Policymaking is an inherently imprecise science. History does not permit us to stage controlled experiments, to test the outcomes of the “what if.” Yet, the Bush administration’s decision to pursue a bold policy departure from mainstream U.S. national security strategy does offer a kind of laboratory to examine why policy choices matter and to understand the nature of the international system at the beginning of the twenty-first century as well as the appropriate role for U.S. leadership within that system.

President George W. Bush took office in January 2001 promising to pursue a “humble” U.S. foreign policy, restore U.S. alliances, and abjure costly, misguided “nation building.”¹ Seven years and $1 trillion later, the U.S. standing in the world has plummeted as 200,000 U.S. soldiers struggle to hold back the tide of chaos and insurrection in Afghanistan and Iraq. Washington’s friends and allies are dismayed, and its adversaries are emboldened. Those who were to restore U.S. leadership after a “holiday from history”² leave office with reputations in tatters. It is obvious why the question of the hour is “what went wrong?” but the more important challenge is to answer the question, “what is to be done?”

For the six-plus years since the September 11 attacks, the U.S. national security debate has been dominated by the contention that the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington “changed everything.” The U.S. experience in Iraq over the past five years demonstrates that although some important things indeed have changed, the fundamental strategy pursued by the United States since it assumed responsibility for global leadership after World War II still remains the most reliable path to U.S. security and prosperity. As a watershed
election approaches in November 2008, there is an urgent need to relearn those lessons and return to the bipartisan tradition of enlightened global leadership that will allow us to meet the real challenges of the twenty-first century.

**How Did We Get Here?**

To understand what went wrong, it is important to recall how the United States got here in the first place. During the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush and his advisers offered conventional “realist” foreign policy bromides: focus on core national security interests and great powers and avoid overextending U.S. military forces or undertaking nation building. Yet, many of the officials who would come to play key roles in the Bush administration long harbored a more revolutionary agenda. By their assessment, U.S. power had eroded dramatically over the 1990s. The United States had failed to respond effectively to challenges from rogue states such as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea and the terrorists whom they supported. This weakness emboldened the United States’ enemies to confront it directly. The United States could only be safe by forcefully taking on these dangerous states through militarily led regime change that would pave the way for pro-American, democratic governments.

As the 1990s wore on, Iraq came to play an ever more central role as the leading “action item” in executing the new strategy. Removing Saddam Hussein not only offered an opportunity to demonstrate that the United States had returned from its holiday from history, but also seemed to be an attractive opening move in the project of democratic transformation. Iraq was the ideal candidate for three reasons. First, Saddam’s continued defiance was the most visible symbol of U.S. weakness. Second, Iraq was seen as having a nascent secular, middle-class culture ready to take its place among the world’s democracies once the obstacle of Saddam and the Ba’ath Party was swept away, a view urged by an articulate, well-connected Iraqi exile community. Third, the progressive deterioration of Iraq’s military after a decade of sanctions made the Iraqi army a tempting target—a “cakewalk.”

When the terrorists attacked on September 11, 2001, the proponents of the new strategy thus had a ready-made U.S. response. For most of the world, “Iraq” was a startling non sequitur to “what shall we do now?” asked in response to an attack executed by al Qaeda from its sanctuary in Afghanistan. For Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and his like-minded colleagues, however, it was the natural conclusion to their theory of how to restore U.S. leadership. The shock of 9/11 was an opportunity to liberate the United States from the shackles of alliance relations and international law to pursue a long-cherished strategy that, until that moment, had been stymied by a domestic political environment that was blind to the gathering dangers.
Alas, things did not work out in any of the ways that their strategy implied. Instead of intimidating North Korea, Kim Jong-il went on to test his long-range missiles and nuclear bomb. Instead of deterring Iran, the intervention dramatically shifted the power balance in the Persian Gulf by installing an Iran-friendly government in Baghdad and reinforcing the domestic strength of the hard-liners in Tehran while making it more difficult for Tehran’s Sunni rivals to identify publicly with the United States.

Far from unlocking the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians by destroying an Iraqi government that had actively supported the radical Palestinian resistance—the theory that formed the basis of the insistence that “the road to Jerusalem runs through Baghdad”—the policy contributed to the election of Hamas to power in the Palestinian territories in January 2006 and the undermining of moderate Fatah leaders. Far from deterring challenges to Israel’s security, an emboldened Hizballah backed by an emboldened Iran attacked deep into Israel’s territory in the summer of 2006 and fought the Israel Defense Forces to a standstill in Lebanon, dramatically strengthening Hizballah’s stature in the Arab and Muslim world while further blackening the eyes of Israel and the United States.

Instead of strengthening ties with moderate Islamic democracies, the administration punished the moderate Islamist government in Turkey for respecting the results of its own democratic processes, which led to Turkey’s decision not to allow the use of its territory to stage the invasion of Iraq. Rather than strengthening democracy advocates in the Middle East, pro-democracy campaigners increasingly found it necessary to distance themselves from the United States. Instead of encouraging U.S. allies to bandwagon in support, the strategy squandered the unprecedented rallying of support for the United States among European allies following the September 11 attacks.

Yet, far worse than all of these, the policy actually strengthened the forces that brought about those attacks. The intervention in Iraq enhanced the terrorists’ operational capabilities through live training against U.S. forces deployed in Iraq; fostered a broadened reservoir of support for the terrorists among those who already felt grievances against the United States and the West; and undermined global public confidence in U.S. leadership, threatening the United States’ ability to sustain the cooperation necessary to take on the terrorists’ challenge to U.S. security.
What Went Wrong?

The strategy failed on a number of levels. At the tactical level, of course, it failed because the administration blithely ignored the advice of its own military, area experts, and intelligence community that establishing a secure, democratic Iraq would not be a cakewalk. Yet, if that were the only reason for the failure, the lessons to be drawn would be modest indeed: do it, but do it right next time.

The course of events in Iraq raises serious doubts that better execution—more troops, a more sober assessment of the opposition, more determined economic reconstruction—would have produced a different result. At its heart, the optimistic view was based on a belief that there was a middle-class, pluralist, and tolerant Iraqi society ready to take charge once the oppressive hand of Saddam and his henchmen was lifted. Whether a change in regime might have had some prospect for success after the early years of Saddam's rule, by 2003, Saddam's predations had so destroyed Iraqi society and polarized the sectarian communities that the Shi'a and Kurds were determined to seize control and exclude the Sunni community, which in their view had brutalized them for so long. Thus, the failure in Iraq was far more profound than a lack of competence or understanding of Iraqi conditions.

The intervention was a strategic failure because the very assumptions underlying the rationale for undertaking it were fundamentally flawed and reflected a profound misunderstanding of the nature of the international system today and how the United States can best protect its interests in it. The Bush doctrine was grounded on two core assumptions about the international system. First, establishing a dominant hegemonic position based on overwhelming military power coupled with the determination to use this power would dissuade potential adversaries from challenging the United States while convincing friends that it was better to support the United States rather than to balance against it. Second, strategies of deterrence, containment, and peaceful political competition were no longer adequate to deal with new security challenges. As Vice President Dick Cheney said while quoting Bush, “[T]ime is not on our side”; only a radical transformation of the international environment through regime change could ensure U.S. security.

These assumptions stood at odds with the dominant approach of the United States during the Cold War and reprised a debate that had been raging throughout that period. On one side stood the liberal internationalism of Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, who believed that U.S. power was greatest when exercised with the support of others and embedded in internationally accepted institutions. This belief was coupled with George Kennan’s conviction that the United States would prevail in the ideological contest
with the Soviet Union not primarily through force of arms but through patient
and deliberate political strategies that drew on the natural superiority of the
U.S. democratic society and the political solidarity of liberal democratic states.
Arrayed against that view were those ranging from Secretary of State John
Foster Dulles, who served under President Dwight Eisenhower, to President
Ronald Reagan, at least in his early years as president, who believed that the
United States would only overcome the Soviet threat through overwhelming strength;
dismissed the value of the United Nations, arms control, and international law; and
advocated a strategy of rollback and liberation.
Far from justifying a radical change in policy, the evolution of the international sys-
tem since the collapse of the Soviet Union actually reinforced the validity of the liberal
internationalist approach. In a world of increasing interdependence in which the greatest dangers to the United States
come not from hostile states but from the dark side of interdependence, a
strategy of assertive hegemony was bound to fail for three core reasons.
First, the strategy misjudged the nature of the enemy and the threat. The
administration failed to understand that U.S. military strength was of limited
use against the real enemy, and by pitting its military might against terrorists
and insurgency, the United States allowed the adversary to take advantage
of asymmetric warfare to deal a damaging blow and enhance their prestige.
The Bush doctrine was sold as a strategy to defend the United States against
terrorists in the wake of the September 11 attacks, but it reflected little or no
understanding of the terrorists’ actual strategy. The approach in fact played
to their strengths and U.S. weaknesses. By engineering a massive military
intervention in the heart of the Arab world in a country that was home to
important Muslim holy sites and seeking to install a government of the United
States’ own choosing, Washington unintentionally validated the argument
that Osama Bin Laden and his followers had used as their prime recruiting
tool. Al Qaeda wanted a civilizational conflict with the West, and the admin-
istration obliged. By defining the enemy as “Islamic fascism,” the administra-
tion gave its adversaries the ideological pedigree they desperately sought. By
disparaging what it called its predecessors’ “law enforcement approach” and
proclaiming a “global war on terror,” it instantly established the terrorists as
warriors for their cause.
Second, the strategy failed to understand what elements of power were
most needed to defeat the emerging threat. Even when faced with more tra-
ditional state adversaries such as Adolf Hitler’s Germany, Japan, or even the

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Soviet Union, U.S. leaders recognized the central importance of allied support. In the context of the challenge posed by al Qaeda and its allies, that support was more urgent than ever. The United States is deeply dependent on cooperation from allies’ intelligence and police forces and the willingness of publics in other countries to take on the terrorists in their midst. The United States could neither dispense with this support nor gain it by coercion or intimidation.

Even in the military sphere, the administration's mantra “the coalition defines the mission” misunderstood the political underpinnings of the successful use of force by fundamentally misreading the lesson of the 1999 Kosovo intervention. Although alliance coordination was at times ugly during that conflict, the benefit of political solidarity counted for far more in the end than the operational inconvenience of working through NATO and engaging diplomatically with Russia. It contributed decisively in the end to Slobodan Milosevic’s decision to capitulate. Such political support may not have been necessary to topple Saddam, but it would have been essential if the United States wanted others to help with the political and economic reconstruction to follow.

To secure international support requires that the United States take seriously the views of others in formulating its own strategy. When the United States acts against well-intentioned counsel, its friends might not balance against the United States by joining with its adversaries. They could and did, however, stand on the sidelines, and Washington could do little to punish them. Those who were inclined to support the United States ran the risk of losing the support of their own people, as with President José María Aznar of Spain and ultimately Prime Ministers Tony Blair of the United Kingdom and John Howard of Australia. By appearing to defy important allies’ advice and by short-circuiting the UN process that the United States itself had help put in place, Washington complicated its ability to gain the support of other countries on actions that were far more central to U.S. interests, including constraining Iran and tackling terrorist cells globally.

Third, the strategy undermined the U.S. global position by calling into question the legitimacy of U.S. leadership. This element of U.S. soft power is particularly critical in the face of terrorist threats, which compel the United States to push the envelope of preventive force. The world rallied to the United States after 9/11 and supported the invasion of Afghanistan because the Taliban’s alliance with al Qaeda represented a clear and present danger. The argument behind the necessity of dispatching Saddam, however, was more...
remote. By acting without the support of others, the administration fueled a fear that the United States would act in an unconstrained fashion that would damage the interests of others and encourage other, more dangerous nations to follow a similar course.

By lowering the substantive bar constraining the use of force in the absence of an imminent threat and rejecting the alternative that would put in place procedural checks, such as approval by the UN Security Council or a regional organization such as NATO, the invasion of Iraq unintentionally fueled a global public perception that both al Qaeda and the United States were threats to peace and stability. The administration believed that overwhelming U.S. military power freed the United States from having to seek the support of others because other countries would have no choice but to side with the world’s sole superpower. Yet, those theorists got it backward. U.S. primacy makes it all the more important that the United States pay judicious attention to legitimacy and greater compliance with international law rather than it being an excuse to throw them overboard in the hubris of the moment.

The challenge to the legitimacy of the intervention _jus ad bellum_ was compounded by the disregard for international _jus in bello_. By falling back on the discredited “ends justify the means” defense of extreme interrogation measures such as waterboarding, which is widely viewed as torture, and denial of even the rudiments of due process at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, the administration undermined the moral claim that elevated the U.S. cause above the one that was seeking to destroy the country. The problem is compounded by a perceived double standard that promotes democracy for adversaries but seems to turn its back on democracy where it interferes with the tactical struggle against terrorists, as in Pakistan and Central Asia, or where it produces undesired outcomes, such as Hamas’s victory in the Palestinian territories.

**What Is to Be Done?**

There is much to be said for the aspirations of the Bush policy. The United States does need to focus on the danger posed by nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists. The United States would be safer if more countries had open, accountable governments that respect the rule of law. Current international institutions are inadequate to the challenges of globalization.

Yet, the idea that these goals could be achieved through a naked assertion of U.S. primacy was fundamentally flawed. Bush and his supporters profoundly misunderstood the significance of the “unipolar moment.” Far from being a license to sweep away the prudential strictures that had long governed the United States’ use of power, this was precisely the moment for the United States to be circumspect in how it wielded its unprecedented strength. Despite its own
certainty that its power would only be used for noble ends, even allies were legitimately concerned that unchecked U.S. power could be dangerous to global stability. This was precisely the moment when Washington needed to reassure others that its power would in fact be used for the broader global public good and thus a moment when the United States should be most willing to listen to the voices of others. At a time when the national confidence was shaken by the September 11 attacks and the public looked to its government to restore a sense of security, the ideology of primacy had a certain natural appeal. Yet, it was the job of statesmen to offer a more farsighted path forward.

The damaging consequences of the departure from these truths run the risk that the United States may overcompensate for these lessons and allow the pendulum to swing back too far. The administration has placed excessive confidence in the force of arms to defeat adversaries, but that does not mean that the United States can dispense with a well-trained, capable military. Even the preventive use of force must remain an option when faced with mortal threats that cannot be eliminated through other means.

The administration pursued a go-it-alone approach to avoid the challenge of patient alliance management and deliberate institution-building, but the United States cannot forsake a leadership role, retreat from global engagement, or be paralyzed by lack of consensus when action is necessary. Nor must the United States always go along with judgments of others when its security is at risk. The administration has overreached in trying to impose democracy, but the United States still has a moral and political stake in supporting the forces of freedom around the world.

How can the United States undo the damage and regain the support necessary to assure its security, liberty, and prosperity? First, it must reject playing into al Qaeda’s narrative. Characterizing efforts to eliminate terrorism as an ideological crusade is exactly what bin Laden wants. By labeling the adversary “Islamic fascism” and likening the current antiterrorist struggle to the conflicts the United States and its allies waged against Hitler and Stalin, the United States gives credence to al Qaeda’s recruiting strategy, which seeks to convince young and disaffected Muslims that the United States is their enemy that seeks to destroy their religion and culture.11

Second, Washington can restore the legitimacy of U.S. leadership by showing a greater willingness to take into account the views of its necessary partners. The administration’s about-face on North Korea and Iran and support for global initiatives on HIV/AIDS and malaria are valuable steps in the right
direction. Yet, more could be done, starting with a leadership role in addressing climate change, supporting the International Criminal Court, and reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy to bolster the flagging nonproliferation regime. The United States has a unique capacity to foster peace and stability in the world, but its unique role and capabilities do not justify an unconstrained version of U.S. exceptionalism. If the United States wants others to live by the rules and be “responsible global stakeholders,” it must accept the need to do the same.

Third, the United States must take seriously the need to reform international institutions rather than disparage or ignore them. Like-minded organizations such as the proposed Community of Democracies have their place, but fora in which countries with divergent views can develop strategies together are also necessary, from the UN to the World Trade Organization. The time has come to bite the bullet on UN Security Council reform and accept that the greater legitimacy offered by a more representative Security Council justifies the risk that action in an enlarged and more diverse council will be more cumbersome or less to Washington’s liking. Similarly, the United States should take the steps necessary to join the East Asian Summit, including ratifying the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which would put the United States back in the mix in the most dynamic region of the world. In short, the United States must return to the strategies of leadership that brought it unprecedented power and security in the first place.

Notes


