

After Bush: The Case for Continuity in American Foreign Policy

Timothy J. Lynch and Robert S. Singh

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Reviewed by Jean Schindler

Discussion of Bush-era foreign policy is still controversial and sometimes emotional. Like parents looking askance at an unloved child, neither realists nor liberal internationalists want to recognize their contribution to “neoconservative” thinking. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq became deeply associated with an unpopular President, but the issues that drew the US into them, as well as the questions surrounding the legitimacy of democracy promotion, have not gone away with his exit.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, an energetic defense of the Bush Administration's foreign policy has come from academics outside of the US. With *After Bush: The Case for Continuity in American Foreign Policy* (written before the 2008 election), British political scientists Timothy Lynch and Robert Singh argue that Bush's foreign policy was itself compatible with longstanding American foreign policy, and that future administrations should continue it. The main reason for this continuity is that the American promotion of “fundamental freedoms” is an extension of American national identity and the “ideological premise of the United States itself.” In action, this can be seen in the War of Independence, the Civil War, WWII or the Cold War. On the other hand, “amoral” policies such as détente have had a “short shelf life” and little success.

Accordingly, they argue, while the Bush foreign policy is adaptable, it should remain largely unchanged because the tradition of confronting challenges to American values is necessary now that the US is engaged in a “Second Cold War,” a generational struggle with jihadist Islam in many ways similar to the West's struggle with the communist bloc.

The authors look at major influences on American foreign policy attitudes, including geography, commerce, and “moralism-legalism.” They also delve effectively into the various ideas that have combined to form US foreign policy, including isolationism, liberal internationalism, and realism. They show convincingly that it is not unusual for the US to act unilaterally when policymakers are confronted with questions of vital national security. Many of their arguments are oft-made neoconservative points explained in a compelling way. For example, they stress that regime change is a regular occurrence in US foreign policy, exemplified by state overhauls in the Southern Confederacy, Japan, and Germany.

The authors also resurrect memories of the debates that raged in the 1990s over American foreign policy. The 1999 bombing of Serbia was just as “unmoored” from international law as the 2003 Iraq invasion, and yet is remembered as a successful US action. Lynch and Singh argue that American foreign policy has long been made up of “à la carte multilateralism and flexible friendship” rather than an unswerving commitment to international organizations and law, with Bush being unremarkable in this regard. Lynch and Singh do good work in articulating the ideas that made neoconservative policy prescriptions initially so attractive to many. Critics too often caricature neoconservative policy as the attitude of “invade now, ask questions later,” when in fact it has academic and conceptual underpinnings that need to be addressed seriously.

At the same time, however, this leads to one of the book's two main weaknesses. While their bibliography is impressive, there are a great many points and issues that Lynch and Singh explore only minimally. This book could easily have been a thousand pages long, but even given space constraints they could have provided more depth on some issues.

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Related to this is the book's other weakness. Not only does the text leave some issues underexplored, but the authors make broad generalizations and points with little context, which undermines the strength of their arguments. While this is often a problem with any “big idea” book on foreign affairs, *After Bush* has more of this than should be expected in such a broad work. While it is a strong entry in the debate amongst public intellectuals, the book falls short of its potential as an academic work.

For example, in building their argument that the US should, as a rule, act in concert with an English-speaking alliance, they contrast Spanish and Australian reactions to terrorist attacks to illustrate a values divide. But they do not provide sufficient context. The 2004 Madrid bombing occurred days before national elections, and the government compounded the bombing's political effect by falsely blaming Basque terrorists. While opinion polls do find stronger anti-American sentiment in Spain than in Australia, the contrast the authors should draw may not be so much based on culture as on political skill and luck.

Broad generalizations also make their analysis appear simplistic at times. Their table on page 21 showing an ebb and flow of isolationism in US foreign policy lists 1918-1940 as a period of national introversion. However, the consensus among historians of that period is that the US government was fairly active in global affairs throughout the first decade after WWI and did not really withdraw until the very end of the 1920s. Other periods the authors list as introverted are likewise the subject of contention among political historians. This may simply be the result of neither author being a historian; they approvingly quote Frederick Jackson Turner, whose 1893 work on US expansion has been superseded. While these weaknesses do not discredit their “Case for Continuity,” it does distract from it.

It is still too early in the Obama administration to offer more than a tentative assessment of its policies in light of this book's arguments. The administration seems to have dropped human rights as a pressure point in US relations with China, indicating a shift towards “realism” and away from the promotion of freedom. But no matter how the current administration's policies develop, *After Bush: The Case for Continuity in American Foreign Policy* is worth reading. Lynch and Singh make a vigorous case for promoting stable regimes that are not only friendly to the US, but friendly to US political values. The national debate on the nature of US involvement in the world is far from over, and while the neoconservative view is out of style now, it may not be out forever.