

Return of the Nation-State—and the Leviathan

By Tom Barry, Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC)

The 1990s were trying times for conservative foreign policy pundits and practitioners.

The end of the cold war erased militant anticommunism as their core organizing principle. Suddenly, the clear and present danger of international communism—the bogeyman around which U.S. foreign policy had been shaped and rationalized for four decades—had evaporated. Then, as they were searching for a new mobilizing principle for their rightist agenda, the conservative foreign policy elite found they faced a surge of nontraditional notions and actors in the international arena.

Liberals such as Clinton and Gore clearly had an easier time adapting to the new context of international relations in which discussions about global interdependence, economic globalization, human security, transnational security challenges, citizen diplomacy, and civil society came to compete with the traditional talk of national interests and national security. From the neoconservative standpoint, the debates about humanitarian interventionism, citizen diplomacy, and the like were just “globaloney.” When push came to shove, what still mattered was power.

As their militant anticommunism lost its popular appeal, many conservatives in the U.S. retreated to the domestic arena, where they launched “culture wars” against secularism, big government, and liberal social programs. Meanwhile, the neoconservative ideologues who had shaped Ronald Reagan’s foreign policy, featuring star wars, rollback, and strikes against the “evil empire,” fretted that the U.S. was squandering the moment—the “unipolar moment.”¹ What America needed was a “neo-Reaganite foreign policy” that would end U.S. complacency and proudly proclaim U.S. exceptionalism.² By the mid-1990s, these neoconservatives recovered from the absence of the cold war and rallied around a new aggressive foreign policy agenda. The mission of a

reborn conservative internationalism would be to extend the unipolar moment throughout the next century—the “new American century.”

History may record September 11, 2001, as the beginning of a fundamental shift in international affairs and U.S. foreign policy. However, the framework of the new era, trumpeting the prerogatives of U.S. power, was erected as soon as the Bush foreign policy team took control in January 2001.

Currently, world concern about Bush’s new bellicose foreign policy is aptly focused on the repercussions of a U.S. first-strike posture, Washington’s clear preference for military rather than diplomatic options, and fears that lesser powers may model their own regional security policies after resurgent U.S. militarism. And citizen activism has set out to mobilize broad opposition to specific U.S. policies, especially Washington’s staunchly pro-Likud stance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Bush’s plans to wage war on Iraq.

BACKLASH AND VISION

As we look at the new directions of U.S. foreign policy, it is important to highlight some key underlying concepts and to recognize what is being tossed aside.

The Bush foreign policy is a melding of backlash politics and visionary grand strategy. The backlash is directed against all forms of feckless liberalism so detested by the neoconservatives, and the vision embraces the opportunities and potential of U.S. power. Backlash and vision are linked by the conservative internationalist penchant for the nation-state as the sole building block of international affairs.

The backlash driving the new U.S. foreign policy arises from conservative disdain for liberal and progressive internationalism. The conservative internationalists, led by the neoconservative ideologues, are determined to undermine the entire framework of

(Tom Barry <tom@irc-online.org> is a senior analyst at the Interhemispheric Resource Center (online at www.irc-online.org) and codirector of Foreign Policy In Focus.)

Foreign Policy In Focus Policy Report November 2002

Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). The project depends on sales and subscription income, individual donors, and grants from foundations and churches. *In Focus* internships are available, and we invite article queries and comments.

Project Directors

Tom Barry (IRC)
Martha Honey (IPS)

Communications & Outreach

Kathy Spillman (IPS)
kathy@ips-dc.org

Erik Leaver (IPS)
erik@fpif.org

Siri Khalsa (IRC)
communications@irc-online.org

Project Administrative Assistants

Nancy Stockdale (IRC)
Juliette Niehuss (IPS)

Design/Production

Tonya Cannariato (IRC)

Orders and subscription information:

Mail: PO Box 4506
Albuquerque, NM 87196-4506

Voice & Fax: (505) 842-8288

Email: infocus@irc-online.org

Editorial inquiries and information:

IRC Editor

Voice: (505) 388-0208

Fax: (505) 388-0619

Email: tom@irc-online.org

IPS Editor

Voice: (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232

Fax: (202) 387-7915

Email: martha@ips-dc.org

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF) aims to help forge a new global affairs agenda for the U.S. government and the U.S. public—an agenda that makes the U.S. a more responsible global leader and partner. The project responds to current foreign policy issues and crises with FPIF policy briefs, the *Progressive Response* ezine, and news briefings. In addition, FPIF publishes a series of special reports, a media guide of foreign policy analysts, and a biennial book on U.S. foreign policy.

FPIF's network of advocates, organizations, activists, and scholars functions as a "think tank without walls," reaching out to constituencies and foreign policy actors to ensure that U.S. foreign policy represents a more broadly conceived understanding of U.S. national interests.

<http://www.fpif.org/>

multilateralism championed by liberal internationalists like Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. It is this multilateralism, along with its attendant norms and treaties, that constrains U.S. power.

U.S. IN A HOBBSIAN WORLD

Conservative internationalists insist that the natural order is one of competing nation-states—a Hobbesian world in which individual nation-states control their own populations while in the international arena the most powerful nation or Leviathan controls the world order. These conservatives contend that the liberal framework of multilateralism distorts this natural order and the reality of power relations by artificially eliciting viewpoints from those without effective power, thus diminishing U.S. dominance. This does not mean that Washington will eschew the multilateral framework as an instrument of foreign policy but rather that its resort to multilateralism and international law will be guided by prudence and tactical considerations, not by principle.

Also threatened by this backlash are the new forms of "complex multilateralism" that began emerging in the 1970s, as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) began creating transborder networks to defend international norms like human rights and environmentalism. In the view of the conservative internationalists, national power—meaning military power—is the single factor determining who counts in international relations. They are dismissive of those who appeal to international norms and international law but lack the military power to enforce order. As such, the backlash of the U.S. supremacists has no patience either for civil society actors who attempt to insinuate themselves into international power politics or for European nations that assert the primacy of international norms and treaties. Washington's current backlash threatens to sweep away not

only liberal multilateralism but also new forms of global governance that open space for civil society participation, citizen diplomacy, and multidimensional forms of conflict prevention.

Conservative internationalists reject what they regard as air-head notions of global interdependence created by globalization. In an essay written in 2000 for the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), Paul Wolfowitz, now deputy secretary of defense and a leading administration hawk, contended that unipolarism and globalization are really the same phenomenon. If there is a new global interconnectedness, it "occurs within the context of [American] global dominance."³ Neoconservatives like Wolfowitz discard liberal and progressive notions of "engagement" and "webs of interdependence" as instruments of peace and conflict prevention. They scoff at seeking peace through engagement, coexistence, détente, or even reform with state or nonstate actors who do not embrace the U.S. worldview.

Instead of pursuing conflict prevention, neoconservatives promote "regime change" by military means—directly by the U.S. or through surrogate freedom fighters. But Washington needs to pick its battles carefully, strategically. Where military confrontation is not an immediate option, as in China, Cuba, or Iran, neoconservatives urge obstructing such "rogues" and "peer competitors" from addressing their internal contradictions and conflicts, thereby hastening their demise.⁴

At its core, U.S. foreign policy represents a fundamental rejection of the liberal philosophies of Locke and Kant based on progressive assumptions about the civilizing power of reason and social consensus. In the 1990s, the hawks and ideologues that now direct U.S. foreign and military policy dismissed as naïve both the elder Bush vision of a "new world order" and the Clinton vision of an interdependent world arising from

economic integration. Reacting to the moderate conservatism of elder Bush and the liberalism of Clinton, the architects of the current Bush foreign policy counterpose a Hobbesian world of conflict in which a Leviathan state is both necessary and good.

STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The global vision embodied by current U.S. foreign policy has been described by its proponents as empire, benevolent global hegemony, Pax Americana, or simply the American century. Despite the emphasis on U.S. cultural and political primacy, military domination, and moral preeminence, the grand strategy advanced by the administration's foreign policy team reserves a major role for the nation-state and national sovereignty.

In their rejection of the framework of multilateralism and deepening global governance and their spurning of any new role for civil society, the theorists of conservative internationalism uphold the traditional concepts of the nation-state and its sovereignty. But they have an original interpretation of the national role, simultaneously positing both absolute sovereignty and conditional sovereignty. As one PNAC scholar observed, "The conservative internationalist views the role of the nation—at least this nation—as being at the core of international relations today more than ever before."⁵

Each country's degree of sovereignty depends on its global power. For the most powerful nation-state, sovereignty is complete and unchallenged. In its grand strategy, Washington does not categorically reject the need and relevance of international norms, treaties, and laws. But because U.S. power and associated global responsibilities greatly exceed those of other nations, it is argued the international rules that constrain the sovereignty of other nations do not apply to the United States. Its supreme military power and moral clarity confer special

privileges and prerogatives with respect to its global operations.⁶

Bush's new foreign policy goes one step further in its exceptionalism. Not only does the U.S. stand above international law, it has assumed for itself the role of final judge. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, this new U.S. role as international arbiter of good and evil was spelled out by President Bush and his conservative internationalist coterie. In their view, respect for the sovereignty of a nation-state could be suspended if that state was

nations are so judged, then the U.S. can intervene to force a regime change. "With perseverance, we can revitalize the state," argued Shultz.⁷

MONSTERS TO DESTROY

John Quincy Adams, the sixth U.S. president, admonished the fledgling hawks of the new republic that America ought not to go "abroad in search of monsters to destroy." But today's grand strategy, as set forth by the conservative internationalists and hawks that circle

Each country's degree of sovereignty depends on its global power. For the most powerful nation-state, sovereignty is complete and unchallenged.

deemed to be either sponsoring terrorism or developing weapons of mass destruction that might challenge U.S. supremacy.

In a *Washington Post* editorial, George Shultz, former secretary of state under President Reagan, articulated the policy of conditional sovereignty announced by President Bush in his "axis of evil" State of the Union address. "The state is all we have as a means of ordering our international existence and of achieving representative government and protecting individual rights," asserted Shultz. "If the pendulum has swung against the sovereign state in past decades, it is time to swing it back, to hold states responsible and to help strengthen them against our common enemy, terrorism." Under this doctrine of conditional sovereignty, the U.S. has appropriated for itself the right to judge whether nations are violating their responsibilities as sovereign entities either by sponsoring nonstate terrorists or by engaging in state terrorism. If

around George W. Bush, exhorts Americans to strike out against an assortment of both nonstate and state actors regarded as evil.

Suffused with a sense of victimization and vulnerability, the U.S. public and the policy community have only just begun to question the apocalyptic, aggressive, and antimultilateral direction of Bush's foreign policy. Like the conservatives who earlier asked themselves what the U.S. should do with its immense power in this unipolar world, the rest of America will need to decide what responsibilities and opportunities come with dominant power—and whether this new era of international relations will be one in which global cooperation and respect for international law are the main instruments of peace and security or whether we are entering into an imperial world order maintained by a Leviathan nation in search of monsters to slay.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, Winter, 1990-91.
- 2 William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1996.
- 3 Paul Wolfowitz, "Statesmanship in the New Century," in Robert Kagan and William Kristol, eds., *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000).
- 4 This dual strategy of "regime change" pervades the writings of PNAC associates and is summarized in William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "National Interest and Global Responsibility," in *Present Dangers*, *ibid.*
- 5 James W. Cesar, "The Great Divide: American Interventionism and its Opponents," in *Present Dangers*, *ibid.*
- 6 In the U.S. Space Command's *Vision for 2020*, we see that conditional sovereignty applies even to European allies if they attempt to compete with U.S. corporations for economic resources in space, such as Helium-3 on the moon and heavy metals on the asteroids.
- 7 George P. Shultz, "Terror and The States," *Washington Post*, January 26, 2002.

Introducing the Project Against the Present Danger:

www.presentdanger.org

"Standing in Defense of International Law, International Cooperation, & Multilateralism"

PROJECT AGAINST THE PRESENT DANGER

The history of global affairs has been marked by major turning points—times when the systems and processes that shape relations among nations shift dramatically. We are alarmed that the domination of U.S. foreign policy by militarists and unilateralists is undermining the constructive, peaceful management of global affairs. By devaluing diplomacy, cooperation, and negotiations, U.S. foreign policy has created new distrust for U.S. global leadership.

– excerpt from the Statement of Concern

INCLUDES:

Defining the Present Danger

Analysis and New Commentary from FPIF

Present Danger Chronology

A regularly updated listing of the Bush administration's policy with respect to international cooperation, international treaties, and multilateralism.

Frontier Justice Weekly Chronicle

A weekly column by Tom Barry and John Gershman, senior analysts at the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC), that chronicles instances of U.S. unilateralism and its assault on the multilateralism framework for managing global affairs.

Citizen Action and Agendas

Grassroots action against American unilateralism.