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Transformational Leadership and U.S. Grand Strategy

Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE?

GEORGE W. BUSH likes to boast that he does not play “small ball.” *The Economist* describes him as “obsessed by the idea of being a ‘transformational’ president: not just a status-quo operator like Bill Clinton but a man who changes the direction of history.” But will he become that man?

Bush’s bid for a legacy of transformation rests on the three major changes he made to U.S. grand strategy after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001: reducing Washington’s reliance on permanent alliances and international institutions, expanding the traditional right of preemption into a new doctrine of preventive war, and advocating coercive democratization as a solution to Middle Eastern terrorism. Those changes, codified in the 2002 National Security Strategy, were widely understood as revolutionary at the time. The British journalist Philip Stephens, for example, wrote in March 2003 that he felt as if he were “present at the destruction” of the international order the Truman administration had created half a century earlier.

Transformation in this regard is more than ordinary adaptation; it implies a major alteration of U.S. grand strategy. Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the failure to find either weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or evidence of a connection between Saddam Hussein and 9/11, two of the three pillars of Bush’s effort at transformation

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have been shaken. Accordingly, Bush has increasingly emphasized the democratization component of his grand strategy. The 2006 National Security Strategy refers to democracy and freedom more than 200 times (three times as often as the 2002 document), downplays preventive war, and even includes a chapter on globalization (a subject Bush once privately derided as “mushy Clintonism”). The shift has been more than rhetorical: Bush’s diplomacy toward North Korea and Iran has recently been much more multilateral than it was during his first term.

Senior administration officials believe that Bush’s aggressive democratization will prove successful and that the next president will be bound to follow the broad lines of Bush’s new strategy. Vice President Dick Cheney expressed the administration’s confidence in January, predicting that in a decade observers will “look back on this period of time and see that liberating 50 million people in Afghanistan and Iraq really did represent a major, fundamental shift, obviously, in U.S. policy in terms of how we dealt with the emerging terrorist threat—and that we’ll have fundamentally changed circumstances in that part of the world.” An analysis of leadership theory and of previous presidents’ efforts to transform U.S. grand strategy, however, suggests that history’s verdict will be less favorable.

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL CENTURY

IN THE nineteenth century, U.S. grand strategy was simple, and its means were mostly unilateral: avoid entanglement in the European balance of power, dominate the Western Hemisphere, and keep an open door for trade in Asia. As the twentieth century dawned, however, the industrial power of the United States overtook that of Germany and the United Kingdom, and the transportation revolution effectively brought the New World nearer to the Old. These conditions led six presidents to attempt major transformations of U.S. grand strategy over the next hundred years.

Although William McKinley started out as a status quo president when he took office in 1897, he succumbed briefly to the temptation of colonial expansion after the Spanish-American War of 1898, leading the United States to acquire Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. But the vogue for colonialism did not last long; popular and congressional

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opinion shifted decisively against it after the beginning of a costly insurgency in the Philippines in 1899.

Theodore Roosevelt, McKinley's successor, sought to transform U.S. foreign policy to match the United States' new position in world politics by combining the use of hard power (expanding the U.S. Navy and enforcing the Monroe Doctrine) with that of soft power (mediating great-power disputes and supporting the creation of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague). He persuaded Congress to back his efforts to bolster U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere (building the Panama Canal, pressing the Platt Amendment—which gave Washington the prerogative to intervene in Cuban affairs—on Havana, and intervening in the Dominican Republic) but failed to overcome long-standing suspicions of balance-of-power politics in Congress and among the American public. As a result, his transformation proved untenable.

Woodrow Wilson, the next president to attempt a transformation of U.S. grand strategy, came into office focusing on domestic issues. He tried for years to avoid U.S. involvement in World War I, even winning reelection in 1916 on a peace platform. But Germany's adoption of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 prompted Wilson to enter the conflict, leading him to envision a transformation of world politics through the spread of democracy and the creation of new international institutions. Wilson's reach exceeded his grasp, and the 1920s and 1930s witnessed the rejection of his policies and the return of American attitudes that favored a more traditional distancing of the country from the European balance of power.

Franklin Roosevelt was the fourth president of the century to attempt to transform U.S. grand strategy, and, according to the historian John Lewis Gaddis, he was the first to succeed. After trying with limited success to educate Americans about the threat Hitler posed to international security, Roosevelt seized the opportunity provided by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor to commit the United States to multilateralism. He scrapped both isolationism and unilateralism and linked Wilsonian ideals to a pragmatic vision of the postwar world, combining the soft power of his Four Freedoms (freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear), which were incorporated into the Atlantic Charter, with the hard

power of the four (later five) policemen of the UN Security Council. He also laid the foundation for global economic stability by helping to set up the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund at Bretton Woods. Roosevelt was adept at combining hard and soft power, and his vision of the postwar world showed his understanding that, in Gaddis' words, "power is far easier to maintain ... when it's there by consent instead of coercion." Unlike Wilson, Gaddis argues, Roosevelt never neglected "the need to keep proclaimed interests from extending beyond actual capabilities."

The broad outlines of Roosevelt's strategy endured for more than a half century because Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, included some of its aspects when he created his own transformational policy in the postwar period. Using Roosevelt's strategy as a jumping-off point, Truman introduced such transformational elements as containment and permanent alliances. Crises such as the Soviet takeover of Czechoslovakia and the Korean War helped Truman overcome resistance from isolationists. Subsequent Cold War presidents worked within the framework Roosevelt and Truman had established and made incremental changes to it: Richard Nixon tilted toward China, Jimmy Carter emphasized human rights, and Ronald Reagan rejected *détente*. Even the successful foreign policy of George H. W. Bush, who presided over the end of the Cold War, was more a matter of brilliant intuition and management of rapid change on the ground than an attempt to change the world.

George W. Bush began his presidency as a traditional realist with little interest in foreign policy; his ambitions to transform U.S. grand strategy developed only after 9/11. As Gaddis argues, Bush's emerging doctrine was "Fukuyama plus force" and was designed to make terrorism obsolete by spreading democracy everywhere. Afghanistan was the obvious first target of the policy, and "Iraq was the most feasible place to strike the next blow." In the aftermath of 9/11, Bush was able to get the majority of the public to support his policy. He obtained a congressional resolution approving the use of force in Iraq and won reelection in 2004. But public and congressional support has eroded as the main rationale for the war, Saddam's pursuit of WMD, has proved hollow and the occupation of Iraq has become a long and costly endeavor.

STIMULUS AND RESPONSE

SURVEYING THESE attempted shifts in grand strategy, it is notable that only Franklin Roosevelt's and Truman's proved to be durable (the jury is still out on George W. Bush's). Given the challenges of foreign policy leadership, this is not surprising. Although presidents often prefer the relative freedom they enjoy in foreign policy to the frustrations of domestic affairs, they hardly have a free hand abroad. A president pursuing transformational objectives faces many obstacles. He must intuit the direction and pace of events, devise appropriate and feasible strategies, win the support of diverse audiences at home and abroad, and find the right mix of hard and soft power to implement his policies. Moreover, although the president can undertake some initiatives on his own, major foreign policy transformations fail without congressional support. Even Truman's policy of containing the Soviet Union was not firmly established until Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg organized bipartisan congressional backing for it.

A crisis—Germany's torpedoing of American ships in 1917, Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, al Qaeda's attacks in 2001—is usually needed to liberate a president from the constraints of pressure groups and bureaucratic inertia. In the absence of a crisis, even a significant threat may not galvanize public and congressional support for a president's transformational foreign policy. Despite the rise of German power before the United States' entry into the two world wars, the American public was reluctant to use force until directly threatened. The challenge is greater yet in the absence of such threats, which is a major reason why Clinton's talk of democratic enlargement and engagement was never translated into transformational policy. Many presidents, such as Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt (before 1941), and Lyndon Johnson, have found it easier to leave a legacy of transformation in domestic policy than in foreign policy.

Although a crisis is usually necessary for a transformational policy to succeed, it is never sufficient. Luck often plays a major role (think of Wilson's untimely stroke in 1919 or Hitler's foolish declaration of war on the United States in 1941). Each president's personality and leadership skills also matter. Three capabilities relating to the exercise of soft power are particularly relevant to a president's ability to attract

followers at home and abroad. The first, policy vision, is the ability to articulate an inspiring picture of the future. Grand speeches are not enough; anyone can produce a wish list. Effective visions must accurately diagnose the world situation, balancing realism with risk and ideals with capabilities. Roosevelt was good at this; Wilson was not. The second is emotional intelligence, the self-knowledge and discipline that allow leaders to project personal magnetism. Successfully managing the impression one makes requires some of the talents good actors possess. Reagan's Hollywood career served him well in this regard. The third, communication, helps a leader to inspire domestic and foreign audiences.

Three other abilities are more closely related to a leader's exercise of hard power. Organizational capacity is a president's ability to manage the structures of government to shape and implement policy, including supervising advisers in order to ensure a flow of accurate information about the inputs and outputs of decisions. Without sound organizational skills, presidents can easily fall into the emperor's trap of only hearing how beautiful their new clothes are. Political skill, the art of finding the means to achieve the ends set forth in one's vision, whether by bargaining, buying, or bullying, is obviously crucial. A president cannot achieve goals just for narrow groups of supporters; he must use his successes to build political capital with wider circles of followers. Johnson, for example, was a brilliantly successful politician for most of his career in the Senate, but he could not replicate that success in the international sphere. Finally, a successful foreign policy leader needs what theorists of business leadership call "contextual intelligence," the ability to understand an evolving environment and to match resources with objectives by moving with rather than against the flow of events. Contextual intelligence allows a leader to act on hunches based on informed intuition, what Bismarck once described as the statesman's task of hearing God's footsteps as he marched through history and trying to grasp his coattails. Although often faulted for his purportedly limited cognitive skills, Reagan had good contextual intelligence.

GRAND (AND NOT SO GRAND) STRATEGISTS

BEARING THESE aspects of leadership in mind, it is interesting to compare George W. Bush with Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. At first

glance, the courses of their presidencies suggest that crises and their contexts, rather than the traits of individual presidents, determine whether a president becomes a successful transformational leader. All three started their terms focused on domestic concerns but then faced a foreign policy crisis that led them to seek transformational objectives through the hard power of war wrapped in the soft power of democracy promotion. But that is not the whole story. Individuals matter. Roosevelt displayed the best contextual intelligence of the three leaders, and his efforts to rearm in the face of Hitler's threat before Pearl Harbor helped prepare the national response after the crisis. In contrast, Bush paid little attention to the threat of transnational terrorism before 9/11. For his part, Wilson could not draw a clear picture in his mind of U.S. interests during the early years of World War I. Moreover, his deficiencies in transactional leadership skills (the ability to bargain and build coalitions), particularly in his later years, contributed to his failure to achieve his transformational objectives.

All three men devoted considerable effort to trying to persuade their followers to accept their picture of the world and the appropriateness of their transformational policy. Wilson initially succeeded in educating a majority of the American people about his transformational policy. He was a highly skilled communicator, and at one point his vision of the League of Nations was quite popular. Indeed, Wilson's rhetoric about democratization has become part of the canon of U.S. foreign policy even though it was rejected in the two decades that immediately followed his presidency. Former presidential adviser David Gergen argues that Roosevelt was "also much more of a public educator than Bush, talking people carefully through the challenges and choices the nation faced, cultivating public opinion, building up a sturdy foundation of support before he acted. As he showed during the lead-up to World War II, he would never charge as far in front of his followers as Bush."

Bush seems to be less patient than Roosevelt was. In the words of a prominent journalist who spent many hours interviewing Bush, "He has a transformational temperament. He likes to shake things up. That was the key to going into Iraq." Political scientist Hugh Heclo noted in a largely sympathetic appraisal written during Bush's first term that "Bush clearly understands the need for persuading

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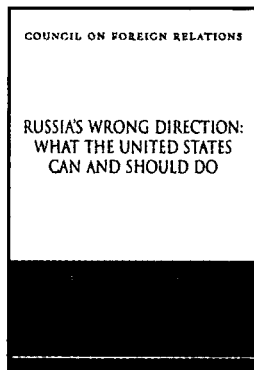
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people to his point of view, but it is also possible to sell people on things without broadening their horizons. The paradox is that successful teaching requires ongoing learning on the teacher's part." Yet Bush's disposition and poor organizational skills discourage such learning. It is true that in his second term Bush has made an effort to change the debate on Iraq by publicly acknowledging new facts. But as one of the designers of this strategy told *The New York Times*, this required "admitting some mistakes and that was quite a fight, because the president doesn't talk that way."

Overall, the similarities between Bush and Wilson are uncanny. Both highly religious and moralistic men, they were both elected president initially without a majority of the popular vote. Bush portrays the world in black and white rather than shades of gray; so did Wilson. Bush was successful in Congress at first with his transformational domestic agenda and paid little heed to foreign policy until a crisis struck; same with Wilson. Bush has proposed the promotion of democracy and freedom abroad as the central feature of his foreign policy vision, as did Wilson. In fact, many of Bush's speeches sound as though they could have been delivered by Wilson, although Wilson was a better rhetorician. Bush defined a vision that failed to balance ideals with national capacities; Wilson made the same miscalculation. Both, moreover, failed to manage information flows in their administrations.

A close adviser remarked of Wilson: "Whenever a question is presented he keeps an absolutely open mind and welcomes all suggestion or advice which will lead to a correct decision. ... Once a decision is made it is final and there is an absolute end to all advice and suggestion. There is no moving him after that." Secretary of State Robert Lansing noted in 1917 that "even established facts were ignored if they did not fit in with [Wilson's] intuitive sense, [his] semi-divine power to select the right." Bush displays many of Wilson's flaws. Gergen describes Bush as "a top-down, no-nonsense, decisive, macho leader who sets his eye on the far horizon and doesn't 'go wobbly' getting there." But strength of character is not an adequate substitute for contextual intelligence and organizational competence.

Persistence can be admirable, but it is dangerous when it slows the process of making corrections. Like Wilson, Bush is not very receptive to new information once his mind is made up. Former Secretary of

State Colin Powell has said of Bush that “he knows kind of what he wants to do and what he wants to hear is how to get it done.” In the words of Powell’s former chief of staff, Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, Bush was, in dealing with Iraq, “too aloof, too distant from the details of postwar planning. Underlings exploited Bush’s detachment.” A former White House official told me privately that Bush believed his military commanders had enough troops in large part because he was insufficiently aware of the climate of fear in Donald Rumsfeld’s Pentagon that impeded full and frank answers to questions.

Bush also did not manage the intelligence-gathering process well before the war: he neither pressed for second (and third) opinions nor took unwelcome advice into account. Like others, Bush may have been misled by faulty intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, but he and Cheney compounded the problem. A 2004 report by Richard Kerr, deputy director of central intelligence under George H. W. Bush, concluded that the White House “apparently paid little or no attention to prewar assessments by the Central Intelligence Agency that warned of major cultural and political obstacles to stability in postwar Iraq.” Robert Hutchings, chair of Bush’s National Intelligence Council from 2003 to 2005, has noted that “frankly, senior officials simply weren’t ready to pay attention to analysis that didn’t conform to their own optimistic scenarios.”

Fortunately for Bush, there are also important differences separating him from Wilson. Bush appears to have an emotional intelligence and self-mastery that Wilson lacked. He relies less on inspirational oratory than did Wilson and is reportedly less brittle and more likeable than the stiff and aloof Wilson, who was supposedly more interested in people than persons. Whether these differences in leadership traits and skills will allow Bush to succeed where Wilson failed is unclear. Successful transformations have been rare in the history of U.S. grand strategy. Bush’s legacy now depends largely on the still uncertain outcome of the preventive war he launched in Iraq. His case remains open, but the odds are against him and he is running out of time. 🌐

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