

Chapter 7

The Foreign Policy Establishment and the “Islamic Threat”

The events of 9/11 precipitated unanimous agreement in the foreign policy establishment that the “War on Terror” would henceforth frame US foreign policy. Barely had the ashes settled from the twin towers when loud proclamations that “Islamic terrorists” represented existential threats to the United States began to echo in the public sphere. From then on, US policy would be geared towards “keeping Americans safe” from Muslim “evildoers.” President Bush even stated that there was a global Islamist conspiracy to create a Muslim empire from Europe to Southeast Asia, which the US must prevent at all costs.¹ These claims fly in the face of reality, as the previous chapter outlined, since Islamist organizations typically emerge from local conditions and are focused on those conditions. What then lies behind this Islamophobic rhetoric? Examining the agenda behind this focus on the “Islamic threat” is the subject of this chapter.

We begin with the neoconservative vision of the post–Cold War world, because it was this logic that informed the United States’ response to 9/11. Even though Obama dropped the phrase “War on Terror” in an effort to rehabilitate US imperialism after Bush’s failures, he nevertheless continued Bush-era policies. We therefore start with the story of the neocons and their rise to power, with an emphasis on locating this strand of thought within the larger foreign policy establishment. Broadly speaking, there are two factions in the policy establishment, the neocons and the “balance-of-forces realist” camp. At times these camps debate, and at others they cooperate. In short, while there are differences in rhetoric and at times strategy, the neocon and liberal/realist factions of the foreign policy establishment are united in their commitment to the project of US imperialism. The overarching threat of “Islamic terrorism” provides a useful cover for their imperial ambitions.

The Neocons

The term “neoconservative” was coined in the early 1970s by Michael Harrington, who is associated with the democratic socialist tradition in the United States, as a way to distance former allies (some liberals, others socialists) who had started to gravitate to the right.² These turncoats included figures such as Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Michael Novak, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Most of the first generation of neocons supported the US’s war with Vietnam and resented the anti-war movement. They saw themselves as liberals who believed in the idea that America was a force for good in the world and that it deserved to intervene militarily. They stood against the “bad liberals” who championed George McGovern’s bid for the presidency in 1972, viewing them as operating with a politics of “appeasement” and liberal guilt.³

The neocons’ vision of imperialism is premised on the notion of American exceptionalism: “a pervasive faith in the uniqueness, immutability, and superiority of the country’s founding liberal principles, accompanied by a conviction that the United States has a

special destiny among nations.”⁴ This vision of the United States as a unique “beacon for other nations” because of its liberal values is taken for granted within the policy establishment as a whole.⁵ However, what is different about the neocons is their singular commitment to unipolarism and militarism. As Danny Cooper writes, the neocons “have been nothing if not consistent in their belief that only overwhelming American military preponderance can prevent the outbreak of great power war . . . [and] that multipolar international orders lead to great power war.” In short, what defines the neoconservatives is the notion of a unipolar world dominated by the United States, which they believe is in the interests of all; “American military preponderance is good for America, and good for the world.”⁶

It follows, therefore, that they drew different conclusions than the liberals about the United States’ role in the world after the defeat in Vietnam. As Gary Dorien notes, the liberal imperialism of the 1940s and ’50s “combined a liberal internationalist commitment to the United Nations and international law with a balance of power realism in diplomacy and an ideological abhorrence of Communism.”⁷ After Vietnam, Cold War liberals backed away from open confrontation and intervention, a posture the neocons saw as weak. For them, any accommodation to the Soviet camp was surrender to the enemy in the name of realism. Alternatively, they advocated an interventionist strategy with huge increases in military spending.

Several neocons held high positions during the Reagan era, such as Bill Kristol (Irving Kristol’s son), Richard Perle, Richard Pipes, and Paul Wolfowitz. They retained the “neo” prefix in order to differentiate themselves from the isolationist (non-interventionist) wing of conservatism. Some even stood to the right of Reagan—such as Podhoretz, editor of the neocon magazine *Commentary*, who argued that liberals were fools and that gay people opposed war because of their lust for “helpless, good-looking boys.”⁸ Frank Gaffney, who founded the Center for Strategic Policy (CSP) think tank, argued that the Soviet leader Gorbachev had seduced Reagan with false promises.⁹

When the Soviet Union did eventually collapse, the next generation of neocons developed a vision for the post-Cold War world that was premised on the notion of American dominance in a unipolar world. Charles Krauthammer, a nationally syndicated journalist best known for his writing in the *Washington Post*, articulated this position in a 1990 piece titled “The Unipolar Moment” published in preeminent foreign policy journal *Foreign Affairs*.¹⁰ Krauthammer argued that the end of the Cold War had created a “single pole of world power.” This single superpower, the United States, could therefore intervene anywhere it wanted around the world and set the terms of world politics. In order to realize this vision, Krauthammer continued that it was necessary to marginalize the arguments of the realists and the isolationists in the policy establishment, who did not realize how important it was for one hegemonic power to rule in order for there to be global stability.

This article was followed by a report prepared for the Pentagon by Paul Wolfowitz (at the request of Dick Cheney) with the help of Scooter Libby, Richard Perle, Zalmay Khalilzad, and others. The report, called the “Defense Planning Guidance” (DPG), was not intended for public

consumption but was leaked to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The document stated that its first objective was to “prevent the re-emergence of a new rival” to the United States.¹¹ The US must “establish and protect a new order”; potential competitors should be convinced that “they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests.”¹² In short, a *pax Americana* should be established on the military, political, and economic fronts. Even advanced industrialized nations would be discouraged from seeking to “overturn the [United States’] established political and economic order.”¹³ It followed from this that the US would act alone if it needed to, in a unilateral manner, with no questions asked. This, the report stated, would guarantee world stability in a way that neither the United Nations nor any other multilateral coalitions could.

In order to maintain world stability, the report continued, the US was right to wage preemptive war on any aggressor. It named a number of state actors as aggressors, from Iraq and North Korea to India and Japan. Post-Soviet Russia was also viewed as a potentially destabilizing force. Additionally, pre-emptive strikes were warranted against any threat to US interests. At the time, these ideas were critiqued harshly by the policy establishment; the report was a political embarrassment for the elder Bush. The backlash was so strong that Wolfowitz believed his political career to be over. The document was revised, and a softer version replaced the original. It was not yet the neocons’ time—as we will see shortly, the 1990s were to be the era of “humanitarian imperialism,” led by Clinton and the liberal imperialists.

What is noteworthy about the document, though, is that the enemies it named were diverse and the list of national interests was broad; these included “access to vital raw materials, primarily Persian Gulf oil; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles, threats to US citizens from terrorism or regional or local conflict, and threats to US society from narcotics trafficking.”¹⁴ Thus, “terrorism” was named as one among several threats faced by the United States. In fact, Krauthammer’s article didn’t even mention terrorism,¹⁵ an omission for which he would later atone in an article where he stated that the “new threat [Islamism] is as evil as the old Evil Empire.” Several neocons and their sympathizers began to advance this notion that “Islamic terrorism” needed to be viewed as the new post-Cold War enemy, as discussed in chapter 4. Daniel Pipes (first-generation neocon Richard Pipes’s son) echoed this point, writing, “Like communism during the Cold War, Islam is a threat to the West.” In short, even before the events of 9/11, the neocons were attempting to replace the Soviet Union with a new archnemesis.¹⁶ However, only after 9/11 could this notion come to fruition. Norman Podhoretz, in his 2007 book *World War IV: The Long Struggle against Islamofascism*, compared Islamism to fascism and argued that the struggle against “Islamofascism” was just as important as the previous world wars. In part, this line of argument, with its association between fascism and Islam, came from the neoconservatives’ right-wing, Likud-style Zionism, a topic to which we turn next.

The Israel Connection

In a *Wall Street Journal* piece titled “What the Heck Is a ‘Neocon’?,” leading neocon Max Boot stated unequivocally that “support for Israel” has been and remains a “key tenet of neoconservatism.”¹⁷ Many of the first generation of neocons were Jewish and found themselves alienated by the New Left’s sympathy for the Palestinian struggle and for third-world causes more broadly. Yet the Jewish experience does not automatically translate into a hard-right Likud-style politics. As Richard Seymour observes, “It is clearly the case that, for many Jewish neoconservatives, their Jewish identity mattered; but there are surely a variety of ways of experiencing life as a Jewish immigrant in the United States, and many more ways of relating to that experience.”¹⁸

Thus, the roots of neocon hard-line Zionism lie less in its Jewish adherents’ ethnic identities and more in their politics and in a particular worldview that sees Israel as instrumental in advancing American power.¹⁹ If the United States was going to maintain its dominance in the Middle East it followed that Israel, the most pro-American country in the region, had to be its key ally. As Dorien notes, most “unipolarist leaders were Jewish neoconservatives who took for granted that a militantly pro-Israel policy was in America’s interest. Wolfowitz, Perle, Podhoretz, Krauthammer, [Ben]Wattenberg, [Joshua] Muravchik, both Kristols, Kagan, Boot, and Kaplan fit that description.”²⁰ Yet this position was also held by prominent non-Jews such as Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, James Woolsey, Francis Fukuyama, Zalmay Khalilzad, Linda Chavez, and others.

At any rate, Israel has always been central to neocon thinking. Thus, three of the lobby groups/think tanks associated with neoconservatism focus solely on the Middle East—the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), and the Middle East Forum (MEF). All three are pro-Zionist institutions that spend time and resources analyzing US strategy in the Middle East and lobbying for those positions. Additionally, neocons have held positions on the boards of other think tanks such as the conservative and pro-Zionist American Enterprise Institute (AEI), with which they are closely associated, as well as the right-wing Hudson Institute. A neocon and senior fellow of the Hudson Institute, the Israeli-born Meyrav Wurmser, established the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) in 1998 to translate unsavory news media articles from the Middle East for domestic media consumption. Another co-founder was a former colonel in the Israeli military intelligence organization.²¹ Before the establishment of Bill Kristol’s *Weekly Standard* in 1997 (incidentally located in the same building as the AEI office), the leading neocon publication was *Commentary*, which Podhoretz edited for thirty-five years. The journal was published by the American Jewish Committee, whose stated mission is to “safeguard the welfare and security of Jews in the United States, in Israel and throughout the world.”²² This translated into a pro-Zionist posture at *Commentary*.

Concretely speaking, neocon positions on Israel are in line with right wing Zionist or Likud-style politics, combined with an abhorrence of any negotiations that show compromise and weakness. It follows, therefore, that the neocons were strongly opposed to the Oslo Accords, which were based on the principle of mutual recognition through a process of “land for peace.”

When Yasser Arafat signed the agreement on the White House lawn in 1993, President Clinton told him that he could proclaim a "state" in the Occupied Territories and become its president. In exchange for US and Israeli recognition of this "state," Arafat was asked to sign away long-standing—and historically just—Palestinian claims on three major issues: the status of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees and the right to return, and sovereignty over their land. The neocons viewed even this as a mistake. And even though Israel had no intention of upholding any of its pledges, and the United States had no intention of forcing Israel to comply, the neocons vociferously opposed the Oslo Accords, seeing the deal as an Israeli, and by extension American, retreat. Consistent with their opposition to the deals Reagan struck with the Soviet Union, the neocons argued that Oslo would lead to the dissolution of Israeli power. Frank Gaffney and the CSP stated that the “land for peace” formula was nothing more than a series of “*retreats* by Israel—unilateral, headlong surrenders of strategically vital real estate” to the Arabs who were “committed to its destruction” (emphasis in original).²³

In 1996, the neocons advised prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with whom they continue to have close ties, that what Israel needed to do to secure itself was to destabilize and overthrow Arab governments. They published a document titled “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm,” arguing that Israel should attack Syrian military targets in Lebanon and even Syria if necessary.²⁴ At the time, conventional wisdom saw Iraq as a major threat to Israel, and the neocons urged Netanyahu to support the Jordanian Hashemites’ challenge to Iraq’s borders.

This argument was similar to a position developed in the 1980s by the right-wing Likud party in Israel.²⁵ The argument went that Israel should fragment, dissolve, or otherwise weaken the neighboring Arab states as a way to shore up its own safety. The logic was that since most of the support for the Palestinian cause came from Arab nations, weakening the latter would help destroy the Palestinian movement. As Noam Chomsky put it, “It is only natural to expect that Israel will seek to destabilize the surrounding states, for essentially the reasons that led South Africa on a similar course in the region. In fact, given continuing military tensions, that might be seen virtually as a security imperative.”²⁶ When Israel undertook the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, it was pursuing this vision. It would, however, come to realize over the course of years that such a unilateral war-oriented strategy was not going to succeed.

Nevertheless, this thinking continued on both sides of the Atlantic and was the basis, Stephen Sniegoski argues, for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Bush plan to destabilize the Middle East in order to reconstruct it again based on the neocons’ vision. He writes that in contrast to the [United States’] traditional goal of stability [as a way to secure access to oil], the neocons called for destabilizing existing regimes. Of course, the neocons couched their policy in terms of the eventual *restabilization* of the region on a democratic basis. . . . Likudnik strategy saw the benefit of regional destabilization for its own sake—creating as it would an environment of weak, disunified states or statelets involved in internal and external conflicts that could

be easily dominated by Israel . . . [and] without outside support, the Palestinians would be forced to accede to whatever type of peaceful solution Israel offered.²⁷

Such is the relationship and coincidence of interests between the Likud right in Israel and the neocons in the United States.

Conservative figures close to the neocons have also had a long and productive relationship with the political right in Israel. For instance, leading Orientalists like Bernard Lewis, Elie Kedourie, and Panyotidis Vatikiotis played a significant role in developing the language of “Islamic terrorism.” They presented their views on this subject at an important conference organized by the Jonathan Institute—then headed by Benjamin Netanyahu—held in Jerusalem in 1979. The conference was meant, in Netanyahu’s words, to engage in a discussion of “the two main antagonists of democracy in the postwar world, communist totalitarianism and Islamic radicalism.”²⁸ Other presenters at the conference included the neocon Daniel Patrick Moynihan and several Israeli and American politicians. In short, the language of “Islamic terrorism” has been in the making since the late 1970s.

Lewis argued at the conference that the term “Islamic terrorism” was apt because Islam had always been political and had never seen the need to separate politics from religion. In other words, although terrorism carried out by Christians or Jews is not typically referred to as “Christian terrorism” or “Jewish terrorism,” the linking of Islam to the violence of Muslims was deemed to be appropriate. Lewis explained that it was “inevitable that when the Islamic world confronts the problem of terrorism, that problem, too, assumes a religious, indeed in a sense an Islamic, aspect.”²⁹ Several participants at the conference rewrote history, drawing for instance on the legend of the assassins, to show that Islam was inherently violent. Elie Kedourie cherry-picked historical examples from various Muslim kingdoms to knit together a narrative of transhistoric “Islamic terrorism.” To stress the point even more, Kedourie declared (without recourse to any facts) that there is a “prevalent (and justifiable) impression that an appreciable part of terrorist activities today originate, and frequently take place in, the world of Islam, and particularly in its Arab portion.”³⁰

These arguments resonated within Israel in the 1980s, as the country was going through a series of changes. In the mid-1970s, the parties of the religious right (the *haredim*) started to play a greater role in domestic politics. These parties were also responsible for raising the level of hateful rhetoric against non-Jews. One rabbi stated that the “Arabs are a cancer, cancer, cancer in the midst of us. . . . There is only one solution, no other, no partial solution: the Arabs out! Out! . . . Let me become defense minister for two months and you will not have a single cockroach around here.”³¹ As Fred Halliday notes, it was in this context that anti-Arab and anti-Muslim rhetoric came together to a much greater extent, especially among the settler community as well as the nationalist and religious parties. Yet, these sentiments did not prevent the Likud party from allying itself with the precursor organization to Hamas, the Mujamma. When the Israeli state recognized and formally licensed the Mujamma in 1978, the logic was simple—the Islamists’ hostility to the secular left made them useful allies. At times, Israel even funded these forces.

As the 1980s progressed, however, the Iranian revolution and its support of the Shia movement in Lebanon, combined with the emergence of Hamas, caused a shift in strategy. As Halliday writes, “By the late 1980s and the early 1990s it did, therefore, appear as if Israel was locked into an overarching battle with the Islamic world.”³² It is from here that the linkages between Islamism and fascism begin to take root, the product of an interchange between Western Orientalists and Likud political thinkers in Israel. These forces worked to convince politicians that “Islamic terrorism” was the next great threat. Daniel Pipes, writing on behalf of the Middle East Forum (MEF) in the 1990s, stated his opposition to Oslo by casting suspicion on the intentions of the Arab leadership and warning of the “threat of militant Islam against America and the West.”³³ But despite the efforts of the neocons and Israeli lobbyists, this attitude toward “Islamic terrorism” did not significantly impact the rhetoric or policy of the first Bush or Clinton administrations, as discussed in chapter 4. The 1990s were the era of liberal imperialism, and the neocons would have to wait their turn.

Before we turn to Clinton and humanitarian imperialism, however, it is worth noting that many of the think tanks and lobbying groups cited above are not exclusively neocon hubs. WINEP, for instance, has a “mix of neoconservative and Clintonite views,” according to Maria Ryan.³⁴ WINEP was founded by Martin Indyk, who formerly served as the research director of the pro-Israel lobby group American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). James Woolsey, Perle, and Wolfowitz served on its board, and Muravchik and Pipes were adjunct scholars. During the 1990s, though, WINEP was largely supportive of Clinton’s policies and many of its leading lights, including Indyk, joined the Clinton administration. Unqualified support for Zionism is a bi-partisan requirement in the US policy establishment. Similarly, as of 2007, JINSA’s board of fifty-five advisors included only four neocons. As we shall see in the next section, neocons are represented on the boards of various realist/liberal imperialist think tanks as well. In short, the neocons are an integral part of a foreign policy establishment that is pro-Israel and pro-US imperialism. The differences emerge in tactics, strategy, and rhetoric.

Humanitarian Imperialism

Liberal rhetoric has long been deployed in the interest of imperial aims. Richard Seymour, in his book *The Liberal Defence of Murder*, outlines this sordid history, stating that the “tradition of imperial liberalism is almost as old and perplexing as liberalism itself. On the face of it, a doctrine that appears to stress human equality and universalism ought to have nothing to do with a violent system of domination and exploitation. Yet, for many liberals, the virtues of empire were then *very much as they are now* for ‘liberal interventionists’: it promised pedagogy, cultural therapy, economic development, the rule of law, liberty, and even, sometimes, feminism”³⁵ (emphasis added).

In a similar vein, Jean Bricmont argues in his book *Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell Wars* that the “ideology of our times, at least when it comes to legitimizing war, is no longer Christianity, nor Kipling’s ‘white man’s burden’ or the ‘civilizing mission’ of

the French Republic, but is a certain discourse on human rights and democracy, mixed in with a particular representation of the Second World War. This discourse justifies Western interventions in the Third World in the name of the defense of democracy and human rights or against the ‘new Hitlers.’”³⁶ While Bricmont may be too hasty in dismissing the uses of the “white man’s burden” logic, given the revival of Orientalism in the post-9/11 era (as discussed in chapter 3), he is correct to point to democracy and human rights as the key rationales for war. These liberal arguments, however, aren’t only the tools of liberal imperialists—they are part of the neocons’ arsenal as well. After all, the Bush administration used women’s rights as justification for the 2001 war on Afghanistan, and named “democracy-building” a goal in Iraq. The difference between the neoconservative and liberal imperialist wings of the policy establishment lies in the latter’s recourse to multilateralism and coalition-building when possible (though not always), as well as a willingness to employ diplomacy.

During the 1990s, the Clinton administration reworked the United States’ image by using the language of “humanitarian intervention.” Anthony Lake, Clinton’s national security advisor, argued that during the era of “the Cold War we contained a global threat to market democracies.” Now, after the collapse of the Soviet threat, it was possible to “consolidate the victory of democracy and open markets.”³⁷ Consequently, the Clinton vision was about promoting democracy through neoliberal reforms. The world needed to be made safe for neoliberal capitalism—and Clinton took it upon himself to penetrate areas of the world previously under Soviet control. As Jean-Marc Coicaud puts it, “Clinton made American economic success and free trade the defining aspect of his presidency.”³⁸ Where military intervention was needed, Clinton resorted to multilateral institutions like the UN or NATO. The key voices in his foreign policy team were Lake, Madeleine Albright, Warren Christopher, and his close friend and advisor Strobe Talbott (of the centrist Brookings Institute). This team advocated the use of military power to pursue more humanitarian goals than before and underscored the priorities of democracy and human rights. They were also opposed to the “go it alone” style, and advocated that, as much as possible, the US should pursue a multilateral strategy.³⁹ Clinton’s “new Wilsonian” view, which stood in contrast to the elder Bush’s balance-of-power realism, was premised on the notion that US policy had entered, as Noam Chomsky put it, a “noble phase” with a “saintly glow.”⁴⁰

The most important think tank associated with the multilateralist camp of the foreign policy establishment is the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), which publishes the journal *Foreign Affairs*. Its board of directors includes Richard Haass (CFR president since 2003), Zbigniew Brzezinski (former national security advisor to Jimmy Carter), Joseph Nye (theorist of “soft power”), Madeline Albright, Colin Powell, Richard Holbrooke, Strobe Talbott, Fouad Ajami (who was part of the Bush inner circle that framed the response to 9/11),⁴¹ and others such as neocon Elliott Abrams, who is a senior fellow. While CFR veers towards the realist side, neocon views are represented within it. Similarly, another influential think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), includes realists like Sam Nunn, David Abshire,

Richard Armitage, Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft, Joseph Nye, as well as neocons like Zalmay Khalilzad.

It should therefore come as no surprise that these individuals talk to one another and vie for influence within the broader political arena. When they disagree it is typically around strategy or rhetoric, not the overall aim of maintaining US hegemony. For instance, back in the 1950s when the Orientalists were arguing that Islam and communism were incompatible (as discussed in chapter 4), the newly formed CFR (founded in 1954) took a position against this thesis. Its Middle East strategist at the time wrote that “Islam cannot be counted on to serve as such a barrier [to the USSR]. The theory that communism and Soviet influence could never make inroads in the Moslem world because they are materialistic and atheistic has not been borne out. Religion does have a significant place in Middle Eastern society. It colors both popular and official attitudes. But it does not establish absolute immunity to a political virus such as fascism or communism.”⁴² In short, CFR offered a realist view of how the US might maintain its power in the Middle East. This is a difference of strategy, not of goals and outcomes.

The first “humanitarian” mission of the 1990s was Clinton’s continuation of George H.W. Bush’s Operation Restore Hope in Somalia in 1993. UN troops, under the leadership of the US, were sent to address the food crisis and feed the hungry—yet the troops arrived months after those most threatened by hunger had already died of starvation. When eighteen US soldiers were killed in the now-famous Black Hawk Down incident, US troops departed and left the East African nation worse off than when they arrived. This intervention prefigured what was to come. Despite this, liberals provided cover for Clinton’s “humanitarianism.” Former leftists like Christopher Hitchens, Paul Berman, and Michael Ignatieff cheered on this new imperialism, as did New Left icons like Daniel Cohn-Bendit.

Of course, the United States did not intervene in every humanitarian crisis—the most famous case being the Rwandan genocide. Nor would the Clinton administration truly adopt multilateralism. For instance, the United States refused to sign an agreement, supported by a majority of the world’s countries, to ban the use of antipersonnel landmines. Neither did the Clinton administration always seek the consent of the UN Security Council before waging war—the NATO-led war on Serbia in 1999 was carried out without UN authorization. Similarly, Clinton did not go through UN channels before bombing Iraq (with British help) in 1998. Phyllis Bennis shows convincingly that even while Clinton used the rhetoric of “assertive multilateralism,” he employed Bush-style unilateralism well before 9/11. She adds that he cynically used the UN to provide “multilateral cover” for US goals, and that Clinton’s “humanitarian interventions” were in reality a disguise for “unilateral militarism.”⁴³

Despite this, the neocons continued to maintain their ideological differences with Clinton, writing several critiques of his foreign policy. In 1996 Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan published an important essay in *Foreign Affairs* titled “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy.” Rejecting balance-of-power realism, they argued that “in a world in which peace and American security depend on American power and the will to use it, the main threat the United States faces now and in the future is its own weakness. American hegemony is the only reliable defense against a

breakdown of peace and international order. The appropriate goal of American foreign and defense policy, therefore, is to preserve that hegemony as far into the future as possible.”⁴⁴ This “neo-Reaganite” policy was called “benevolent global hegemony” because it asserted that what was good for the United States was generally good for the world as well. As an aside, we might note that this was not a radically new idea, given the concept of “benevolent supremacy” or Luce’s post–World War II–era “American Century” (discussed in chapter 4). What *was* new in the late 1990s was the willingness among the adherents of this policy to use the word “empire” more openly.⁴⁵ The rhetorical reticence of the postwar era had finally faded away.

While one might argue that Clinton’s vision was not so different from the neocons’, it was, at least, packaged in more sophisticated language. As Maria Ryan writes, there was significant convergence between the neoconservative objectives and those of the Clinton administration. To be sure, the language some of the neocons used was more explicit. They openly prioritized the credibility of NATO and were frank about why a US and NATO victory was important. Clinton presented a softer image, claiming he was also motivated by humanitarian considerations—and perhaps he was—but even for Clinton humanitarianism alone was not enough to compel intervention.⁴⁶

Towards the end of the 1990s, his administration stated that the US was an “indispensable nation,” and that because of its unmatched power and its values it could “stand taller and see farther” than others. Therefore its dominance of the world was necessarily benign: it was not based on coercion but rather on the attractiveness of American values, its commodities, and its popular culture.⁴⁷ This is what Joseph Nye refers to as “soft power.” (Nye served in the Clinton administration and is on the board of the CFR). While they might quibble over the details, this vision of US dominance is shared by all sections of the policy establishment.

September 11 and the Bush Doctrine

Almost immediately after 9/11, the Bush administration started to look for ways to attack Iraq. As Richard Clarke, then “counterterrorism czar,” reveals in his book *Against All Enemies*, President Bush took a few people aside and said to them: “I know you have a lot to do and all . . . but I want you, as soon as you can, to go back over everything, everything. See if Saddam did this. See if he’s linked in any way.”⁴⁸ This effort to target Iraq was part of the larger neocon strategy of destabilizing the Middle East. The Bush Doctrine, as it came to be known, laid out in the National Security Strategy document released in 2002 enshrined neoconservative foreign policy.

The key element of the Bush Doctrine was that it proclaimed the United States’ unilateral right to wage preventive war—to attack another sovereign nation not because it directly threatened the United States but because it could *potentially* pose a threat. It gave the president discretion to determine what constituted a threat. Thus, if a nation “harbored terrorists,” developed weapons of mass destruction, or otherwise acted in ways that went against the US’s interests, it would be subject to attack and invasion. Another key aspect of the Bush Doctrine was the imperative to put down the rise of any rival that might challenge US hegemony. The

NSS document states: “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military buildup in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”⁴⁹ This translated into US military presence in the Middle East and Central Asia, considered “hot spots” due to their oil and natural gas resources as well as their closeness to potential rivals like China, India, and Russia. The US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were designed to accomplish both of the aforementioned aims: to put down potential threats and dissuade potential adversaries.

The leaked Wolfowitz DPG report from the early 1990s—the report so roundly scorned by the policy establishment—was now being put into practice against the backdrop of the tragedy of 9/11. The neocons, as well as others sympathetic to their vision, understood the historic opportunity the 9/11 attacks presented. Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser and later secretary of state, put it succinctly when she told her senior national security staff shortly after 9/11 to think about how to “capitalize on these opportunities” which were “shifting the tectonic plates in international politics” to the United States’ advantage.⁵⁰ Yet capitalizing on this opportunity to realize the neocon vision also meant orchestrating an elaborate public relations campaign designed to elicit public support and stifle criticism. Enter the War on Terror and the language of Islamophobia.

Stephen Sheehi has argued that the rhetorical response to 9/11 was worked out by a group of academics, journalists, policy makers, and experts who were invited to strategy sessions at the White House. As Wolfowitz explained, “The US government, especially the Pentagon, is incapable of producing the kinds of ideas and strategy needed to deal with a crisis of the magnitude of 9/11.”⁵¹ Among those invited to help in generating the appropriate public response were Bernard Lewis, journalist and former *Newsweek* editor Fareed Zakaria, and John Hopkins professor Fouad Ajami, as well as several neocons.

Sheehi points to the different approaches Lewis and Zakaria take. He writes that if “Lewis locates the failures of Islam within the barbarism of the ‘Arab mind,’ then Zakaria locates the hate for the West in the failure of Arab political culture and economic organization.”⁵² Zakaria, for instance, has argued that the United States should promote free markets and democracy in the Middle East. He states that Arabs have seen the “reverse of the historical process in the Western world, where liberalism produced democracy and democracy fuels liberalism. The Arab path has produced dictatorship, which has bred terrorism.”⁵³ In this view, the US therefore had to intervene to carry out the white man’s burden and bring democracy and neoliberalism. This is Clinton-style liberal imperialism. Lewis, on the other hand, has always taken a harder line and in this sense is more closely aligned with the neocons. It is therefore not surprising that the neocons would turn to Lewis to provide the intellectual ballast needed to justify their foreign policy; as Danny Cooper puts it, the neocons “lionize Lewis.”⁵⁴ Also, according to Bob Woodward, Lewis was “a Cheney favorite,” and Cheney used Lewis’s academic credentials and credibility repeatedly to justify his own policy positions.⁵⁵

The “clash of civilizations” rhetoric therefore became dominant in the aftermath of 9/11 and was the ideological basis for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well domestic attacks on

Muslims and Arabs. For a while it appeared that the neocons were unstoppable—but they overplayed their hand. During its first term, the Bush administration built a “coalition of the willing” to invade Iraq, rejecting criticisms from allies it derogatorily labeled “old Europe.” The war on Iraq, however, did not go the way the neocons wanted it to. Instead of greeting US forces as liberators, the Iraqi people resisted and rejected US hegemony. This prompted an about-face in the Bush administration’s policies, which moved toward the use of more multilateral tactics. Additionally, the administration moved away from “hard” power (such as the use of coercion and bribery) and toward winning “hearts and minds,” as represented in the counterinsurgency strategy championed by its military commander in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus.

Following its 2007 shift in strategy, the Pentagon recruited anthropologists through a forty-million-dollar program called the “Human Terrain System.” It sent these anthropologists to Iraq and Afghanistan to gather cultural information in order to better prosecute the “war on terror.” They stated their goal clearly: “Empathy will become a weapon.”⁵⁶ Thus, the United States was following in the footsteps long ago blazed by Napoleon in trying to accumulate knowledge to use in controlling colonized populations ideologically.

By the end of Bush’s second term, however, the failing occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq—as well as an economic crisis of proportions not seen since the Great Depression—meant that it was time for a changing of the guards. Obama was voted into power by an electorate disgusted by the hubris and arrogance of the Bush regime. The ruling elite also gave him their blessing, hoping to put a friendlier face on US imperialism. The other team of imperialists was ready with a plan, already worked out, to rehabilitate the global image of American empire.

In January 2007, a leadership group on US-Muslim relations headed by Madeline Albright, Richard Armitage (former Deputy Secretary of State under George W. Bush), as well as several academics like Vali Nasr and Jessica Stern and Muslim Americans like Daisy Khan and Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf (of Cordoba House fame), produced a document titled “Changing Course: A New Direction for US Relations with the Muslim World.” This document received high praise from political figures like Senator Dick Lugar, Congressman Howard Berman, and Leon Panetta (soon to be CIA director and eventually Secretary of Defense), as well as former generals like Anthony Zinni.⁵⁷ In its opening pages, it stated that the distrust of the United States in Muslim-majority countries was the product of “policies and actions—not a clash of civilizations.” It went on to argue that to defeat “violent extremists,” military force was necessary but not sufficient, and that the United States needed to forge “diplomatic, political, economic, and cultural initiatives.” The report urged the US leadership to improve “mutual respect and understanding between Americans and Muslims,” promote better “governance and improve civic participation,” and help “catalyze job-creating growth” in Muslim countries. This was a return to Clintonian liberal imperialism, with its emphasis on diplomacy and markets. The report’s call to action stated that it would be vital for the next president to talk about improving relations with Muslim-majority countries in his or her inaugural speech and to reaffirm the United States’ “commitment to prohibit all forms of torture.”

Who better than Barack Obama to sell this new rhetorical posture? Indeed, in his inaugural address, Obama did precisely as the policy group’s document suggested. In one of his

first speeches, in Cairo, Obama even rejected the “clash of civilizations” argument, emphasizing the shared common history and aspirations of the East and West. Whereas the “clash” discourse sees the West and the world of Islam as mutually exclusive and as polar opposites, Obama emphasized “common principles.” He spoke of “civilization’s debt to Islam,” which “pay[ed] the way for Europe’s Renaissance and Enlightenment,” and acknowledged Muslims’ contributions to the development of science, medicine, navigation, architecture, calligraphy, and music. This was no doubt a remarkable admission for an American president, but one that Obama clearly saw as vital to bolstering the United States’ badly damaged image in the “Muslim world.”⁵⁸ Indeed, this speech marked a significant rhetorical shift from the Bush era.

It was, however, consistent with the line argued by liberal imperialists. As Joseph Nye put it in *Foreign Affairs*:

The current struggle against Islamist terrorism is much less a clash of civilizations than an ideological struggle within Islam. The United States cannot win unless the Muslim mainstream wins. There is very little likelihood that people like Osama bin Laden can ever be won over with soft power: hard power is needed to deal with such cases. But there is enormous diversity of opinion in the Muslim world. Many Muslims disagree with American values as well as American policies, but that does not mean that they agree with bin Laden. The United States and its allies cannot defeat Islamist terrorism if the number of people the extremists are recruiting is larger than the number of extremists killed or deterred. Soft power is needed to reduce the extremists' numbers and win the hearts and minds of the mainstream.⁵⁹

The Obama era therefore came to be characterized by a shift to liberal imperialism and *liberal Islamophobia*. The key characteristics of liberal Islamophobia are the rejection of the “clash of civilizations” thesis, the recognition that there are “good Muslims” with whom diplomatic relations can be forged, and a concomitant willingness to work with moderate Islamists. Liberal Islamophobia may be rhetorically gentler than conservative Islamophobia and (as we will see in chapter 9) the language of the “Islamophobic warriors,” but it is nonetheless racist and imperialist in that it takes for granted the “white man’s burden.” It doesn’t occur to the likes of Nye, Albright, and Haass that “Islamist terrorism” can be pushed back by ordinary people in the Middle East, people who should have a right to self-determination; their analyses leave “benevolent supremacy” unquestioned.

Obama’s policy marks a shift to the realist tradition of great power geopolitics. As he himself put it, “The truth is that my foreign policy is actually a return to the traditional bipartisan realistic policy of George Bush’s father, of John F. Kennedy, and in some ways of Ronald Reagan.”⁶⁰ Thus, instead of breaking from the imperial consensus or the policies of Bush’s second term, Obama adopted them. His inaugural staff included Bush personnel like Defense Secretary Bob Gates and General David Petraeus as well as Democratic Party hawks like Hillary Clinton and Joseph Biden. Obama’s strategy consisted of a return to multilateralism, using multilateral institutions to incorporate and subordinate international and regional rivals. In his

2010 National Security Strategy document, he argued that the United States should focus its “engagement on strengthening international institutions and galvanizing the collective action that can serve common interests such as combating violent extremism; stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and securing nuclear materials; achieving balanced and sustainable economic growth; and forging cooperative solutions to the threat of climate change, conflict, and pandemic disease.”⁶¹ Yet, despite this multilateral strategy, the Obama administration still resorted to unilateral actions when needed, such as the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, as well as to bilateral agreements. Obama’s vision was to secure, through this strategy of engagement, a world order under the United States’ management and in its interests.

In practice, this didn’t go very smoothly. The NATO intervention in Afghanistan began to lose its multilateral character, as various European nations started pulling out their forces in response to domestic opposition. By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the “hearts and minds” approach and the counterinsurgency strategy had more or less failed. A study by the US intelligence community assessing the 2009 surge in Afghanistan concluded that “there remains no clear path toward defeating the insurgency.”⁶² Obama therefore had to return to counterterrorism to bolster the Afghan occupation. Ashley Smith notes that “throughout his term in office, Obama has used counter-terrorism tactics of air strikes and black ops to kill supposed al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters, but they have inevitably led to the slaughter of growing numbers of civilians.”⁶³ So much for relying on a president with a Nobel Peace Prize and Muslim relatives to pursue a more humane foreign policy.

In this chapter we looked at US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War and traced the evolution of the “Islamic threat.” As we saw, even though the language of “Islamic terrorism” was in development through a collaborative engagement between the neocons (and Lewis) and their Likud counterparts in Israel since the late 1970s, it was not until the events of 9/11 that this rhetoric became the United States’ dominant means of justifying its imperialism. The implosion of the Bush regime then saw the baton handed over to the liberal imperialists, who instituted a rhetorical shift and new multilateral strategies to project and maintain US hegemony. Correspondingly, conservative Islamophobia gave way to liberal Islamophobia. This did not, however, change the realities of people’s lives in the “Muslim world.” In some ways, it got worse under Obama. This is true, too, of the domestic environment for Muslims in the United States, a topic we turn to in the next chapter.

¹ George W. Bush, “President’s Address to the Nation” (speech delivered September 11, 2006).

² Gary Dorien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatives and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ Stewart Patrick and Shepard Forman, *Multilateralism and US Foreign Policy: Ambivalent Engagement* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ Danny Cooper, *Neoconservatism and American Foreign Policy: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 14 (both quotes).

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- ⁷ Dorien, *Imperial Designs*, 21.
- ⁸ Quoted in Dorien, *Imperial Designs*, 11.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹⁰ Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, 1990.
- ¹¹ Dorien, *Imperial Designs*, 39.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 40.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ¹⁴ Maria Ryan, *Neoconservatism and the New American Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 22.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Gerges, *America and Political Islam*, 24.
- ¹⁷ Max Boot, "What the Heck Is a 'Neocon'?" *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2002.
- ¹⁸ Seymour, *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (New York: Verso, 2008), 160.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 159–60.
- ²⁰ Dorien, *Imperial Designs*, 196.
- ²¹ Stephen Sniegoski, *The Transparent Cabal: The Neoconservative Agenda, War in the Middle East, and the National Interest of Israel* (Norfolk, Virginia: Enigma Editions, 2008), 84
- ²² *Ibid.*, 26.
- ²³ Quoted in Ryan, *Neoconservatism*, 34.
- ²⁴ Dorien, *Imperial Designs*, 197.
- ²⁵ Sniegoski, *Transparent Cabal*, 52.
- ²⁶ Noam Chomsky, *Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel and the Palestinians* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999), 455.
- ²⁷ Sniegoski, *Transparent Cabal*, 5.
- ²⁸ Quoted in Karim H. Karim, *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence* (New York: Black Rose Books, 2003), 73.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ³¹ Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 190–91.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 190.
- ³³ Ryan, *Neoconservatism*, 57.
- ³⁴ Ryan, *Neoconservatism*, 57.
- ³⁵ Seymour, *Liberal Defence*, 23.
- ³⁶ Jean Bricmont, *Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell Wars* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006), 20.
- ³⁷ Quoted in Noam Chomsky, *The New Military Humanism* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1999), 14.
- ³⁸ Jean-Marc Coicaud, *Beyond the National Interest: The Failure of UN Peacekeeping and Multilateralism in an Era of U.S. Primacy* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 119.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁴¹ See Sheehi, *Islamophobia*.
- ⁴² Dreyfus, *Devil's Game*, 85
- ⁴³ Phyllis Bennis, *Challenging Empire: How People, Governments, and the UN Defy US Power* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2006).
- ⁴⁴ Quoted in Ryan, *Neoconservatism*, 78.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.
- ⁴⁷ Patrick and Fornan, *Multilateralism*, 23.
- ⁴⁸ Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 32.
- ⁴⁹ 2010 USNSS 2, available at www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.
- ⁵⁰ Quoted in Anthony Arnone, "The Decade of the 'War on Terror,'" *Socialist Worker*, September 11, 2011.
- ⁵¹ Sheehi, *Islamophobia*, 44.
- ⁵² Sheehi, *Islamophobia*, 78.
- ⁵³ Quoted in Sheehi, *Islamophobia*, 78.
- ⁵⁴ Cooper, *Neoconservatism*, 92.
- ⁵⁵ Sheehi, *Islamophobia*, 56.

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- ⁵⁶ James Udris, Michael Udris, and James Der Derian, *Human Terrain*. UDRIS Film and OXYOPIA Productions (Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, 2010), DVD.
- ⁵⁷ Leadership Group on U.S.–Muslim Engagement, “Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World” (Washington: U.S.–Muslim Engagement Project, 2009). Available at http://www.usmuslimengagement.org/storage/usme/documents/Changing_Course_Second_Printing.pdf.
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- ⁵⁹ Joseph S. Nye Sr. “Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88(4), July 2009.
- ⁶⁰ Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist,” *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011.
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