

Exporting democracy: Bush's security strategy

by [Theodore R. Weber](#) in the [July 11, 2006](#) issue

America is at war. This is a wartime national security strategy required by the grave challenge we face—the rise of terrorism fueled by an aggressive ideology of hatred and murder, fully revealed to the American people on September 11, 2001. This strategy reflects our most solemn obligation: to protect the security of the American people.

—George W. Bush, introducing the National Security Strategy for 2006

Given that bold entry, one would expect a strategy focused explicitly on the terrorist threat, elucidated in a document that defines terrorism, its appeal and its methods, then lays out means of dealing with it. Instead, the National Security Strategy for 2006 deals with terrorism only indirectly, folding it into the problems of failing and tyrannous states and thereby into the larger currents in international society. This approach allows the Bush administration to draw antiterrorism efforts into its strategy of democratization—its preferred and advertised means of transforming problem states into responsible governors of their people and participants in world affairs.

The rationale for approaching terrorism this way is the possible or probable link between terrorist movements and these bad actors, a link that is of particular concern when the states have or might acquire nuclear weapons. Terrorist movements might work in alliance with rogue states, receive or steal weapons from them, or even take over the states and thus have the weapons and other instruments of state power at their disposal. Democratizing the rogue states will not solve the problem of terrorism, but it will render the states largely immune to terrorist takeover. Democratized states will deal more successfully than tyrannies with the sources of terrorist sympathy and recruitment: political alienation, unresolved grievances, cultures of conspiracy and misinformation. If problem states can be transformed into stable democracies with prosperous economies based on free-market principles, the phenomenon of terrorism will dry up.

This approach fails to focus on the particular form of terrorism that is a threat to the U.S. and to treat it as a movement with its own identity and program. The problem is radical Islamic militancy, not terrorism as such. The administration should say so explicitly. "From the beginning," says NSS 2006, "the War on Terror has been both a battle of arms and a battle of ideas—a fight against the terrorists and against their murderous ideology." But what is the content of this "murderous ideology"? How is it possible to fight without knowing what the ideas are? The document is silent on these issues.

The strategy document says that terrorism is not "inevitably" or "simply" the result of poverty, "Israel-Palestinian issues" or "hostility to U.S. policy in Iraq"; nor is it "simply a response to our efforts to prevent terror attacks." Perhaps. But the implication is that these factors do have some bearing on the generation, power, attraction and durability of international terrorism. If NSS 2006 is a serious strategy and not a public relations pitch, it should investigate these factors rather than casually dismiss them. It should address whether, where and to what extent U.S. policies motivate and orient the Islamist insurgency.

Dealing with states, even unstable and brutal states, is conceptually and strategically different from dealing with an international movement. The failure to recognize this distinction is exposed in the document's emphatic restatement of the Bush doctrine of preemptive war: "To forestall or prevent . . . hostile acts by our adversaries, the U.S. will, if necessary, act preemptively in exercising our inherent right of self-defense." The main premise supporting preemption—or, more accurately, prevention, the destruction of potential for future attacks—is that deterrence does not work in the case of a stateless movement like terrorism that has nothing to lose and is committed to inflicting maximum harm without counting the cost; therefore preemptive or even preventive attacks are justified against terrorists. However, NSS 2006 proposes taking action not against terrorists, but against tyrannous or rogue states. Because states do have something to lose, deterrence must have priority over preemption, the latter being justifiable only when it is clear that deterrence will not work.

The virtual unanimity among major international players in opposing terrorism dissolves when threats of sanctions or military action are made against rogue states. States have interests that come into play in international relations, so interstate consensus supporting preemptive or preventive attacks on terrorist cells and leaders may be reduced to a "coalition of the willing" when the target is another state.

The document's proposed method of democratization also needs reconsideration. Will democratization lead to secularization and to a separation of religion and politics that is alien to some branches of Islam? What will be the fate of human rights in an Islamic society that democratically establishes Shari'a as the law of the land? What will happen when autocratic regimes friendly to the U.S. are displaced democratically by radical Islamists?

Like its predecessor document, NSS 2002, this statement fails to discuss the politics of oil. The writers emphasize the importance of reducing U.S. dependence on foreign oil and of opening markets and diversifying energy sources, but they do not address the relationships between oil, autocracy, terrorism and democracy. For some time commentators have observed that autocratic control by oil-dependent governments rises and falls with the price of oil, and they have noted also that oil profits are a major source of funding for terrorist groups.

According to NSS 2002, the national vocation in international politics derives from the massive predominance of U.S. military might. The U.S. is to lead the world and, indeed, to control power relationships by reason of this predominance, which is supported by the nation's economic superiority. This requires the U.S. to perpetuate its dominance by increasing its military force, relocating bases to more sensitive spots, ensuring the security of U.S. projects and equipment in space (which implies U.S. control of space) and preventing the emergence of rival powers.

Though the new document calls for increasing U.S. military power and preventing the rise of rival powers, it makes no mention of rearranging military bases or protecting U.S. projects in space. The neoconservative vision of military vocation and control is absent from the new document. Though there is language about "hedging" nonmilitary approaches to foreign policy with the prospect of military intervention should those approaches fail, the stated preference for intervention is "transformational diplomacy." Assertions about American global leadership are still present, but they are modest compared with the grandiose, muscular and hegemonic posture adopted in the earlier document.

The reason for the new tone is not clear. Perhaps the disaster in Iraq has undercut earlier confidence; perhaps the authors concluded that the earlier posture was too imperious and provocative. Or perhaps the neoconservative attitude remains operative but is no longer exposed to view.

President Bush has stated that his administration's approach is "idealistic about our national goals, and realistic about the means to achieve them." Idealism is abundant in this document that proposes that the U.S. address a comprehensive list of issues—regional conflict, globalization, genocide, poverty, nuclear proliferation, the problem of unstable states—by transforming the world into a society of democracies with prosperous, free-market economies. But realism with regard to terrorism requires situational analysis, self-understanding and understanding of the nature and relevance of various means. All of these are in short supply.

True realism would not require surrender of American ideals or even of U.S. leadership. But it would result in an increased awareness of power and interest that would induce more humility and produce more wisdom.