

Axis of one: The 'unipolarist' agenda

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [March 8, 2003](#) issue

Many critics of the U.S. plans for going to war in Iraq point to oil as a motive. If that is true, it is worrisome indeed. But the policymakers who have long demanded this war are more concerned with ideological and strategic considerations than economic factors. The Bush administration is loaded with policymakers who have long maintained that the U.S. should use its overwhelming economic and military power to remake the world in the image of Western capitalist democracy. While holding office they cannot say that, but they did say it when they were not in office and they are closely allied with people who are saying it plainly.

After the Soviet Union imploded in 1991, a number of hardline anticommunists began arguing that the U.S. must use its military and economic power to remake the world and put down America's remaining enemies. They declared that the "unipolarist moment" had arrived: the U.S. needed to use its overwhelming military and economic power to create a new Pax Americana. Not all hardliners went along with this transition. A few of them defected from the cause, notably Edward Luttwak and Michael Lind; and some rediscovered their realism, such as Irving Kristol and Jeane Kirkpatrick. Kristol characteristically opined that "no civilized person in his right mind wants to govern Iraq."

But a version of the unipolarist ideology was adopted by some key figures: Elliott Abrams, John R. Bolton, William F. Buckley Jr., Stephen Cambone, Richard Cheney, Angelo Codevilla, Eliot Cohen, Devon Gaffney Cross, Eric Edelman, Douglas Feith, Frank Gaffney, Donald Kagan, Frederick Kagan, Robert A. Kagan, Robert Kagan, Lawrence F. Kaplan, Robert Kaplan, Charles Krauthammer, William Kristol, I. Lewis Libby, Joshua Muravchik, Michael Novak, Richard Perle, Daniel Pipes, Norman Podhoretz, Donald Rumsfeld, Ben Wattenberg, James Woolsey, Dov Zakheim.

In his article "Universal Dominion: Toward a Unipolar World," Charles Krauthammer spelled out the unipolarist idea: "America's purpose should be to steer the world away from its coming multipolar future toward a qualitatively new outcome—a unipolar world whose center is a confederated West." Elsewhere he explained that

unipolarism refers to “a single pole of world power that consists of the United States at the apex of the industrial West.”

The term didn't catch on, but the idea was seized upon by hawkish conservatives and neoconservatives. Ben Wattenberg urged nervous politicians not to be shy about asserting American superiority: “We are the first universal nation. ‘First’ as in the first one, ‘first’ as in ‘number one.’ And ‘universal’ within our borders and globally.” Because the United States is uniquely universal, he reasoned, it has a unique right to impose its will on other countries on behalf of an American-style world order. With a lighter touch, Wattenberg declared, “A unipolar world is a good thing, if America is the uni.”

Joshua Muravchik put it this way: “For our nation, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. Our failure to exert every possible effort to secure [a new world order] would be unforgivable. If we succeed, we will have forged a Pax Americana unlike any previous peace, one of harmony, not of conquest. Then the 21st century will be the American century by virtue of the triumph of the humane idea born in the American experiment.”

These comments were made in the early 1990s, when there was a debate within the first Bush administration about unipolarism. In 1990 Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney quietly commissioned a new strategic plan. Paul Wolfowitz (undersecretary for defense policy), Lewis Libby (Cheney's chief of staff) and Eric Edelman (Cheney's senior foreign-policy adviser) outlined a policy of U.S. global domination.

Pentagon Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Colin Powell countered with a case for a moderately conservative realism that was backed by Secretary of State George Schultz and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft. Though Cheney leaned toward Wolfowitz's strategy, the realists held the upper hand in George H. W. Bush's administration. Cheney's attempt to create a new big-picture strategy was derailed by the Persian Gulf war and the leaking of Wolfowitz's plan to the press, and the unipolarists despaired of Bush's lack of ideological vision. A few of them supported Bill Clinton in 1992, largely because Clinton campaigned that year as a democratic globalist.

But most of the Pax Americanists stayed in the Republican Party, and Clinton soon disappointed the others. In 1997, a group of unipolarists led by Cheney, Libby, Wolfowitz, Elliott Abrams, Eliot Cohen, Frank Gaffney, Donald Kagan, Norman

Podhoretz and Donald Rumsfeld founded the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which issued a statement of principles that called for an aggressive American policy of global domination. This group forged an alliance with George W. Bush, who carried a personal grudge against Saddam Hussein and who turned out to be a strident unilateralist and debunker of humanitarian nation-building.

Two months before the presidential election of 2000, the PNAC unipolarists issued a position paper titled “Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century” that spelled out the particulars of a global empire strategy: repudiate the ABM treaty, build a global missile defense system, increase defense spending by \$20 billion per year to 3.8 percent of gross domestic product, and reinvent the U.S. military to meet expanded obligations throughout the world. When Bush won the presidency, the Pax Americanists (notably Bolton, Cambone, Cheney, Cohen, Cross, Feith, Libby, Perle, Pipes, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Woolsey) won numerous positions in his administration.

In the early months of Bush 43, as the current administration is called by insiders, Powell selectively resisted the aggressive unilateralism of Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz. Donald Kagan, who cochaired the PNAC position paper on defense policy, contends that before 9/11, the unipolarists were losing the argument in the Bush administration. After the fiendish attacks of 9/11, however, the unipolarist view of the world blended with the fight against terrorism.

On September 14, Wolfowitz declared at a press conference that the U.S. government was committed to “ending states who sponsor terrorism.” That remark earned a public rebuke from Powell, who countered that America’s goal was to “end terrorism,” not launch wars on sovereign states. The differences between these objectives soon blurred in the Bush administration’s rhetoric about the war on terrorism, however. On September 20, Bush declared that any nation that sponsors, aids or harbors terrorists is an enemy of the U.S. One year later, he issued a remarkable document titled “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” which declared the right of the U.S. to wage preemptive wars on rogue states. The following month, Wolfowitz asserted: “This fight is a broad fight. It’s a global fight. . . . The war on terrorism is a global war, and one that must be pursued everywhere.”

To keep track of what the unipolarists are thinking, one has to pay close attention to those who didn’t take jobs in the Bush administration. Wolfowitz and Perle were

sharp polemicists before they took the positions as, respectively, deputy defense secretary and chair of the Pentagon's defense policy board. In office they speak mostly bureaucratically. Among their ideological allies in the private sector, the talk goes way beyond Iraq. The unipolarists are pressing Bush not to back away from the implications of his speeches and policy statements.

Boston University professor of international relations Angelo Codevilla argues that America's world war against terrorism must begin by overthrowing Iraq, Syria and the Palestinian Authority; eminent conservative William F. Buckley Jr. asserts that the U.S. is in a world war against all nations that shelter terrorists and that Iraq is merely a "manageable" opening target; Frank Gaffney, who heads the Center for Security Policy, maintains that the United States must take the fight to Iran and the Palestinians and that Bush needs to sweep away most of the longtime professionals in the State Department and the CIA; neoconservative Norman Podhoretz believes that "we ought to kill" the PLO and the regimes in Iraq and Syria, that the United States must overthrow Iran and Lebanon as soon as possible, and that Egypt and Saudi Arabia belong on the list of enemy regimes; Yale classicist Donald Kagan admonishes that the "Arab street" only makes anti-American noise when America shies away from using its military power.

It has long been assumed in unipolarist circles that Iraq, Iran and North Korea constitute an "axis of evil," as Bush called these nations last fall. Wolfowitz singled out Indonesia, Pakistan and Yemen as high-priority targets of the fight against terrorism. Much of the in-house debate among unipolarists concerns the ranking of Syria, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority on this list. One of the most prominent advocates of permanent war is Robert Kaplan, who combines a fervent militarism with a Samuel Huntington-style "clash of civilizations" realism. Kaplan goes very near the heart of the matter when he says: "The real question is not whether the American military can topple Saddam's regime but whether the American public has the stomach for imperial involvement of a kind we have not known since the United States occupied Germany and Japan."

The unipolarist ideology, by whatever name, adds a fourth party to the foreign-policy debate, which has otherwise involved 1) liberal internationalists, who seek world peace and stability by securing collective agreements from nation states to comply with international law; 2) realists, who seek to ensure a balance of power among competing regimes; and 3) principled anti-interventionists, who renounce the use of military force for all reasons besides self-defense. Unipolarism is essentially a

nationalistic and militaristic version of the liberal internationalist vision of world democracy.

To the unipolarists, America must not shrink from its moral and ideological obligation to establish a new Pax Americana, because it is the exemplar and guardian of the liberal democratic idea. No other nation has the means or stature to put tyrants in their place or uphold the rules of a liberal democratic world order. The unipolarists emphasize the categorical difference between classic imperialism, which ruled by direct conquest and the subjugation of populations, and aggressive American leadership, which advocates democracy and freedom, not empire.

Krauthammer has recently capsulized the argument: “The future of the unipolar era hinges on whether America is governed by those who wish to retain, augment and use unipolarity to advance not just American but global ends, or whether America is governed by those who wish to give it up—either by allowing unipolarity to decay as they retreat to Fortress America, or by passing on the burden by gradually transferring power to multilateral institutions as heirs to American hegemony. The challenge to unipolarity is not from the outside but from the inside. The choice is ours. To impiously quote Benjamin Franklin: History has given you an empire, if you will keep it.”

The unipolarists may be granted their semantic insistence that this kind of “imperialism” deserves to be called something else, for they do not aspire to occupy any particular land without the consent of its people. But the U.S. makes a mockery of its democratic ideals when it bullies other nations to serve U.S. interests and pretends that its bullying deserves to be called justice or idealism. And it is ridiculous for American unipolarists to insist that any conceivable American occupation of Iraq, North Korea, Iran or Syria in the wake of the carnage and killing of war will be welcomed as a liberation by the majorities of these countries’ populations.

The U.S. spends as much on defense as the next 15 nations combined. When military spending by U.S. allies is excluded, the United States is spending nearly twice as much on “defense” as the rest of the world combined. American troops are stationed in 75 countries; each branch of the armed services has its own air force; and in the next year we may learn if the U.S. can pull off what it has been preparing to do since the end of the cold war: fight two regional wars at the same time. After 9/11, most Americans are quite happy to spend more on warfare than the next 15

nations combined. They trust in the assurance of our leaders that if we overwhelm our enemies and kill enough of them, we will be safe.

A true realism would distinguish between international police action to curb terrorism and wars of aggression against governments and their civilian populations. Realism tells us that there will always be bad leaders who have to be coped with and contained. But a war fought for the reasons that we are being given leads inevitably and necessarily to more wars, exactly as its unipolarist advocates insist. We cannot diminish terrorism by incinerating Muslim nations and causing most of the world to despise the U.S.

Even if it lasts only three weeks, this war could be a terrible disaster in moral, political and economic terms. We are being led to war against Iraq by people who know very well that this war will lead to further wars and that even a \$380 billion defense budget barely begins to pay for the first war. The economic costs of unilateral war, occupation and reconstruction will be staggering. Bush administration officials admit that they have no idea how much the war against Iraq will cost; their current estimates range from \$50 billion to \$200 billion. On February 5, Rumsfeld informed the House Armed Services Committee that the military buildup against Iraq has already cost \$2.1 billion and that further costs of the war will require a separate spending bill.

Pro-war liberals like Peter Beinart, Jonathan Chait and Senator Joseph Lieberman contend that the United States will rebuild Iraq after destroying it. They overlook the fact that Afghanistan is still waiting for an economic infusion, and in the case of Iraq, the U.S. will be bombing, destroying, killing, occupying and rebuilding nearly by itself.

President Bush and his key advisers show little concern about the costs of the war and the occupation, because occupation is a necessary means to their goal of “a transformed Middle East” and an American-dominated world. Since they can’t say that, they have stumbled in explaining why the U.S. must go to war. They began by claiming that we have to overthrow Saddam because he is building a nuclear bomb. That didn’t pan out, so they switched to the claim that he is connected to terrorism. That didn’t pan out either, so they switched to the possession of weapons of mass destruction. They found no hard evidence of that either, so now Americans are being called to war because of Saddam’s lack of cooperation with inspectors.

Significantly, the Bush administration turned to Powell to make its case for going to war on this basis. Americans remain skittish about the unilateralist militarism of Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz. Powell's insistence on winning a United Nations Security Council mandate for war may well deliver the political goods that the unipolarists could not have won on their own.

I assume that Saddam possesses biological and chemical weapons, like other thugs of his kind, and that the United States, working through the United Nations, has just cause to pressure his regime to disarm. But Saddam was not chosen as America's first target of preemptive war because he poses an immediate threat to the U.S. He was chosen because he is not strong enough to have to be dealt with diplomatically, like North Korea or China, and because his regime is the key to what the unipolarists call "a transformed Middle East"—one that serves American economic and security interests and that renounces its hostility to Israel.

The Pax Americanists are determined to establish a major American military presence in the Middle East; they dream of toppling nearly every regime in that region. Unipolarists often refer to this process as "draining the swamp." At the moment it is prudent for them to focus their mass-media attention on the present war, not the permanent war, but they take the permanent war for granted.

President Bush is fond of declaring that America invades and fights only to liberate, never to conquer. I do not doubt that he is sincere in perceiving himself and his country in this way, for this self-perception is widely held in the U.S. Many Americans actually believe that we should be welcomed as liberators whenever we invade another country. For decades Americans felt safe from the problems and dangers of other countries, often while being oblivious to the suffering that we caused in the world. On 9/11 we lost the former illusion, but our leaders are invoking that experience to reinforce our hubris and our obliviousness to the consequences of our actions.