

# Bush’s “Useful Idiots”: 9/11, the Liberal Hawks and the Cooption of the “War on Terror”

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This article examines the development of two distinct theories of American internationalism in the 1990s – the political humanitarianism of the liberal hawks and the unipolarism of the neoconservatives – and the fundamentally different and opposing grounds on which these two groups supported the 2003 Iraq War. The liberal hawks, however, failed almost completely to examine the motivations of the neoconservative architects of the “war on terror.” Instead, they imposed their own normative schema on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and campaigned for them as wars of liberation. Their almost total failure to engage with the intellectual origins of the war led them to accept uncritically the idealistic rhetoric of the President and to assume that the Bush administration and the neoconservatives were motivated by the same idealism and world view as they were themselves. This led them to dismiss critics of the war as opponents of liberal values. As the situation in Iraq worsened, they continued to view the war as a moral endeavour – just one that had gone wrong, as opposed to a war fought for strategic reasons in which nation building was never a priority.

Writing in the *London Review of Books* in September 2006, the late Tony Judt, professor of European studies at New York University, decried the apparent lack of centre-left opposition to the Bush administration’s “war on terror.”<sup>1</sup> “Why have American liberals acquiesced in President Bush’s catastrophic foreign policy?” Judt asked. Why had magazines and newspapers of the traditional liberal centre – the *New Yorker*, the *New Republic*, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* – fallen over themselves “in the hurry to align their editorial stance with that of a Republican president bent on an exemplary war”? Why had they been so accommodating towards the Bush administration and failed to scrutinize its rhetoric or its proclaimed motives? For Judt, the answer was that many mainstream liberals had discovered a new sense of purpose in the “war on terror.” For the so-called “liberal hawks,”

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Judt, “Bush’s Useful Idiots,” *London Review of Books*, 21 Sept. 2006, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n18/tony-judt/bushs-useful-idiots>, accessed 12 Aug. 2010).

9/11 had revealed the existence of “a new global confrontation: a Good Fight, reassuringly comparable to their grandparents’ war against Fascism and their Cold War liberal parents’ stance against international Communism.” For the liberal hawks, the “war on terror” was an epic struggle of liberalism against “Islamofascism,” but what so exasperated Judt was his belief that, for the neoconservative architects of the Bush foreign policy, the “war on terror” was something quite different. For Bush and his advisers, the invasion of Iraq was, according to Judt, an exercise in “the re-establishment of American martial dominance.” By supporting it as an ethical and humanitarian endeavour, high-profile liberals such as Paul Berman, Peter Beinart, Michael Ignatieff and Christopher Hitchens had become the “useful idiots” of the “war on terror.” “In today’s America,” Judt continued, “neoconservatives generate brutish policies for which liberals provide the ethical fig-leaf.” Thus America’s liberal intellectuals were fast becoming “a service class” for the conservative hawks in and around the Bush administration.

Judt’s sweeping evaluation of American liberalism and its capitulation to the Bush administration contained an element of exaggeration, for there were still some mainstream liberal commentators and scholars who opposed the Iraq War, including Michael Walzer of Princeton University, co-editor of *Dissent* magazine; Todd Gitlin of Columbia University; and writer and essayist David Rieff.<sup>2</sup> Their opposition was notable because the three writers all believed that American military power *could* be harnessed for progressive ends; all of them had supported the US interventions, apparently for humanitarian purposes, in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Judt’s exasperation with the left was not unjustified. After 9/11, some of America’s most prominent liberal left intellectuals, led in particular by Berman and Hitchens, offered a sustained critique in favour of the Bush administration’s new wars, thus creating a bipartisan political-intellectual bloc in support of the “war on terror.” Liberals who had traditionally

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Walzer, *Arguing about War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 143–68. Todd Gitlin, “The War Movement and the Anti-war Movement, 18 Oct. 2005, [http://tpmcafe.talkingpointsmemo.com/2005/10/18/the\\_war\\_movement\\_and\\_the\\_antiw](http://tpmcafe.talkingpointsmemo.com/2005/10/18/the_war_movement_and_the_antiw), accessed 12 Aug. 2010; *idem*, “Liberalism’s Patriotic Vision,” *New York Times*, 5 Sept. 2002. David Rieff, *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Walzer, “The Politics of Rescue,” *Dissent* (Winter 1995), 35–41. *Idem*, “Kosovo,” *Dissent* (Summer 1999), 5–7. *Idem*, “Can There Be a Decent Left?,” *Dissent* (Spring 2002), 19–23. Todd Gitlin, “Do Less Harm: The Lesser Evil of Non-intervention,” *World Affairs* (Summer 2008), <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/articles/2008-Summer/full-Gitlin.html>, accessed 12 Aug. 2010. David Rieff, “A New Age of Liberal Imperialism,” *World Policy Journal*, 16, 2 (Summer 1999), 1–10. *Idem*, “Lost Kosovo,” *New Republic*, 31 May 1999.

opposed the use of military force overseas now lined up alongside the neoconservatives and conservative nationalists in support of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>4</sup> What these liberal hawks showed precious little awareness of, however, was that their new bedfellows supported those wars for fundamentally different and opposing reasons. Whereas the neo-conservative architects of the Iraq War had campaigned for the regime change since the mid-1990s on the basis of maintaining America's political and military primacy in the Middle East, the liberal hawks claimed – often without any reference to those who had conceived the policy in the first place and would carry it out – that the “war on terror,” and the invasion of Iraq especially, had been envisaged as a great antitotalitarian struggle, an epic “war” against the forces of modern tyranny. The struggle against “Islamofascism” (or Islamism) was, they believed, the latest phase of modern liberalism’s ongoing battle against its totalitarian enemies, of which communism, fascism, Stalinism, and Third World communism were previous incarnations.<sup>5</sup> Thus the liberal hawks imposed their own normative schema on the “war on terror” and campaigned for the invasion of Iraq as though it were designed primarily as a war of liberation, or a humanitarian war. In other words, they simply assumed that the Bush administration shared its aims and objectives and that the outcome of the war would be the one they hoped for.

Thus far the literature on intellectuals and the war has been dominated by the liberal hawks themselves, with academic treatments still few and far between. Given their high profile as public intellectuals, staunch defences of the humanitarian case for war have been forthcoming from Hitchens, Ignatieff and Berman, with edited volumes compiled by both Thomas Cushman and George Packer.<sup>6</sup> Scholarly examinations include Tony Smith’s much-discussed *Pact with the Devil*, which argues that the Bush Doctrine was the result of a merging of two sets of ideas: the strategic designs of the

<sup>4</sup> On these different groups of conservatives see Maria Ryan, *Neoconservatism and the New American Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 25, 52–60.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2004), especially 22–102.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq* (New York: Plume, 2003). Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* (New York: Vintage, 2003). *Idem*, “Why Are We in Iraq? (And Liberia? And Afghanistan?)” *New York Times* (henceforth *NYT*), 7 Sept. 2003. Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*. *Idem*, *Power and the Idealists* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2005). Thomas Cushman, ed., *A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005). See also Simon Cottee and Thomas Cushman, eds., *Christopher Hitchens and His Critics: Terror, Iraq and the Left* (New York: New York University Press, 2008). George Packer, ed., *The Fight Is for Democracy: Winning the War of Ideas in America and the World* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003).

neoconservatives and the liberal theory of Democratic Peace, which was prevalent amongst political scientists in the 1990s, with the liberal hawks no more than an afterthought.<sup>7</sup> Michael Bérubé's excellent *The Left at War* examines the schism between the pro and anti-intervention left but many questions remain about the pro-interventionists' relationship with conservative supporters of the "war on terror."<sup>8</sup>

This article will examine the emergence of two distinct and very different world views during the 1990s: the political humanitarianism of the liberal hawks, which saw American power as a force to be used for progressive ends, and the neoconservative world view, which viewed military power as the means to preserve America's supposed "unipolar" hegemony above all else. The liberal hawks' alliance with the neocons in and around the Bush administration in 2003 was based on an almost complete failure to engage with or recognize the distinct agenda and the different priorities of the intellectual architects of the war and the impact this might have upon the conduct of the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. There were, I argue, two important and serious consequences of these intellectual crossed wires. First, those making the ethical–humanitarian case for war gave a moral sheen to the whole enterprise, despite the fact that they did not speak for the intellectual architects of the war or for those carrying it out. They also prepared the ground for the Bush administration which began to fall back on humanitarian arguments in the absence of any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Second, the liberal hawks' claim that the war was an antitotalitarian endeavour led them to assert that opponents of the war were opponents of liberal values, appeasers of Islamic fascism and supporters of Saddam Hussein – as opposed to people who believed that US military intervention could not fix or improve the problems of the Middle East and may just make things worse. Although some – but not all – of the liberal hawks later believed that they had been wrong to support Bush, they still thought that the war had been conceived not as a strategic project but as a moral one that had, unfortunately, been poorly executed. Thus while some of the liberal hawks came to believe that they had erred in supporting the war, they failed to fully understand *why* they had been wrong. They continued to believe that the invasion of Iraq had been designed by the neoconservatives essentially as a humanitarian intervention, rather a strategic gambit in which ethical

<sup>7</sup> Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil: Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007). His brief discussion of the liberal hawks is confined to Berman and Cushman on 221–25.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Bérubé, *The Left at War* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009).

considerations had been incidental and were invoked in an instrumental way by the Bush administration as its security rationale – presence of weapons of mass destruction – appeared increasingly untenable. Thus even as they retreated from their support for the Bush administration, the liberal hawks were unable to grasp that the neoconservative architects of the war had had fundamentally different views on the ends to which American military power might be put; in other words, on the ultimate purpose of the invasion of Iraq and the “war on terror.”

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE “LIBERAL HAWKS”

The end of the Cold War opened up greater space for the development of humanitarian intervention as US foreign policy was no longer governed by an anticommunist mission.<sup>9</sup> Many leftists who had opposed the Vietnam War and other manifestations of what they once saw as imperial power now began to envisage the possibility of using American power as a liberal or even liberating force. Todd Gitlin believed that the end of the Cold War meant the end of “the automatic ‘No’” for many American leftists because it was now possible that power could be wielded for progressive ends rather than for the purposes of countering communism or repressing left-leaning movements in the developing world.<sup>10</sup> Michael Walzer believed the left and right had now switched positions on intervention: without a rival superpower, conservatives could see no point in intervention where there was no material advantage to be gained, and leftists favoured intervention due to their internationalist ethic. “Yes, the norm is not to intervene in other people’s countries,” Walzer wrote; “the norm is self-determination. But not for ... the victims of tyranny, ideological zeal, ethnic hatred, who are not determining anything for themselves, who urgently need help from outside.” Endorsing a proactive humanitarian agenda, Walzer continued, “it isn’t enough to wait until the tyrants, the zealots, and the bigots have done their filthy work and then rush food and medicine to the survivors. Whenever their filthy work can be stopped, it should be stopped.”<sup>11</sup>

Though disparaging of many of America’s Cold War interventions and by no means sanguine about the future, many *Dissent* contributors were cautiously optimistic about the possibilities of using US power for humanitarian

<sup>9</sup> Michael Newman, *Humanitarian Intervention: Confronting the Contradiction* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), 38.

<sup>10</sup> Todd Gitlin, *Letters to a Young Activist* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 139–58. “Trading Places: Ground Wars Make Strange Bedfellows” *NYT*, Week In Review, 30 May 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Walzer, “The Politics of Rescue,” *Dissent* (Winter 1995), 38, 41.

purposes in the post-Soviet world. Berman believed that the demise of communism and the advent of globalization permitted “a new kind of left-wing internationalism.” “Our vision is sober, nonutopian, cautious,” he wrote, “but we do still have a vision. It is a vision of democracy in all fields, and of democracy’s potential for growth.”<sup>12</sup> Berman believed that during the Cold War much of the American left had retreated into isolationism because of its reliance on Lenin’s theory of imperialism. Rather than viewing the workers of the world as a transnational class, Lenin argued that workers in imperialist countries benefitted from the economic exploitation of their counterparts in the developing world. This incriminated the American working class as well as the capitalist class and led the American left to view its own country as “far more rapacious than it actually was and far less amenable to reform,” Berman claimed. However, the globalization of production meant that, now, workers in the West could only protect their relatively high levels of remuneration if wages were also increased in the developing world (and if wages decreased abroad, they would decline at home too). In other words, Berman claimed, the working class was no longer implicated in the exploitation of others so the left no longer needed to advocate isolationism. Instead it could “mak[e] distinctions between the good and the bad in American foreign policy” and identify “the progressive uses of American influence” abroad.<sup>13</sup> Mitchell Cohen, coeditor of *Dissent*, also called for the left to reject isolationism and to “recognize that international relations have autonomous dimensions, that all is not simply reducible to imperialism versus anti-imperialism or capitalism versus socialism.” In other words, the left should not hold America responsible for every problem in the world.<sup>14</sup> The implication was that if America was not all bad, it might just be able to do some good.

It was Bosnia that truly catalysed the emergence of the liberal hawks. As liberal George Packer, himself a supporter of wars in the Balkans and Iraq, observed, “the Bosnian generation of liberal hawks ... h[e]ld an important place in American public life, having worked out a new idea about America’s role in the post-Cold War world long before September 11 woke the rest of the country up.”<sup>15</sup> For Berman, too, the Balkans was “the big moment of left-wing evolution.”<sup>16</sup> According to Michael Ignatieff, “In the 90s, being a liberal meant being in favour of military intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Berman, “The Future of the American Left” *Dissent* (Winter 1993), 103–4.

<sup>13</sup> Berman, “Future of the American Left,” 99–100, 102–3.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell Cohen, “The New World Flux” *Dissent* (Fall 1991), 452–53.

<sup>15</sup> George Packer, “The Liberal Quandary over Iraq,” *NYT*, 8 Dec. 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Berman, *Power and the Idealists*, 82.

Human rights ha[d] come into this and complicated the picture considerably."<sup>17</sup> The West had

edged its way towards a new idea of armed intervention. We are moving towards a new world in which the international community engages itself to protect minorities from majorities, to feed the starving and to enforce peace in cases of civil strife.<sup>18</sup>

These imperatives animated the nascent liberal hawks. For Christopher Hitchens, it was Bosnia that brought about "the realization that American power could and should be used for the defense of pluralism and as a punishment for fascism."<sup>19</sup> Many liberals had been alerted to the situation in Bosnia through an article on the Serb ethnic cleansing written by David Rieff appearing in the November 1992 edition of the *New Yorker*. Judt, himself a supporter of intervention in Bosnia, called Rieff's reporting a warning of "a major moral crisis of our time" which was widely read by the liberal New York intelligentsia.<sup>20</sup> In *Slaughterhouse*, Rieff's chronicle of the failures of the West in Bosnia, he excoriated Europe, the US and the UN for doing nothing to prevent genocide, and endorsed the so-called "lift and strike" policy – lifting the arms embargo against the Bosnians Muslims and conducting Nato air strikes in support of them against the Serbs.<sup>21</sup> Hitchens reminisced on the history of peaceful coexistence in the Balkan region between Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Jews that had been destroyed by Slobodan Milošević. Bosnia mattered to the West, Hitchens wrote, "because it has chosen to defend not just its own self-determination but the values of multi-cultural, long-evolved and mutually fruitful cohabitation."<sup>22</sup> Ignatieff suggested that the no-fly zone in northern Iraq, which kept Saddam Hussein's forces out and protected the Kurds from the *génocidaire* in Baghdad, could be a model to protect the Bosnians from Serbian

<sup>17</sup> "Liberals for War: Some of the Intellectual Left's Longtime Doves Taking on Role of Hawks," *NYT*, 14 March 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Ignatieff, "Should Our Soldiers Die to Save Bosnia?" *The Observer*, 3 Jan. 1993.

<sup>19</sup> Jamie Glazov, "An Interview with Christopher Hitchens, Part II: Anti-fascism, Reactionary Conservatism and the Post-September 11 World," *Frontpage*, 10 Dec. 2003, reprinted in Cottee and Cushman, *Christopher Hitchens and His Critics*, 203.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Paul Starobin, "The Liberal Hawk Soars," *National Journal*, 31, 20 (15 May 1999), accessed online via Lexis Nexis, 16 September 2011.

<sup>21</sup> David Rieff, *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). Carlin Romano, "A Writer Who Feels Compelled to Bear Witness to Bosnia for the West, Says David Rieff, 'The Defeat Is Total, the Disgrace Complete'" *Philadelphia Enquirer*, 13 June 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "Why Bosnia Matters," *London Review of Books*, 10 Sept. 1992, 7. Hitchens often used his regular column in *The Nation* to excoriate US policy towards Bosnia. See his (otherwise untitled) "Minority Report" columns of 7 June 1993; 22 Nov. 1993; 27 Feb. 1995; and 19 June 1995.

ethnic cleansing.<sup>23</sup> Although Ignatieff also recognized that, ultimately, Washington would not intervene anywhere in the absence of a compelling strategic interest, paradoxically he continued to emphasize the humanitarian framework as the primary motivator of US policy in the Balkans.<sup>24</sup> When Nato intervened in Kosovo in 1999, largely on the basis of protecting the credibility and prestige of the Nato alliance, Ignatieff stated that the legitimacy of the bombing campaign was based on “what fifty years of human rights has done to our moral instincts, weakening the presumption in favour of state sovereignty, strengthening the presumption in favour of intervention when massacre and deportation become state policy.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, he claimed, values had taken precedence over interests.<sup>26</sup>

The nascent liberal hawks’ conversion to interventionism was not without its tensions, however. Despite their newfound enthusiasm for using US military power, the Rwandan genocide of 1994 elicited fewer responses from them. Neither *Dissent* nor *The Nation* ran any articles calling for intervention. Hitchens, Berman and Ignatieff had little to say. The *New Republic* addressed the mass killings in an editorial which contrasted the West’s concern about Serbia’s atrocities in Bosnia – which were on a much smaller scale – with its lack of interest in Rwanda. What accounted for this discrepancy, the editors asked, and was it right to prioritize the Bosnian case? Faced with two competing cases of intervention, the editors argued that the

potential reverberations for the rest of humanity from ethnic cleansing in the heart of Europe are simply greater than those of ethnic cleansing in Rwanda. That doesn’t make the cleansing any less repugnant; merely less urgent a cause for direct military action by the outside world ... In Bosnia ... the world faces a case of cross-border aggression with the intention to wipe a recognized state off the map. Genocide there is made doubly dangerous because it is being carried out in the service of that broader aim.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Michael Ignatieff, “Second thoughts of an interventionist” *The Observer*, 16 May 1993, 21.

<sup>24</sup> “The dilemma is that only the Americans have the capability and resolve to act upon the outrage and concern,” Ignatieff wrote, but “the result is that these interventions have to coincide with American interests.” Michael Ignatieff, “The Fault Is with Us Not with the AMERICANS,” *The Observer*, 10 Jan. 1993.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Ignatieff, “Human Rights: The Midlife Crisis,” *New York Review of Books*, 20 May 1999, 58. On why the US intervened in Kosovo see Hal Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America’s Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 204–16. Noam Chomsky, *A New Generation Draws the Line: Kosovo, East Timor and the Standards of the West* (London: Verso, 2001), 94–147.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Ignatieff, “The Next President’s Duty to Intervene” *NYT*, 13 Feb. 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Editorial, “Why Not Rwanda?,” *New Republic*, 16 May 1994, 7. David Rieff wrote a thought-provoking and critical essay on Rwanda and the nature of genocide, but did not directly suggest that the West should have intervened. See his “An Age of Genocide: The Far Reaching Lessons of Rwanda,” *New Republic*, 29 Jan. 1996, 27–36.

The concurrence of the two cases led the *New Republic* to prioritize the Balkans. But why did so many of the liberal hawks fail to engage with the Rwandan case – one of the bloodiest killing sprees of the twentieth century – in the same manner as they did Bosnia? There is no clear answer except to say that their calls for intervention still tended to reflect the cases receiving the most attention from the mainstream media and the Western powers. In other words, they were engaging with cases where there were realistic possibilities for the kind of intervention they envisaged, rather than cases that were peripheral to the interests of Western powers.

Despite not calling for intervention in Rwanda, the liberal hawks' emergence and their identity was solidified by the 1998–99 crisis in Kosovo. After witnessing the failure of the West firsthand in Bosnia, Rieff produced his most hawkish work ever in 1999, praising Nato's efforts, which he claimed were "more in the name of human rights and moral obligation than out of any traditional concept of the national interest."<sup>28</sup> (Rieff even opposed the establishment of the International Criminal Court on the grounds that international legal norms would not stop those bent on slaughter: "To the extent that such horrors can be prevented, they will be stopped by the use of force by outside powers, which, in practical terms, usually means the United States," he wrote.<sup>29</sup>) Peter Beinart, a young liberal contributor to the *New Republic*, proclaimed Kosovo "a war to expand the frontiers of America's moral community," while Hitchens praised Nato for taking a stand against "Slavo-fascism" and branded those opposed to the war "not-so-reluctant supporters of a national socialist demagogue."<sup>30</sup> For Berman, the humanitarian rationale made Kosovo "the 68ers war," while Walzer claimed that even though America could not be the world's fire service, it was vital that the left "see the fires for what they are: deliberately set, the work of arsonists, aimed to kill, terribly dangerous ... I can't just sit and watch."<sup>31</sup> In sum, the "Bosnia consensus," as Packer called it, held, and the liberal hawks had become firm advocates of using American military power in support of

<sup>28</sup> David Rieff, "A New Age of Liberal Imperialism?," *World Policy Journal*, 16, 2 (Summer 1999), repr. in David Rieff, *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2006), 35–36.

<sup>29</sup> David Rieff, "Court of Dreams," *New Republic*, 7 Sept. 1998, 16.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Beinart, "War Fair," *New Republic*, 31 May 1999, 6. Christopher Hitchens, "Port Huron Piffle," *The Nation*, 27 May 1999, <http://www.thenation.com/print/article/port-huron-piffle>, accessed 1 Sept. 2010. *Idem*, "Belgrade Degraded," 29 April 1999, <http://www.thenation.com/print/article/belgrade-degraded>, accessed 1 Sept. 2010. *Idem*, "Kosovo on Hold," *The Nation*, 17 April 2000, 9. Walzer, "Kosovo," 7.

<sup>31</sup> Berman, *Power and the Idealists*, 90. Walzer, "Kosovo," 6–7.

humanitarian values.<sup>32</sup> However, they were not the only group developing a new vision of America's role in the post-Cold War world.

### THE NEOCONSERVATIVES AND THE POST-COLD WAR WORLD

At the other end of the political spectrum, the neoconservatives were also offering a new rationale for American power in the post-Soviet world, but it was a rationale quite different to the humanitarian objectives of the left-liberal interventionists. For the neocons, it was strategic interests that mattered, not humanitarian interventions. The neoconservatives advocated an offensive military posture dedicated to preserving and extending America's newfound "unipolar moment," as it was called by Charles Krauthammer, by taking preventive action to preclude the emergence of rival powers, unilaterally if necessary. In essence they sought to remain – in Krauthammer's provocative formulation – "the *single pole* of world power," which could act as the "decisive player *in any conflict in whatever part of the world it chooses.*"<sup>33</sup> The Pentagon's infamous 1992 Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) document – which summed up the neocons' global objectives – used a similar formula: it called for the United States to prevent the emergence of all global and regional rivals.<sup>34</sup> This was an ambitious and ultimately unrealistic objective, for in reality there were already alternative poles of power in the world – such as China and the European Union – that could constrain US actions and preclude offensive and preventive action.<sup>35</sup> For these neocons, however, the new strategic touchstone would be the active preservation of America's supposed "unipolarity" rather than containment, deterrence or humanitarian intervention. According to Zalmay Khalilzad, the drafter of the DPG (and a future member of the George W. Bush administration), it was the imperatives of "unipolar" power that constituted "the prism for identifying threats and setting priorities." Humanitarian considerations would be a secondary or tertiary concern.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> George Packer, "The Liberal Quandary Over Iraq," *NYT*, 8 Dec. 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* (Winter 1990–91), 23–33, emphases added. For a full explanation see Ryan, *Neoconservatism and the New American Century*, 2, 14–16.

<sup>34</sup> For the most extensive excerpts see "Excerpts from Pentagon's Plan: 'Prevent the Re-Emergence of a New Rival,'" *NYT*, 8 March 1992.

<sup>35</sup> For more on the false premise of "unipolarity" see Ryan, 14–16.

<sup>36</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad, *From Containment to Global Leadership* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Project Air Force, 1995), viii and 21.

It was on the basis of these principles that the neocons supported US intervention in the Balkans.<sup>37</sup> Although there were humanitarian catastrophes in Bosnia and Kosovo, the neocons supported the interventions on the grounds that the ongoing instability there constituted a serious challenge to the credibility of the Nato alliance – the cornerstone of American leadership in Europe and a building block of the US-led world order. In the case of Bosnia, the neocon coalition criticized Clinton's vacillation on the grounds that, in Richard Perle's words, "the deeper ... more lasting effect [would be] to shatter British and French confidence in the United States as the leader of an institution [Nato] which is nothing if it's not led by the US."<sup>38</sup> Paul Wolfowitz concurred: the most serious consequence of Clinton's initial inaction was "the appearance of American weakness and inability to lead."<sup>39</sup> In the case of Kosovo, William Kristol and Robert Kagan – founders of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) neocon advocacy group – affirmed the primary issues: "Nato's future and American credibility are at stake."<sup>40</sup> PNAC claimed that if Nato failed to take action, it would look impotent on the global stage and, as leader of the alliance, American resolve and ability would be called into question: it would be "the end of Nato as an effective alliance," PNAC warned. Closely linked to this was the question of finding a new role for Nato in the post-Cold War world so as to preserve America's position as the guarantor of European security:

The question is: why does the alliance still exist? If the alliance defines itself as strictly defensive, and of no value until threatened by a revitalized Russian superpower, it will define itself out of existence. No such threat is likely to emerge for many years, if not decades. In the interim, NATO would have no purpose at all. NATO will not continue to exist on that basis ...

With Nato due to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in April 1999, the embarrassment of a failure to defeat a relatively weak Milošević would render

<sup>37</sup> The disagreements amongst the neocons were based on *how* to intervene – whether to use ground troops, how much force to use, etc. – rather than on *whether* to intervene. The only neocon who did not support the Balkan interventions was Charles Krauthammer. He believed that there were no American interests at stake in the Balkans, that the wars did not constitute a serious challenge to the credibility of Nato and that intervention was therefore unnecessary. For a full discussion of these issues, see Ryan, 65–70.

<sup>38</sup> Comments reported in Albert R. Hunt, "Politics and People: A Cold Warrior Keeps the Faith on Bosnia," *Wall Street Journal*, 8 Dec. 1994. Writing in 2003, Kagan would also argue that "saving the alliance [Nato] had been a primary motive for America's ... intervention in Bosnia". See Robert Kagan *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), 49.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Wolfowitz, "Clinton's First Year," *Foreign Affairs* (Jan.–Feb. 1994), 31.

<sup>40</sup> "All Necessary Force," Editorial, *Weekly Standard* (henceforth *WSJ.*), 3 May 1999, 9–10.

it obsolete.<sup>41</sup> In fact the neocon rationale for supporting the Balkan interventions was similar to Bill Clinton's. Although Clinton also invoked humanitarianism, the President acknowledged that this alone was not enough to compel US intervention; it was the challenge to the credibility of the NATO alliance that could no longer be tolerated and, ultimately, pushed the administration into war. Clinton may have initially been reluctant to become involved in the Balkans, but by 1995, and again by 1999, he had come to believe that a show of force was necessary if the alliance was to maintain credibility and relevance.<sup>42</sup> Thus the neocons and the liberal hawks both found themselves supporting the Nato interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo but for quite different reasons.

However, the signature case for the neocons was not the Balkans but Iraq. Given Saddam Hussein's apparent defiance of the United States in the most geopolitically significant region in the world, his removal was their top priority and a key element in the global strategy of unipolarity. Kagan summed up the neocons' rationale in 1997: "A successful intervention in Iraq would revolutionize the strategic situation in the Middle East, in ways both tangible and intangible, and all to the benefit of American interests."<sup>43</sup> It would also serve as a demonstration case for anyone tempted to challenge the American-led world order. As John Bolton commented, "We can be certain that other rogue governments will be watching closely."<sup>44</sup> In January 1997, PNAC released a public letter to Bill Clinton calling for regime change in Iraq. "Democracy" did not merit a single reference in the letter. For the neocons, the intervention was necessary because of Iraq's geopolitical importance; it was not a humanitarian endeavour. The US had staked its political capital on protecting its regional allies – namely Israel and the "moderate" Arab states – and "a significant portion of the world's supply of oil [would] be put at hazard" if the situation continued. A second letter, sent

<sup>41</sup> PNAC Memo, 1 April 1999, <http://www.newamericancentury.org/kosovoapro199.htm>, accessed 31 Jan. 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War: From Sarajevo to Dayton* (New York: Modern Library, 1998), 22, 43, 65, 103. Madeleine K. Albright, "U.S. and NATO Policy towards the Crisis in Kosovo," Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 20 April 1999, *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, 10, 4 (May 1999), <http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/1999/990420.html>, accessed 23 Aug. 2010. Comments by Secretary of Defense William Cohen and National Security Advisor Sandy Berger cited in Chomsky, *A New Generation Draws the Line*, 29. Bill Clinton's televised address of 24 March 1999, <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3932>, accessed 23 Aug. 2010. Karin Von Hippel, *Democracy by Force: US Military Interventions in the Post-Cold War World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 169–71.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Kagan, "Saddam's Impending Victory," *WSJ*, 2 Feb. 1998, 25.

<sup>44</sup> John Bolton, "The U.N. Rewards Saddam," *WSJ*, 15 Dec. 1997, 15.

in February 1998, under the auspices of the Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf and signed by many neocons as well as other conservatives, called for the US to pursue regime change in order "prevent Saddam Hussein from attaining a position of power and influence in the region."<sup>45</sup> It was not the nature of Saddam's regime that so concerned the neoconservatives, but the fact that he posed a challenge to American interests in the region and had displayed a willingness to provoke the superpower.<sup>46</sup>

In sum, the neocons were not liberal internationalists. With their focus on states as the only international actors worth engaging, and their emphasis on military power above all else, the neocons were firmly within the realist tradition of international relations, although theirs was not a balance-of-power realism.<sup>47</sup> Rather they defined the 'national' interest in the broadest, most expansive terms: the United States should be "the single pole of power" in every region of the world, able to act decisively "in any conflict in whatever part of the world it chooses." Nowhere should potential challengers be allowed to threaten American regional – and thus global – primacy and this would most likely be achieved through using preventive action where necessary. Thus the neocons were not humanitarian interventionists and did not engage with the new agenda of the liberal hawks.

### THE 9/11 EFFECT

In a PNAC report of September 2000, which was signed by five members of the future Bush administration, the authors observed that their vision for unassailable military supremacy was so ambitious that implementing it might prove difficult, "absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a new

<sup>45</sup> Project for the New American Century, letter to President Clinton, 26 Jan. 1998, <http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqlintonletter.htm>; Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf, letter to President Clinton, 19 Feb. 1998, <http://www.iraqwatch.org/perspectives/rumsfeld-openletter.htm>, both accessed 31 Jan. 2009.

<sup>46</sup> In the pre-9/11 years, the neocons rarely, if ever, mentioned the undemocratic nature of a regime as a rationale for changing it. Even after 9/11, they were prepared to tolerate undemocratic regimes that did not threaten US interests. For examples see Maria Ryan, "Exporting Democracy? Neoconservatism and the Limits of Military Intervention, 1989–2008," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 21, 3 (Oct. 2010), 491–515.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security*, 22, 1 (Summer 1997), 86–124. Benjamin Schwarz and Christopher Layne, "A New Grand Strategy," *Atlantic Monthly*, 289, 1 (Jan. 2002), 36–42. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), chapter 7.

Pearl Harbor.”<sup>48</sup> Genuine grief notwithstanding, the neocons inside and outside the Bush administration immediately recognized 9/11 as a tremendous window of opportunity. Within ten days they began to link Islamist terrorism to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. An invasion of Iraq was quickly recast as an integral part of a “war on terror,” despite the fact that terrorism had received virtually no attention from the neocons during the Clinton years. On 20 September 2001, PNAC sent another letter, this time to President Bush, stating that “even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the [9/11] attack, any strategy aiming at the eradication of terrorism and its sponsors must include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq.”<sup>49</sup> (In contrast, there was no mention of terrorism in any of the previous letters on Iraq.)

The PNAC view was also clearly shared by key members of the Bush administration, who had supported the neocons during the 1990s and shared their vision of a “unipolar” America.<sup>50</sup> Just five hours after the attacks on New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld called for “Best info fast. Judge whether good enough to hit S[addam] H[ussein] at same time. Not only O[sama] B[in] L[aden] ... Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not.”<sup>51</sup> National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice called together the senior staff of the NSC and asked them to think about “how do you capitalize on these opportunities?”<sup>52</sup> In April 2002, she described the post-9/11 world as “a period not just of grave danger, but of enormous opportunity ... a period akin to 1945 to 1947.”<sup>53</sup>

The administration’s immediate response to 9/11 is now well known. On 12 September was seen a collective cabinet decision that while the “first round” of the “war on terror” would be in Afghanistan – the country that had harboured the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks – the “second round”

<sup>48</sup> A Report of the Project for the New American Century, *Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century*, Sept. 2000, 76, <http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>, accessed 31 Jan. 2009.

<sup>49</sup> PNAC letter to President Bush on the war on terrorism, 20 Sept. 2001, <http://www.newamericancentury.org/Bushletter.htm>, accessed 31 Jan. 2010.

<sup>50</sup> On the close relationship between these two groups of conservatives see Ryan, *Neoconservatism and the New American Century*, 25, 52–60.

<sup>51</sup> “Plans for Iraq Attack Began on 9/11,” *CBS News*, 4 Sept. 2002, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/04/september11/main520830.shtml>, accessed 6 Sept. 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Nicholas Lemann, “The Next World Order,” *New Yorker*, 1 April 2002, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/04/01/020401fa\\_FACT1](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/04/01/020401fa_FACT1), accessed 4 Feb. 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Cited in Frances Fitzgerald, “George Bush & the World,” *New York Review of Books*, 26 Sept. 2002, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2002/sep/26/george-bush-the-world>, accessed 4 Feb. 2011.

would be in Iraq.<sup>54</sup> Planning for the "second round" began almost immediately. By 13 September, Rumsfeld had asked for scenarios for an assault upon Iraq and for a specific contingency plan to seize and hold the southern Iraqi oilfields, complementing and moving beyond a plan for an attack by ten thousand insurgents supported by US airpower.<sup>55</sup> In the days after 9/11, Rumsfeld also established the Policy Counter-Terrorism Evaluation Group in the Pentagon in order to find evidence that might link Saddam Hussein to al Qaeda.<sup>56</sup> The group was headed by Douglas Feith and Abram Shulsky, two neocons who had campaigned for the removal of Saddam during the Clinton years, and was expanded into the larger Office of Special Plans (OSP) in 2002.

Much of this information was in the public domain shortly after it happened, with further material – on the establishment of the OSP, for example – appearing in the months after the invasion.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the neocon think tanks that had lobbied so hard for regime change in Iraq during the Clinton years all had websites, making their justifications and motivations accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. Yet there was an almost complete failure on the part of the liberal hawks to engage with the neocons' rationale for regime change. Instead, they took for granted that the architects of the war, and those prosecuting it, were motivated by the same considerations as themselves; in other words, they assumed that the neocons too were humanitarian interventionists. This led the liberals to construct their own normative framework for understanding and promoting the war – though they assumed that it was shared by the Bush administration – and impose it onto a conflict that had been conceived for quite different reasons. Since the leftist supporters of war believed that Bush and his advisers shared their humanitarian priorities, they also assumed that they

<sup>54</sup> Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (London: Pocket Books, 2003), 49, 83–84, 137.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis D. Solomon, *Paul Wolfowitz: Visionary, Intellectual, Policymaker and Strategist* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers Inc., 2007), 80. Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 5. James Fallows, "Blind into Baghdad," *The Atlantic* (Jan./Feb. 2004), <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200401/fallows>. Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Atlantic Books, 2007), 15–7, 19–20. Woodward, 97–99.

<sup>56</sup> Seymour Hersh, "Selective Intelligence," *New Yorker*, 12 May 2003, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/05/12/030512fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/05/12/030512fa_fact), accessed 23 Aug. 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Woodward's *Bush at War* was first published in November 2002 and contained details of the administration's decision to pursue two "rounds" of the war on terror – Hersh. Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Unknown," *New Yorker*, 10 Feb. 2003, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/02/10/030210fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/02/10/030210fa_fact), accessed 4 Feb. 2011. The Bush administration's outlook and strategy was discussed in Lemann and in Fitzgerald.

could be trusted to take responsibility for postconflict peace building in Iraq, despite the fact that Bush had explicitly ruled out nation building when running for President.<sup>58</sup> And since the liberal hawks viewed Iraq as an anti-totalitarian war, they also assumed that anyone against it was an opponent of liberal values and a supporter of tyranny.

Although the Bush administration eventually fell back on humanitarian arguments for war in Iraq, it was a justification conferred retrospectively: largely after the failure to discover weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq.<sup>59</sup> But by October 2001, Berman had already gone much further than Bush would ever go in framing the new “war” against terrorism as an epic antitotalitarian struggle in an article titled “Terror and Liberalism” (the genesis of a book of the same name published in 2003).<sup>60</sup> His narrative became a popular explanation of and justification for the “war on terror” amongst the liberal hawks. For Berman, the new “war” was the heir to the great liberal struggles of the twentieth century against communism and fascism. The latest variant of antiliberalism was “radical Arab nationalist and Islamic fundamentalist.” In the past, this had taken differentiated forms – Baathism, Marxism, pan-Arabism, Islamism – but all of them were “antiliberal insurgencies.” Thus contemporary Islamist terrorists were “the heirs of twentieth-century totalitarians,” Berman claimed. Comparing Saddam Hussein’s regime – unsavoury as it was – with the Nazis, who were not only bent on world domination but had the military and industrial power to attempt it, was a fallacious analogy, but a powerful one. According to

<sup>58</sup> For example, in the first Gore–Bush presidential debate on 3 October 2000, Bush stated that “the Vice President and I have a disagreement about the use of troops. He believes in nation building. I would be very careful about using our troops as nation builders. I believe the role of the military is to fight and win war and therefore prevent war from happening in the first place.” See the debate transcript at <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-3-2000-transcript>, accessed 4 Feb. 2011. In the second debate, on 11 October 2000, Bush stated that the 1993 intervention in Somalia went wrong when “it changed into a nation building mission ... I don’t think our troops ought to be used for what’s called nation building.” See the debate transcript at <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-11-2000-debate-transcript>.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Bush’s 2005 State of the Union speech – two years after the invasion – in which he suggests that the United States is committed to the promotion of freedom in the Middle East. Transcript at <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/ALLPOLITICS/02/02/sotu.transcript.5/index.html>, accessed 2 Sept. 2010. In his valediction to neoconservatism, Francis Fukuyama acknowledges that the “freedom agenda” was an “ex post facto” justification for Iraq. See his *After the Neocons: America at the Crossroads* (London: Profile Books, 2006), 46–47, 79.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Berman “Terror and Liberalism,” *American Prospect*, 21 Oct. 2001, [http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=terror\\_and\\_liberalism](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=terror_and_liberalism), accessed 23 Aug. 2010. Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*.

Berman, the war against terrorism was not driven by strategic considerations but moral and ethical ones. It was an antitotalitarian struggle with the invasion of Afghanistan constituting "the first feminist war" in world history.<sup>61</sup>

The corollary to this was his view that Islamic extremism was an independent causal force in the world, not something that was caused, even in part, by Western foreign policies. Indeed, Berman came close to suggesting that Islamism had no cause at all: it was not a consequence of anything; it emerged because "millions of people have gone out of their minds and have subscribed to a pathological political tendency" that could not be explained by the Enlightenment rationalism of Western liberals.<sup>62</sup> Hitchens argued that al Qaeda was definitely not the extreme fringe of a broader, more moderate political sensibility that emerged, in part, in opposition to US foreign policy. For him, too, Islamism was entirely independent of US actions; al Qaeda was doing nothing more than "fighting for the right to throw acid in the face of unveiled women in Kabul and Karachi."<sup>63</sup> There could be no compromise with this violent fanaticism; the only answer was to wage a war against the new totalitarianism in order to rescue those suffering under fanatical regimes and to safeguard and spread Western values.<sup>64</sup> On this basis, Hitchens rounded on antiwar demonstrators: the only possible explanation for these protests was that they were organized "by people who do *not* think that Saddam Hussein is a bad guy at all. They were in fact organized by people who ... openly like Saddam, and Milošević, and Mugabe, and Kim Jong-Il."<sup>65</sup> Thomas Cushman retrospectively concurred: "it is an objective fact that those who chose to stand against the war were in one sense standing with Saddam Hussein" and that the dictator and his cronies "were greatly appreciative of the global left's opposition to the war."<sup>66</sup> Sounding almost as though he was speaking on behalf of the Bush administration, Hitchens assured his readers that there was not a hint of imperialism in the administration's plans for Iraq:

A condition of the new imperialism will be the specific promise that while troops will come, they will not stay too long. An associated promise is that the era of the

<sup>61</sup> Berman "Terror and Liberalism." *Idem, Terror and Liberalism*, 191.

<sup>62</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, 122, 133–34, 152–53.

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "The Pursuit of Happiness Is at an End," *Evening Standard* (London), 19 Sept. 2001.

<sup>64</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "Terrorism: Notes toward a Definition," 18 Nov. 2002, repr. in *idem, A Long Short War*, 25.

<sup>65</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "Twenty-Two Foresight: Arguments for War," in *idem, A Long Short War*, 10, original emphasis; see also 11 and 54.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Cushman, "Introduction: The Liberal-Humanitarian Case for War in Iraq," in *idem, A Matter of Principle*, 22.

client state is gone and that the aim is to enable local populations to govern themselves. This promise is sincere.<sup>67</sup>

How could Hitchens be so sure of the Bush administration's intentions? Because he believed that it was acting on the basis of the antitotalitarian principle. While Saddam's possession of WMDs and his alleged links to al Qaeda were taken very seriously by Hitchens – indeed he proselytized in favour of the war using these arguments – it was the nature of the regime and its antiliberal character that gave these issues salience.

*Dissent* magazine editorialized in a similar vein after the attacks. A “war on terror” was justified because “[t]hese terrorists are a new kind of force ... Doctrinally, they are reactionary, fundamentalist, repressive; they are hostile to liberal values and universal human rights.” Those questioning the rationale of the “war on terror” and the motivations of the Bush administration were repudiated by *Dissent* as sympathizers and appeasers of Osama bin Laden, who were sorely misguided. Caricaturing the opposition from Noam Chomsky, Edward Said and Alexander Cockburn, the editors claimed that the old left triumvirate threatened “to disassociate the word ‘left’ from any morally intelligent politics. One almost expects them to explain that bin Laden’s crew attacked the World Trade Center because Thomas Jefferson owned slaves ... The Tobin Tax was never the rational kernel within al Qaeda’s murderous cells” (though none of the old leftists had ever suggested that al Qaeda favoured progressive causes such as the Tobin Tax or the abolition of slavery).<sup>68</sup> For *Dissent*, the only explanation for the antiwar positions taken by the old leftists was not that they were suspicious of the priorities of the Bush administration, but that they viewed Bin Laden as a genuine representative of some of their own views. There was an ironic mirror-imaging at work here: in the spring 2002 issue of *Dissent*, Walzer claimed that the old left believed that any group attacking the US must be motivated by the same concerns that animated old leftist attacks on American power, but Walzer and his allies were guilty of the same thing: assuming that the Bush administration had to be motivated by moral and humanitarian considerations rather than strategic ones because it was the former that animated the liberal hawks.<sup>69</sup>

The neocons’ devotion to geopolitics and unipolarism had no place in this schema and, for the most part, was overlooked or ignored by the liberal

<sup>67</sup> Christopher Hitchens, “Imperialism: Superpower Dominance, Malign and Benign,” *Slate*, 10 Dec. 2002, <http://www.slate.com/id/2075261>, accessed 23 Aug. 2010.

<sup>68</sup> “Editor’s Page,” *Dissent* (Winter 2002).

<sup>69</sup> Michael Walzer, “Can There Be a Decent Left?” *Dissent* (Spring 2002), 21.

hawks. The narrative of "antitotalitarianism" was abstract and unrelated to any consideration of interests, geopolitics or security and this precluded consideration of alternative rationales for war. Thomas Cushman's edited collection, *A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq*, which included contributions from Hitchens, Berman, Norman Geras and Ian Buruma, did not contain a single reference to the neoconservatives or their ideas. Nor did a similar collection edited by Packer, titled *The Fight Is for Democracy*.<sup>70</sup> Hitchens simply projected his own preferences onto the neocons, claiming that they had supported intervention in the Balkans on the basis of "the battle against religious and ethnic dictatorship" and that they had "been thinking about the menace of jihadism when most people were half-asleep," though in fact they had never framed the Balkans conflicts as struggles against dictatorship, nor had they even noticed jihadism before 9/11.<sup>71</sup>

Of the liberals who supported the Iraq War, it was Ignatieff who seemed most cognizant that it might be possible for others to make an alternative case for war on the basis of strategic rather than ethical imperatives – although ultimately he continued to downplay this possibility. As an admirer of American power, Ignatieff lauded Washington's "humanitarian empire," which, he claimed, prioritized nation building and the creation of stability and security in places like Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. "To the extent that human rights justify the humanitarian use of military force, the new empire can claim that it serves the cause of moral universalism," Ignatieff wrote. However, he also acknowledged that "empires that are successful learn to ration their service to moral principles to the few strategic zones where the defense of principle is simultaneously the defense of a vital interest." Modern imperial ethics were inherently hypocritical, he argued.<sup>72</sup> And yet the caveats still seemed like an aside for Ignatieff, who continued to focus mainly on the potential humanitarian benefits of a US invasion of Iraq and to suggest that there was no conflict between the antitotalitarian ethic and the imperatives of unipolar power: "it remains a fact," he stated in January 2003, "that there are many peoples who owe their freedom to an exercise of American military power." Japanese, Germans, Bosnians,

<sup>70</sup> Cushman, *A Matter of Principle*. In Packer's collection, just one contributor out of ten – Michael Tomasky – recognised that the Bush Doctrine did not derive from liberal internationalism. Tomasky's perceptive essay pointed out the importance of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance (though he did not mention the neoconservatives specifically). See Packer, *The Fight Is for Democracy*.

<sup>71</sup> Cottee and Cushman, *Christopher Hitchens and His Critics*, 206–7.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite*, 17–19, 110.

Kosovars, Afghans had all benefitted and now American “empire” was “the last hope” for democracy and stability in Iraq too.<sup>73</sup>

For the most part, the liberal hawks were quite sure of the veracity of their own explanatory narrative for the “war on terror” despite the fact that the President’s public justifications for war – WMDs, terrorism and the belated invocation of humanitarianism – did not seem to cohere with that narrative. Berman wondered why the President had failed to fully explain that the real and most important reason for the war was actually its ideological and humanitarian component. Why did he persist with the security rationale when, Berman claimed, the real reason for the “war on terror” was the need to confront the new totalitarianism? To Berman, this was a mystery. He was perplexed by Bush’s repeated “failure to take up the larger war of ideas” when “these goals stood at the heart of the war.” Rather than questioning whether these objectives really were at the heart of the war, Berman suggested that Bush’s failure to fully articulate this was for “no reason ... Maybe out of inexperience. For lack of time to ponder the alternatives. Or who knows?” “Mostly he presented, or he allowed his cabinet officers to present his war strategies on different bases entirely,” he wrote.<sup>74</sup> Most confusing of all for Berman was Bush’s failure to challenge the brutal theocratic dictatorship of Saudi Arabia. How could Bush maintain a close relationship with such a regime when he was committed to (in Berman’s words) “undoing the whole of Muslim totalitarianism”?<sup>75</sup> Rather than questioning whether the prosecutors of the “war on terror” genuinely shared his objective, Berman assumed that there had been a catastrophic communications blunder and that, for reasons unknown, the administration had failed to inform the public of its most important war aims: Bush “seemed unable to get any of these points across to the world. He spoke, and the mute button swallowed his words.”<sup>76</sup> Hitchens, too, claimed knowledge of the inner minds of Bush administration officials: they had definitely identified the root causes of 9/11 as the illiberal Muslim regimes from Riyadh to Islamabad and recognized the need to challenge them, he wrote, but “such causes *cannot be publicly admitted*.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, the failure to articulate the “real” war aims, which Berman had noted, was actually a deliberate omission from the public case for war. Trapped in their own antitotalitarian paradigm, Berman and

<sup>73</sup> Michael Ignatieff, “The Burden,” *New York Times Magazine*, 5 Jan. 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/05/magazine/the-american-empire-the-burden.html?pagewanted=all>, accessed 23 Aug. 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, 202, 199.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>77</sup> Christopher Hitchens, “Machiavelli in Mesopotamia,” in *idem, A Long Short War*, 19 and 17, emphasis added.

Hitchens were unable to conceive of any other possible rationale for the invasion of Iraq.

The view that there were important unstated war aims was given voice in the mainstream press by the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. Though not a former leftist like Berman and Hitchens, Friedman was another influential liberal voice for war and put forward a case that was reminiscent of Berman's. Although he did not believe that Islamism was the heir of fascism or communism, Friedman identified a new Islamist worldview – "the terrorism bubble" – that had taken hold during the 1990s. This violent and irrational anti-Western outlook was "a kind of temporary insanity" that embraced the suicide bombing of civilians and appealed to swathes of people across Europe and the Arab world. Like Berman and Hitchens, Friedman believed that there was an unstated agenda that was central to the invasion of Iraq:

For George Bush and Tony Blair ... I think it was about something larger, *but unstated*. They were implicitly saying: "This terrorism bubble has come to threaten open societies and all they value. So, we're going to use Iraq – because we can – to demonstrate to you that we'll come right into the heart of your world to burst this bubble."<sup>78</sup>

For Cushman, however, motives were less important. In the introduction to his collection of pro-war essays, Cushman warned against the danger of making judgements about the war based solely on motives: "One of the strongest ethical arguments for the humanitarian intervention argument lies in considering the *consequences* of the war." Judgement should be based on outcomes rather than intentions.<sup>79</sup> But Cushman's hoped-for outcomes were overly sanguine: limited only to the successful removal of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent desire of ordinary Iraqis to craft a liberal democratic society.<sup>80</sup> Nor did Hitchens pay much attention to the potentially negative consequences of the war. In April 2003, just one month after the invasion of Iraq, he declared a premature victory: "Look back, if you care to, and read the wild alarmist predictions that were made. There would be a military quagmire. The Arab street would arise, led by fans of Osama bin Laden, and wreak revenge ... Heaps of civilian corpses would rise."<sup>81</sup> Sadly, in time, Hitchens and Cushman would be proven too optimistic.

<sup>78</sup> Thomas Friedman, "The Third Bubble," *NYT*, 20 April 2003, emphasis added.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Cushman, "Introduction," in *idem*, ed., *A Matter of Principle*, 9, original emphasis. For this argument see also Fernando Tesón, "Ending Tyranny in Iraq," *Ethics & International Affairs*, 19, 2 (Summer 2005), 1–20. <sup>80</sup> Cushman, "Introduction," 9–10, 15.

<sup>81</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "Epilogue: After the Fall ...," in *idem*, *A Long Short War*, 101.

A fundamental difference between the liberal hawks and the architects of the war was in their attitude to postwar nation building. For humanitarian interventionists, postconflict peace building was an integral part of the crusade against totalitarianism – but for the architects of the war, more concerned with geopolitics, it was not. The neoconservatives who had campaigned for regime change during the Clinton years were interested in deposing the regime for strategic reasons but had very little to say about what came after the war other than an endorsement of Ahmad Chalabi, their favoured Iraqi exile, as leader, despite Chalabi being unknown inside Iraq, having left the country in 1958 aged fourteen.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, the liberal hawks simply assumed that the administration would rebuild the war-torn nation. However, Bush's pre-9/11 rejection of nation building proved to be more indicative of his administration's light-touch approach to rebuilding Iraq.<sup>83</sup> The earliest indication of this came before the invasion, when Donald Rumsfeld sacked the US Army chief-of-staff, Eric Shinseki, after he called for "something in the order of several hundred thousand soldiers" to control Iraq after regime change, when the administration was committed to a much lower number.<sup>84</sup> In October 2003, seven months after the invasion, it was reported that the State Department had completed a major report on nation building in postwar Iraq, the Future of Iraq Project, with the help of over two hundred exiled Iraqi lawyers, engineers, businesspeople and other experts, and that this had predicted many of the postwar problems beginning to emerge in Iraq.<sup>85</sup> However, the report had been shelved at the behest of the Department of Defense, which took over the postwar running of Iraq, led by retired General Jay Garner, who travelled to Iraq with no professional translators or interpreters on his staff.<sup>86</sup> The Pentagon airlifted Chalabi and his aides into Baghdad, and what ensued was a minimalist approach to nation building, which Toby Dodge calls "despotic decapitation": the removal of the top-level leadership and any former senior Baathists in government

<sup>82</sup> See Toby Dodge, "Coming Face to Face with Bloody Reality: Liberal Common Sense and the Ideological Failure of the Bush Doctrine in Iraq," *International Politics*, 46, 2–3, March 2009, 263–71. Ryan, *Neoconservatism and the New American Century*, 105.

<sup>83</sup> Dodge calls the administration's approach the "decapitation thesis," which was followed by the establishment of a minimalist neoliberal state that would adopt a laissez-faire approach to politics and the economy – a disaster, he argues, for post-Saddam Iraq. Dodge, 264–65.

<sup>84</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 255. See also Seymour M. Hersh, "Offense and Defense," *New Yorker*, 7 April 2003, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/04/07/030407fa\\_fact1](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/04/07/030407fa_fact1), accessed 2 Sept. 2010.

<sup>85</sup> Department of State, *Future of Iraq Project*, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB198/index.htm>, accessed 2 Sept. 2010. Fallows, "Blind into Baghdad."

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Dodge, 266.

employment and the disbanding of the 400,000-strong Iraqi army, thus creating a large pool of disaffected and unemployed men, propelling Iraq into insurgency and civil war.<sup>87</sup>

### “WHAT WE GOT WRONG AND WHY”

By 2005, the quagmire in Iraq became undeniable and liberal hawks and neocons alike began to consider what had gone wrong.<sup>88</sup> The neocons rounded on the Bush administration and its failure to hand over power quickly to Chalabi.<sup>89</sup> The response of the liberal hawks was similar. They also blamed the Bush administration's incompetence and did not reconsider the premise – war as an ethical undertaking – on which their initial support had been based. Whereas the neocons believed that their project was strategically essential but ruined by Bush's incompetence, the liberal hawks still conceived of the invasion of Iraq as an idealistic endeavour, just one that had gone wrong due to the unexpected incompetence of the Bush administration.

To their credit, some of them acknowledged that they had placed too much trust in the administration when it came to the rebuilding of post-Saddam Iraq. Jacob Weisberg, one-time liberal hawk and editor of the online magazine *Slate*, convened a forum in 2004 in which some of the war's most enthusiastic supporters considered its aftermath. Weisberg acknowledged the Bush administration's poor postwar planning and the increase in anti-American feeling in the Middle East, which would breed further terrorism.<sup>90</sup> Packer stated bluntly that

the American occupation had about two weeks to get things right after the fall of Baghdad in order to set in motion a process that had any chance of success, and it got everything wrong. The best efforts of the best Americans in Iraq are constantly being undermined by the terrible decisions of policy makers in Washington.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 268–70. On the administration's incompetence and lack of planning see Charles Duelfer, *Hide and Seek: The Search for Truth in Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), 273–96 and 309–30. See also Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin, 2007); and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Baghdad's Green Zone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

<sup>88</sup> George Packer, “What We Got Wrong and Why,” *Slate*, 16 Jan. 2004, <http://www.slate.com/id/2093620/entry/2094000>, accessed 4 Feb. 2011.

<sup>89</sup> For a sample of their views see David Rose, “Neo Culpa,” *Vanity Fair* (Jan. 2007), <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2007/01/neocons200701>, accessed 4 Feb. 2011.

<sup>90</sup> Jacob Weisberg, “Should We Have Backed This Invasion?,” *Slate*, 12 Jan. 2004, <http://www.slate.com/id/2093620/entry/2093641>, accessed 6 Sept. 2010.

<sup>91</sup> George Packer, “The Trouble with Liberal Hawks,” *Slate*, 12 Jan. 2004, <http://www.slate.com/id/2093620/entry/2093785>, accessed 6 Sept. 2010.

Writing in 2007, Ignatieff finally appeared to recognize that some of those who opposed the war had done so because they had “rightly evaluated *the motives that led to the action*”:

What they didn't do was take wishes for reality. They didn't suppose ... that because they believed in the integrity of their own motives everyone else in the [Middle East] region would believe in it, too. They didn't suppose that a free state could arise on the foundations of 35 years of police terror. They didn't suppose that America had the power to shape political outcomes in a faraway country of which most Americans knew little. They didn't believe that because America defended human rights and freedom in Bosnia and Kosovo it had to be doing so in Iraq.

Ignatieff was the only liberal hawk to acknowledge that not all those who opposed the war had shared his belief that US action was propelled by ethical imperatives and that it would be relatively easy to establish a new post-Saddam state. And yet he remained a liberal hawk at heart; his conclusion was still hedged to avoid being too critical of the Bush administration: “A prudent leader will save democracies from the worst,” he wrote, “but prudent leaders will not inspire a democracy to give its best. Democratic peoples should always be looking for something more than prudence in a leader” – a conclusion suggesting that Ignatieff himself still believed that Bush's actions had been driven by a moral vision, even if those who opposed the war did not.<sup>92</sup>

Others continued to critique the war on the basis that it was a humanitarian intervention gone awry. While Weisberg was wary of the costs of the war, “I still think [it] was morally justified,” he wrote.<sup>93</sup> Although Packer now questioned whether military power was the right way to promote democracy, he continued to support the war on those grounds: “Before going to Iraq I knew abstractly that it was one of the worst [regimes] in modern history ... I know that's hardly the best or only basis for foreign policy decisions, but in this case, it's decisive for me.”<sup>94</sup> Friedman also reiterated a threefold ethical justification for war. The “the moral reason” was to rid the world of “a genocidal regime.” The “right reason” was to do something about “the young people being churned out, year after year, by failed and repressive Arab states, who hate us more than they love life.” Finally,

the real reason for the war – which was never stated – was to burst what I would call ‘the terrorism bubble’ ... the only way to do it was to go right into the heart of the

<sup>92</sup> Michael Ignatieff, “Getting Iraq Wrong,” *NYT*, 5 Aug. 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/05/magazine/05iraq-t.html?\\_r=2&ex=1343966400&en=13354304](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/05/magazine/05iraq-t.html?_r=2&ex=1343966400&en=13354304), accessed 6 Sept. 2010. My emphasis.

<sup>93</sup> Weisberg.

<sup>94</sup> Packer, “Trouble With Liberal Hawks.”

Arab world and smash something – to let everyone know that we, too, are ready to fight and die to preserve our open society.<sup>95</sup>

Berman and Hitchens remained bullish and made few, if any, concessions. In Weisberg's *Slate* forum of 2004, Berman stated that "the larger totalitarian movement in the Muslim world has been dealt two very powerful blows" in Afghanistan and Iraq, and that "the prospects of Muslim liberalism are looking up, somewhat." "Why don't people understand these accomplishments?" he asked. The answer, he claimed, was the Bush administration's continuing failure to give full voice to the larger war of ideas that was apparently central to the "war on terror": "The blame, a lot of it, does fall on Bush, who, in addition to his other errors, has given a very muddy picture of the reasons for war ... Really, the man has a lot to answer for."<sup>96</sup> Hitchens summed up his position in another *Slate* forum five years after the war with a contribution titled "How Did I Get Iraq Wrong? I Didn't." While acknowledging that the Bush administration had made "an unarguable hash" of the intervention, Hitchens listed a string of humanitarian achievements, from the public trial of a war criminal, to the outline of a new federal democratic system. This was an intervention "on the right side and for the right reasons."<sup>97</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The idea of humanitarian intervention remains a compelling one. The liberal hawks' sincere desire to "do something" in the face of oppression and violent fanaticism is understandable, but doing something does not necessarily mean making things better. In the case of the "war on terror," the liberal hawks' understandable desire to see the end of the truly monstrous regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq led them to avoid scrutinizing the motives of the Bush administration and the neoconservative architects of the "war on terror" and to project their own values and hopes onto a war that had been conceived and contrived for quite different reasons. Throughout the

<sup>95</sup> Thomas Friedman, "Four Reasons to Invade Iraq," *Slate*, 12 Jan. 2004, <http://www.slate.com/id/2093620/entry/2093763>, accessed 6 Sept. 2010.

<sup>96</sup> See Berman's contributions to the *Slate* forum: "Stopping Muslim Totalitarianism," 12 Jan. 2004, <http://www.slate.com/id/2093620/entry/2093798>; "Iraq's Crack Polish Division," 13 Jan. 2004, <http://www.slate.com/id/2093620/entry/2093867>; "Only the Left Can Win the War of Ideas," <http://www.slate.com/id/2093620/entry/2093925>; "Hitler, Stalin, Hussein," <http://www.slate.com/id/2093620/entry/2094016>, all accessed 6 Sept. 2010. See also Paul Berman, "Will the Opposition Lead?," *New York Times*, 15 April 2004.

<sup>97</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "How Did I Get Iraq Wrong? I Didn't," *Slate*, 17 March 2008, <http://www.slate.com/id/2186740>, accessed 6 Sept. 2010.

build-up to the invasion of Iraq and during its aftermath as the country descended into virtual civil war, most of the liberal hawks continued to insist that the “war on terror” was an unavoidable and necessary confrontation with the forces of illiberalism, as opposed to a strategic war of choice based on an expansive conception of America’s national interest as the world’s “unipolar” power. Their shortsightedness meant that they dismissed critics of the administration as terrorist sympathizers; they buttressed Bush’s retrospective invocation of human rights after the failure to find WMDs in Iraq; and, perhaps most importantly, they risked undermining the very values they sought to uphold. First, they encouraged a war with some predictable outcomes – such as US occupation, ethnic conflict and an anti-American insurgency – that militated strongly against the development of a stable democracy. More broadly, as Thomas G. Weiss argues, the legitimate *idea* of humanitarian intervention has been contaminated by association with the “war on terror.” Many developing countries were already highly suspicious of Western interventionism; the Non-aligned Movement has publically rejected “the right of humanitarian intervention” three times, viewing it as a dubious cover for Western imperialism.<sup>98</sup> The United Nations’ human security agenda, encapsulated in the slogan “the responsibility to protect” (R2P), has also suffered as a result. When the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), empowered by the UN Secretary-General to examine the international response to humanitarian emergencies, reported to the UN World Summit in 2005, consensus on the R2P concept was only possible by watering down the original ICISS report on intervention and emphasizing that the host state had primary responsibility to act in humanitarian emergencies and that if outside intervention occurred, only the Security Council could take action (i.e. there could be no unilateral action). Even in this form, the Non-aligned Movement remained unhappy with the prospect of outside intervention, while the United States – despite its (late) invocation of idealism as a rationale for the Iraq invasion – reiterated its refusal to be committed to humanitarian intervention by others.<sup>99</sup> Washington sought to retain flexibility, to decide itself which “humanitarian” emergencies were worthy of intervention and which were not – precisely the reason why some countries remained suspicious of the US invocation of humanitarianism.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Interventionism* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), 119–29.

<sup>99</sup> Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention*, 117. *The Responsibility to Protect*, Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, Dec. 2001, <http://www.iciss.ca/report2-en.asp>, accessed 27 June 2011.

Similarly, Thomas Carothers has demonstrated that linking US military interventions to human rights is counterproductive because those rights often become tainted by association with Western imperialism (or the perception of it).<sup>100</sup> Since the Iraq War, governments in Russia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, China, Nepal, Ethiopia and Eritrea have expelled or harassed Western NGOs and prohibited or punished local groups who receive funding from Western sources on the grounds that democracy promotion and human rights are a Trojan horse designed to effect regime change. The Bush administration's retrospective invocation of democracy promotion has made it easier for those governments eager to resist liberalization to portray their actions as resistance to aggressive Western interventionism.<sup>101</sup>

Ultimately, though the idea of humanitarian intervention is attractive to some, it was not the ideological impetus firing the Bush administration's "war on terror" and liberal hawks wishing to encourage democracy and promote human rights should be wary of advocating US military intervention as a vehicle through which to do this.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas Carothers, "The Backlash against Democracy Promotion," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2006, 55–68. See also Helen Laville, "Gender Apartheid? American Women and Women's Rights in American Foreign Policy," in Andrew Johnstone and Helen Laville, eds., *The US Public and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2010), esp. 91–100.

<sup>101</sup> Carothers, "Backlash against Democracy Promotion," 56–62.