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THE BUSH REVOLUTION

GEORGE W. BUSH had reason to be pleased as Air Force One swooped in to land at Andrews Air Force Base in late February 2005. He had just completed a successful visit to Europe. The trip began in Brussels, where he hosted an elegant dinner for French president Jacques Chirac, a staunch opponent of the Iraq War. He next attended the twin summits of NATO and the European Union, in the process becoming the first American president to visit the European Commission. He then traveled to Germany to meet with Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, another fierce critic of the Iraq invasion. Before leaving Germany, Bush stopped at Wiesbaden Army Airfield Base to thank hundreds of cheering American troops and their families for their service to America. He then flew on to his final stop, Bratislava, for a summit meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin, yet another vocal opponent of the Iraq War. Now, as Bush buckled his seat belt, he knew that his visit had drawn favorable reviews on both sides of the Atlantic.

Bush made the five-day, three-nation trip at the start of his second term to extend an olive branch to a Europe that had been hostile to many of the foreign policy decisions he had made during his first term in office. But in a larger sense, he and his advisers saw the trip as a vindication of his vision and leadership. The man from Midland had been mocked throughout the 2000 presidential campaign as a know-nothing. He had been denounced early in his presidency for turning his back on time-tested diplomatic practices and ignoring the advice of America's friends and allies. Many of the Europeans he had met on the trip believed that his foreign policy was dangerous and had rooted for his opponent in his run for reelection. The

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American people had thought differently, though. They had returned Bush to the White House by a surprisingly comfortable margin. So now he traveled through Europe, not as a penitent making amends but as a leader commanding respect.

As Air Force One landed at Andrews, Bush could say that he had become an extraordinarily effective foreign policy president. He had dominated the American political scene like few others. He had been the unquestioned master of his own administration. He had gained the confidence of the American people and persuaded them to follow his lead. He had demonstrated the courage of his convictions on a host of issues—abandoning cold-war treaties, fighting terrorism, overthrowing Saddam Hussein. He had spent rather than hoarded his considerable political capital, consistently confounding his critics with the audacity of his policy initiatives. He had been motivated by a determination to succeed, not paralyzed by a fear to fail. And while he had steadfastly pursued his goals in the face of sharp criticism, he had acted pragmatically when circumstances warranted.

In the process, Bush had set in motion a revolution in American foreign policy. It was not a revolution in America's goals abroad, but rather in how to achieve them. In his first term in office, he discarded or redefined many of the key principles governing the way the United States should act overseas. He relied on the unilateral exercise of American power rather than on international law and institutions to get his way. He championed a proactive doctrine of preemption and de-emphasized the reactive strategies of deterrence and containment. He promoted forceful interdiction, preemptive strikes, and missile defenses as means to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and he downplayed America's traditional support for treaty-based nonproliferation regimes. He preferred regime change to direct negotiations with countries and leaders that he loathed. He depended on ad hoc coalitions of the willing to gain support abroad and ignored permanent alliances. He retreated from America's decades-long policy of backing European integration and instead exploited Europe's internal divisions. And he tried to unite the great powers in the common cause of fighting terrorism and rejected a policy that sought to balance one power against another. By rewriting the rules of America's engagement in the world, the man who had been dismissed throughout his

political career as a lightweight left an indelible mark on politics at home and abroad.

Nevertheless, good beginnings do not always come to good endings. Even as Bush peered out the window of Air Force One, foreign policy problems persisted. American troops in Iraq were battling a vicious insurgency. Anger had swelled overseas at what was seen as an arrogant and hypocritical America. Several close allies continued to talk about how to constrain America, rather than how best to work with it. As the president stepped onto the tarmac, Washington was asking a new question: Was the president about to abandon the Bush revolution because the costs had begun to swamp the benefits?

THE QUESTION OF how the United States should engage the world is an old one in American history. The framers confronted the question only four years after ratifying the Constitution when England went to war with France. President George Washington ultimately opted for neutrality, disappointing partisans on both sides. The hero of Valley Forge calculated that the small and fragile experiment in republican government would likely be crushed if it joined a battle between the world's two greatest powers.

America's relationship with Europe remained an issue throughout Washington's presidency. He discussed the topic at length in the open letter announcing his decision to retire to his beloved Mount Vernon. He encouraged his countrymen to pursue peace and commercial relations. "Harmony, liberal intercourse with all nations are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest." But he discouraged them from tying their political fate to the decisions of others. "It is our true policy," Washington counseled, "to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world." His argument for keeping political ties to a minimum was simple: "Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns."¹

Washington concluded his Farewell Address by noting, "I dare not hope [that my advice] will make the strong and lasting impression I could wish."² He should not have feared. His vision of an America that traded

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happily with Europe but otherwise stood apart from it became the cornerstone of the new nation's foreign policy. John Quincy Adams eloquently summarized this sentiment and gave it an idealistic twist in an address he made before the House of Representatives on July 4, 1821. America applauds those who fight for liberty and independence, he argued, "but she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own." America stuck to its own business not merely for pragmatic reasons, but because to do otherwise would repudiate its special moral claim. "The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from *liberty* to *force*," Adams warned. "She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit."³

However, even liberal, democratic spirits can be tempted by changed circumstances. When Adams spoke, the United States was an inconsequential agrarian country of twenty-three states, only one of which—Louisiana—was west of the Mississippi. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was an industrial colossus that spanned a continent. Its new status as a leading economic power brought with it growing demands from within to pursue imperial ambitions. Intellectuals used the reigning theory of the day, Social Darwinism, to advocate territorial expansion as a demonstration of American superiority and the key to national survival. Church groups saw American imperialism as a means to spread Christianity to "primitive" areas of the world. Commercial interests hoped to reap financial gain by winning access to new markets for American goods. Anti-imperialists such as Andrew Carnegie and Mark Twain challenged these arguments for expansion with great passion, but they were fighting a losing battle. As William McKinley's secretary of state John Hay put it, "No man, no party, can fight with any chance of success against a cosmic tendency; no cleverness, no popularity avails against the spirit of the age."⁴

The opportunity that imperialists had waited for came with the Spanish-American War. The windfall from that "splendid little war," as its supporters took to calling it, was an empire that stretched from Puerto Rico in the Caribbean to the Philippines in the Pacific. With victory safely in hand, concerns that America would lose its soul if it went abroad quickly faded. Under Teddy Roosevelt's corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which had been largely forgotten for seven decades after it was first issued,

Washington assumed the role of policeman of the Western Hemisphere. The former Rough Rider denied that “the United States feels any land hunger or entertains any projects as regards the other nations of the Western Hemisphere.” Nonetheless, he insisted that the United States could not stand idly by while Latin American nations mismanaged their economies and political affairs. Latin American nations needed to “realize that the right of such independence can not be separated from the responsibility of making good use of it.”⁵ In the view of Roosevelt and his successors, they failed to do that. Between 1904 and 1934, the United States sent eight expeditionary forces to Latin America, took over customs collections twice, and conducted five military occupations. The Caribbean was soon nicknamed Lake Monroe.

With the Spanish-American War and the Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, internationalists for the first time triumphed over isolationists in the struggle to define the national interest. However, the imperialist cause would soon begin to struggle. Part of the problem was the cost of empire. America’s new subjects did not always take easily to Washington’s rule. In the Philippines, the United States found itself bloodily suppressing a rebellion. American occupations of several Caribbean countries failed to produce the stability that Roosevelt had promised. By then, the imperialists were confronted by another, more serious challenge. This one came not from isolationists, but from within the internationalist camp itself.

WOODROW WILSON TOOK office in 1913 determined to concentrate on domestic concerns. Shortly before taking the oath of office, he told an old colleague: “It would be the irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs.”⁶ Yet fate had precisely that destiny for Wilson. His domestic policies are long forgotten; his foreign policy legacy is historic. Wilson’s importance rests not on his achievements—he ultimately failed to see his proposal for a new world order enacted—but on his vision of America’s role in the world. It was a vision that would dominate American politics after World War II.

Wilson shared with all his predecessors an unwavering belief in American exceptionalism. “It was as if in the Providence of God a continent had been kept unused and waiting for a peaceful people who loved

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liberty and the rights of men more than they loved anything else, to come and set up an unselfish commonwealth.”⁷ But whereas that claim had always been used to argue that America would lose its soul if it went abroad in search of monsters to destroy, Wilson turned it on its head. America would lose its soul if it did not go abroad. His liberal internationalism set forth a moral argument for broad American engagement in world affairs.

“We insist,” Wilson told Congress in 1916, “upon security in prosecuting our self-chosen lines of national development. We do more than that. We demand it also for others. We do not confine our enthusiasm for individual liberty and free national development to the incidents and movements of affairs which affect only ourselves. We feel it wherever there is a people that tries to walk in these difficult paths of independence and right.”⁸ Not surprisingly, when Wilson requested a declaration of war against Germany—thereby doing the unthinkable, plunging the United States into a European war—he did not argue that war was necessary because Germany endangered American interests. Rather, the United States must fight because “the world must be made safe for democracy.”⁹

Wilson’s commitment to a world in which democracy could flourish was by itself revolutionary. Equally revolutionary was the second component of his vision—the belief that the key to creating that world lay in extending the reach of international law and building international institutions. The former college president—who ironically during his first term had enthusiastically used American military power to enforce the Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe Doctrine—called on the victorious powers to craft an international agreement that would provide “mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.”¹⁰ He went to the Paris Peace Conference in December 1918 to push his idea on deeply skeptical European leaders. He was ultimately forced to compromise on many of the particulars of his plan. Nevertheless, in the end he prevailed on the core point. The Treaty of Versailles, signed in July 1919, established a League of Nations that would “respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all.”¹¹ Wilson returned to the United States convinced that the idea of collective security—“one for all and all for one”—would prevent war and remake world politics.

The idea of the League of Nations was also revolutionary for American

politics. Wilson was asking Americans to do more than just cast away their aversion to entangling alliances. The United States, after all, had fought World War I as an “associated” power and not an “allied” one in deference to the traditional reluctance to become tied militarily to other countries. He was asking them to spearhead an international organization that would seek to protect the security of its members, however far they might be from American shores. That would prove the rub.

The Senate’s rejection of the Treaty of Versailles is usually recounted as a triumph of traditional isolationism. Isolationists certainly were the treaty’s most vociferous critics. The “irreconcilables” and “bitter-enders,” as they were called, were led by Republican Senator William E. Borah of Idaho, a man who had a reputation as an expert on world affairs despite never having left American soil. The irreconcilables were traditional isolationists who vehemently opposed entangling the country in foreign alliances. Borah insisted that if he had his way the League of Nations would be “20,000 leagues under the sea” and he wanted “this treacherous and treasonable scheme” to be “buried in hell.” Even “if the Savior of men would revisit the earth and declare for a League of Nations,” he declared, “I would be opposed to it.”¹²

Although Borah and his fellow irreconcilables lacked the votes to carry the day, many of the Senate’s most ardent internationalists and imperialists also opposed the treaty. What bothered them was not that Wilson wanted to involve the United States in affairs beyond its borders. They were all for that. They simply opposed the way Wilson intended to engage the world. These anti-League internationalists, who included most Republicans and a few Democrats, believed that the United States had to preserve a free hand to act abroad, not tie its fate to the whims and interests of others. They charged that the League would trump the Constitution and usurp Congress’s power to declare war. The leader of the anti-League internationalists, Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, went to the heart of the matter when he asked his colleagues: “Are you willing to put your soldiers and your sailors at the disposition of other nations?”¹³

The victory of the antitreaty forces heralded for a time the continuation of the policy of the free hand that Lodge and others so loved. By the beginning of the 1930s, however, this unilateral internationalism began giving way to rising isolationist sentiment. As the country entered the

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Great Depression and war clouds gathered on the European horizon, Americans increasingly retreated to Fortress America. Some isolationists argued that war would not occur. In July 1939 Senator Borah confidently predicted, "We are not going to have a war. Germany isn't ready for it. . . . I have my own sources of information."¹⁴ Others admitted war might occur and that it would be best for the United States to remain apart. Regardless of the reason, the German invasion of Poland, the Battle of Britain, and Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union came and went without convincing most Americans of the need to act. It took Pearl Harbor to do that.

THE FOREIGN POLICY questions Americans faced at the end of World War II had little to do with what the United States *could* do abroad. By every measure, America dominated the world as no nation had ever done before. All the other major powers, whether victor or vanquished, were devastated. The United States, in contrast, emerged from the war not only unscathed, but far stronger than it was when it entered the hostilities. Its economy was by far the world's largest. It possessed the world's strongest navy and most powerful air force. And it alone held the secret to the world's most terrifying weapon: the atomic bomb.

The foreign policy questions facing Americans dealt much more with what the United States *should* do abroad. Some Americans wanted to "bring the boys back home" from Europe and the Pacific and to return to a "normal" life. Others warned against a return to isolationism. But internationalists themselves disagreed on important questions. Should the United States define its interests regionally or globally? What were the threats to U.S. security? How should the United States respond to these threats?

The task of answering these questions fell to President Harry Truman, a man who in many ways was ill prepared for it. By his own admission he was "not a deep thinker."¹⁵ A product of the Democratic political machine in Kansas City, he had cut his political teeth on domestic issues. He had served in the Senate for ten years with modest distinction before becoming Franklin Roosevelt's surprise choice in 1944 to be his running mate. When FDR died in April 1945, Truman had been vice president for less than three months and had not been included in the administration's

foreign policy deliberations. Indeed, he did not learn that the United States was building an atomic bomb until *after* he was sworn in as president.

Whatever Truman lacked in experience he more than made up for with a commitment to pursuing Woodrow Wilson's aims without making his mistakes. During his seven years as president, Truman remade American foreign policy. In March 1947 the former Kansas City haberdasher went before a joint session of Congress and declared what became known as the Truman Doctrine: "It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."¹⁶ Three months later his secretary of state, George C. Marshall, unveiled the Marshall Plan in a commencement address at Harvard, claiming a major role for the United States in rebuilding a war-torn Europe. Two years later, Truman signed the treaty creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). With the stroke of his pen, he cast off America's traditional aversion to entangling alliances and formally declared that Washington saw its security interests as inextricably linked with those of Europe.

The hallmark of Truman's foreign policy revolution was its blend of power and cooperation. Truman was willing to exercise America's great power to remake world affairs, both to serve American interests and to advance American values. However, he and his advisers calculated that U.S. power could more easily be sustained, with less chance of engendering resentment, if it were embedded in multilateral institutions. During his presidency, Truman oversaw the creation of much of the infrastructure of the international order: the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the Organization of American States among other multilateral organizations. In creating these institutions, he set a precedent: Even though the United States had the power to act as it saw fit, it accepted, at least notionally, that its right to act should be constrained by international law. In marked contrast to the epic League of Nations debate, the Senate overwhelmingly endorsed this multilateral approach.

Nonetheless, Truman's foreign policy choices were not unanimously applauded. The challenge, however, did not come from isolationists. The smoke pouring from the USS *Arizona* had shown the vulnerability of Fortress America. The complaints instead came from hard-line conservatives who thought Truman's policy of containing the Soviet Union was too

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timid. These critics believed that the United States had a moral and strategic interest in working to liberate nations that had fallen under Soviet control. Truman rejected these calls for “rollback” because he judged the costs of the wars that would inevitably follow as too high.

Proponents of rollback thought they had found their leader in Truman’s successor, Dwight Eisenhower. Ike campaigned in 1952 criticizing Truman’s foreign policy and particularly his handling of Korea. The official Republican Party platform denounced containment as a “negative, futile, and immoral” policy that abandoned “countless human beings to a despotism and Godless terrorism.”¹⁷

However, it is one thing to campaign, another to govern. Once Eisenhower was in office, his actions made clear, in the words of one historian, that Republican rhetoric about “‘liberation’ had been aimed more at freeing the government in Washington from Democrats than at contesting Soviet influence in Eastern Europe.”¹⁸ In June 1953 the former Supreme Allied Commander stood by as Soviet troops crushed a revolt in East Germany. The following month he brought the Korean War to an end not by invading North Korea but by signing an armistice with Pyongyang. The next year he rebuffed a French appeal for U.S. military help to relieve the French forces trapped at Dien Bien Phu. Two years after that, Washington again did nothing when Soviet tanks rolled into Hungary, crushing yet another revolt against communist rule. Eisenhower’s reason for inaction was not timidity but prudence. Any effort to liberate Eastern Europe by force of arms risked a nuclear war that would have turned American cities into smoking, radiating ruins. With the cost of being wrong so high, the appeal of rollback policies dimmed.

EISENHOWER’S EMBRACE OF Truman’s foreign policy blueprint solidified America’s basic approach to world affairs for the next half century. Even with the debacle in Vietnam, a basic foreign policy consensus held. The United States had extensive interests overseas that it must be prepared to defend. Washington actively cultivated friends and allies because in a world with a superpower adversary it was dangerous to be without them. International organizations, and especially military alliances, were a key instrument of foreign policy.

At the same time, however, the ever-present Soviet threat muffled the continuing disagreement between the intellectual descendants of Woodrow Wilson and Henry Cabot Lodge. Those in the Wilson school cherished the contribution of international law to world stability and prosperity. They took pride in the fact that Washington had championed the creation of international organizations such as NATO and the United Nations and that by doing so the United States was laying the groundwork for the gradual expansion of the rule of law in international affairs. Those in the Lodge school longed for the policy of the free hand but were comforted by the fact that America's great wealth and military might meant it dominated international organizations. In NATO, for example, the United States was not simply Italy with more people. It was the superpower that provided the alliance's ultimate security guarantee, and as a result it had a disproportionate say over alliance policy. When multilateral organizations refused to heed American wishes, the United States could—and frequently did—act alone.

As the cold war ground on and America's allies became less willing to follow Washington's lead, it became harder to paper over the differences between those who emphasized cooperation and those who stressed the free exercise of power. While the former saw new possibilities for building multilateral organizations, the latter decried the ineffectiveness of many international organizations and despaired at the constraints they placed on America's freedom to act. These differences flared into the open in the 1990s with the demise of the Soviet Union. Suddenly those who emphasized international institutions and law lost the trump card they had long held over those who favored the unilateral exercise of American power—the prospect that going it alone might produce costs that were unbearably high.

The foreign policy debates of the 1990s were at first mistakenly seen as a replay of the debates between isolationists and internationalists of the 1930s. True, some voices called for America to return home, but this was a distinctly minority view. Most Americans had little interest in disengaging from the world. They quite liked American predominance and saw it as costing them little. As a result, politicians such as Patrick Buchanan, who thought they could ride an isolationist tide to power, instead sank without leaving a ripple.

The real debate in the 1990s was not over *whether* but *how* the United States should engage the world. Bill Clinton's presidency in most ways

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represented a continuation of the traditional Wilsonian approach of building a world order based on the rule of law. Clinton and his advisers argued that globalization was increasing economic, political, and social ties among nations and that this growing interconnectedness made fulfilling Wilson's vision all the more important. In keeping with this thinking, the Clinton administration pursued traditional arms control agreements such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and a strengthening of the Biological Weapons Convention. It also sought to create new international arrangements such as the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court to deal with a new set of policy challenges.

Clinton's opponents criticized his decisions on numerous grounds, but one in particular stood out: He had failed to recognize that, with the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States now had the freedom to act as it saw fit. In their view, Clinton not only failed to assert American primacy, he also ensnared the country in multilateral frameworks that did not even serve broader international interests. As the columnist Charles Krauthammer put it, "An unprecedentedly dominant United States . . . is in the unique position of being able to fashion its own foreign policy. After a decade of Prometheus playing pygmy, the first task of the new [Bush] administration is precisely to reassert American freedom of action."¹⁹ America, in short, could and should be unbound.

GEORGE W. BUSH delivered the revolution that Krauthammer urged. It was not a revolution that started, as many later suggested, on September 11, 2001. The worldview that drove it existed long before jet planes plowed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Bush outlined its main ideas while he was on the campaign trail, and he implemented parts of it as soon as he took the oath of office. What September 11 provided was the rationale and the opportunity to carry out his revolution.

But what precisely was the Bush revolution in foreign policy? At its broadest level, it rested on two beliefs. The first was that in a dangerous world the best—if not the only—way to ensure America's security was to shed the constraints imposed by friends, allies, and international institutions. Maximizing America's freedom to act was essential because its unique position in the world made it the most appealing target for any country or group hostile to the West. Americans could not count on others to protect

them; countries inevitably ignored threats that did not involve them. Moreover, formal arrangements would inevitably constrain America's ability to make the most of its primacy. Gulliver must shed the constraints that he helped the Lilliputians weave.

The second belief was that an America unbound should use its strength to change the status quo in the world. Bush's foreign policy did not propose that the United States keep its powder dry while it waited for dangers to gather. The Bush philosophy instead turned John Quincy Adams on his head and argued that the United States should aggressively go abroad searching for monsters to destroy. That was the logic behind the Iraq War, and it animated the administration's efforts to deal with other rogue states.

These fundamental beliefs had important consequences for the practice of American foreign policy. One was a decided preference for unilateral action. Unilateralism was appealing because it was often easier and more efficient, at least in the short term, than multilateralism. Contrast the Kosovo war, where Bush and his advisers believed that the task of coordinating the views of all NATO members greatly complicated the war effort, with the Afghanistan war, where Pentagon planners did not have to subject any of their decisions to foreign approval. This is not to say that Bush flatly ruled out working with others. Rather, his preferred form of multilateralism—to be indulged when unilateral action was impossible or unwise—involved building ad hoc coalitions of the willing, or what Richard Haass, an adviser to Colin Powell, called “à la carte multilateralism.”²⁰

Second, preemption was no longer a last resort of American foreign policy. In a world in which weapons of mass destruction were spreading and terrorists and rogue states were readying to attack in unconventional ways, Bush argued that “the United States can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past. . . . We cannot let our enemies strike first.”²¹ Indeed, the United States should be prepared to act not just preemptively against imminent threats, but also preventively against potential threats. Vice President Dick Cheney was emphatic on this point in justifying the overthrow of Saddam Hussein on the eve of the Iraq War. “There’s no question about who is going to prevail if there is military action. And there’s no question but what it is going to be cheaper and less costly to do now than it will be to wait a year or two years or three years until he’s developed even more deadly weapons, perhaps nuclear weapons.”²²

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Third, the United States should use its unprecedented power to produce regime change in rogue states. The idea of regime change was not new to American foreign policy. The Eisenhower administration engineered the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh; the CIA trained Cuban exiles in a botched bid to oust Fidel Castro; Ronald Reagan channeled aid to the Nicaraguan contras to overthrow the Sandinistas; and Bill Clinton helped Serb opposition forces get rid of Slobodan Milosevic. What was different in the Bush presidency was the willingness, even in the absence of a direct attack on the United States, to use U.S. military forces for the express purpose of toppling other governments. This was the gist of both the Afghanistan and the Iraq wars. Unlike proponents of rollback, who never succeeded in overcoming the argument that their policies would produce World War III, Bush based his policy on the belief that nobody could push back.

GEORGE W. BUSH presided over a revolution in foreign policy, but was he responsible for it? Commentators across the political spectrum said no. They gave the credit (or blame) to neoconservatives within the administration, led by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who they said were determined to use America's great power to transform despotic regimes into liberal democracies. One critic alleged that Bush was "the callow instrument of neoconservative ideologues."²³ Another saw a "neo-conservative coup" in Washington and wondered if "George W fully understands the grand strategy that Wolfowitz and other aides are unfolding."²⁴ Pundits weren't the only ones to argue that the Bush revolution represented a neoconservative triumph. "Right now, the neoconservatives in this administration are winning," Democratic Senator Joseph Biden, the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in July 2003. "They seem to have captured the heart and mind of the President, and they're controlling the foreign policy agenda."²⁵

This conventional wisdom was wrong on at least two counts. First, it fundamentally misunderstood the intellectual currents within the Bush administration and the Republican Party more generally. Neoconservatives—who might be better called democratic imperialists—were more prominent outside the administration, particularly on the pages of *Commentary* and the *Weekly Standard* and in the television studios of Fox News, than they

were inside it. The bulk of Bush's advisers, notably Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, were not neocons. Nor, for that matter, was Bush. They were instead assertive nationalists—traditional hard-line conservatives far more interested in using American military power to defeat threats to U.S. security than to remake the world in America's image. What they shared in common with the democratic imperialists, and what enabled them to make common cause in overthrowing the cold-war approach to foreign policy, was a belief that America had failed to use its primacy to advance its interests.

To be sure, the tone and substance of Bush's public remarks changed dramatically in late 2003, after it became clear America might never find the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq that had been the main reason for the war. Dark talk of the links among terrorists, tyrants, and technology gave way during the election year to optimistic speeches about democracy and a "forward strategy of freedom." What did not change, though, was the general thrust of Bush's foreign policy decisions—which remained decidedly nationalist in execution. This continuity did not stop pundits from hailing Bush as the new Woodrow Wilson, a comparison that required ignoring the fact that Bush still spurned the defining feature of Wilsonianism: the belief that extending the rule of law and building international institutions are essential to creating a peaceful, democratic world. Bush put his faith in power and resolve, not in diplomacy and treaties.

The second and more important flaw of the neoconservative coup theory was that it grossly underestimated George W. Bush. The man from Midland was not a figurehead in someone else's revolution. He may have entered the Oval Office not knowing which general ran Pakistan, but during his first term in office he was the puppeteer, not the puppet. He governed as he said he would on the campaign trail. He actively solicited the counsel of his seasoned advisers, and he tolerated if not encouraged vigorous disagreement among them. When necessary, he overruled them. George W. Bush led his own revolution.

