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The Dangers and Costs of Pax Americana

by Richard M. Ebeling

On September 17, 2002, the White House released a 31-page document entitled “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America.” It spells out the planned global agenda for the U.S. government for the foreseeable future. It is nothing less than the declared statement of the intention for the United States to consciously become the policeman and social engineer of the world. America will try to prod and persuade its allies around the world to join in this grand design to remake the planet. But if they choose not to participate, the Bush administration has announced its intention of going about this task, if necessary, unilaterally.

The document overflows with the tone of high moral fervor and indignation in the face of the events of September 11, 2001. After having been lulled into a false slumber in the wake of the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, America has been shocked into a new awareness of a new enemy — international terrorism. This new enemy does not play by the traditional rules and standards of warfare and is determined to destroy America simply for what it stands for as a nation.

The United States, says the president and those who penned this document, cannot wait for this new foe to strike first before crushing him. America must preemptively act to destroy the threat before it can even reach our shores. But that is not enough. The United States must prevent the seeds of terrorism from germinating in foreign soils by using all of the weapons in its political, economic, and military arsenal to transform into Western-style democracies all those parts of the world in which the roots of terrorism are found. America will use all of its power to make the world over into its own image. This “global enterprise” is of “uncertain duration,” the president says in his introduction to the document.

The vision of our Founders

Since the Founding Fathers, Americans have often viewed themselves as offering the world a better and superior vision of what could be. As the great experiment in constitutional self-government and individual freedom, America has been seen as that “beacon on the hill” showing an alternative to political tyranny and economic control over men’s lives.

For the first 125 years of the country’s existence as an independent nation, it served as that example for the rest of the world by practicing the idea of freedom on its own shores. Even the

inconsistencies and contradictions between the American ideal in principle and in practice within its own land also highlighted to others that compromises between liberty and tyranny were ultimately impossible. The 19th-century American controversies over freedom and slavery, national power versus states' rights, gold or paper money, free trade or protectionism, and privileges and subsidies versus the unhampered free market were lessons for other countries to observe being played out in America; as well, they were challenges for Americans who were struggling to determine who they were as a free people.

The presumption for most of that 125-year period was that freedom and its underlying political, economic, and cultural institutions could not be bestowed or imposed upon a people from the outside. The ideal of freedom and its institutional foundations had to take seed and develop in each land in its own way. The spirit of liberty had to blossom within the hearts and minds of the people in those foreign lands. Just as the American Founding Fathers had attempted to learn from the thinkers and historical experiences of the past in devising the U.S. constitutional order, other peoples could base their systems of freedom on the lessons to be learned from America and other (classical) liberal societies.

Neither did Americans, in general, believe in U.S. military intervention to overthrow foreign tyrannies and reconstruct societies in which political despotism had been removed. That was a task for the people in those other countries; they were the ones primarily responsible for their own liberation.

The task of the American government was to ensure the domestic tranquility in which the free people of the United States could design their own individual futures and follow their separate dreams. If any Americans were deeply moved and felt compelled to assist others struggling for their freedom from domestic tyranny or foreign oppression, they were more or less free to volunteer their personal lives and fortunes to any cause they considered just. But this was a matter of individual conscience and choice — it was not the duty or responsibility of the U.S. government.

The turn toward intervention

All that changed with the presidency of Woodrow Wilson and America's participation in the First World War. Wilson assigned the United States the task to "make the world safe for democracy." This was to be achieved by America intervening in the European conflict and ensuring that the war would be the "war to end all wars." Though not attacked by any of the belligerent powers in that European conflict, Wilson persuaded the Congress to declare war and enter the conflict. America was no longer merely the great example of freedom — America was now to bestow freedom on the world through its political and military intervention. Peace would be established by reordering the world according to a new socially engineered design.

Twenty-five years later, Franklin Roosevelt took on Wilson's mantle to once more lead a crusade against evil and remake a better world that would be given a "new deal." For the next half-century, the United States took on the role of global crusader against the very communist state that it had been in an alliance with in the fight against Nazism.

The Cold War transformed the United States. As Derek Leebaert has recently detailed in his book *The Fifty-Year Wound: The True Price of America's Cold War Victory* (2002), many of our

traditional civil and economic liberties were weakened and a great deal more prosperity that could have been ours was sacrificed in this global battle.

The U.S. government lied and deceived, both at home and abroad; it pried into the personal lives of many Americans in the name of national security; it used unsuspecting Americans as guinea pigs for experiments in chemical and nuclear warfare; it manipulated foreign governments, conspired to overthrow foreign regimes, and bribed and threatened foreign political leaders to make them bend to American wishes.

The government taxed the income and wealth of tens of millions of Americans to have the financial wherewithal to supply foreign-aid giveaways and prop up corrupt and brutal foreign dictatorships who swore their allegiance to anti-communism. It spent tens of billions on inept covert operations around the world on the basis of poorly collected intelligence data that was incorrectly interpreted by the American intelligence agencies. And it intervened in the wars in Korea and Vietnam, resulting in the death of more than 100,000 Americans soldiers.

America's reach in this crusade was truly global. "American frontiers are on the Rhine and the Mekong, and the Tigris and the Euphrates and the Amazon," said President John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s. "There is not a place in the world that is not of concern to all of us.... We are responsible for the maintenance of freedom all over the world."

The global policeman

Now in the post-Cold War era, this is the mantle that President George W. Bush has taken on his shoulders. The American people — including their lives and their fortunes — are to be permanently responsible for the peace and freedom of the world in the name of national security. While the new "National Security Strategy" emphasizes the importance and role of America's allies in this global crusade, the U.S. government makes it crystal clear that it will act on its own whenever and however it decides that it is necessary to do so.

"While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists, to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country...."

The U.S. government will decide who and what is a threat, and on that basis use military force to crush the suspected source of that threat.

"The United States has long maintained the option of preemptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security.... We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries.... To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively."

Application of the full power of the U.S. armed forces may now be unleashed anywhere in the world at the discretion of the president of the United States and his advisors. They will decide whether to regard some group in a foreign country or some foreign government halfway around the world as a possible threat to what they define at that moment as the national interests of the United States.

This will necessitate as well, the document emphasizes, the continuing presence of American military forces around the world.

“To contend with uncertainty and to meet the many security challenges we face, the United States will require bases and stations within and beyond Western Europe and Northeast Asia, as well as temporary access arrangements for the long-distance deployment of U.S. forces.”

In every corner of the world, American military personnel will continue to be placed in harm’s way under the paradoxical rationale that only by being ready to intervene in any foreign conflict in any nation around the globe can America be protected from enemies abroad.

Nowhere in the document is there any mention of the U.S. Constitution and the separation of powers. Nowhere is there reference to declarations of war with congressional approval or even congressional resolutions of consent and agreement for individual acts of military intervention. No, the decisions whether and when to undertake a preemptive military strike anywhere in the world will reside exclusively with the mortal and imperfect man who sits in the Oval Office.

The mortal and imperfect man who might wrap himself up in rhetoric of goodness and freedom but who is none the less a politician concerned with his own reelection and that of his political party. A man who is open to and influenced by the various special interests upon whom every politician is dependent for votes and campaign contributions.

And a man, like all others, who is susceptible to the vainglory of wanting to leave his mark on history to ensure that his name will be recalled with awe and respect for the ages to come. Hail Caesar!

Global welfare and regulation

The “National Security Strategy” document waxes eloquent about the importance of individual freedom, free markets, free trade, and free movement of technology and scientific ideas to improve the conditions of the masses of mankind. But in every discussion of what these ideas mean in practice, government and its overseeing and regulatory hand is always present. The United States will

“improve the effectiveness of the World Bank and other development banks in raising living standards.... We have ... proposed an 18 percent increase in the U.S. contributions to the International Development Association (IDA) — the World Bank’s fund for the poorest countries — and the African Development Fund.”

The document promises,

“We will continue to work with the [International Monetary Fund] to streamline the policy conditions for its lending and to focus its lending strategy on achieving economic growth through sound fiscal and monetary policy, exchange rate policy, and financial sector policy.”

The avenues for fostering international economic growth and stability are to be the international agencies and organizations whose policy recommendations have been the source of numerous

financial crises around the world, and the basis of often anti-market, pro-taxing domestic agendas in unfortunate recipient countries.

At the same time, it is proposed for the United States to increase by 50 percent its direct development assistance to developing countries. This is to be a part of what the “National Security Strategy” refers to as a “Millennium Challenge Account.” Large sums of U.S. taxpayers’ money will be distributed to those countries that follow the dictates of the American policy teams that will know how the governments in these various nations should pursue economic growth through economic freedom.

And these will not be loans but “results-based grants.” Each of the recipient governments will be inspected and supervised to make sure that the money that is given to them is being spent in the “correct” way. Since looking over the domestic agenda and policies of the Bush administration creates no confidence that it knows what free-market policies should mean in America, it raises serious doubts that it would have any clearer conception of how to foster economic freedom in those countries abroad.

The document also states,

“The United States has strongly backed the new global fund for HIV/AIDS organized by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and its focus on combining prevention with a broad strategy for treatment and care.”

Considering the government’s abject failure in its wars on poverty, illiteracy, and racism at home, international government intervention against AIDS does not bode well for the victims of that disease.

Stating that “literacy and learning are the foundation of democracy and development,” the United States promises to “increase its own funding for education assistance by at least 20 percent with an emphasis on improving basic education and teacher training in Africa.” Just as the Bush administration turned its back on its own weak and contradictory case for private-school choice in America, it clearly believes that the problem of education in Africa is best left in the hands of government schools and teachers.

Never once in this document that hails a coming epoch of Pax Americana is there any reference to or estimate of the cost to permanently reinforce this global presence and domination of the world. “The United States must and will maintain the capability to defeat any attempt by an enemy — whether a state or non-state actor — to impose its will on the United States, our allies, or our friends.” How many trillions of dollars will Americans be deprived of to pay for this world empire? How much poorer will the American people be than they would have to be, given that this wealth will not be available for private-sector savings, investment, and capital formation?

In the name of national security, how many of our civil liberties will be further eroded or taken away, because once one is responsible for the world, there are potential global enemies everywhere? How many acts of terror and disaster will the American people have to suffer precisely because by intervening even more in every part of the world, the United States will become the enemy of even more groups in faraway lands?

And for how long will the rest of the world tolerate an arrogant and self-righteous America claiming to be the self-appointed master of the world, in the name of knowing the real best interests of everyone on the face of the earth?

President Bush's "National Security Strategy of the United States," if fully implemented, will only accelerate the long and torturous path along which America has been following its own road to serfdom for many decades.

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