

## Weaving Constraints on an Easy Empire

By John Gershman | November 3, 2004

The election of President Bush to a second term as well as the increase in Republican-held seats in the House and Senate provides a major challenge to progressives as we seek to articulate alternative policy agendas and defend basic rights and social programs such as reproductive choice, social security, environmental protection, and civil liberties from a fresh round of legislative and judicial assaults.

Foreign policy will occupy center stage in the next few months, especially Iraq, terrorism, and proliferation (particularly in Iran and North Korea). Several pieces in the past year from across the political spectrum (such as John Ikenberry in *Survival* and Francis Fukuyama in *The National Interest*) pronounced the end of the neoconservative moment, arguing that Iraq has been its death knell. But these eulogies are clearly premature, and while many Republicans remain concerned about the financial and political costs of Iraq, the election will undoubtedly spur a more aggressively unilateralist approach, as the second Bush administration claims the mantle of a popular, not merely an electoral college, mandate. The practice, if not the rhetoric, of empire is certain to increase.

Three elements in the short term are in play: an imminent reshuffling of the foreign policy team, efforts at home and abroad to constrain U.S. policy, and a refocusing of the terms of political debate on culture and values.

### Reshuffling the Foreign Policy Team

It's widely believed that Secretary of State Colin Powell will be the first out the door. His deputy Richard Armitage might follow. And while National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice has expressed interest in returning to academia, she's likely to stay on, perhaps replacing Powell at State, and in turn be replaced by her deputy Stephen Hadley.

With Powell gone, Vice President Dick Cheney and his staff are likely to play an even greater role in shap-

ing the foreign policy of a second Bush administration. This would build upon a role he has already assumed in the first administration. As David Rothkopf, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace noted in *New York Times* (October 5, 2004) “[Cheney] has become the national security adviser.” He continued, “Time after time, he has co-opted the leadership and policy-shaping role that the national security adviser or secretary of state usually has.”

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's position is a little uncertain, but it's unlikely he would ask to step down, as it would be widely seen as a belated effort at holding him accountable for the Iraq disaster and abuses at Abu Ghraib. Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz would also like to have Powell's job, or replace Rumsfeld, but his widely recognized role in the Iraq fiasco and his close ties to the now-sidelined Ahmad Chalabi may make confirmation difficult. With the Senate firmly in Republican hands, that might seem to be a less problematic situation at the moment, as Democrats will have to choose whether to use their filibuster threats against new foreign policy appointments, radical right wing judicial appointments, renewed efforts to drill in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, and other likely efforts to complete the Bush revolution.

There will still be conflicts in a second Bush administration between the neoconservatives and their focus on exporting democracy to the Middle East (the proponents of World War IV articulated by Norman Podhoretz in his recent article in *Commentary*) and the assertive nationalists like

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Cheney and Rumsfeld, who are eager to use aggressive rhetoric and U.S. military power but don't share the same enthusiasm for social transformation abroad. Realists like Colin Powell are likely to be sidelined, although their legacy (and perhaps presence in the case of Rice) will likely dominate relations with China, while the neocons focus on Iraq, Iran, Israel/Palestine, and the Middle East as a whole.

Bush administration policy toward North Korea remains contested, and it is likely that the more militarized view advocated by Cheney as well as

Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton will move to center stage, especially if Powell, the strongest proponent of dialogue, leaves.

In short, progressives as well as the conservatives and realists critical of the Bush administration's Iraq policy will remain on defense. It remains unclear if or how that *de facto* convergence of views, from the libertarians at the

Cato Institute and the Independent Institute to progressives, from disenchanted neocons like Fukuyama and paleocons like Pat Buchanan could ever force a reorientation in U.S. policy, at least with respect to Iraq. This is in major contrast to domestic policy, where progressives will largely face the Bush administration's assault alone, with the exception perhaps, of alliances with libertarians on issues of civil liberties and gay marriage.

The more relevant question is what constellation of forces and conditions can effectively serve as constraints on the most destructive aspects of this agenda.

### Constraining Coalitions

At this point the most likely constraints would come from within the right wing itself, whether it be from Republican moderates like Arlen Specter in the Senate Judiciary Committee or as concerns about the

quagmire in Iraq and ballooning deficits animated some conservative opposition to the neoconservatives. The financial costs of the occupation in Iraq, the growth in military spending, and the tax cuts have all accelerated the growth in deficits that make some of the deficit hawks concerned. While they are more likely to take out their concern on programs that benefit the poor, recurring concerns on the deficit implications of increased military spending and the cost of the occupation in Iraq may reduce enthusiasm for costly military adventures.

The second set of constraints could be efforts by governments to rebalance against what is likely to be an even more assertive exercise of U.S. hegemonic power under a second Bush administration. Europe's role here will have to be critical, but as of yet it has not demonstrated a positive agenda and alternative for trying to balance Washington. The imminent entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol could represent the model for forging ahead without the

U.S., but as of yet Europe does not seem willing and/or able to do so.

Southern governments, if they are able, could offer a counterbalance on the economic front, especially if they can sustain and deepen the Cancun coalition. In contrast to the re-election of right-wing governments in the U.S. and allies like Australia and the Philippines, Latin Americans have elected more left and populist governments from Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela to Ecuador and Uruguay. This may portend a more unified effort to halt efforts to push the Free Trade Area of the Americas, while the Bush administration continues picking off the weakest members in the region to integrate on its own terms, first with the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and its renewed efforts with the Andean Free Trade Agreement (AFTA).

China could play an important role here, as it already has in the economic arena in Southeast Asia,

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largely filling the void formed by the U.S. emphasis on terrorism and Japan's focus on its own internal crisis. A more assertive effort led by China could hamper Bush administration policy in the region, although it has the support of Australia and Japan.

The potential for big business to play a constraining role remains uncertain as well. While many U.S.-based transnational corporations eagerly support the Bush administration's trade and investment agenda, the anti-Americanism and instability that has been a product of the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq and its broader militarism and unilateralism is generally seen as bad for business. It's unclear the extent to which business leaders other than George Soros will be willing to articulate such a position openly and support efforts to reorient, or at least mitigate, the destabilizing aspects of the Bush administration's foreign policy.

The final question remains the role of progressives in the U.S. and that ever elusive "other superpower" proclaimed with fanfare in February 2003. Here is where progressives need to be realistic and utopian at the same time. Perhaps the run-up to the World Social Forum meeting in January 2005 can focus discussion on the kinds of alliances and networks that will be most effective at constructing the Lilliputian ropes to constrain the Bush administration's Gulliver.

### Culture Wars Ascendant

The emerging conventional wisdom of the election is: *It's the culture war, stupid*. That's certainly the view of William Bennett—I wonder how much he bet on the outcome of the race?—writing in *National Review Online* that

Having restored decency to the White House, President Bush now has a mandate to affect policy that will promote a more decent society, through both politics and law. His supporters want that, and have given him a mandate in their popular and electoral votes to see to it. Now is the time to

begin our long, national cultural renewal ("The Great Relearning," as novelist Tom Wolfe calls it)—no less in legislation than in federal court appointments.

There's a healthy amount of spin here in the effort to proclaim a mandate. Yes it's true that an incumbent president was re-elected and expanded his party's seats in both houses of Congress for the first time since 1936. But nearly 50% of the 120 million voters opposed George W. Bush's agenda, reflecting that the election does not represent a mandate, let alone a consensus on the values and beliefs to be promoted by President George W. Bush. Despite the rhetoric, which is likely to be of the "uniter, not a divider" sort, what is likely to emerge is some very mean-spirited, divisive politics, precisely because the country is divided on these issues, not united.

The progressive community needs to suit up to meet that assault head on, because there's a lot of self-satisfied arrogance that will be animating a movement that has just won the election on the back of mobilizing evangelicals (which they failed to do in 2000). Writing in the *New Republic* in 1927, John Dewey (a former Vice President of the Anti-Imperialist League) argued that:

Public sentiment, to be permanently effective, must do more than protest. It must find expression in a permanent change of our habits. For at present, both economic conditions and political arrangements and traditions combine to make imperialism easy.

The crusade is on, and the struggle will be over what "America" means and stands for at home and in the world.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2004. All rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

John Gershman, “Weaving Constraints on an Easy Empire,” (Silver City, NM: Interhemispheric Resource Center, November 3, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.presentdanger.org/commentary/2004/0411christsoj.html>

Production Information:

Writer: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

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