

# Did 9/11 Really Bring About a Revolution in American Foreign Policy?

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The modern western world had never witnessed an attack on the US as profound, momentous and devastatingly spectacular as those of September 11 2001. Not only were the attacks instantly televised for a disbelieving global audience, but ‘the fact that the September 11 attacks struck New York and Washington, the two capitals of “Globalization” ...explains not only why Americans were so deeply shocked and moved but also why the rest of the world was to such a degree.’<sup>1</sup> The death toll was similarly shocking, as ‘thousands of ordinary people from 26 countries...were killed on 9/11 in the first ‘military’ attack on continental US soil since the war of 1812.’<sup>2</sup> For a new generation of Americans, terrorism had been brought into their borders, and ‘not since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 did Americans feel anything remotely as threatening to their homeland as this...that feeling made the US public highly receptive to calls to ‘do something about it.’<sup>3</sup>

However, the US government’s response to these strikes on American soil was far from revolutionary. In ‘responding to...the horrors that took place on September 11,

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Achcar, (translated by Peter Drucker), The Clash of Barbarisms: September 11 and the Making of the New World Disorder (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002), p. 21

<sup>2</sup> John Peterson & Mark A. Pollack, Europe, America, Bush: Transatlantic relations in the twenty-first century, (Oxford: Routledge, 2003), p. 7

<sup>3</sup> Marcin Zaborowski, Friends Again? EU- US relations after the crisis (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2006), p. 102

2001..the Bush administration, whether intentionally or not, has been drawing upon a set of traditions that go back to the aftermath of the first attack on Washington 187 years earlier...the methods that secured those benefits (of the formative American nation)- in short, the grand strategy of John Quincy Adams- should be embedded within American national consciousness. They would be the default: when in doubt, fall back on these.’<sup>4</sup>

The conclusions reached by the official US governmental 9/11 Commission might not, at least initially, seem to concur with this analysis. The report focuses strongly on the sources of funding for international terrorism, and suggests that the CIA’ response to the attacks has been profoundly original, as ‘since September 11 the world has indeed changed and nowhere more than in the area of countering terrorist financing.’<sup>5</sup> But in many other, perhaps more significant ways, the Bush administration’s response to 9/11 has paralleled the reaction of US administrations to various crises throughout the nation’s history. Noam Chomsky has written that the ‘belief that 9/11 signalled a sharp change in the course of history...seems questionable.’<sup>6</sup> We should not, Chomsky argues, confuse the unique global environment- the context in which 9/11 occurred- with the consequent American policy, which was not an unparalleled retort to threats to American interests. The US in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century may have exercised, and continued to exercise, an

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<sup>4</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, Surprise, Security And The American Experience. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 31

<sup>5</sup> The 9/11 Commission, ‘National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States’, Monograph on Terrorist Financing: Chapter 3- Government Efforts Before and After the September 11 Attacks.  
[http://www.9-11commission.gov/staff\\_statements/911\\_TerrFin\\_Ch3.pdf](http://www.9-11commission.gov/staff_statements/911_TerrFin_Ch3.pdf) (Viewed February 19 2007)

<sup>6</sup> Noam Chomsky, Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance, (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 191

unchecked global 'hyperpuissance', but its circumstances alone are revolutionary, not its actions.

Merely a year on from 9/11, political commentators in Britain were left to contemplate how, far from bringing about a revolution in American foreign policy, the aftermath of 9/11 saw 'the US rejecting an opportunity to reflect on itself and its place in the world, and instead reasserted its exclusionary, unilateralist ideology...the shattering experience of September 11 (has) ultimately served as a means of enabling the dominant ideology to "go back to basics", to reassert itself against anti-globalisation and other critics.'<sup>7</sup> In doing so, the US managed to eliminate a groundswell of global sympathy that had emerged in the wake of 9/11, with 'the wave of positive feeling and sympathy for America after 9/11 dissipating quickly, as the emboldened Bush crew continued to strong-arm the world. For them, 9/11 represented an opportunity beyond the war of terror.'<sup>8</sup>

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, the U.S. declared "war against international terrorism", headed by the Saudi, Osama bin Laden, who their sources suggested was hiding in Afghanistan. This war, it was declared, 'would be a long and costly war involving a large number of different countries and conducted on a range of different fronts.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Zizek, 'What If nothing at all has changed?', The Times Higher Education, September 6 2002, p. 16

<sup>8</sup> Maureen Dowd. Bushworld: Enter At Your Own Risk (New York: Berkley, 2004), p. 13

<sup>9</sup> Suman Gupta, The replication of violence: thoughts on international terrorism after September 11 2001 (Sterling, V.A: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 25

Evaluating the ‘War on Terror’ using this criteria, it becomes clear that American foreign policy post -9/11 is indeed far from revolutionary. After all, the prolonged American anti-Communist offensive of the second half of the twentieth century was fought, over a number of years, in various theatres; most notably in Korea and Vietnam. And, like Vietnam, Bush’s war against Al Qaeda ‘obviously strained the American military by forcing continual action at long distances....on a broader level, it strained the US military by stretching’ them to continue a conflict that dragged on far longer than was originally anticipated.<sup>10</sup> Bush might have announced *unanticipated* military operations occurred in the wake of 9/11, but they were certainly not *unprecedented*. A generation ago, the American government had to swiftly re-align their foreign policy objectives in a similar manner, as the US, originally anticipating a European conflict, had to turn their attentions instead to the Far East and Vietnam.

Although the US were facing up to a new role as first-time 21<sup>st</sup> century domestic victims in the wake of 9/11, the country’s response to the attacks was, in fact, strikingly familiar. Far from resulting in a radical new foreign policy agenda, George W. Bush’s post- 9/11 programme was shaped by his predecessors, not least his own father; the ‘famous presidential reference to the “axis of evil” made by the younger President Bush in early 2002, rhetorically lumped together the separate challenges posed by North Korea to the stability of Northeast Asia, by Iran’s longer-range ambitions in the Persian Gulf

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<sup>10</sup> George Friedman, *America’s Secret War: Inside The Hidden Worldwide Struggle Between the United States And Its Enemies* (London: Abacus, 2006), p. 79

region, and by the unfinished legacy of the 1991 campaign against Iraq's Saddam Hussein.'<sup>11</sup>

Bush himself had immediately placed the events of September 11 in a broader historical context: "The Pearl Harbor of the 21<sup>st</sup> century took place today" Bush dictated into his diary on the night of 11 September 2001. The comparison with Pearl Harbor was also repeatedly made by Condoleezza Rice, his National Security Adviser.<sup>12</sup> Equally, Bush has compared the post 9-11 international political climate to that of the Cold War. He made a speech to Congress less than 2 weeks after 9/11, on September 20, 2001, in which he remarked that '...These terrorists...are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century....they follow the path of fascism, and Nazism and totalitarianism.'<sup>13</sup>

George W. Bush is, in the essence of his belligerent foreign policy and unilateralist leanings, similar to each one of his recent predecessors on both sides of the political divide, from Clinton to Carter –the latter an advocate of reduced US military presence in Europe and increased NATO accountability. However Bush's foreign policy is perhaps most comparable to that of his ideological mentor, Ronald Reagan. Indeed, Bush 'came into office with priorities similar to those of the Reagan administration in the 1980s: The transfer of resources from the poor to the rich; large increases in military spending that subsidizes many US industries; and open rejection of any international

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<sup>11</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership. (New York: Basic Books, 2004), p.27

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, Free World: Why a crisis of the West reveals the opportunity of our time (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 117

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert Achcar, (translated by Peter Drucker), The Clash of Barbarisms: September 11 and the Making of the New World Disorder (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002), p. 48

constraints on US action.’<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the post-war president whose foreign policy can most exactly be termed ‘revolutionary’ is probably Reagan. ‘Bush’s ‘Axis of Evil’ speech ‘appeared to signal a shift from the measured, restrained, and coalition-focused language and behaviour shown by his administration in the first days after 9/11 to a new brand of headstrong American unilateralism.’<sup>15</sup> Conversely, this ‘new brand’ of proactive US militarism was, in fact, a reversion to the Reagan doctrine of the 1980’s.

Reagan’s (foreign policy) vision ‘had three principal elements: that US foreign policy must be based on American ideals; that these ideals- primarily democracy and self-government- are desired by all peoples; and that the United States has a special mission to promote the success and spread of democratic governments around the world. These “idealist” views were a sharp departure from the “realist” assumptions about international relations that had prevailed in the US for most of the post-WW2 period.’<sup>16</sup> There are clear echoes of Reagan’s foreign policy philosophies in Bush’s staunch but unspecific determination to ‘spread democracy’ and ‘build nations.’

Bush attempted to offer a contrast with Clinton, but not to the extent that 9/11 brought about a ‘revolution’ in his agenda; it would be better described as reactionary, as Bush’s approach was strikingly reminiscent of Ronald Reagan’s insistence on putting further weight on American economic growth and military security. As he came into

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<sup>14</sup> Tom Rockmore, Joseph Margolis, Armen T. Marsoobian, editors. The Philosophical Challenge of September 11 (Blackwell, Oxford, 2003) p. 25

<sup>15</sup> Peterson &. Pollack, Europe, America, Bush: Transatlantic relations in the twenty-first century, p.8

<sup>16</sup> Peter J. Wallison, Ronald Reagan (Colorado: Westview, 2004), p.283

office, in the field of foreign policy George W. Bush favoured a militant form of “unilateralism” that certainly distinguished his administration from that of his predecessor. This refusal to countenance any challenge on how an Allied reaction to 9/11 should be directed is one element that might be described as truly ‘revolutionary’, certainly in the post-World War Two era; as ‘in the aftermath of September 11, Europe- the key states of the European Union- took the path of ‘unconditional compromise’, giving in to US pressure. The war in Afghanistan, the plans for an attack on Iraq, the new explosion of violence in Palestine: each time, there were muffled voices of discontent in Europe...however, there was no formal resistance, no imposition of a different global perception of the crisis....the result of September 11 is an unprecedented strengthening of US hegemony, in all its aspects.’<sup>17</sup> But this represents just one unusual element of a broader American foreign policy that otherwise adhered strongly to established norms.

Clinton’s policy of “enlargement”, meanwhile, had implied engagement in a wide range of fields overseas and a broadly multilateralism approach.’<sup>18</sup> ‘...On one level Bush’s foreign policy could be described as consistent with his predecessors, (but) on another level it could be summarised as ABC- Anything But Clinton....Clinton’s failure to set priorities, Bush argued, was most visible in the way his administration had promiscuously deployed US military forces around the globe.’ In fact, it was Bush’s ingrained Republic distaste for Clinton and his regime, rather than the 9/11 attacks, that

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<sup>17</sup> Slavoj Zizek, Welcome To The Desert Of The Real! Five Essays on September 11 And Related Dates (London: Verso, 2002), p. 143

<sup>18</sup> Richard Crockatt, America Embattled: September 11, Anti-Americanism & The Global Order (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 142

provided the foundation for Bush's decisive response to the events.<sup>19</sup> September 11 merely gave public license to the simmering right-wing sloganeering that had been bubbling under the surface of acceptability during Clinton's time in office. American 'right-wing nationalist discourse' has its roots in 'very old cultural, racial and religious' locations, 'strengthened and perpetuated by the Cold War', and merely 'attaining new force as a result of 9/11.'<sup>20</sup>

Today, commentators are left to consider that 9/11 eliminated the prevalent Clinton-era belief in 'benevolent hyperpuissance', but did not in fact alter the crucial ethos of American foreign policy. 'One of the many casualties of 9/11 and its aftermath has been the idea, fashionable in the 1990s, that a world with only one super-power would be a more comfortable place to live. This hinged on the argument that in a unipolar world order the dominant state, in pursuit of its global interests and responsibilities, acts as a producer of global public goods from which everyone benefits, such as security, stability and free trade.'<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the most popular discernment of the allegedly 'dramatic' shift in US foreign policy following 9/11 was a stringent tightening of legislative powers intended to curb civil liberties of those suspected of aiding the cause of America's enemies abroad. The most striking example of this was the 'Patriot Act', which was signed into law merely hours after being proposed; 'despite the "homeland" name, (it) extended defence

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<sup>19</sup> Ivo H. Daalder & James M. Lindsay, America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), p. 37

<sup>20</sup> Anatol Lieven, America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 28

<sup>21</sup> David Clark, 'Like it or not, the US will have to accept a multipolar world', The Guardian, 16.02.2007, p. 35

well beyond American borders – with as many foreign policy repercussions as domestic initiatives, increased surveillance on non-Americans...government powers to detain citizens, [and] freeze financial assets to those suspected of aiding terrorism.’<sup>22</sup>

Once again, however, this is far from unprecedented. Although in the wake of 9/11 ‘the sporadic national alerts over completely unspecified threats contributed to a mood in which concern over personal security tended to overshadow traditional attachment to civil rights’ such a mood ‘has happened before in American history.’ The adoption in 1798 of the Alien and Sedition Acts, the Espionage Act of 1918, the crackdown on pacifists and radicals in connection with America’s participation in World War I, and the World War II internment of about 120,000 Japanese Americans are all legislative precedents for the ‘Patriot Act.’<sup>23</sup>

Having failed to assert a dominant political personality or ethos in the months before September 11, George W. Bush was eager to use the American response to cultivate an assertive, forceful image of his leadership. He had run for election in the Presidential campaign of 2000 promising strong and decisive American military weight, and 9/11 offered Bush and his cabinet the change to manifest this. Contemporary American history books allude to this aim, claiming that the ‘full implementation of President Bush’s objectives *implies* a dramatic restructuring of US diplomatic and military policy’ (my italics.)<sup>24</sup> However the key term in such discourse is ‘implies’-

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<sup>22</sup> David McKay, American Politics and Society, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005,) p. 249

<sup>23</sup> Brzezinski, The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership.  
p. 204

<sup>24</sup> Peter Thompson, Cassell’s Dictionary of American History, (London: Cassell, 2002),  
p. 548

Bush's team of neoconservatives carefully manufacturing an image for their leader.

Bush had surrounded himself with staunch critics of Clinton in an attempt to distance himself from his predecessors supposedly slapdash approach to foreign affairs. For example, 'in [the] run up to 2000 primaries Bush invited Richard L. Armitage, a former assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration, to join his team of foreign policy advisers...he signed on because he believed that the Clinton administration had no theory or underlying principles for its foreign and defense policies. It was ad hoc....a big job for the next president, he thought, was no less than figuring out the purpose of American foreign policy.'<sup>25</sup> But although 9/11 gave Bush the opportunity to flex the US's military muscle, his administrations' rapid, unrestrained increase in counter-terrorism financial support, which eventually overtook even missile defence expenditure, appeared to be comparably hasty. Bush's defence spending is currently beyond comparison with either Clinton's, or the rest of the planet's: 'The Pentagon's total budget requests for the fiscal year ending September 2008 have swollen to \$716.5bn (£366bn). That is more than double Clinton-era spending....with Mr Bush as head of the police academy, the US is becoming, de facto, the self-appointed global policeman it said it never wanted to be.'<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps this is, ultimately not surprising, given the many similarities between America under Clinton and George W. Bush. For all their supposed mutual antipathies, there are a series of striking parallels between the pair- for just 'like the current

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<sup>25</sup> Bob Woodward, State of Denial: Bush at War Part III (London: Simon & Schuster UK, 2006), p. 7

<sup>26</sup> Simon Tisdall. 'US moves in on Africa', The Guardian. February 9 2007.

administration, Clinton sought major reductions in social spending, the extension of international free-trade agreements, changes in environmental regulations desired by the business community, and the deregulation of financial markets.’<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, It was during the Clinton regime and the massive American economic boom of the late 1990s ‘that the broad contours of the power equation in the international political system had changed’, not post-9/11.<sup>28</sup>

Neither was Armitage a lone representative of bygone administrations with an intimate connection to Bush. Donald Rumsfeld, Bush’s Secretary of Defense, had served under Richard Nixon, whilst Bush’s deputy Dick Cheney repeatedly acknowledged the personal influence of Henry Kissinger, the veteran foreign policy strategist from the Nixon era, as an influence on America’s post-9/11 foreign policy doctrine. Cheney and Kissinger ‘shared a worldview that international relations were a matter of military and economic power, Diplomatic power derived from threatening to, and then actually using, that power. In its rawest form, using the military sent a useful message to the world: it’s dangerous to be an enemy of the United States...for Kissinger, Iraq was the Vietnam sequel.’<sup>29</sup> Kissinger would offer his own post 9-11 response in a book entitled ‘Does America Need a Foreign Policy?’, published in 2002. He maintained that Americans had faced challenges like the ones posed by Al Qaeda before, even if ‘within months of near unanimity with respect to the Afghan operation’ a presidential call to arms (Bush’s ‘Axis

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<sup>27</sup> Rockmore, Margolis, Marsoobian, editors. The Philosophical Challenge of September 11, p.8

<sup>28</sup> Peterson &. Pollack, Europe, America, Bush: Transatlantic relations in the twenty-first century, p.8

<sup>29</sup> Woodward, State of Denial, p. 410

of Evil' speech in early 2002) evoked an unprecedented degree of acrimony.<sup>30</sup> Kissinger implies that the International response to post- 9/11 US foreign policy may accurately be described as 'revolutionary' in its anti-American sentiment; but not the actual American policy itself.

Political observers remarked upon the uncompromising nature of Bush's rhetoric in the days following 9/11 and in particular his overt use of religious symbolism and Christian imagery, invoking an American 'crusade' against the 'evil-doers' who wished the country harm. But such stark public pronouncements are not a new phenomenon in the world of American global politics. Bush's decision to 'frame the fight not as a conflict between competing interests or perspectives, but as a struggle between absolutes' had its roots in Ronald Reagan's declaration that the Soviet Union the 'Evil Empire' - he 'had been ridiculed for it, but he believed this.'<sup>31</sup>

Nor was the political construction of a pernicious, insidious unseen foe lurking within the United States' borders a new phenomenon. The 'missionary zeal' of the so-called "War on Terrorism" created a sustained paranoia 'disturbingly reminiscent of paranoid feelings that have periodically haunted Western capitals during the past couple of centuries, most memorably in 1930s Germany and 1950s America.'<sup>32</sup> Bush's affirmation that the population of earth could either choose to 'be with America, or against us' is further evocative of the 'Red Scare' of the early Cold War years, as were

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<sup>30</sup> Henry Kissinger, Does America need a foreign policy? Toward a diplomacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, (New York: Touchstone, 2002), p. 293

<sup>31</sup> Alexander Moens, The Foreign Policy of George W. Bush: Values, Strategy and Loyalty (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), p. 135

<sup>32</sup> David Held & Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, editors. American Power in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 255

the terms expressed in The Bush National Security Strategy, released on September 17 2002 . This ‘sets three tasks for post-September 11<sup>th</sup> American grand strategy: “We will defend the peace by fighting terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. We will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent”...defense against tyrants, of course, is nothing new: that’s what our World War II and Cold War strategy was all about.’<sup>33</sup>

By the end of 2004, with Iraq descending further into chaos, Bush refused to greatly alter the US’s approach to nation-building in the Middle East; rather, the President retained his original ‘goal, which was not to dramatically alter the American foreign policy mind-set as radically as it had been changed at the beginning of the Cold War in the late 1940s, with policies of containment and deterrence.’<sup>34</sup>

Ultimately, in ‘essentials, the Bush administration’s definition of the international situation showed strong elements of continuity not only with the approach it had adopted after September 11 but with the actions of the months prior to these events...the threat posed by the terrorism of 9/11 was *consistent with the long-established patterns in the way America perceived its relations with the outside world.*’ (my italics.)<sup>35</sup> The stark, shocking nature of the September 11 attacks did not herald a new dawn in American foreign policy: they simply focused the eyes of the world on the USA, and gave it’s nations leaders a heightened sense of purpose.

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<sup>33</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, Surprise, Security And The American Experience, p. 83

<sup>34</sup> Woodward, State of Denial, p. 371

<sup>35</sup> Crockatt, America Embattled: September 11, Anti-Americanism & The Global Order p. 159

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But did September 11 signal a failure of theory on par with the failures of intelligence and policy? Familiar theories about how the world works still dominate academic debate. Post-9/11 developments seem to undercut one of realism's core concepts: the balance of power. Standard realist doctrine predicts that weaker states will ally to protect themselves from stronger ones and thereby form and reform a balance of power. In his 2001 book, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations*, political scientist Daniel Philpott demonstrates how the religious ideas of the Protestant Reformation helped break down the medieval political order and provided a conceptual basis for the modern system of secular sovereign states. I see several elements of Trumpian foreign policy, noting this list is far from exhaustive: 1. Little if any emphasis on human rights. 2. There is no particular tendency to prefer to deal with the democracies, if anything the contrary (it is easier to do "funny" opportunistic deals with the autocrats, plus democratic citizens, especially in Western Europe, may not want their leaders to do deals with Trump). 3. Problems can pop up all over the place, there is nothing special about Europe, and Europe is irrelevant to many of the most important geopolitical struggles. I now believe that, for better or worse, #1-6 are likely to survive in American foreign policy, with or without the reelection of Donald Trump. 225 Comments. Facebook.