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Colin Dueck: Reluctant Crusaders

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Introduction

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY

EVER SINCE THE terrorist attacks of September 2001, a wide-ranging debate has opened up regarding the proper course of American national security policy. Some critics have advocated a retrenchment of America's international commitments, while others have called for a more multilateral approach; still others, including the Bush administration itself, have embraced the aggressive promotion of American primacy overseas. The immediate focus has been on counterterrorism. But the broader question at stake has been the future of American "grand strategy."

Grand strategy involves the prioritization of foreign policy goals, the identification of existing and potential resources, and the selection of a plan or road map that uses those resources to meet those goals. Whenever foreign policy officials are faced with the task of reconciling foreign policy goals with limited resources, under the prospect of potential armed conflict, they are engaging in grand strategy. Levels of defense spending, foreign aid, alliance behavior, troop deployments, and diplomatic activity are all influenced by grand strategic assumptions. Whether implicitly or explicitly, leading officials in every nation-state have a sense of their country's interests, of the threats that exist to those interests, and of the resources that can be brought to bear against those threats. Grand strategy is the inevitable process of ranking and assessing those interests, threats, and resources. And any nation's grand strategy can sometimes change dramatically.

One of the conventional criticisms of the Bush administration's grand strategy is that it is excessively and even disastrously unilateralist in approach. According to the critics, the Bush administration has turned its back on a long-standing and admirable American tradition of liberal internationalism in foreign affairs, and in doing so has provoked resentment worldwide. But these criticisms misinterpret both the foreign policy of George W. Bush, as well as America's liberal internationalist tradition. In reality, Bush's foreign policies since 9/11 have been heavily influenced by traditional liberal internationalist, or Wilsonian, assumptions—assumptions that all along have had a troubling impact on U.S. foreign policy behavior and have fed into the current situation in Iraq.

The conduct of American grand strategy has long been shaped, to a greater or lesser extent, by a set of beliefs that can only be called “liberal.” These assumptions specify that the United States should promote, wherever practical and possible, an international system characterized by democratic governments and open markets. President Bush reiterated these classical liberal assumptions in his November 6, 2003, speech to the National Endowment for Democracy, when he outlined what he called “a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East.” In that speech, Bush argued that “as long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export.” In this sense, he suggested, the United States has a vital strategic interest in the democratization of that region. But Bush also added that “the advance of freedom leads to peace,” and that democracy is “the only path to national success and dignity,” providing as it does certain “essential principles common to every successful society, in every culture.” These words could just as easily have been spoken by Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt—or Bill Clinton. They are well within the mainstream American tradition of liberal internationalism. Of course, U.S. foreign policy officials have never promoted a liberal world order simply out of altruism. They have done so out of the belief that such a system would serve American interests, by making the United States more prosperous, influential, and secure. Americans have also frequently disagreed over how to best promote liberal goals overseas. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that liberal goals and liberal assumptions, broadly conceived, have had a powerful impact on American foreign policy, especially since the presidency of Woodrow Wilson.

The problem with the liberal, or Wilsonian, approach, however, has been that it tends to encourage very ambitious goals and commitments abroad, while assuming that these goals can be met without commensurate cost or expenditure on the part of the United States. Liberal internationalists, that is, tend to define American interests in broad, expansive, and idealistic terms, without always admitting the necessary costs and risks of such an expansive vision. The result is that sweeping and ambitious goals are announced, but then pursued by disproportionately limited means, thus creating an outright invitation to failure. Indeed, this pattern of disjuncture between ends and means has been so common in the history of American twentieth-century diplomacy that it seems to be a direct consequence of the nation’s distinctly liberal approach to international relations.

Americans have often been “crusaders”—crusaders in the promotion of a more liberal international order. But Americans have also frequently been “reluctant”—reluctant to admit the full costs of promoting this liberal international vision. These two strains within the American foreign

policy tradition have not only operated cyclically; they have operated simultaneously. In this sense, the history of American grand strategy is a history of “reluctant crusaders.”

The Bush administration’s present difficulties in Iraq are therefore not an isolated event. Nor are they really the result of the president’s supposed preference for unilateralism. On the contrary, the administration’s difficulties in Iraq are actually the result of an excessive reliance on classically liberal or Wilsonian assumptions regarding foreign affairs. The administration willed the end—and a very ambitious end—in Iraq, but it did not, initially, will the necessary means. In this sense, the Bush administration is heir to a long liberal internationalist tradition that runs from Woodrow Wilson through Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman to William Jefferson Clinton. And Bush inherits not only the strengths of that tradition, but also its weaknesses and flaws.

When and why might we expect further changes in American grand strategy? When and why does grand strategy change? Are the causes of change in U.S. grand strategy the same as in other countries, or are there patterns of strategic adjustment that are distinctly American? In all of the recommendations for one policy course or another, these are questions that are rarely asked. Yet the United States has been through such periods of strategic adjustment before—notably, in the immediate aftermath of each world war. By examining and comparing these historical periods, together with the post—Cold War period, we can begin to answer the question of how and why grand strategy actually changes. Those insights can then be applied to current conditions, allowing us to predict future changes in American strategic behavior.

POWER AND CULTURE: EXPLAINING CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY

The study of grand strategy—and of international relations—has undergone dramatic changes over time. The “classical” realist authors of the 1940s, such as Walter Lippmann (from whose writings this book’s epigraph is drawn) and George Kennan, understood that cultural factors can have a profound effect on the strategic behavior of nations. Indeed, in the case of the United States, these same classical realists pointed to the impact of a liberal and idealistic political culture precisely to condemn its impact on American foreign policy. At the same time, classical realists took it for granted that any country’s grand strategy must eventually reflect international pressures. Authors like Lippmann and Kennan were as much interested in history, policy, and prescription as in scientific explanation. Contemporary realism, on the other hand—known as “structural”

realism, for its emphasis on the structure of the international system—in its search for theoretical rigor and parsimony tends to downplay, ignore, or even deny the influence upon grand strategy of nationally distinctive cultural factors. This tendency in contemporary realism has only encouraged the creation and growth of an alternative, “constructivist” school of thought, which in turn emphasizes culture at the expense of international pressures.

International relations theory today is therefore characterized by a dichotomy between realist approaches, which emphasize international pressures, and constructivist approaches that emphasize the importance of norms, ideas, and culture. Much of the work from both perspectives is written as if the two approaches were entirely incompatible. In this book, I try to bridge that gap, and advance the realist-constructivist debate, by showing exactly how international pressures and American “strategic culture” have acted together to push and pull U.S. grand strategy in opposite directions over time.

I examine in depth three major turning points in America’s role in the world: the first, after World War One, the second, after World War Two, and the third, after the end of the Cold War. I argue that in each case international conditions were a crucial influence on U.S. strategic behavior. But I also show that certain cultural legacies, unique to the United States, have had a powerful impact on patterns of change and continuity in American grand strategy.

First, I will contend that classical liberal assumptions have acted as a filter on potential policy options in the United States, allowing certain strategic alternatives while rendering others unthinkable. U.S. foreign policy officials have tended to rule out strategic concepts that do not resonate with America’s liberal political culture, both because they anticipate public rejections of such concepts, and because they do not themselves believe in such “illiberal” approaches. So, for example, after World War One, certain senators, such as Henry Cabot Lodge, favored a simple balance-of-power alliance with France in order to check any future German aggression. Similarly, a number of credible foreign policy experts such as Walter Lippmann advocated a pure “sphere-of-influence” arrangement in 1945, whereby the United States and the USSR would explicitly agree to a straightforward partition of influence in Europe and Asia. Both concepts were feasible in material, structural terms. But both alternatives were ruled out of consideration by leading officials, because they could not be framed in terms that suited the predominantly liberal discourse characteristic of American foreign policy debates.

Second, I will argue that a tradition of “limited liability” in matters of grand strategy has encouraged Americans to limit the costs of overseas commitments, to an extent greater than realists would have predicted.

And while this tradition was strongest before World War Two, it remains an important constraint on American strategic behavior.

To a large extent, as will be seen, these two cultural legacies contradict one another. Liberal assumptions encourage American officials to define American goals in unusually idealistic, expansive, and global terms. At the same time, the tradition of limited liability discourages Americans from making concrete sacrifices toward that liberal vision. The result tends to be that expansive goals are pursued by quite limited means.

These twin cultural legacies also incline American grand strategy in opposite directions from international pressures. Whereas domestic cultural forces tend to constrain U.S. strategic behavior abroad, and pull it in a more “liberal” direction, international conditions tend to stimulate American involvement overseas, while forcing unwanted compromise on liberal principles. The result is a persistent tug of war between international pressures and U.S. strategic culture: a cyclical tension that drives the story of American strategic adjustment over time.

I use historical counterfactuals, extensive archival research, and competitive theory testing to show exactly how and why cultural legacies, in tension with international conditions, have shaped and will continue to shape American grand strategy. The result is a study that seeks to recover some of the strengths of classical realist thinking in international relations by combining an appreciation for the role of both culture and power in international affairs.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In chapters 1 and 2, I look at some potential sources of U.S. strategic adjustment. I begin by defining the term “grand strategy,” and indicate the ways in which such a strategy can change. I examine two common explanations for changes in grand strategy: first, a realist explanation, emphasizing international conditions, and second, a domestic cultural explanation. Then I outline my own neoclassical realist model, showing exactly how realist and cultural factors interrelate in the formation of strategic choice. The first chapter is meant as a starting point for a theory of change and continuity in grand strategy, potentially applicable to any country. Readers who are strictly interested in the history and causes of American grand strategy, but not in general theories of strategic adjustment, may wish to move directly to the second chapter.

In chapter two, I analyze and describe American strategic culture, and provide a typology of four distinct strategic “subcultures” within the United States: nationalist, realist, progressive, and internationalist. I discuss the factors and forces that allow one subculture to win out over

the others at a given point in time. I pay special attention in this chapter to the precise way in which culture and ideas have an impact on American grand strategy, through processes of agenda setting and coalition building. Finally, I discuss my use of cases, theory testing, and historical counterfactuals.

In chapter 3, I address the empirical puzzle of why the United States returned to isolationism after World War One. I show that there were not two, but three plausible alternatives for U.S. grand strategy after that war: a League of Nations, disengagement, or a simple military alliance with France and Great Britain. I demonstrate that international conditions could not have predicted the return to disengagement, given America's immense power by 1918. From a structural realist perspective, any of the three options were viable, and in fact, a Western alliance would have been preferable. I then show how domestic patterns of agenda setting and coalition building by Woodrow Wilson, conditioned by cultural considerations, shaped and directed the process of strategic choice. A simple balance-of-power alliance with Western European countries was ruled out by Wilson and many other Americans, because it seemed to represent a violation of liberal foreign policy goals; but membership in a strong League was ruled out by the Senate, because it violated the U.S. tradition of limited liability in strategic affairs. The culturally influenced result was a return to the default option of disengagement, in spite of the fact that America was materially ready to assume a larger role in world affairs.

In chapter 4, I address the puzzle of why the United States adopted the strategy of containment after 1945. I show that four major alternatives were discussed at the time: first, the isolationist option of strategic disengagement; second, the alternative of rolling back the Soviet sphere by military means; third, an explicit sphere-of-influence arrangement with the USSR; and fourth, the containment of Soviet influence worldwide. I show that international conditions, while ruling out isolationism, cannot explain why American officials selected containment. Specifically, from a realist perspective, a sphere-of-influence strategy was feasible and even preferable to containment. Containment was selected not because it was the only strategy that matched international conditions, but because it was the only strategy that matched international conditions as well as domestic cultural concerns. I then show how American classical liberal assumptions regarding international affairs worked against a sphere-of-influence strategy, and in favor of containment. I also show how the American tradition of limited liability continued to exert pressure on U.S. officials, even after 1945, leading them to select a strategy that was extremely ambitious but relatively inexpensive—a combination that could not last, and indeed broke down after 1950.

In chapter 5, I address the puzzle of why the United States followed a broadly liberal internationalist strategy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I outline four major alternatives that were open to U.S. foreign policy officials after the end of the Cold War: neoisolationism; a pure balance-of-power strategy; liberal internationalism; and a strategy of American primacy. I show that international material conditions, while rendering isolationism unlikely, did not rule out any of the other three strategies. The pursuit of an essentially liberal internationalist strategy by the Clinton administration was as much a response to domestic cultural assumptions and expectations, especially at the elite level, as it was a response to international conditions. American liberal foreign policy assumptions continued to make a pure balance-of-power strategy problematic from a domestic political point of view, while the more ambitious strategy of international primacy was incompatible with the desire for limited liability in strategic affairs. The result during the 1990s was a paradoxical combination of liberal foreign policy goals pursued worldwide, but by strictly limited means.

In the sixth and concluding chapter, I use the same analytical approach as in previous chapters to explain patterns of U.S. strategic adjustment since the inauguration of George W. Bush. I also summarize my findings: first, pointing to a neoclassical realist framework as the best way of understanding the real relationship between domestic cultural factors and international material conditions; second, noting how American strategic adjustment has always been driven by a tug of war between international pressures and domestic cultural concerns; and third, suggesting how this tension will continue to drive future changes in U.S. grand strategy.

One of the central findings of this work is that certain cultural legacies, unique to the United States, have had and will probably continue to have a powerful effect on change and continuity in American grand strategy. Classical liberal ideas, in particular, have shaped and molded U.S. strategic assumptions and behavior in ways that no structural realist or materialist could have predicted. This is not to say that liberal ideas have been the only force behind American grand strategy, or that the United States has been selfless in its promotion of a liberal international order. Obviously, American foreign policymakers have often pursued nominally liberal goals in a manner that was largely rhetorical, self-interested, and/or hypocritical. But the basic liberal vision of an international system characterized by democratic governments and open markets has also been a genuine animating force behind the making of American foreign policy. After all, there would be little point in making rhetorical gestures toward liberal ideas if these ideas did not have real power. And even when leading decision-makers are skeptical of this broad liberal vision, they are still constrained by it for domestic political reasons. The overall effect is that

on questions of grand strategy, the United States often behaves in a surprising way—or at least, in a way that must be surprising from a realist perspective. Realists tell us that in the end, all states are basically alike, because they are forced to act alike, and to play the balance-of-power game, in order to survive. That may be true, up to a certain point. But U.S. foreign policymakers have often refused to engage in simple or straightforward balance-of-power behavior, and the cause of their refusal can be traced to the influence of America's liberal strategic culture.