
foreign policy, they focus on explanation rather than advocacy. They provide a
useful résumé of the Iraq crisis up to the time when this book was published.
But even more useful is their attempt to place Bush and the neo-conservatives
in context. How far and in what sense, they ask, is the Bush foreign policy new?
What is new, they say, is not the aims of US foreign policy (to guarantee security, prosperity and freedom) but the methods used to achieve them. George W. Bush has, from the outset, discarded many of the key principles governing US actions overseas. The innovations include, of course, pre-emption, regime change, the downplaying of treaties and the de-emphasis on European integration. All this could indeed be held to amount to a revolution.

The authors dismiss the notion that Bush is a mere tool in the hands of his advisers. On the contrary, he is very much his own man. He has strong beliefs—based on gut reactions rather than on knowledge. As Bush himself said: 'I don’t spend a lot of time theorizing and agonizing, I get things done' (p. 199). To a large extent the assumptions underlying his foreign policy are those of the ‘realist’ school: the world is a dangerous place made up of nation-states pursuing their own interests. What counts most of all on the world scene is power (especially military power) plus the will to use it. In general, multilateral agreements are neither essential nor necessarily conducive to American interests, because they constrain American power. (Hence the rejection of the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court and the abrogation of the ABM treaty.)

These assumptions have for long formed part of the ‘realist’ doctrine. What is alien to that doctrine is Bush’s belief, widely shared in his own country, that the US is a unique power and is seen as such. Bush and his advisers were perplexed by the hostile foreign reactions to US policies; and as Bush himself remarked in October 2001, ‘Like most Americans, I just can’t believe it. Because I know how good we are’ (p. 194). This ties in with another difference between America and Europe: the American emphasis on religion. George Bush, the authors note, is the most overtly religious president for more than a century. They point out, however, that religion does not in itself produce a strategy for dealing with terrorism: Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton are both practising Christians who oppose the Bush strategy.

Bush’s advisers, the authors note, are not a totally homogeneous group. They consist of ‘assertive nationalists’ who believe America should pursue its own interests; and ‘democratic imperialists’, many of them former Democrats (some of whom started out on the far left) who became Republicans. These are the much publicized ‘neo-conservatives’ (often more prominent outside rather than inside the administration) who want to use American power to reshape the world in the American image. However, not everyone in the Republican Party shares these views. There are ‘sovereigntists’ who incline towards protectionism, and ‘moderates’, such as former Secretary of State James Baker who cautioned against invading Iraq without first going to the United Nations.

Throughout this book, the authors point to unsolved problems with the Bush doctrine. For example, the right of pre-emption could lead to international anarchy if it became available to all states. Furthermore, the notion that most terrorism is state-sponsored is at least questionable: the deadly anthrax attacks in the US in the autumn of 2001 are a case in point. Besides that the
optimistic belief that American troops would be welcomed in Iraq as liberators has not been vindicated. Nevertheless, as of 2003, when this book appeared, Daalder and Lindsay saw no convincing evidence that the ‘Bush revolution’ had run its course.

The book by Robert McNamara and James Blight also deals with American foreign policy, unilateralism and terrorism, but from a very different and more historical perspective. McNamara served as US Defense Secretary during the period 1961–8, which covered both the Cuban missile crisis and the Vietnam war. His co-author is a professor of International Relations at Brown University. Both are admirers (as well as being critics) of Woodrow Wilson, now mainly remembered for his failed attempt to create a security system based on the League of Nations.

These writers agree with George Bush about the danger of a ‘nuclear 9/11’. But the starting point of their argument is a different one. In the last century, approximately 160 million people died as the result of violent conflict (see pp. 20–22 for the basis of their calculations). For the twenty-first century, they say, it must be a major foreign policy goal of the US and other countries to reduce the carnage.

To achieve such an ambitious goal involves, needless to say, much more than ‘western unity’ or the mending of the transatlantic rift. It involves, for example, questions of morality, the management of relations between all the world’s great powers and the reduction of communal killing in civil wars. Here the book urges a rethink of American foreign policy in several directions.

The authors insist that morality cannot be excluded from international politics, although they quote the warning by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr that in politics it is sometimes necessary to do evil in order to do good. ‘Morality’, according to their definition, derives from the Kantian imperative: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’. They point out that the injunction to ‘do as you would be done by’ is to be found in most of the world’s great religions.

The authors deplore the failure, after the end of the Cold War, to bring both Russia and China ‘in from the cold’. The result, they say, is a ‘crisis in slow motion’. Russia feels betrayed by the NATO expansion to the east, while China fears that the US intends to encourage Taiwanese independence. (Here, a possible compromise might, they say, be a Taiwanese pledge not to declare independence in exchange for a Chinese pledge not to use force.)

Whether one endorses these grievances or not, the authors insist that they are genuinely felt and have to be addressed. As for the rise of nationalism in general, the authors quote the explanation given by the late Sir Isaiah Berlin, who ascribed it to ‘the inflamed desire of the insufficiently regarded to count for something among the cultures of the world’ (p. 221). But they sharply criticize Woodrow Wilson’s doctrine of ethnic self-determination, which did much to sow the seeds of conflict. Secession by an ethnic minority should be allowed only as a last resort.
When using force abroad, the authors say that America should always act multilaterally, except when its own homeland is attacked. And in some cases, the use of force with allies may itself be wrong. For example, even a well-intended humanitarian intervention in a civil war sometimes makes matters worse, especially if the interveners withdraw quickly. They strongly argue that the best agency for authorizing the use of force is a reformed United Nations (or, perhaps in the absence of reform, a shadow Security Council). Given the enlargement of the Security Council, with individual vetoes replaced by the requirement of, say, a 75 per cent majority, they would like the Secretary General to have command of a small volunteer force of perhaps 10,000 soldiers.

As already noted, the authors fully share the general alarm about terrorists getting hold of nuclear weapons or other WMD. But what worries them most is not WMD plus terrorism, but WMD plus human fallibility. These weapons, they insist, are immoral, highly dangerous and of no practical use, except to deter others from using them. (They quote a whole number of senior retired American generals, as well as the late Lord Mountbatten, to support their view.) In order to ensure the eventual elimination of WMD, they urge that all countries should be required to account for their own stocks; that they should be dismantled under UN inspection; and that this should be done by force if other means fail.

Much of this book is concerned, however, not with specific policy prescriptions, but with the need to change America's mindset: the US should switch from a posture of deterrence to one of reassurance. The emergence of Al-Qaeda has merely reinforced one of their central messages, namely the importance of empathy in world politics. Citing his own experience at the Pentagon during the Vietnam war and later talks with Vietnamese leaders, McNamara now believes that the conflict was driven on both sides by lack of empathy: the Vietnamese communists were convinced that America wanted to destroy their state, while the US believed that the Vietcong were part of a worldwide communist conspiracy to dominate the world. He recalls three occasions when Washington rejected offers by President de Gaulle to broker a settlement.

The advice offered in this book may be dismissed as 'utopian', although the authors would probably regard themselves as 'liberal pessimists' who foresee planetary disaster unless drastic counter-measures are taken. They would probably agree that the chances of their advice being acted upon in the immediate future are slim. For the moment, the unilateralists have a very strong leverage. It is, therefore, important to study the views of such writers as Perle and Frum. Nevertheless, America does have a choice. As Daalder and Lindsay point out, America was already a lone superpower in 1945 when the rest of the world was exhausted. At that time, it chose to exercise its power differently.

It is not true, as sometimes claimed, that the UN was destroyed by the Cold War. It was much more successful than the League of Nations in surviving Great Power conflict. Indeed, in 1963, President John F. Kennedy in a major speech now largely forgotten went out of his way to emphasize that he wanted
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‘a genuine peace’, ‘not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war’. He also said that he wanted to strengthen the United Nations, help solve its financial problems and ‘develop it into a genuine world security system ... capable of resolving disputes on the basis of law’.  

That is not to say that the US, or any other country, invariably abided by international law. But the principle remained firmly enshrined. American support for the UN began to cool off, with the admission of Third World states, few of them democratic, which deprived the US of its majority in the organization. The anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric of the General Assembly was greatly resented by the US public. However, the real crisis for the UN came not with the Cold War, but with its ending when many Americans saw the organization as largely redundant.

As these books confirm, America is now divided over matters not of detail but of fundamental principle. For example, does the US still believe in international law? And if the Iraq war flouts the UN Charter (as Richard Perle believes) then should the US Senate feel bound by its own treaties? If, as is now said, we have to ‘move forward’ over Iraq, is the 2003 invasion to be accepted as a valid legal precedent for the future? International law is not, of course, a panacea solution and is open to different interpretations. The immediate question, however, is whether it is to survive at all.

Not the least important is the purely moral side of the question. Large numbers of people who are not pacifists nevertheless believe that the killing of innocent people requires moral justification. If the war was launched on false information about WMD and against a state that had no plausible connection with 9/11, where is that justification to be found? It is not enough to justify the Iraq invasion simply on the basis of America’s supposedly inherent goodness or to present the invasion as a ‘war of choice’ against a non-imminent threat.

Regardless of who occupies the White House in the years ahead, these divisions are likely to continue. Indeed, the whole debate may have run into a cul-de-sac, with neither side making many converts. Many non-Americans have been alarmed by the recent trend of US foreign policy, but have been at a loss to know how it can be changed. It may well be modified not by debate but by events, which by their nature are beyond control. It is true, as the hawks constantly repeat that power matters. It is equally true that there are some things that cannot be achieved by force. Developments in the Arab and Muslim world are already beginning, yet again, to confirm this.

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3 Perle is reported in the Guardian, 20 Nov. 2003, as saying in a speech in London that ‘I think in this case international law stood in the way of doing the right thing’ since international law ‘would have required us to leave Saddam alone’. I am grateful to Mary Bone of the Chatham House Library for locating this report.