

Power play: The new 'National Security Strategy'

by [Theodore R. Weber](#) in the [March 8, 2003](#) issue

The Bush administration's grand design for foreign policy, spelled out last September in a document titled "The National Security Strategy," declares that the U.S. will exercise the responsibilities of the dominant power in international politics in order to resist terrorism and rogue states and to shape a global ethos of human dignity and prosperity. The authors of the document believe that history has thrust the U.S. into this role and has established a coincidence between its national interests and the larger interests of the world. "The great struggle of the 20th century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise." It is the responsibility of the U.S. to preserve, protect and extend—that is, to universalize—this model.

What are we to make of this political-moral declaration? Is it a rational recognition of the fact that dominance imposes leadership responsibilities on the U.S. in every corner of the world? Or does it express the arrogance of power more than the responsibilities of power, with an implicit sense of providential election? The answer is not entirely clear, though the historical antecedents of this document give us reason to fear that arrogance is indeed at work.

The ancestors of the September document are the Defense Policy Guidance paper of 1992, prepared in the Department of Defense under then Secretary Richard Cheney, and "Rebuilding America's Defenses; Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century," issued in September 2000 by the Project for the New American Century. These earlier documents were explicit in their frank commitment to seizing and exploiting the opportunity for American global hegemony on a permanent basis. Toward this end, "Rebuilding America's Defenses" called for U.S. control of outer space and cyberspace, the development of smaller nuclear weapons to dig out embedded weapons of hostile states, regime change where necessary, the expansion of regular military forces, substantial increases in defense budgets, and

the relocation and extension of American military forces around the world, including the establishing of bases in Southeast Asia.

By contrast, the National Security Strategy paper speaks not of permanent superiority but of leadership, calls for a secure presence in space but not control of it (or cyberspace), implies the possibility of regime changes without stating it explicitly, and does not mention developing smaller nuclear weapons. However, it agrees on the need to upgrade and transform U.S. military capabilities and to relocate military positions so as to cope with distant crises. Both documents advocate the development and deployment of missile defenses, and both call for proactive leadership to counter the dangers of terrorism and rogue states. Which of the two visions prevails in this administration may depend on which individuals prevail in the struggle for dominance within the Bush foreign-policy team.

Although there are problems with the National Security document, it is important to acknowledge that most of its premises are defensible. The U.S. is in fact the dominant power in world politics. It is the only state able to exercise its power with global reach. Other states acknowledge this leadership, however grudgingly, and at times they demand it. Inevitably, the U.S. is criticized for its interventions, and just as inevitably criticized when it does not intervene where its dominant power seems needed.

And there is nothing controversial in the document's commitment to freedom and democracy throughout the world, to peaceful cooperation in international relations, and to "the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity; the rule of law; limits on the absolute power of the state; free speech; freedom of worship; equal justice; respect for women; religious and ethnic tolerance; and respect for private property." These commitments express the liberal internationalism of every Democratic president since Woodrow Wilson. The pertinent passages in this Republican document easily could have been written by Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton. In any event, the list itself is commendable, and it serves as a benchmark both for shaping an international future and for examining the domestic practices and policies.

Nor is there anything controversial in the claim that the Constitution requires the U.S. government to protect and defend its people and territory against all enemies foreign and domestic. Disagreements will arise over the seriousness of particular threats, whether "just cause" and "last resort" are present for the use of military force, the utility of nonviolent and persuasive methods, whether a missile defense

system (required by the strategy paper) is itself defensible practically and morally, and whether the U.S. should make interventionary decisions unilaterally or with international consent and support. Further disagreements arise over whether the Bush administration has sufficiently justified a war against Iraq, and over the uses and limits of militant rhetoric and military power in dealing with North Korea. But few people would contend that the U.S. government has no business concerning itself with terrorism, with Saddam Hussein or with North Korea.

Finally, the document is right in arguing that defense against terrorism and rogue states must be proactive and not merely reactive.

On other points, however, the National Security Strategy document is seriously deficient.

1) The document ignores the strategic significance of oil. It contains no discussion of oil reserves, their location, their transmission, and their relationship to other policy proposals and military projections. The section on economic growth and free trade contains a short paragraph devoted to enhancing energy security, pledging “to expand the sources and types of global energy supplied, especially in the Western Hemisphere, Africa, and the Caspian region.” But it does not mention the Middle East or the obvious relationship of oil politics to geopolitics. The document fails as a declaration of national security strategy at least on this essential point.

2) It offers no sustained, self-critical inquiry into whether the nation’s use of its power always is responsible, no inquiry into why American power and presence are resented so deeply around the world, no attempt to examine when international interests might be subordinated to American interests and human rights to political and economic objectives.

Perhaps it is naïve to expect the administration to explore critically the relation of American oil interests to Middle East politics, or whether its initial neglect of the Israel-Palestine conflict followed by partiality toward Israel exacerbates that problem, or whether its campaign for world democracy is congruent with alliances with autocratic regimes, or whether its stated commitment to energy conservation is its actual policy. However, asking questions of this sort is the essence of realism. To ignore them in the consideration of strategy is to compromise both international responsibility and national interest. At minimum, it shows a lack of moral seriousness.

3) Though the strategy document calls for investing “time and resources into building international relationships and institutions that can help manage local crises when they emerge,” this seems more like a policy of convenience subordinated to the unilateralist approach often taken by this administration. The concept of “coalitions of the willing” advanced in the document appears to describe a coalition of states willing to follow the leadership of the U.S. when international institutions prove reluctant and resistant. A “balance of power that favors freedom” appears to be fundamental in the proposed strategy, but the nature of this balance is unexplained.

Historically, the purpose of a balance of power is to prevent any state from becoming dominant in a system of interstate relationships. What the U.S. seems to be proposing here, by contrast, is a “balance” created and controlled by the dominant power. In the meantime, what other states are doing—especially with regard to a possible war with Iraq—is to use international institutions to limit and restrain (or “balance”) the power of the U.S. Helping international institutions to develop the strength and authority to manage local crises is a responsible use of dominant power. That work implies arranging for one’s own power to be balanced, and thereby building into the practice procedures for the diminishing of dominance.

4) The document never addresses the high costs of implementing this strategy. “Rearming America’s Defenses” boldly proposed budget increases, which it assumed would be covered by the (now disappeared) budget surplus. It also recommended major increases in military personnel, not only to staff expanded military obligations but also to diminish the use of reserves and the National Guard. If these proposals were to be adopted, they would increase greatly the tax bill for the American people. More important, they also most certainly would require the reinstitution of the draft. President Bush’s National Security Strategy document entails similar cost implications. The administration should have the courage and the wisdom to confront the American people with these costs.

5) The strategy document seeks to justify preemptive war, but then extends the argument to preventive war by collapsing the distinction between the two. Preemptive war is a matter of negating an imminent attack on one’s own forces, territory or allies. Preventive war is a matter of eliminating the possibility of future threats by attacking and destroying latent or emergent capabilities. The document claims that “legal scholars and international jurists often conditioned the legitimacy of preemption on the existence of an imminent threat—most often a visible

mobilization of armies, navies, and air forces preparing to attack.” Then it continues, “We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today’s adversaries.” The purpose is to “interdict enabling technologies and materials”—by implication, to wage war on Iraq for seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction even in the absence of an actual and imminent threat against the U.S.

Technological development being what it is, one should not dismiss the possible justification of preventive war, but neither should one equate it with preemptive war. The process of moral justification in the case of preventive war is more stringent. A nation’s potential to create terrible weapons may turn into a catastrophic actuality, but that potential may have more than one use, it may never be developed fully, or it may never find its way into an actively threatening situation. Given the immediacy of a threat, preemptive war may of necessity be a unilateral decision. However, in the absence of an immediate threat, justification for preventive war should require international consensus—unless, of course, the U.S. means to universalize this moral permission and allow it to every state.

One positive observation: The document appears to move away from the language of evil used at times by President Bush, but it does not address the issue directly. The preamble to Chapter III quotes the president as saying that “our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.” The document then avoids any further reference to “ridding the world of evil” and proceeds generally in somewhat less emotive and more pragmatic (but nevertheless grandiose) terms to discuss and project foreign-policy objectives. Also, it never refers to an “axis of evil.” These omissions suggest important differences between Bush and other members of his foreign-policy team in conceptualizing international politics.

Finally, the document presents two conflicting goals. On the one hand, it aims to maximize national power to eliminate all real and suspected threats and to impose the nation’s moral vision on the world in the name of justice and peace. On the other hand, it seeks to encourage international organizations and other states to manage threats in a cooperative manner. Some might say the first option is an expression of realism, the second of idealism. On the contrary, the first option may be too optimistic and therefore too idealistic in assuming that security can be established and perpetuated by military domination without provoking uncontrollable resentment or bankrupting the dominating state.

In fact, the second approach may be more realistic in recognizing that a participatory and cooperative order—with power widely shared—is more stable than one that is hegemonic if not imperial. If the second course is the course of realism, then the overriding responsibility of the dominant power is to enable the conditions for reducing and perhaps ending its own dominance.