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A Critique of the Bush Administration's National Security Strategy

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In March 2006 the Bush administration released its National Security Strategy (NSS), as required by Congress under the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. This latest iteration of the national security strategy again disappoints—it fails to offer a realistic plan with achievable goals to safeguard American interests, contradicts the actual policies and actions of the administration, and reveals an absence of introspection and lessons learned from the mistakes of the first term.

Conceptual Errors

A good place to start a constructive critique is to look at the basic logic and conceptual soundness of the arguments made in the NSS. Unfortunately, the new NSS makes a number of conceptual errors that undermine its relevance for solving or managing many of the complex global problems now confronting the United States. It continues to confuse preemption with preventive war, emphasizes the unachievable goal of “ending tyranny” completely throughout the world, and fails to make a realistic assessment of the threats to our security.

Preemption

The 2002 and 2006 editions of the NSS proclaim that the United States will act preemptively in exercising our inherent right of self-defense. Yet it refuses to acknowledge the dangers inherent in preemptive war, such as the possibility of creating a failed state and the setting of precedents for other powers who might wish to undertake offensive military actions against their neighbors for less than altruistic reasons.

Simply put, there is no cost-benefit analysis of the method of military preemption. Moreover, the very concept of preempting imminent threats is stretched to also include instances where an immediate threat is *not* clear, but *might* exist or emerge at some indefinite time in the future. For instance, the invasion of Iraq was labeled as a preemptive war against the

imminent production of Iraqi WMD, but it was in reality a preventive war that sought to remove a regime that might, at some time in the future, pursue a long-term WMD program. By confusing these two radically different concepts, the NSS shows a continued failure to evaluate “lessons learned” from attempts to militarily preempt uncertain threats and remove regimes without clear plans for putting a new government in place.

By confusing preemption with preventive war, the United States has created a new precedent that could lead to the collapse of a widely held international norm that forbids offensive attacks by one state against another purely for self-gain. While many Americans may not realize that this law-based norm exists, it has been widely held and observed by rich and poor nations alike since World War II. The explicit, legal outlawing of international aggression in the UN Charter has been effectively internalized by leaders of most countries across the globe. This norm has been largely invisible but hugely effective, as seen in the international condemnation of Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the support by Iraq’s Arab neighbors for US defensive efforts in support of Kuwaiti sovereignty in Operation Desert Storm. Saddam’s actions against Kuwait were so despised precisely because such cases of blatant aggression had become practically extinct by the end of the Cold War. But now, if it is legitimate or lawful for the United States to attack Iraq because in its view the country posed a potential or latent long-term danger, what is to prevent India from claiming it would be legitimate to use military force to remove the regime of General Musharraf in Pakistan? Or Russia, to attack Georgia? Or China, Taiwan?

Furthermore, by making preventive war the centerpiece of US strategy even against other states, this NSS, like its predecessor, ignores the role that containment and deterrence can play. While 9/11 was a traumatic event, it did not change international relations completely. Iraq was contained at a cost of \$2 billion a year and

growing weaker by the day as we invaded. Even if Iran should develop a few nuclear weapons, in the next decade, why would they not be deterred by the 5,700 operational nuclear weapons in the US inventory?

In the new version of the NSS, Iran replaces Iraq as the country likely to present the single greatest future challenge to the United States. President Bush has stated that the United States will not allow Iran to develop nuclear weapons, and the NSS declares that tyrants know they pursue WMD at their own peril. It is not clear whether these recent diplomatic preparations are meant as a strategy of “coercive diplomacy” in which the United States lays out a mix of carrots and sticks, incentives and disincentives, to change Iranian behavior or whether the administration is laying the groundwork for waging a preventive war against that nation. We now know the United States has been developing military options for a potential attack against Iran, and there is widespread concern both within the United States and in the international community that the United States is not just trying to deter Iran or change Iranian cost-benefit calculations, but rather it is actually preparing for yet another war to prevent a threat that does not yet demonstrably exist.

If the United States wishes to wage a preventive war against Iran, it should present the facts to the international community and obtain its approval in much the way the first President Bush did in 1990 when he sought and received approval from the UN Security Council to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. Not only did the United Nations legitimize the American-led operation, but the international community supplied more than 200,000 troops and paid most of the financial costs of the war.

Democracy Promotion and the Elimination of Tyranny

One of the most striking elements of the latest NSS is the emphasis placed on democracy promotion and the final goal of ending all forms of tyranny. The 2006 NSS states that it is the goal of our statecraft to “create

a world of democratic, well-governed states” and that it is the policy of the United States to “seek and support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in the world.” Thus the administration advances democracy promotion as the highest national security priority of the United States, and all other foreign policy interests are now subordinate to its pursuit.

While the core of democracy promotion, in fact, has been central to US foreign policy since President Wilson occupied the White House, the administration’s advancement of democracy promotion as the cure-all for instability and poverty is overstated. As Henry Hyde (R-IL), chairman of the House International Relations Committee noted, the Bush administration treats democracy as a “magic formula.” The administration’s vision of democracy must be balanced against the primary goal of protecting the American people and other priorities. No previous president has made democracy promotion the preeminent goal of foreign policy. President Wilson wanted to make the world safe for democracy. He never envisioned forcing it on a reluctant population as we have tried, so far unsuccessfully, to do in Iraq.

President Reagan told Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall. He did not use or threaten to use American military power to tear it down. Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson did not employ American military power to prevent the former Soviet Union from crushing the democratic revolutions in Hungary and Poland in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. All of those presidents knew that using military power to promote democracy in those circumstances would have precipitated World War III.

More to the point, no previous US administration, Democratic or Republican, has tied the goal of democracy promotion to *the total elimination of all forms of tyranny*. The NSS effectively proposes as a strategic US goal the universal achievement of freedom, something that has never been achieved in all of human history.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this grand, utopian rhetoric slips when looking at the actual record of US policy.

The US government has continued to provide billions of dollars in aid and assistance to such nondemocratic regimes as Egypt, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan and continues to work with such authoritarian regimes as Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia to prosecute the war on terror. And the administration has “rendered” prisoners to authoritarian regimes such as Syria and Egypt that practice torture in order to gain intelligence about the activities of groups like Al Qaeda.

Furthermore, this vision of democracy promotion has been excessively focused on elections, while underemphasizing the more difficult tasks of building an overall culture of open civil society and institutions based on the rule of law. And the United States has frequently thrust itself into the spotlight with stark and very public democracy promotion rhetoric without recognizing the importance of acting behind the scenes, so that nascent democratic movements are not immediately delegitimized by a “made in America” label.

Not Defining the Threat

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the new strategy is the failure once again to define the enemy, place it in the proper context, and offer a coherent, realistic strategy to defeat it.

The NSS opens by informing us once again that America is at war. But nowhere does it tell us exactly with whom we are at war and why, and what we must do about it in specific terms.

According to the new NSS, the American people are threatened by the rise of terrorism fueled by an aggressive ideology. But terrorism cannot be an enemy. It is a tactic, not a state or even a political movement. The document then proceeds to state that the United States must keep on the offensive against terrorist networks, but without telling us which terrorist networks threaten us.

In the Pentagon’s Quadrennial Defense Review, released approximately a month prior to the NSS, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld spoke about the “long war.” In order for the United States to eliminate all terrorist networks and terrorism itself, it will indeed be a long war. The vagueness of this terminology and

timeline confuse the American people and the world. The NSS exemplifies this confusion by conflating the attacks on the streets of Falluja, Iraq, with the bombings in London. These are two different threats, unrelated to international terrorist networks, with separate causes, requiring different responses. The attacks in Falluja were carried out by native Iraqis against those civilians cooperating with the American occupiers. Their gruesome attacks against American contractors seemed to be an expression of opposition to the occupation. On the other hand, the perpetrators of the London bombings, according to an official British government report, were British citizens largely motivated by their opposition to the invasion of Iraq and the British government's foreign policy, with no apparent connection to Al Qaeda.

The NSS also exaggerates the threat from these violent extremists, telling us that we are in the early years of a long struggle against a new, totalitarian ideology, similar to what our country faced in the early days of the Cold War. But comparing Osama bin Laden and his scattered followers to the Red Army is quite a stretch.

It is true that before the US attacks in Afghanistan following 9/11, Al Qaeda constituted a large, centralized network with strong ties to the Taliban government, which touted a totalitarian ideology that oppressed, tortured, and killed anyone who dared to challenge their puritanical fusion of Islam and politics. But the US invasion and larger global law-enforcement efforts have progressively dried up funding and destroyed the original camps in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda has now changed into a loose ideology that seeks to capitalize on local conflicts in failed states around the world. Given this morphing of the terrorist threat, the true danger is not a strong totalitarian government with a huge central army (the Soviet threat that the NSS compares to Al Qaeda), but rather the exploitation by scattered extremists of failed state environments like Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, and others to gain recruits. Whereas the United States was threatened in the Cold War by a global superpower, it is threatened now by largely disconnected extremists who seek to capitalize on local grievances. In other words, comparison of the current terrorist threat to

the emerging Soviet behemoth in the 1950s is spurious and misleading.

Furthermore, the NSS misreads the motivations of the violent extremists. The president tells us that their resort to terrorism is not simply a result of hostility to our occupation of Iraq, Israeli-Palestinian issues, or our response to Al Qaeda. Rather, the terrorists' ideology is based on "enslavement," and that terrorists see individuals as objects to be exploited and then to be ruled and oppressed. The implication from the NSS is clear: the terrorists hate our freedoms.

The truth is that these violent extremists hate our policies, feel threatened by our influence and power, and are galvanized by extremist religious beliefs. Al Qaeda owes its origins to the United States stationing military forces in Saudi Arabia beginning in 1990. In their view, our direct and indirect support keeps what they view as heretical, oppressive, and corrupt regimes in places like Saudi Arabia and Egypt in power. Al Qaeda wishes to make us pay such a heavy price for that support that we will not continue it.

Osama bin Laden and his followers do not care if we separate church and state, protect minority rights, give women an equal vote, or conduct free and open elections. They want the United States and its influence out of the Arab world. A misreading of what terrorists want and stand for undermines US efforts to battle them.

Our invasion of Iraq and subsequent occupation has been the best recruiting tool that Al Qaeda has ever had. Moreover, these violent extremists want to continue to tie us down in Iraq so that our military will be so weakened that, like the Soviets in Afghanistan, we will withdraw from their region. Attacking Iran, another Muslim country, would be a boon for those radical jihadists. It would further inflame anti-US sentiment in the Muslim world and endanger the predictable supply of oil to a growing global economy at reasonable prices.

Stated Policy Goals Versus Suggested Budgets

Despite the conceptual problems outlined above, the administration's NSS says many of the right things

about national security priorities—it strives to champion aspirations for human dignity and to advance freedom. Unfortunately, the actual resources provided in the 2007 budget request are not commensurate to the challenges identified in the NSS. Budgets always reveal priorities, and the administration’s funding request for 2007 does not equate with the goals emphasized in the strategy.

For example, the Bush administration’s 2006 version rightly places more emphasis on conflict prevention and resolution, as well as on post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction than its 2002 NSS. Yet, in the administration’s fiscal year 2007 national security budget—comprised of an offensive component (Department of Defense), a defensive component (Department of Homeland Security), and prevention (State Department)—the amount allocated for offense is approximately 20 times higher than prevention. The administration notes with some satisfaction in its NSS that it is spending about \$3.5 billion on funding the Millennium Challenge Corporation, as well as on reducing the incidence of malaria and providing clean drinking water. Yet it leaves out the fact that it is actually spending about twice that amount every month in Iraq. Furthermore, in the last two years, the administration has not spent the political capital necessary to prevent the Congress from cutting its foreign aid budget request by 10 percent. Finally, despite the document’s extremely strong language about democracy promotion, the administration actually reduced its funding for democracy promotion in its 2007 budget submission.

The Recent Historical Record: Where We Are Now

Given that the initial NSS was first released in fall 2002, the release of its successor four years later invites a quick analysis of critical security trends and events during that period. This comparison is required whether the issue in question is proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, transnational terrorism, environmental events, or progress in economic development goals throughout the developing world. In particular, there must be comparisons of successes claimed in the current 2006 version with the recent historical record.

While the NSS acknowledges correctly that America is not yet safe, it claims that this country is safer than it was 42 months ago. Yet terrorist attacks have increased since September 11, and the US military is overstretched, undermining its ability to respond to natural disasters and terrorist attacks on the homeland or to other global contingencies.

In his January 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush told the nation that it was threatened by three rogue nations who comprised what he described as the “axis of evil”: Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. Four years ago, Iraq was contained and growing weaker by the day and neither Iran nor North Korea had nuclear weapons.

The US intervention in Iraq has left chaos in its wake. Approximately 2,400 American military personnel have lost their lives, and more than 17,500 US troops have been wounded. Between 34,000 and 100,000 Iraqis have been killed since the invasion, and the United States has spent more than \$300 billion in prosecuting the war. Yet Iraq is a mess—the Iraqis are still forming a cohesive government five months after their election; Iraq has become a training ground for global terrorists to test and hone their skills against the world’s superpower; independent armed militias are still executing civilians belonging to different ethnic or religious groups; and by most measures, the quality of life in Iraq is worse now than it was before the invasion, with utilities performing below pre-war levels and Iraqi citizens fearing for their lives. Furthermore, because the claimed caches of WMD were never found (and even the elemental infrastructure for producing WMD was never found) and because of the litany of tactical mistakes in stabilizing the country which Secretary Rice has now acknowledged, US prestige around the globe is at an all-time low.

Iran and North Korea are much closer to having nuclear weapons than they were 42 months ago because of the administration’s overwhelming focus on Iraq and its unwillingness to engage in direct negotiations with North Korea or Iran. In fact, it is estimated that North Korea has between six and ten weapons already, and Iran is aggressively pursuing uranium enrichment. Moreover, because the Bush administration exaggerated

the threat of nuclear weapons in Iraq, Security Council members China and Russia can justify their reticence in confronting North Korea and Iran by accusing the United States of exaggerating the threat from those two countries. Finally, our overextension in Iraq means that both North Korea and Iran know we have neither the military capability nor the political support from the American people to take forceful action against them.

Even Afghanistan, the base of the 9/11 attacks, is not where it should be five years after the United States toppled the Taliban. Despite the NSS's claims that the "tyranny of the Taliban has been replaced by a freely elected government," Afghanistan is still not out of the woods. Because the administration reduced its force presence so quickly in Afghanistan and diverted attention from that country in early 2002 to Iraq, the Taliban has been allowed to regroup. In 2005, 91 American service personnel and 1,600 civilians were killed, making it the deadliest year since the invasion that deposed the Taliban in 2001. The insurgency in Afghanistan has strengthened in the past year and now appears to have imported tactics from Iraqi insurgents.

The 2006 NSS also places much more rhetorical emphasis than its predecessor on diplomacy and multilateralism. But, while Secretary of State Rice has indeed accrued thousands of frequent flyer miles visiting US allies and strategic competitors around the world, the United States has not reached out to its allies in more concrete and productive ways—that is, through commitments to compromise on issues that matter to others. The United States still has not joined the International Criminal Court—the first permanent, treaty-based, international criminal court established to promote the rule of law and ensure that the gravest international crimes do not go unpunished—or signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which prohibits testing nuclear weapons; the Enforcement Protocol of the Biological Weapons Convention, which would allow international inspectors of facilities with the capability to produce biological weapons; or the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty that bans the production of materials intended for use in a nuclear weapon. And the United States did not

emphasize senior-level official attendance of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in New York in spring 2005.

Thus the secretary's admirable and extensive shuttle diplomacy abroad has not been followed by actual changes in policy that would fulfill promises made to our allies. In general, a greater commitment to the international rule of law, to environmental protection, and to cooperative efforts for prevention of weapons proliferation were all promised to US friends and allies, but these commitments have yet to materialize in concrete actions.

Although the United States continues to work with our European allies on the Iranian nuclear issue, it has repeatedly reaffirmed the doctrine of preventive war against rogue states that possess or attempt to acquire chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons. In other words, it professes multilateral approaches while still threatening and planning unilateral military action. Not only does this represent a schism between words and reality, it also contradicts Article 7 of the NPT, which calls for the P-5 to offer "negative security assurances" to nonnuclear states—that is, assurances that nuclear-capable great powers will not wield these weapons against states that are not also nuclear powers.

Finally, for the first time, the NSS addresses the challenge of globalization on US national security. The NSS does mention the problem of environmental destruction but fails to acknowledge that the administration will not sign the Kyoto Treaty nor allow government scientists to publicly discuss their research demonstrating that global warming is a problem. The NSS recognizes public health challenges, like HIV/AIDS, but does not reveal how the administration has hurt efforts to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS through its overwhelming focus on "abstinence before marriage" programs, its limitations on condom distribution, and its attempts to limit US government scientists' participation in international meetings on health issues.

Conclusion

The 2006 version of the NSS is deficient on several counts. First, it is three years late. The 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act mandates that a new NSS be forwarded to Congress every year. From 1987 through 2006, the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations produced twelve strategies, nearly one per year. In his five years in office, the second President Bush has produced only two. Given the foreign policy challenges currently facing the nation, this is unconscionable.

Second, while the language in the 2006 version is less belligerent than the 2002 edition, the essence is the same. The 2006 NSS glosses over the real issues, exaggerates successes, and emphasizes the wrong priorities. Finally, after more than five years in office, the administration still has not produced an achievable national security strategy that has a realistic chance of gaining the support of the American people on a bipartisan basis. What the United States needs is a strategy that integrates all of the tools of US foreign policy—that is, economic, military, and diplomatic—in order to find effective solutions to national security challenges and that places the threats to our security in the proper context. ■

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