

How Anomalous Was The 'War on Terror' In The Context Of US Foreign Policy Since 1900?

History, and a nation's role within it has implicit meaning for how a modern day government behaves. Like the natural layering of earthly sediment through time, laws are embedded, precedents are set, and traditions are enshrined. They constitute the bedrock upon which contemporary society, in constant motion at the surface, is built, and the soil from which its cultural, ideological and legislative roots grow.

The War on Terror with its preventive and unilateralist stance is often singled out as an unprecedented aberration of traditional US foreign policy, with President Bush criticised for lacking the kind of prudence reverently exhibited by his twentieth century predecessors. However, the War on Terror was an evolution of US political history rather than a revolutionary, radical departure from it. To understand the actions of the War on Terror within the context of US foreign policy, we must first consider the ideological impetus behind them through defining the War on Terror and uncovering the genetic lineage in its "exceptional" ends. This essay will then examine the means of Bush foreign policy in historical context to establish that traditional methods were adapted to engage new transnational threats in a technologically advanced environment, within vastly expanded American national security boundaries that were restrained by fewer geopolitical limits on its power than ever before.

Given the prominence of the War on Terror in the National Security Strategy (NSS) (2006), one might assume that the War on Terror was the overall grand strategy of the United States, but it was not. It holds that "the struggle against militant Islamic radicalism is the great ideological conflict of the early years of the twenty-first century" (Bush, 2006: 36). It equates a "totalitarian" ideology of Islamic terrorism with that of communism, the twentieth century scourge of the free world, and in doing so attempts to elevate the War on Terror to the historic significance of the Cold War. But whereas communism had widespread worldwide appeal and a perfect (albeit false) organised vision of society backed by incredible military might, Osama bin Laden's jihad was limited, disruptive and lacked universal significance, political reach and military power (Brzezinski, 2005).

In reality, the War on Terror constituted the key military foreign policy objective within a conventional broader, longer-term set of political, diplomatic and economic efforts designed to advance the national interest. Bush's grand strategy could be better defined by his first term NSS (2002) which broadly laid out his goals as those of political and economic freedom, peace with other states, and respect for human dignity (Bush, 2002: 1). His internationalism starkly recalled the stated traditional goals of security, prosperity, democracy and human rights listed in Clinton's NSS (2000), which itself explicitly attributed authorship to the timeless basic design that began the Constitution in which the People: "provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity" (Clinton, 2000: 3). These are the sacred pillars that colonnade the path set by the Founding Fathers towards the Manifest Destiny and redemption of mankind. To veer off course would expose American wellbeing to outside threats. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the War on Terror would protect them through "the power of [American] values to shape a free and more prosperous world" (Bush, 2003: 2) and lead it to the same democratic peace chased by common US foreign policy.

While the means of US foreign policy have varied with time and technology since 1900, all have been driven by the same broad ends: stability for a liberal, peaceful world order. Bush sought to achieve these ends through the spread of "freedom, democracy, and free enterprise" hailing that together they represent the "single sustainable model for national success" (Bush, 2002: 1). This notion runs deep in American consciousness and is a perspective Bush inherited from Woodrow Wilson's liberal internationalist tradition. Indeed, the principles of Wilson's Fourteen Points for democratic peace are echoed in the post-World War Two outlook of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Atlantic Charter, and the Truman Doctrine. They are as much the inspiration for Clinton's internationalism as they are for the Bush NSS (2002) maxim that American values "help make the world not just safer but better", and because these values are universal, they are "open to all" (Bush, 2002: 1). Bush embraced the Wilsonian idea that non-democracies are the cause of war, and democracies are peaceful. To eliminate war, the former would need to be transformed into the latter. In continuity, Bush considered American democratic peace to be intrinsically linked to Iraq's domestic regime. Thus, the War on Terror embraced the long-held American political cultural view that it is a state's domestic political system that determines its foreign policy, the United States included. The exceptionalism of America is engrained in its conduct of foreign affairs which by extension wields the transformative power of redemption. Not only would a democratic Iraq be peaceful, but it would also be a free and prosperous example to the rest of the Middle East. This was the War on Terror design for regime change.