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“Benevolent Global Hegemony”:
William Kristol and the Politics of American Empire

by
Gary Dorrien

Near the end of the Cold War a group of neo-conservative intellectuals and policy makers began to argue that instead of cutting back on America's vast military system, the United States needed to use its unmatched power to create a global Pax Americana. Some of them called it the unipolarist imperative. The goal of American foreign policy, they argued, should be to maintain and extend America's unrivaled global dominance.

The early advocates of unipolar dominance were familiar figures: Norman Podhoretz, Midge Decter, Charles Krauthammer, Paul Wolfowitz, Joshua Muravchik, and Ben Wattenberg. Their ranks did not include the godfather of neo-conservatism, Irving Kristol, who had no interest in global police work or crusading for world democracy. Though he later clarified that he was all for enhancing America's economic and military preeminence, Irving Kristol thought that America's overseas commitments should be determined by a classically realist calculus. His son William Kristol had a greater ambition for America, which he called “benevolent global hegemony.”

In 1992, the *New York Times* revealed that Wolfowitz, then an undersecretary for defense, was drafting a new policy plan for the Pentagon that sought to prevent any nation or group of nations from challenging America's global supremacy. President George Bush disavowed the controversial plan, and for the rest of the 1990s establishment Republicans did not speak of grand new strategies. But the neo-cons continued to argue for “American Greatness,” founded new institutions, and made alliances with hard-line conservatives such as Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. By the time that George W. Bush won the presidency, neo-cons were the strongest foreign policy faction in the Republican party. More than twenty of them swept into office with Bush. Cheney was the key to the neo-cons' windfall of appointments, but the key ideologist and builder of the new neo-conservatism was William Kristol.

Bill Kristol had made a name for himself during the George Bush presidency as Vice President Dan Quayle's chief of staff; reporters called him “Dan

Quayle's brain." After Bush lost the presidency, Kristol set up his own Washington advocacy operation, the Project for the Republican Future, and supplied Republicans with hard-edged policy advice. He played a leading role in the fight against Hillary Clinton's health care plan, supported Newt Gingrich's Contract with America, and became a fixture on television news programs.

In 1995, Kristol launched an upstart right-wing magazine, *The Weekly Standard*, that called Republicans to dream of an American-shaped new world order. Like many neo-con enterprises, the *Weekly Standard* was founded with Rupert Murdoch's money. The following year Kristol and his ideological comrade Robert Kagan issued a manifesto, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," that urged Americans to dump Clinton's nannyish multilateralism for a policy of global dominion. The year after that Kristol launched a think tank, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), that defended and amplified the Wolfowitz plan, called for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and spelled out the particulars of a global empire strategy. The time had come to redeem Wolfowitz's global vision, the PNAC neo-cons urged. America did best for itself and the world when it aggressively pursued its own interests and prevented all nations from challenging its power in every region of the world.

Many of the neo-cons supported John McCain in the Republican primaries. Kristol's group admired McCain's courage as a soldier in Vietnam, his maverick eagerness to take on the establishment, and his pledge to extend "the unipolar moment . . . for as long as we possibly can." George W. Bush, by contrast, had no inspiring biography and rarely spoke about foreign policy. He pledged to sustain America's global preeminence, but zigged and zagged between the party's isolationist and unipolarist wings. That smacked of another muddled-realist Bush administration. After the meaningful primaries ended, the neo-cons went to work on Bush.

The Defense Department had to fulfill four missions, they argued: defend the homeland, prepare to fight and win multiple large wars at the same time, perform the "constabulary duties" of a global superpower, and transform the U.S. armed forces. In September 2000, Kristol and the PNAC unipolarists explained that "the United States must retain sufficient forces able to rapidly deploy and win multiple simultaneous large-scale wars and also to be able to respond to unanticipated contingencies in regions where it does not maintain forward-based forces." This resembled Colin Powell's two-war standard, but

the neo-cons believed that the Powell Doctrine had to be updated to deal with multiple simultaneous conflicts. Moreover, the so-called “revolution in military affairs”—employing advanced technologies—was a mission in itself, on a par with defending the homeland, fighting simultaneous wars, and maintaining the global order. The U.S. needed a major increase in its East Asian military presence, a more confrontational policy toward China, and a permanent force in the Persian Gulf. The neo-cons sadly observed that it might take “a new Pearl Harbor” for Americans to face up to the need for an expanded military.

They cheered candidate Bush’s commitment to missile defense and liked his occasional words on behalf of American preeminence. But Bush’s positions didn’t add up to an aggressive unipolarist policy. He didn’t advocate the increases in defense spending or reconfigurations of force structure that the PNAC detailed. Kristol and Kagan were not assured by private assurances from campaign officials that Bush would significantly increase defense spending beyond Clinton’s 2001 budget increase. Condoleezza Rice was fond of saying that when Bush became president, the U.S. would no longer be the world’s “911.” Kagan surmised that the U.S. would be the world’s busy signal. Rice assured reporters that it didn’t matter if Bush didn’t know much about foreign affairs, because “it’s a whole team of people who are going to get things done.” Kristol and Kagan worried that much of the Bush team would consist of realpolitikers from the previous Bush presidency.

Right up to the election Kristol and Kagan complained that Bush downplayed America’s military crisis and distastefully trolled for isolationist votes, denigrating Clinton’s wars against Slobodan Milosevic in Bosnia and Kosovo. Bush suggested that American troops should be withdrawn from the Balkans; Cheney groused that Milosevic’s electoral defeat on September 24, 2000, did not vindicate Clinton’s decision to fight in Kosovo; Kristol and Kagan replied that it certainly did. The triumph of democracy in Serbia was Clinton’s greatest foreign policy victory.

Kristol later recalled that he felt “moderately unhappy” about the Bush/Cheney team throughout the 2000 campaign. Though neo-cons wrote some of Bush’s speeches, “he gave other speeches in which he said, ‘We have to be humble. We’re over-extended. We don’t need to spend much more on the military.’ ” Besides Bush’s advocacy of missile defense and his rhetorical commitment to American supremacy, he didn’t seem like a good unipolarist. Kristol remarked: “I wouldn’t say that if you read Wolfowitz’s Defense Planning Guidance from

1992, and read most of Bush's campaign speeches and his statements in the debates, you would say, 'Hey, Bush has really adopted Wolfowitz's worldview.' " Though Rice and Wolfowitz were Bush's chief foreign policy advisors, Rice was much closer to him, and she kept her distance from neo-cons: "She was skeptical about a lot of these claims that the U.S. really had to shape a new world order, that we had to engage in nation-building, that we might have to intervene in several places at once." Sixteen months after 9/11, Kristol concluded: "She was much more, I think, kind of a cautious realist than she is today."

Cheney and Wolfowitz had worked together in the first Bush administration, where they hatched the first unipolarist blueprint, and in the 1990s Cheney strengthened his ties with neo-cons at the American Enterprise Institute. A charter member of the Project for the New American Century, Cheney embraced its imperial ambitions. Rumsfeld was also a charter PNAC associate, and unlike Cheney, had signed its letter to Clinton in 1998 that called for the overthrowing of Saddam Hussein

Powell was too important not to get a top position, and Rice was the obvious choice for national security advisor, but Bush and Cheney didn't want Powell to determine their administration's foreign policy. Someone of equal stature and forcefulness to Powell was needed; thus Cheney reached out to his former mentor Rumsfeld. Wolfowitz settled for the number two slot at Defense and was backed up by a more aggressive ideological twin, Douglas Feith, at number three. Thus the vice-president, defense secretary, and deputy defense secretary were all associates of the Project for the New American Century, while Secretary of State Powell and his top appointee, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage—also a PNAC associate—represented a realist unipolarism that accented diplomatic cooperation.

From there the unipolarist appointments went all the way down. Of the eighteen figures who signed the PNAC's 1998 letter to Clinton calling for regime change in Iraq, eleven took positions in the Bush administration. In addition to Armitage, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, they were Elliot Abrahms (senior director for near east, southwest Asian and North African affairs on the National Security Council); John Bolton (undersecretary, Arms Control and International Security); Paula Dobriansky (undersecretary of state for global affairs); Zalmay Khalilzad (president's special envoy to Afghanistan and ambassador-at-large for Free Iraqis); Richard Perle (chair of the Pentagon's semi-autonomous Defense Policy Board); Peter W. Rodman (assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs); William Schneider, Jr.

(chair of the Pentagon's Defense Science Board); and Robert B. Zoellick (U.S. trade representative). Other PNAC associates and/or prominent unipolarists who landed high-ranking positions included Stephen Cambone (director of the Pentagon Office of Program, Analysis and Evaluation); Eliot Cohen (Defense Policy Board); Devon Gaffney Cross (Defense Policy Board); I. Lewis Libby (Vice President Cheney's chief of staff), William Luti and Abram Shulsky (eventually, directors of the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans), James Woolsey (Defense Policy Board), and David Wurmser (special assistant to the undersecretary of state for arms control). Libby served as assistant to the president and national security adviser to the vice-president in addition to being Cheney's chief of staff, an unprecedented trifecta of positions that amplified Cheney's influence.

By all appearances this extraordinary harvest of appointments put the neo-cons in the driver's seat of the new administration. But for eight months, until 9/11, they didn't feel that way. They worried about Powell's influence over the president, Rice was hard to read, and Bush had other priorities. The complaining began very early. Shortly before Bush's inauguration, Kagan declared that the incoming administration had an obvious split between its leading hawks (Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz) and doves (Powell and Rice), and that even Bush's commitment to missile defense was jeopardized by it. Powell, a longtime skeptic about missile defense, had wanted the defense post to go to his friend, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, a missile defense opponent. Rice's viewpoint was not well defined, or at least not known, but she appeared to share the skepticism of her former boss and mentor, Brent Scowcroft. Kagan warned: "Whether the hawks or the doves prevail depends on the president, of course, but the president's judgment will depend on whom he's listening to. So far Bush's missile defense briefings would seem to have come exclusively from the doves."

On the latter issue he was in a position to know. Bulging with connections to the new administration, he and Kristol doled out inside dope that reflected the frustrations of their friends, and their own. Bush campaigned as an Eisenhower, they judged, not a Reagan, but America desperately needed a Reaganite president who fought for America's interests and scared people. Unfortunately, "Bush's campaign from the beginning was designed not to scare anyone, anywhere, on any issue." They judged that it would take six months to know whether Bush had the neo-con spirit. Their ray of hope was that Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz would be running the Pentagon.

But on the mother of all issues, the Pentagon budget, Bush stunned his neo-con supporters by announcing that he would live with Clinton's defense budgets for 2001 and 2002. Informed by a "well-placed administration official" that Rumsfeld was blindsided by this decision, Kagan fumed at Bush's "first broken campaign promise." Bush's constant railing against America's declining military strength had led Americans to expect something very different, Kristol and Kagan protested. Kagan caustically remarked that he certainly never said, "If elected, I promise to enact Bill Clinton's defense budget."

How could Bush and Cheney now claim that Clinton's defense budget was good enough? How could they promise that "help is on the way" and then dare to say, "never mind?" Kagan judged that Bush cared more about his tax cut than national security; repeatedly he and Kristol observed that the budget decision was made by political aides and Office of Management and Budget bean counters, not those who knew the military situation. They also protested that Bush continued or even weakened Clinton's foreign policy. *The Weekly Standard* neo-cons didn't know that Bush targeted Iraq at his first National Security Council meeting, or that Rumsfeld announced at the second NSC meeting that "what we really want to think about is going after Saddam." Kristol and Kagan bitterly complained that in place of Clinton's broad economic sanctions against Iraq, Bush retreated to a dumb and spineless idea of Powell's called "smart sanctions," which targeted materials that might be used for weapons construction. Worse yet, instead of aggressively supporting the Iraqi opposition, the Bush team, "led by Powell," backed away from Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress. Bush gave piddling donations to the INC, "just as the Clinton administration did," and Chalabi was spurned by the State Department, National Security Council, and CIA. Incredibly, the Bush policy was a weak version of the Clinton policy.

In the spirit of the "let Reagan be Reagan" protests of the 1980s, Kristol and Kagan detected a fateful pattern in the early Bush administration. Bush would offer a strong immediate reaction to a problem, then back down after Powell, Rice, the bean counters, or political guru Karl Rove prevailed upon him. At the same time they gave praise where it was due, from a neo-con perspective. Bush's unipolarism was half-baked, but he had its unilateralist spirit. Kristol appreciated that Bush dared to scare people on the ABM Treaty and Kyoto Protocol. In June, the *Weekly Standard* celebrated what it called "the new American unilateralism," running a cover story by Krauthammer on the Bush

Doctrine. According to Krauthammer, Bush accepted that the first and foremost purpose of American foreign policy was to maintain America's preeminence. Though many Americans strangely desired "a diminished America and a world reverted to multipolarity," Bush understood that the best world order would occur "under a single hegemon" and that America was a new kind of imperial power, one that promoted democracy and freedom.

But unipolarism on the cheap was a contradiction in terms. Writing in the *Weekly Standard*, PNAC deputy director Tom Donnelly reported that the White House blindsided even Cheney when it stuck with Clinton's defense budgets. Donnelly came close to charging betrayal. Having condemned Clinton for cheating the military, Bush did the same thing.

So many members of the Project for the New American Century had taken positions in the Bush administration that the PNAC had to recruit a whole new group of associates. Yet the Bush administration was hardly any better than the derided Clinton liberals, because the bean counters and political spin-masters were running the Bush administration. By July, Kristol and Kagan were so exasperated that they advised "two old friends," Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, to resign in protest. The "best service they could perform for their country" was to ring the alarm by resigning. Rumsfeld had recently requested an additional \$35 billion for fiscal year 2002, Kristol and Kagan observed, but for the third time in six months he "had his head handed to him by the White House."

The campaign rhetoric of 2000 seemed long forgotten. A missile shield wouldn't deter anyone if America lost its capacity to project force abroad. In mid-July, Wolfowitz told Congress that it was "reckless" for the administration to "press our luck or gamble with our children's future" by spending only three percent of the gross domestic product on defense. Kristol and Kagan replied, "All honor to Wolfowitz for telling the truth about his own administration's 'reckless' defense budget." Asking Cheney to intervene, they warned that if Bush did not soon reverse course, he would go down in history as the president who squandered America's preeminence, "the president who fiddled with tax cuts while the military burned." Kagan added that Bush's Clintonesque approach to the military probably explained his Clintonesque Iraq policy; Bush feared that he couldn't afford to fight Saddam, "or, to be more precise, he doesn't want to afford it."

Right up to 9/11, the *Weekly Standard* blasted Bush's "soft" positions on China, Iraq, the Middle East in general, and defense spending. Not coincidentally it confirmed popular suspicions that Karl Rove, a campaign consultant, was running the country. As long as Bush had to worry about the anti-interventionism of soccer moms and the political trade-offs between cutting taxes and hiking the military budget, the *Weekly Standard* had one cheer for Karl Rove.

Eight days before 9/11, the *Weekly Standard* spelled out its solution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict: a devastating war of invasion, seizure, destruction, separation, and evacuation. Kristol and Kagan implored the Bush administration to "give Israel a green light" to settle the Israel/Palestine dispute. Krauthammer explained that the green light was for a full-scale war of antiterrorist obliteration: "The Israeli strike will have to be massive and overwhelming. And it will have to be quick." The Arab nations would call for world action through the UN, he observed, and America would feel tremendous pressure. The key was for the U.S. to give Israel a week's worth of unrestrained destruction.

Upon smashing Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Palestinian Authority, Krauthammer explained, Israel would leave Palestinian chaos behind, build a wall between it and Israel, abandon Israel's most far-flung settlements, and hope that Palestinian chaos might yield something better: "Chaos will yield new leadership. That leadership, having seen the devastation and destruction wrought by Israel in response to Arafat's unyielding belligerence, might be inclined to eschew belligerence." Israel would build a wall that suited its security needs and permitted a livable situation for the Palestinians. Though Israel appeared to have two choices—the status quo or antiterrorist devastation—in fact it had only one. Sooner or later Israel would take it: "Strike, expel, separate, and evacuate."

Wanted: Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein

THE FIENDISH ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, drove Bush to fully join an administration that already existed. Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld wanted the U.S. to wage a global war against terrorism that began with Iraq and Afghanistan. On September 12th, Bush startled counterterrorism coordinator Richard Clarke and Clarke's assistant Lisa Gordon-Hagerty by pressing them

to find a connection between Saddam and the attacks; Gordon-Hagerty surmised that “Wolfowitz got to him.” The following day Wolfowitz declared at a press conference that instead of destroying only those who attacked the United States, the U.S. had to terminate governments that harbored or otherwise aided terrorists. That declaration earned a public rebuke from Colin Powell, who countered that America’s goal was to “end terrorism,” not launch wars upon sovereign states, and that Wolfowitz spoke for himself, not the administration.

But the developing Bush Doctrine led to Wolfowitz’s position, not Powell’s. Bush, Rice, Powell, and Wolfowitz all worried that the U.S. might get bogged down for months in Afghanistan; to Wolfowitz, this was another reason to attack Iraq immediately. Iraq was a brittle desert dictatorship that might break in a few weeks, he argued; overthrowing Saddam Hussein would give the U.S. an inspiring victory while American troops slogged through the mountains of Afghanistan. Rumsfeld supported Wolfowitz; Powell countered that attacking Iraq without any evidence of Iraqi involvement in September 11 would alienate America’s allies. Sharing an eye-roll with Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Hugh Shelton, Powell exclaimed, “What the hell, what are these guys thinking about? Can’t you get these guys back in the box?” The Pentagon, showing a tin ear for connotations, wanted to call the war “Operation Infinite Justice,” which suggested permanent war and the terrorists’ conceit of a holy war between religions.

Bush sided with Powell for the moment, but he told Richard Perle at Camp David that after the U.S. disposed of Afghanistan it would be Iraq’s turn. Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld had already won the argument about the scope and meaning of the war against terrorism; Perle later reflected that Wolfowitz planted the seed. Wolfowitz apologized for raising a public fuss about “ending states,” but on September 16th, Cheney declared, “If you provide sanctuary to terrorists, you face the full wrath of the United States of America.” Four days later, speaking to Congress, Bush declared war against all terrorist groups and “every government that supports them.” The war against terrorism began with al Qaeda, he asserted, but “it does not end there.” It targeted “every terrorist group of global reach.” Though he made no specific vow to overthrow Saddam, Bush embraced Wolfowitz’s global conception of the war against terrorism, including his contention that Saddam had to be overthrown, sooner or later, whether or not he had a connection to 9/11.

Kristol and the neo-cons seized the moment, plugging hard for a world war against terrorism, lifting Saddam above al Qaeda as an immediate threat to America, and defending Wolfowitz against a barrage of Powell-favoring commentary in the prestige media. The *Weekly Standard* made no pretense of concentrating on the terrorists who actually attacked the U.S., which smacked of mere police action. Even liberals were eager to destroy al Qaeda; from the beginning Kristol and Kagan hunted bigger game, urging that al Qaeda was just the beginning of the war against terrorism and not its most important part. Addressing the NATO ministers meeting in Brussels on September 26th, Wolfowitz declared that “while we’ll try to find every snake in the swamp, the essence of the strategy is draining the swamp.” There was an “alarming coincidence” between the states that sheltered terrorists and those that sought weapons of mass destruction, he warned. Wolfowitz eschewed specifics, but the *Weekly Standard* adorned its October 1 issue with a poster reading: “Wanted: Osama bin Laden [and] Saddam Hussein.” Even that suggested more symmetry than they had in mind, however. Citing the president’s vow to destroy “every terrorist group of global reach,” Kristol and Kagan declared: “We trust these words will reverberate far beyond Kabul, in Tehran, Damascus, Khartoum, and above all, in Baghdad.”

Iraq was the prize. Afghanistan was a wasteland and geo-political nothing, they argued, but Iraq was the key to the Middle East: “Saddam Hussein, because of his strategic position in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, surely represents a more potent challenge to the United States and its interests and principles than the weak, isolated, and we trust, soon-to-be crushed Taliban.” Al Qaeda had no weapons of mass destruction and was about to lose its sanctuary in Afghanistan, but Saddam Hussein had chemical and biological weapons, a nuclear weapons program, and a powerful state apparatus at his disposal. To Kristol and Kagan, it was inconceivable that the U.S. would destroy al Qaeda’s Taliban base without overthrowing Saddam. They lauded Bush’s September 20th address to Congress for establishing “that taking decisive action against Saddam does not require absolute proof linking Iraq to last week’s attack.” That was absolutely crucial, they contended; 9/11 opened the door to a worldwide American war against terrorism, not merely a police-action response to 9/11.

Kristol and Kagan admonished their unipolarist friends in the Bush administration to remember who they were. In 1998 they had urged Clinton to remove Saddam Hussein from power; now it was their job to do it: “The

signatories of that 1998 letter are today a Who's Who of senior ranking officials in this administration: Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Under Secretary of State John Bolton, Under Secretary of State Paula Dobriansky, Assistant Secretary of Defense Peter Rodman, and National Security Council senior officials Elliot Abrahms and Zalmay Khalilzad. If those Bush administration officials believed it was essential to bring about a change of regime in Iraq three years ago, they must believe it is even more essential today. Last week we lost more than 6,000 Americans to terrorism. How many more could we lose in a world where Saddam Hussein continues to thrive and continues his quest for weapons of mass destruction?"

Recycling Kristol's talking points, the Project for the New American Century sent a new letter to the president on September 20th. Like the *Weekly Standard*, PNAC took a two-sentence pass at al Qaeda, emphasized Iraq, and called for anti-terrorist action against Hezbollah and the Palestinian Authority. In addition to providing "full military and financial support to the Iraqi opposition," it urged, American forces had to be ready "to back up our commitment to the Iraqi opposition by all necessary means," a euphemism for invasion. The PNAC also reminded Bush that global war is expensive and that America needed to show "no hesitation" to spend whatever it took to prevail. New PNAC signatories included Krauthammer, former UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, *New Republic* publisher Martin Peretz and *New Republic* writer Leon Wieseltier.

Just days before 9/11, *Time* magazine had asked where Powell had gone; he seemed to disappear during the administration's first eight months. Kristol and Kagan never felt that Powell was invisible; they detected his influence over the cautious, underfunded, and overly diplomatic foreign policy they disliked. But after 9/11 they ardently wished he had disappeared. Powell spoke constantly on television, tried to steer Bush away from crusading rhetoric, assembled a pro-American coalition for the war on terrorism, and sought help from Iran and Syria. Kristol and Kagan were appalled. Fighting terrorism meant destroying Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Hezbollah, they argued, not cutting deals with them.

Worse yet, Powell's coalition-building led straight to UN nonsense about the existence of a "peace process" between Israel and the Palestinians. In October,

Bush declared that he favored a Palestinian state. Kristol and Kagan noted that Bush had previously said nothing about a Palestinian state; his new-found conviction on the subject was obviously a ploy “to appease the so-called ‘Arab street.’” Besides being pathetic, they protested, this piece of pandering told the Arab street that terrorism works. To the Palestinians and Arabs who cheered the terrorist assault on America, “Bush’s statement told them they were right to celebrate. Kill enough Americans, and the Americans give ground. Bush’s statement last week was thus not a blow against terrorism. It was a reward for terrorism.”

Disastrously, Powell was willing to be led by allies; even worse, he was eager to make alliances with terrorists to destroy other terrorists. Kristol and Kagan warned that if the U.S. made Phase One deals with Hezbollah and the Iranian government it would never get to the Phase Two work of destroying them. A month after 9/11, the *Weekly Standard* featured a cover article by Max Boot titled “The Case for American Empire.” Boot argued that imperialist realism was America’s most realistic option; 9/11 was a wake-up call for the United States to unambiguously embrace its imperial responsibilities. America felt conflicted in its imperial role, he explained, which emboldened its enemies. Now America had to deflate its enemies by aggressively using its overwhelming power.

Neo-cons Krauthammer, Angelo Codevilla, David Frum, Frank Gaffney, Michael Ledeen, Laurent Murawiec, Richard Perle, Norman Podhoretz, and others called for offensive wars of destruction against several regimes. Iraq, Syria, North Korea and the Palestinian Authority were named most often, in addition to Hezbollah; some lists included Cuba, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Sudan. Kristol and Kagan emphasized Iraq, Iran, and Hezbollah. “This war will not end in Afghanistan,” they vowed in October 2001. “It could well require the use of American military power in multiple places simultaneously. It is going to resemble the clash of civilizations that everyone has hoped to avoid. And it is going to put enormous and perhaps unbearable strain on parts of an international coalition that today basks in contented consensus.”

In January 2002, while American forces mopped up in Afghanistan, Kristol and Kagan urged Bush to get on with the real business. It was true that the U.S. needed to capture bin Laden, destroy al Qaeda, and build a functional government in Afghanistan, they acknowledged, but overthrowing Iraq was

more important and urgent. The Iraqi threat got bigger every day “and it can’t wait until we finish tying up all the ‘loose ends.’ ” Iraq was the supreme test of America’s global hegemony. “Whether or not we remove Saddam Hussein from power will shape the contours of the emerging world order, perhaps for decades to come,” they explained. To merely contain Saddam Hussein would ensure that thugs of his kind would be tolerated. Thus the question of Iraq was “*the* supreme test of whether we as a nation have learned the lesson of September 11.”

They brushed aside objections that invading Iraq would divert attention from destroying al Qaeda, or that the cure of war and occupation would be worse than the disease. A civil war would be unfortunate, but not as bad as “the disease of Saddam with weapons of mass destruction.” And the diversion argument was a red herring. America fought Japan and Germany at the same time, and it was far more powerful in 2002. As for unilateralism versus multilateralism, they hoped that other nations would support the U.S. and share its burdens, but that was up to them. There was too much at stake to be slowed or deterred by anybody’s objections.

The neo-cons often said that Bush became one of them on 9/11, but they only trusted it was true after he declared in his 2002 State of the Union Address that Iraq, Iran, and North Korea were an “axis of evil.” The *Weekly Standard*, while wishing that Bush included China, Syria, Hezbollah, and the Palestinian Authority in the axis of evil, enthused that he had become “a full-blown war president” who surprisingly fulfilled the dreams of his neo-con appointees. To Kristol and Kagan, the war on terrorism had nothing to do with adjudicating Arab or Muslim grievances. Bush did very well when he kept it simple and invoked a single anti-terrorist standard, they judged; when he performed poorly, as on the Palestinian problem, Powell was usually involved.

By January 2003, the Bush administration spoke with one voice on Iraq, and the following month, Powell made its showcase brief for war at the United Nations. Kristol’s pro-war primer, however, *The War Over Iraq*, co-authored with *New Republic* Senior Editor Lawrence F. Kaplan, contained some anti-Powell holdovers. For the entire second half of 2002, Powell had cautioned that a U.S. invasion of Iraq might provoke its Sunni establishment to plunge the country into chaos. Kristol and Kaplan countered that Powell had made the same warning about Afghanistan, where the ethnic Pashtuns played the Iraqi Sunni role. They assured that Iraq’s Sunni, Shi’ite, and Kurdish

populations all wanted a unified nation and that the best way to do it was to build a federated system consisting of a central government in Baghdad and limited powers of self-government for each ethnic community.

More important than the precise model of the next Iraqi government was America's commitment to Iraq. Kagan worried that the Bush team seemed reluctant to plan for a long occupation or even think about what came after the war; Kristol and Kaplan, filling the vacuum, explained that Americans had to prepare for a lengthy occupation of Iraq, an occupation force of 75,000 troops, and a cost of about \$16 billion per year. Against the objection that democracy cannot be imposed by military force, they pointed to Japan, Germany, Austria, Italy, Grenada, the Dominican Republic, and Panama. Against the objection that Iraq made a poor candidate for American-style democracy, they contended that its high literacy rates and urbanized middle class made the country "ripe for democracy." If Iraq became a pro-American democracy, they argued, America would be able to stop coddling Saudi Arabia and other miserable Arab regimes. Iraq was the key to the political transformation of the Middle East. Realism was about coping with problems, but aggressive American internationalism was about solving problems.

It was true that Bush-style neo-imperialism might engender a countervailing threat, they allowed, but America had to cope with this possibility no matter what it did. Even a polite America would still be resented because of its power, but if America became too polite, it would lose its dominant position and the world would be much worse off.

Just after American forces marched into Baghdad, Kristol announced that Iran had to be next, along with North Korea. The battle for Iraq was "the end of the beginning" of a larger war for the world, he explained, and the "next great battle" was for Iran: "We are already in a death struggle with Iran over the future of Iraq. Theocrats ruling Iran understand that the stakes are now double or nothing." If Iran's Shi'ite rulers did not subvert America's victory in Iraq, their own regime would die; conversely, if the U.S. did not get a change of regime in Iran, its victory in Iraq would be lost. The U.S. could not afford to choose between Iran and North Korea, or delay on both while mopping up in Iraq. The fate of Iraq was inextricably bound up with that of Iran, North Korea couldn't wait, and Syria was a major problem too. America needed to turn Iraq into a "decent, democratic" society, but more importantly, Americans had to understand that there were other battles to fight, some of which affected Iraq. Kristol observed: "President Bush understands that we are

engaged in a larger war. His opponents, on the whole, do not, and this accounts in large measure for the yawning gulf between the supporters and critics of the Bush Doctrine.”

But the aftermath of the war against Iraq proved more absorbing than Kristol and the Bush administration had counted on, and the administration was deeply conflicted about how to manage the occupation. Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz wanted to establish a pro-American provisional government, but the State Department worried that such a nakedly imperialist strategy would ignite an anti-American rebellion, if not a civil war. After the rebellion occurred anyway, the Pentagon eventually opted for accelerated Iraqification, and the State Department favored a strong role for the UN. Kristol and Kaplan sharply told the administration to face up to its imperial responsibilities. It was too late to evade the “taint of imperialism,” Kaplan chided, and Bush officials were embarrassing themselves by squirming to avoid it. Kristol urged the administration to send more troops to Iraq and apply overwhelming force—at the same time that it moved against North Korea and Iran.

Having begun the occupation with the fantasy of a rapid pro-American regime change, the Bush administration sowed expectations of a quickie democracy, reverted to a longer occupation leading to a constitution, banked on an international bail-out, gave up on the constitutional model, resorted to a quasi-democratic caucus process, and finally begged the UN to broker a revision of the original Iraqification strategy. From November 2003 to February 2004, the plan was to yield sovereignty to a quasi-democratic patchwork of elites, but that was universally rejected in Iraq, Shi’ite leader Ayatollah Sistani refused to deal directly with the U.S. and demanded that any constitutional process had to be democratic, and America’s hand-picked Iraqi Governing Council had no support either. The *Weekly Standard* protested that Bush officials learned nothing from the occupation and substituted an exit strategy for a victory strategy. “The Pentagon wants to get out,” Kristol and Kagan observed in November 2003. “The stunning victory in the war to remove Saddam has been followed by an almost equally stunning lack of seriousness about winning the peace, despite the vital importance of creating a stable, secure, and democratic Iraq.” The U.S. reverted to fast nation building, but that was even more pathetic and dangerous than reverting to the United Nations. American Greatness required something else: “Not blowing out the bad regime and then leaving others to pick up the pieces, but staying long enough to ensure that a

good regime can take its place.” It was absurd for the Pentagon to deny that America needed a major escalation of troops in Iraq; it was doubly absurd to reduce American troops in the face of escalating violence.

But how was an overstretched American military supposed to pacify Iraq at the same time that it brought North Korea, Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria to their knees? Kristol replied that that was exactly what his group had been screaming about for years. America lacked the force structure that it needed to be itself. The U.S. had to get a bigger military and a larger idea of its global mission: “We need to err on the side of being strong. And if people want to say we’re an imperial power, fine.”

He prized his influence on the Bush administration, while playing it down when asked about it. Before the 2000 election Kristol predicted that Gore would win, prompting Bush campaign spokesman Ari Fleischer to inform him that his words had been “duly noted.” Two years later Kristol was still not invited to White House schmoozes with conservative journalists. “The Bush people aren’t big on constructive criticism,” he explained. But the administration was loaded with his friends, he counted Cheney and Rumsfeld as ideological allies, he met regularly with Rice to talk policy, and Bush made a fence-mending speech in honor of Kristol’s father. “Look, these guys made up their own minds,” Kristol said. “I would hope that we have induced some of them to think about these things in a new way.” During the Iraq war, a White House official remarked of Kristol: “People appreciate what he’s doing. But there’s still hesitation and trepidation about where Bill would stand if our interests weren’t mutual.”

When Kristol founded the *Weekly Standard* and the PNAC, his causes were on the fringe of the Republican party. The neo-cons made them respectable, and then politically powerful, in remarkably little time. Just as Irving Kristol’s generation of neo-cons believed they could do great things if they advocated the right ideas, and the New York intellectuals of the 1930s believed it before them, Bill Kristol exuded the neo-con belief in the power of ideas, backed by the Right’s mighty Wurlitzer of foundations, think tanks, magazines, and media networks.

Kristol took pride that his ideas about global supremacy, regime change, preemptive war, democratic globalism, and weapons of mass destruction became the causes of a popular Republican administration. “We at the *Weekly*

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Standard and the Project for the New American Century—and many other people, Wolfowitz way back in 1992—had articulated chunks and parts of what later became the Bush Doctrine,” he observed. “Certainly there was a lot out there that could be stitched together into the Bush Doctrine. But certainly, even people like me were kind of amazed by the speed and decisiveness with which the Bush administration, post-9/11, moved to pull these different arguments together.”

He loved Bush’s line from his September 20, 2001, address to Congress, that “in our anger and in our grief, we have found our mission and our moment.” That was exactly right, Kristol believed; Bush spoke for America and himself in claiming the war on terrorism as the cause of the present age. Bush was not as militant on China, North Korea, and the Middle East as his neo-con allies, but to a remarkable extent he championed the neo-con vision of global Americanism. And every Monday Cheney sent a courier to pick up thirty copies of the *Weekly Standard*.

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