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NÚMERO 80

Peter Trubowitz

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION AND THE FUTURE OF TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS
Abstract

In just over three months, the Bush administration has managed to antagonize many of America’s closest friends in Europe and elsewhere. Its single-minded pursuit of missile defense, the decision to abruptly quit missile talks with North Korea, and its summary rejection of the Kyoto agreement on global warming have produced consternation and outrage in European capitals. This paper offers a provisional assessment of the new administration’s foreign policy and argues, contra much of the commentary in the mass media, that Mr. Bush’s harsh diplomatic style serves his political interests by playing to core constituencies in the Republican party. An analysis of the party’s foreign policy preferences reveals mounting frustration with multilateral style diplomacy and strong penchant to “go it alone” in foreign affairs. How far Mr. Bush is willing to go to placate Republican hard-liners remains to be seen. Judging from the administration’s first one hundred days, the more critical international opinion, the more likely Mr. Bush will temper his unilateralist impulses.

Resumen

En tan solo tres meses, la administración Bush se ha convertido en antagonista de sus aliados más cercanos en Europa así como de otros países del mundo. Su decisión unilateral de crear un Misil Nacional de Defensa, su abandono abrupto de las pláticas con Corea del Norte sobre misiles, y su rechazo al Tratado de Kyoto sobre el calentamiento global; han producido consternación e indignación en los gobiernos europeos. El presente trabajo ofrece una evaluación provisional de la política exterior de la nueva administración estadounidense al igual que se argumenta, contraria a la opinión de los medios de comunicación sobre la misma; que la severa diplomacia del mandatario Bush es resultado de sus intereses políticos, al poner como núcleo al electorado en el Partido Republicano. Un análisis sobre las preferencias en política exterior de ese partido, revela una creciente frustración ante la diplomacia de carácter multilateral y una fuerte propensión al “caminar solos” en temas de política exterior. ¿Qué tan lejos quiere llegar Bush para apaciguar la rígida postura republicana? A través del estudio de los primeros cien días de la actual administración norteamericana, podemos afirmar que, entre más crítica sea la opinión internacional al respecto, mayor serán los impulsos unilaterales del presidente Bush.
"If we are an arrogant nation, they will resent us. If we're a humble nation, but strong, they'll welcome us."

George W. Bush, Televised Presidential Debate, October 2000

Introduction

When George Bush campaigned for the presidency last year, he stressed the need for America to act with greater patience and humility in foreign affairs. The Texas Governor cautioned that the United States, as the world's leading power, had to use its power wisely, especially when dealing with its traditional allies. Clumsiness or arrogance on the part of the U.S. could invite resentment or worse, contempt. "Carry a big stick", Teddy Roosevelt said, "but walk softly."

What a difference a few months can make. In just over a hundred days, the White House has managed to antagonize many of America's closest friends on the continent. Its single-minded pursuit of missile defense, the decision to abruptly quit missile talks with North Korea, and its summary rejection of the Kyoto agreement on global warming have produced consternation and outrage in European capitals. The recent flurry of high level "consultations" by Bush's missile defense experts with European leaders seems to have done little to allay their concerns and worries.1

It is tempting to view Bush's heavy-handed approach as a temporary rough stretch that will smooth out as the administration gains experience. Some observers argue just that, recalling that Bill Clinton's was also somewhat overbearing in his early dealings with Europe. Then too, fears about an American "tilt" away from Europe were the cause of a fair amount of transatlantic angst—a worry heightened by some loose talk in the State Department about the coming "Pacific Century" and Clinton's own failure to visit the continent until early 1994.2

This is perhaps a comforting theory but it is also quite misleading. It ignores the powerful affect that politics has on foreign policy. Strengthening America's ties with Europe was very much in Clinton's own political self-interest and goes a long way toward explaining why he ultimately invested so much political capital on

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2 Michael Cox, U.S. Foreign Policy after the Cold War: Superpower without a Mission? (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1995)
issues of nuclear proliferation, global warming, and human rights. Clinton's "assertive multilateralism" spoke to the demands of core Democratic constituencies like labor and environmental groups looking for ways to defray the costs of US global leadership and redefine the nation's security agenda after decades of Cold War. For Clinton, good transatlantic ties were good party politics.

The reverse can be said of George Bush. The truth is that Mr. Bush's harsh diplomatic style serves his political interests. To understand why, it is necessary to take a closer look at the Republican Party and the political forces animating it today. Republicans, it turns out, have much less use for the type of multilateralism Democrats think so essential. Party politics, not geopolitics, is driving Bush's unilateralism.

This paper develops this argument in five sections. The first section, Part A, examines the role of party politics in foreign policy making. Part B focuses on the Cold War era of bipartisanship in American foreign policy and specifically how Republican attitudes toward multilateralism have changed over the past half-century. Part C considers the sources of Republican unilateralism today, tracing it to changes in the economic and political profile of the South and Mountain West, today the Republican Party's political base. The final part puts the current turn toward unilateralism in broader historical context and discusses the limits of unilateralism in the contemporary era.

A. Strategy and Politics

Everyone recognizes that party politics matter in making foreign policy. The New York Times, CNN, Newsweek, and virtually all other media outlets routinely speculate on the domestic political calculations that lead this president or that president to act in one way or another on foreign policy matters. Yet systematic analysis of the role of party politics in the making of broad U.S. foreign policies is curiously absent from current writing, just as it was during the Cold War.

Most literature on American foreign policy-making assumes or argues that foreign policy is made by statesmen whose visions of the national interest are untainted by the pressures and incentives that animate democratic politics. Scholars debate the relative merits of alternative strategies—"primacy", "selective engagement", "retrenchment"— as though matters of such import should and can be decided in a political vacuum. The stuff that comprises the warp and woof of American politics—party competition, coalition building, and struggles over the federal purse—is left out.

What accounts for this? Certainly, part of the answer has to do with the way American foreign policy is taught in the United States. Foreign policy is usually treated as a distinct, and usually residual, category in courses on American politics. Meanwhile, someone trained in International Relations, not American politics, teaches courses on U.S. foreign policy making. As a result, Americanists are routinely trained to ignore foreign policy, or they learn about it from scholars who
have little interest in issues and questions that animate the study of American politics.

That is part of the story. But I think there is another reason. In my view, the inattention to politics is an artifact of the Cold War consensus over the purposes of American power and the President's authority to exercise it. As the domestic political circumstances that made that consensus possible in the late 1940s receded from view, it seemed possible, as Aaron Wildavsky provocatively argued in the 1960s, to think about foreign policy as though it were suspended balloon-like above politics.\(^3\) To mix metaphors, everyone acknowledged that Presidents engaged in political strategizing and partisan maneuvering when making domestic policy, but this was thought to stop at the water's edge.

As a result, most scholars writing about America's foreign policy fixed their gaze on what we might call foreign policy's first, or "outward-looking" face, and most still do. In this so-called "Realist" approach, Presidents are assumed to be primarily attentive to the international environment in defining the nation's strategic interests and in choosing means to secure these goals.\(^4\) That is, their views about foreign policy are thought to be based mostly on judgements about what will best protect and where possible, extend the nation's power and influence abroad.

In the Realist model, Presidents' foreign policy choices are dictated from the "outside-in", by external threats, challenges, and opportunities. Foreign policy choices have little to do with politics "back here", with building coalitions, dividing opponents, and more generally solving domestic political problems. To the extent that domestic considerations enter into Presidents' thinking, they do so, Realists argue, only because Presidents must mobilize people and resources to achieve their broad foreign policy goals. Their ability to achieve their goals may thus depend on politics, but the goals themselves cannot be explained in terms of politics.

Foreign policy however is not just about the world "out there". It has a second face, and this second face of strategy goes far in determining the foreign policy choices Presidents make. Instead of assuming a priori that Presidents do not "play politics" with "the national interest", an approach that looks at the second face of strategy entertains the possibility that they are more entrepreneurial in the choices they make about foreign policy. To oversimplify, the argument is that the choices Presidents make are informed as much by their political ambitions as party leaders as they are by their constitutional obligations as commanders-in-chief.

\(^3\) In this widely cited essay, Wildavsky argued that presidents were granted greater deference from Congress on foreign policy matters than they were on domestic policy. See his "The Two Presidencies", in Aaron Wildavsky Perspectives on the Presidency (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), 448-61.

Seen in this light, many of the anomalies or paradoxes of American foreign policy seem less puzzling. Consider, for example, the case of the 1890s. For Realists the period has always presented a bit of a problem. As everyone knows, the 1890s were a watershed, a time when America redefined its grand strategy, replacing decades of passivity and self-isolation with a new and dynamic diplomacy of expansion in the Western Hemisphere and Pacific Basin. What is much less clear is, why? For the 1890s were also a time when America enjoyed tremendous security: it was surrounded by two vast oceans and weak neighbors, and protected by the British Royal Navy, which ruled the seas without challenge.

America’s turn to empire becomes easier to understand when one recognizes that expansionism was a powerful weapon in the Republican’s campaign against populism. Drawing on strategic arguments popularized by Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, the Harrison and McKinley administrations offered the promise of foreign markets to western farmers to weaken the agrarian movement, and to consolidate Republican control over the national government. For Republican presidents, expansionism was politically motivated. It was part of a larger electoral strategy aimed at exploiting sectional differences between West and South and preventing an alliance against the North.

If an active, outward-oriented foreign policy was good politics for Republicans in the 1890s, the reverse was true in the 1920s. Then, America suffered from what might be called “imperial understretch”. Instead of converting its unrivalled power into influence, as Realism would predict, America under Republican leadership retrenched, rejecting Wilsonianism and adopting narrow nationalist policies on tariffs, war debts, and foreign lending. In an effort to account for this awkward anomaly, Realists depart from “externally driven” explanations and fall back on domestic political culture and institutions, blaming America’s anti-statist traditions and weak institutions for its failed diplomacy.5

But the policy failures of the 1920s had as much to do with politics as anything else. In contrast to the 1890s, sectional divisions within the party made it nearly impossible for Republican Presidents to exploit the nation’s unrivaled power. Badly split along East-West lines, Republican presidents from Harding to Coolidge to Hoover tried to finesse contentious issues like tariff reform, European reconstruction, and debt cancellation by “farming out” foreign policy to Wall Street bankers and investors; this was so-called “dollar diplomacy”. What emerged was a kind of semi-internationalism, a foreign policy based on private initiative rather than governmental activism.

What these examples underscore is the need for greater attention to the second face of strategy. Foreign policy is not just about the world out there. It is also about politics back here. This means that IR scholars need to pay more attention to the currents of American politics that go far in shaping when, how, and why the

United States exerts its power abroad. Never has this been truer than it is now, a decade into the post-Cold War era, when the United States enjoys tremendous latitude in defining its interests. At the same time, Americanists interested in explaining the logic of sectional and partisan alignments and realignments need to look more systematically at foreign policy, which Presidents exploit as a political resource in the larger games of American political competition.

B. Slouching Toward Unilateralism

This brings us to Mr. Bush and the new American unilateralism. For all the criticism President Bush’s actions have provoked, it is important to point out that little of it has come from within his party’s ranks. If anything, Republicans privately complain that the White House is being “too soft” on the allies. This is not blind Republican fealty to their new leader, though clearly Republican backbenchers on Capitol Hill want Mr. Bush to succeed. The reason is that the new President has carefully hewed to the party line on foreign policy. That line is unilateralism — strengthening American power and unashamedly using it on behalf of self-defined global ends.

Most Republicans today are very suspicious of the kind of international agreements and institutions popular in Europe. Indeed, for Republican politicians eager to get ahead, bashing global compacts like the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Kyoto Protocol, or the International Criminal Court is good party politics, the foreign policy equivalent of such Republican elixirs as “lower taxes” and “deregulation”. Multilateralism may not be dead in American politics, but in Republican circles it no longer inspires the kind of political deference and support it did in years past.

Consider how different George Bush’s Republican Party is from the one Dwight Eisenhower presided over in the 1950s. The comparison is an apt one. Eisenhower’s triumph also gave the Republicans control of Congress — the only other time Republicans have been in charge of both the executive and legislature since World War II. Back then, Republicans were staunch proponents of closer transatlantic ties, and they viewed multilateralism as means to that end. For Republicans, European stability and American security were synonymous.

Of course Republicans were not alone in thinking this. Democrats also championed closer transatlantic ties. It was after all a Democrat, Harry Truman, who took the lead in promoting European recovery after World War II. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s Democrats as well as Republicans saw a strong Europe as a prerequisite for America’s own security and prosperity. The two parties sometimes disagreed over means — Republicans, for example, thinking nuclear weapons were...
Trubowitz/The Bush Administration and the Future of Transatlantic Relations

better than conventional ones for protecting Europe—but on the essential question of whether European and American security were indivisible there was little debate.

There was also little disagreement over what constituted the primary strategic goal: the preservation of a balance of power in Eurasia to prevent any state (or coalition of states) from establishing control over the Eurasian landmass and thereby pose a threat to the United States itself. The essential idea was actually laid out by Nicholas Spykman in 1941. But it was not until George Kennan coined the term “containment”, and the Soviet Union had become identified in the American psyche as the most likely state to seek dominance on the Eurasian landmass, that average Americans came to see the “virtues” of coordinating policy with other nations.

While initially focused on Europe, America quickly extended its multilateralist view to include other parts of the world. What emerged is what James Kurth calls a “national project of international expansion”—the rise of a Pax Americana that rested on an interlocking network of international economic, political, and military institutions that were led and dominated by the United States. Its cornerstones were the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, whose main purpose was to promote the development of an open international economy and contain the Soviet Union.

To be sure, America’s leaders pursued this strategy with varying degrees of consistency and success over the next twenty years. Still, the central strategic vision animating U.S. foreign policy remained relatively stable, as did the strategic corollaries that followed from logically from it: punishing aggression, preserving the inviolability of borders, and preventing instability in regions of the world that might conceivably jeopardize the pacification of Europe or Asia.

The domestic political viability of this strategy rested heavily an alliance that spanned the Mason-Dixon line—the so-called New Deal coalition. Forged in the shadows of depression and war, this coalition embraced the interests of big business, northern labor, and the “small town big men” who dominated southern society. The urban Northeast and the agrarian South were the domestic bases of political support for the Pax Americana that America’s leaders erected after the war. These parts of the country were the earliest and largest beneficiaries of liberal-internationalist policies aimed at promoting an open interdependent world economy, and at the Cold War isolation or “containment” of nations that threatened it.

Because this coalition was rooted in the regional power base of the Democratic Party and the powerful eastern wing of the Republican Party, it provided the electoral framework for a bipartisan foreign policy. In Congress, this alliance found institutional expression in the development of a strong committee system that

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7 Nicholas John Spykman, America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942).
gave control over the agenda in key policy domains to powerful committee chairmen from the Northeast and South. These arrangements worked to mute the expression of potentially divisive conflicts between the Northeast and South and to marginalize opponents from the western states that were less enamored with multilateralism. In short, politics did not stop at the water’s edge during the Cold War years: shared interests kept political divisiveness in check.

This bipartisan coalition lasted until the 1970s. Then it began to fall apart as the Democratic Party moved “left” and the Republican Party shifted “right.” The story of the Democrats is well known. Frustrated with the Vietnam War, and looking for ways to reduce the costs of U.S. global leadership, Democrats increasingly favored foreign policies that would reduce the “overhead costs” of the Pax Americana. While most Democratic leaders continued to favor continued U.S. participation in international institutions, they urged greater restraint in the use of military force, a smaller defense establishment, and a larger role for Congress in the foreign policy-making process.

These efforts have not ebbed with the end of the Cold War. Indeed, since the early 1990s Democrats have led the chorus urging the country to redefine its interests and devote a larger share of its attention and money to solving long-standing domestic problems and issues. Congressional Democrats’ attempts to slash the Pentagon’s budget and limit access to the U.S. market should be seen in this light. So should the party’s support for UN peacekeeping, NATO expansion, World Bank debt relief, and multilateralism more generally—the idea is that the international community should assume a larger share of the burden of preserving the peace.

Less well-understood are the equally dramatic changes that occurred on the Republican side of the aisle. Here too there was frustration with the way American power was being exercised. But Republican concerns were different than Democrats’. Republican leaders like Ronald Reagan worried aloud that America had become too heavily reliant on others, claiming that multilateralism unnecessarily restricted the nation’s freedom of action. Increasingly, the Republicans’ long-standing commitment to a strong national defense was grafted onto a “new” agenda favoring “bolder, more assertive” leadership, a euphemism for less dependence on multilateral institutions and international negotiations.

To be sure, the erosion of Republican support for multilateralism over the past quarter of century has been uneven. As staunch Republican backing for the international coalition formed to defeat Iraq in 1991 illustrates, Republican leaders are more than willing to coordinate policy with other nations when the potential electoral costs of not doing so are sufficiently high for their party. George Bush Sr. drew a line in the sand in the Arabian Desert, but that happened only after it became obvious that he would be blamed for “losing” Kuwait. Still, as the depth of Republican opposition to American intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo makes equally clear, multilateralism is no longer Republicans’ preferred strategy. All

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things being equal, Republicans would have the United States acting alone in foreign affairs.

C. The New Republican Party

Many factors have contributed to this shift in the Republican attitudes, which has been in the making since the 1960s. Mounting frustration with European “free riding” on collective defense during the Cold War was one factor, especially as it became clear that Europe could devote a larger share of its GDP to its own defense. So did harsh European criticism of America’s long and costly war in Southeast Asia—long a bone in Republican throats. More significant however has been the changing electoral makeup of the Republican Party itself.

In the 1950s, power in the Republican Party was centered in the Northeast, where Republicans (as well as Democrats) saw real benefits in closer transatlantic ties.

Though the Republican’s base extended into the Great Plains, the party’s presidential candidates—the Wendell Wilke’s, Thomas Dewey’s, and Dwight Eisenhower’s—were closely associated with the more liberal Northeast. There was good reason for this: Republicans who could not win the Northeast’s big electoral prizes (New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois) could not easily capture the White House. In those days, Democrats had a lock on the conservative South and neither party owned the mercurial West.

Times have changed. Ever since Barry Goldwater defeated Nelson Rockefeller for the 1964 Republican presidential nomination, the Republicans have lost seats and political appeal in the Northeast and gained seats in the South and West. In the process old, moderate Northeastern Republicans have been replaced by newer, more conservative lawmakers from the South and West. The last Republican who could reasonably be described as liberal, Senator Lowell Weicker of Connecticut, was effectively expelled from the party (and the Senate) in 1988.

Today, the Republican Party is the party of the South and Mountain West, what party strategists call the “Big L” on the map of U.S. voting patterns. Over 40 percent of the Republicans in the House of Representatives today are from these regions, a far cry from Eisenhower’s days when few Republicans were a rare bird in the South. When Senate seats are added, the percentage of Republican seats held by the Big L jumps to 46 percent. Even more dramatic is Republican strength at the

\[\text{For accounts about the changing regional composition of the Republican party see Jerome L. Himmelstein, } \textit{To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Nicol C. Rae, \textit{The Decline of the Liberal Republicans from 1952 to the Present} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); and David W. Reinhard, \textit{The Republican Right Since 1945} (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1983).\]

\[\text{Republicans occupy nearly 70 percent of the Senate seats from the South and Mountain West and 57 percent of the two regions’ House seats.}\]
state level in the South and Mountain West. Today, 15 of the Big L’s 21 governors are Republicans, a whopping 71 percent.

All of this has changed the way Republicans view foreign policy. With the exception of international trade agreements, which they support when pacts promote freer trade, voters from the Big L strongly prefer a foreign policy without compromise, free of the encumbrances that international negotiation and multilateral diplomacy inevitably entails (and that earlier generations of Republicans accepted as necessary). Republicans today believe that a more effective foreign policy—one with more “bang for the buck”—comes from swift and decisive American action.

As Figure 1 illustrates, their representatives in Washington share those views. The bars summarize the extent to which congressmen from different parts of the country voted for or against multilateralism. The “multilateralism index” itself was compiled from roll call votes in the 105th House (1997-98) on issues ranging from funds for the UN to support for the World Bank to arms control negotiations. The regional breakdown could not be much starker. Congressmen from the South and Mountain West are much less inclined to support multilateralism than their colleagues from the Northeast and Pacific, the Democrats’ electoral strongholds.
Of course, the South and West's unilateralist proclivities are not wholly new. Deep skepticism about foreign do-gooding, international law, and big government (international or domestic) has long figured into their politics. During the Cold War, these prejudices were largely held in check by a "higher calling": anti-communism. In the absence of a Soviet style threat, unilateralist impulses have returned with a vengeance. What makes them particularly worrisome, at least from the perspective of transatlantic relations, is that Big L politicians see Europe as less and less important to their regions' welfare and hence, their own.

Many analysts attempt to explain the Republicans' turn away from Europe in terms of the changing demography of the South and West. As they point out, the percentage of non-Whites in the Big L has increased dramatically in the past twenty years. Hispanics account for much of this. As one recent study indicates, the Hispanic population in these regions accounts for over 35 percent of the total population, an increase of almost 10 percent since 1990. Today Hispanics are the majority of the population in 50 counties across the United States. Of these counties, 35 are in the South and 15 are in the West.

One only has to do the arithmetic to see why George Bush is trying to enhance the Party's appeal among Hispanics. It is clear that Republicans will struggle as the minority party if they cannot get the Hispanic vote. Some argue that the new emphasis Washington is placing on US-Mexican relations is one way it is doing this, and that the push for a hemispheric-wide free trade zone is another. The high-visibility that the Bush team accords to these issues may partly reflect what Republicans strategists like Bush adviser Karl Rove have been saying for some time: the Hispanic vote is critical to the Party's future, and even its hold on key states like Florida. If Bush administration discourse on foreign policy is any indication, we can expect to hear a good deal more from the White House about how important the Western Hemisphere is to American security and welfare.

How effective hemispheric diplomacy will actually be in mobilizing the Hispanic vote is less clear. The theory that voters vote their ethnicity, popular in some academic circles, does not always hold up. Take, for instance, the case of Midwestern isolationism in the 1930s. At the time, some political analysts claimed that the Midwest was reluctant to aid Britain against the Nazis because it was home to so many voters of German and Irish descent. Closer analysis revealed there was

12 Betsy Guzman, "The Hispanic Population", U.S. Census 2001 Brief, May 2001. The study does not distinguish between Mountain West and Pacific states. Thus the numbers include California's sizable Hispanic population.


14 The argument was forcefully made by political scientist Samuel Lubell in "Who votes Isolationist and Why?" Harper's Magazine (April 1951): 29-36. In the face of criticism, Lubell
no ethnic bias in Midwestern attitudes toward interventionism. In fact, the Midwest’s indifference to Europe’s plight was concentrated in the region’s rural districts—areas that relied heavily on the American market for the sale of its foodstuffs. These Midwesterners did not worry much about Europe because turbulence there did not directly affect their livelihoods and interests. In the 1930s, Midwesterners thought more about their pocketbooks than their ethnic identity when thinking about Europe.

So do many Southerners and Westerners today. As their economic ties to Latin America and Asia have grown, Europe has become less important as a market for their exports. By the 1990s, states from the Mountain West accounted for over 36 percent of America’s exports to Asia, well above the national average. Similarly, more than two-thirds of the South exports were going to non-European destinations. Southern exports to Latin America were 35 percent greater than the national average. By contrast, the bulk of the Northeast’s exports were going to Europe and Canada.

There is a good deal of irony in these figures, especially those pertaining to the South. For much of its history, the South’s fortunes were deeply intertwined with Europe’s. Cotton and tobacco were the region’s main source of foreign exchange and as late as the 1930s roughly 60 percent of the South’s exports went to Europe. Much like today’s Third World economies, the agrarian South provided roughage for more advanced industrial economies. When European economies grew, the South’s economy grew and conversely, hard times on the Continent meant hard times in the Cotton Belt.

None of this was lost on the “planter class” that dominated Southern politics and society. Their representatives in Washington understood that the entire Southern social order, as well as their own political futures, depended on Southern access to European markets. In times of crisis like the 1910s and 1930s, when powerful forces threatened European stability, the South furnished the bedrock of support for American intervention on the Continent to re-impose order. Without Southern backing in Congress, neither Woodrow Wilson nor Franklin Delano Roosevelt could have moved as decisively as they did to save Europe from itself.

The Southern planter class is long gone, and with it went the South’s obsession with Europe. The fact that Southern politicians voted against the war in
Kosovo is a sign of how different Southern attitudes about foreign affairs are today, and how similar they now are to attitudes in the Mountain West. It was Richard Nixon who first recognized the possibility of forging an alliance between the South and West—the so-called “Southern strategy”. But it was Ronald Reagan who saw in foreign policy a powerful means to that end. Combining the promise of laissez-faire trade with the lure of Pentagon largesse, Reagan was able to cater to the party’s expanding base in the West while peeling off the South from the Democrats. Reagan’s victory signaled the death of the coalition that had shaped America’s foreign policy since the 1930s. For the first time in over a hundred years, “the national interest” was not defined in terms of those of the Northeast.

D. The Limits of Unilateralism

Multilateralism is a vision of American foreign policy interests that reflects the needs and interests of the Northeast. Throughout the last century, the country’s most influential foreign policy writers and thinkers have articulated the goals of this region. Perhaps the most celebrated example is that of Frederick Jackson Turner. Writing in the midst of economic crisis and populist insurgency, Frederick Jackson Turner sketched-out his famous “frontier thesis”, a historical interpretation of American political development suggesting that what was unique and true in American democracy was the product of an expanding frontier.

Westward expansion had been the formative influence on American life: like a safety valve it relieved the social and political tensions that came with rapid and uneven growth. The problem, Turner declared, was that the frontier was disappearing. Americans were entering a new period in their history. No longer would they be able to turn to the West to avoid the intractable problems of a closed society. America’s exceptional years were over. It now faced the same choice that confronted other great nations in the throes of economic depression and political upheaval: it could learn to live as a self-contained society, with all that implied about redistributing wealth and power, or find new areas for expansion overseas. Opting for the latter, the country broke its long-standing tradition of self-isolation and embraced a vigorous, nationalistic, and imperial foreign policy.

A half-century later another writer, the prominent publisher Henry Luce, called America’s attention to a new challenge, and a new frontier. In a series of widely read editorials, Luce proclaimed an “American Century”. Claiming that the United States had passed up “a golden opportunity” after World War I “to assume the leadership of the world”, he called on the American people to help Franklin

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Roosevelt succeed where Woodrow Wilson had failed. It was time for Americans "to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world". Isolationism and economic nationalism, he asserted, were disastrous, self-defeating policies. They had opened the door to aggression overseas and fueled the economic crisis that threatened democracy at home.

If the United States was to preserve its way of life, Luce argued, it had to use its tremendous power to create an international capitalist marketplace that would be open to all, and that would embody the country's ideals of freedom, justice, and opportunity. Only a nation as powerful, and that enjoyed as much moral authority, as the United States could provide the leadership necessary to turn back the Axis powers, restore the peace, and build this new liberal world order. Henry Luce's vision was a commanding one: it became America's vision. His call to national greatness became the credo of American foreign policy and lay at the heart of the multilateralist postwar order—the Pax Americana.

In the 1980s, no writer spoke more to Americans' concerns about their place in the world than Paul Kennedy. His unexpected bestseller, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* told a story of an America in decline, of a country that was living beyond its means. As Kennedy saw it, the United States was suffering from the same ailment that had plagued Spain in the seventeenth century, France in the eighteenth, and Great Britain more recently: "imperial overstretch". The American century was over. The ambitious internationalist agenda that America's leaders set in the early Cold War years had led the country to invest scarce resources in ways that proved damaging over the long haul.

The result was the gradual erosion of American power, measured in the standard ways (share of international growth, percent of world trade, share of international resources). Though it was still the world's leading power, America's overseas commitments now outdistanced its domestic capacity to sustain them. Kennedy's book was not a clarion call like Luce's, but a warning more in the tradition of Turner's famous paper. Likening the country to an aging man carrying a pack up a hill, ever less able to carry the burden, Kennedy suggested that America could avoid the old man's fate if it acted wisely and brought its commitments in alignment with its strengths. Its overseas strategic burdens had to be reduced and its domestic industrial plant had to be revitalized.

Taken together, these three books trace a trajectory arcing across the twentieth century: the rise and decline of the Northeast in the world economy. Like Turner's expansionism and then Luce's liberal-internationalism, Kennedy's "declinism" described the interests and needs of America's industrial heartland. Seen from afar, it is easy to confuse the Northeast's story with America's, and to see the evolution of American foreign policy over the last century as a series of logical, almost inevitable, phases—a kind of chronicle of the nation's changing position in

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the international system. In reality, of course, the tale of the Northeast is only part of the story, just as the story of America’s turn to multilateralism after World War II was anything but predestined.

The multilateralist foreign policy that America’s leaders pursued during the Cold War was made possible by domestic as well as international circumstances and conditions that no longer obtain. For much of the Cold War, the Northeast retained its control over America’s international agenda. Meanwhile, party politics cut across regional boundaries, keeping political divisiveness over America’s involvement in international institutions in check. This is no longer the case. There is no overarching Soviet-style threat on the Eurasian landmass. Just as important, perhaps, is the emergence of a powerful sectional alliance between the American South and Mountain West. As the Northeast as lost its political dominance in the US political system, support for multilateralism has eroded, and Europe has become less central to Republican judgements about what is in America’s national interest.

Any chance George Bush has of winning re-election to the White House in four years depends critically on rebuilding the Reagan coalition in the Big L. The Northeast is not the regional prize that the Republicans are trying to win: the party needs the South and West. This was the lesson of Bush the elder’s humiliating defeat in 1992, as well as the son’s razor-thin Electoral College victory in November 2000. If there was any question about whether George W. Bush understood this, it was answered when the new President moved quickly to the “right” upon taking office in 2001. He moved to the right to win over the South and West by making Cabinet choices that would appeal to Republican interests in these regions, but also in the policy issues he chose to focus on, and the choices he made (e.g. the Kyoto Treaty, missile defense, North Korea). This White House appears much more willing to act unilaterally in foreign affairs than the Clinton administration ever was. No one should be surprised if Mr. Bush continues to play the unilateralist card when and where he can.

“When and where” is the operative phrase here, for Mr. Bush’s hold on power is fragile. The trouble is not just that the Congress is evenly divided between the two parties, with the Republicans having nothing more than what amounts to a one-vote edge: Vice President Dick Cheney’s tie-breaking vote in the Senate. More problematic, at least from the perspective of George Bush’s own political future, are the circumstances that led to his inauguration—the way the Florida recount was handled, the Supreme Court’s questionable 5 to 4 decision, and so on. The fact is George Bush lost the popular vote. Questions of legitimacy linger.

This means that there are limits to how far Mr. Bush can go to oblige Republican hard-liners. This was abundantly clear during the recent China spy plane incident, and it is instructive. In this instance, fears of a politically crippling Iranian-style hostage crisis forced the White House to jettison all the early bravado and settle for a negotiated solution that met China’s own hard-liners halfway.

Fearing a loss of public confidence, President Bush exercised what candidate Bush had counseled: self-restraint. Yet the President’s tone toward China
immediately hardened once the American crewman were safely on their way home. This only underscores how politically motivated the administration's foreign policy really is. The White House's rule seems to be this. When the political risks are acceptable, "go unilateral". When they are not, be pragmatic. Politics not principle is driving the president's foreign policy. No wonder the mass media is now drawing unflattering comparisons with Mr. Bush's predecessor: Bill Clinton.
References


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