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Conservatism, Democracy, and Foreign Policy

In a penetrating essay dating from 1948, the Hungarian political philosopher Aurel Kolnai wrote that in our time, a balanced defense of liberty should aim “to *displace the spiritual stress* from the ‘common man’ aspect of Democracy to its aspect of constitutionalism and of moral continuity with the high tradition of Antiquity, Christendom, and the half-surviving Liberal cultures of yesterday.”¹ Kolnai’s profoundly conservative appreciation of the moral foundations of democracy provides a principled ground for resisting what Roger Scruton has called “the culture of repudiation” and for making one’s way in the culture wars. Kolnai’s thought can also provide inspiration for a principled and prudent foreign policy that does not confuse a robust defense of liberty with doctrinaire support for democracy abroad. An early critic of both National Socialism and Soviet Communism, Kolnai knew that the Western world has every reason to consider totalitarianism the *summum malum*, the worst political evil. But a variety of legitimate anti-totalitarian political options exist even in a “democratic” age. In foreign policy, the intellectual alternatives are not exhausted by cultural relativism, on the one hand, and a democratic “progressivism” that overlooks the fragility of political civilization, on the other.

In my view, the West’s victory over Communism is best understood not as a victory for democracy *per se*—especially not for democracy in its current, post-national and post-religious manifestation—but rather, as a defeat for the utopian illusion that human beings could somehow live free and dignified lives without property, religion, nations, or politics. The collapse of Soviet Communism was thus the definitive repudiation of what the Hegelian-Marxist philosopher Alexandre Kojève called “the universal and homogenous state.” Kojève believed that by the mid-twentieth century the avant-garde of humanity had put “an end to history,” to all world-transforming political or ideological contestation. Henceforth, there would be no politics, only the administration of things, whether by Communist commissars or E.U. bureaucrats. This was history’s *inevitable* denouement. These fantasies ought to have been revealed for what they were by the *annus mirabilis* 1989.

Yet such is the hold of historicism on us that politicians and theorists across the ideological spectrum succumbed to the

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temptation to give a “progressivist” interpretation of the end of the Cold War itself. Marvelously mirroring Marxist arguments, lifelong anti-Communists now claimed that it was the West’s victory in the Cold War that had been inevitable, that Communism was destined to collapse because it had been “on the wrong side of History.” In his address to the British parliament in 1982, Ronald Reagan had stated that “the Soviet Union...runs against the tide of history by denying freedom and human dignity to its citizens.” Surely this noble statesman was correct that Communism entailed nothing less than a fundamental assault on “the natural order of things.” But it was another matter to turn the tables on the Marxists by claiming that “History” favored the universal triumph of the democratic ideal. With the systematic breakdown of classical and Christian education in the Western world, few were still capable of articulating an older wisdom that refused to identify the Good with the alleged movement of History.

With the publication of Francis Fukuyama’s article “The End of History?” in *The National Interest* in 1989 (and the book which quickly followed on its heels), the world was treated to a sophisticated neo-“Marxist” interpretation of the fall of Communism, this time at the service of a broadly conservative politics. According to Fukuyama, the end of the Cold War had indeed culminated in something like the “universal and homogenous state.” But in one of those displays of dialectical cleverness beloved by social theorists, democratic capitalism was now said to alone embody the authentic “recognition of man by man.” In a “Ruse of Reason” worthy of Hegel himself, History had vindicated the bourgeois order whose doom had been prophesied by a century and a half of “progressive” thought.

Fukuyama’s thesis gave powerful impe-

tus to what can be called the “second neoconservatism,” an intellectual current that wished to follow up the defeat of Communism with vigorous support for a “global democratic revolution” aided and sustained by the military and political power of the United States. The first neoconservatism, in contrast to the second, had been more anti-totalitarian than “democratic” in orientation, and was perfectly willing to acknowledge the sheer intractability of cultures and civilizations. Whatever the intellectual pedigree of some of its adherents, the new neoconservatism owed more to Alexandre Kojève than to Leo Strauss, who had been an unremitting critic of the “universal and homogenous state” in all its forms. The new neoconservatism shared few of the older neoconservatism’s concerns about the pernicious spiritual and cultural effects of a fully “democratized” polity and culture (see almost any essay by Irving Kristol from the 1970s) or its hesitations about dogmatic support for human rights in foreign policy (the *locus classicus* of this position is Jeane J. Kirkpatrick’s important 1979 *Commentary* essay, “Dictatorships and Double Standards”).

Fukuyama’s Indictment

In his latest book, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (Yale, 2006), Fukuyama ignores his own role in the genesis of the “second neoconservatism.” In important respects, the present-day partisans of “muscular Wilsonianism” have built upon Fukuyaman premises about “the end of history” and the unchallenged ideological ascendancy of liberal democracy, even if they have emphasized the efficacy of military power more than Fukuyama now thinks prudent. In his current self-presentation, Fukuyama plays Marx to William Kristol’s Lenin. He defends the desirability and ultimate inevitability of global democratization while criti-

cizing ill-advised efforts to push the process along. He sees himself as the true neoconservative, one who has remained faithful to neoconservatism's original critique of large-scale social engineering and its salutary concern about the unintended consequences of social action. In his new book and in the Postscript to the 2006 edition of *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama defends a relatively uncontroversial version of modernization theory that owes more to Tocqueville and Weber than to Kojève. He claims that he "never posited a strong version of modernization theory, with rigid stages of development or economically determined outcomes. Contingency, leadership, and ideas always play a complicating role, which made major setbacks possible if not likely."

There is an element of truth, as well as much bad faith, in these formulations. The second neoconservatism is, to be sure, more activist than anything suggested in Fukuyama's original speculations about the nature of the post-Cold War world. But just as Leninist voluntarism—the revolutionary effort to give History a shove toward its ultimate destination—was a natural consequence of Marx's own philosophy of history, so Fukuyama's announcement of the ideological triumph of liberal democracy was bound to provide inspiration for what was to become the second neoconservatism. Fukuyama cannot evade responsibility for his decisive role in interpreting the collapse of Communism in an essentially progressivist or historicist light. It is also difficult to understand why Fukuyama needed to resort to an obscure mélange of Hegel and Kojève, or to rhetoric about the "end of history," if all he had in mind from the beginning was a relatively innocuous version of modernization theory. This born-again Tocquevillian now more carefully distinguishes between economic and social modernization (which

indeed has something "irresistible" about it) and political liberty, which can never simply be guaranteed by unfolding historical or social processes. To make that distinction, however, is to deny any *essential* identification of modernization with "the end of history." It is to affirm with Tocqueville and the classics that the political problem is in principle unsolvable, that History can never substitute for the imperative for human beings "to put reasons and actions in common," as Aristotle put it.

In addition to his failure to appreciate the tendentious logic of his own position, Fukuyama's attribution of real or even metaphorical Leninism both to the Bush administration and to contemporary neoconservatives is unjust and irresponsible. It muddies the theoretical waters while adding nothing to our understanding of the real alternatives facing citizens and statesmen today. Leninism entailed a self-conscious abrogation of the moral law in the name of a revolutionary project to create a New Man and a New Society. It was a manifestation of an inhuman ideological impulse that Edmund Burke did not hesitate to call (in different historical circumstances) "metaphysical madness." Leninism inevitably gave rise to totalitarianism because its ends were *contra naturum* and because it provided ideological justification for tyranny and terror on a truly unprecedented scale. Neoconservatives such as William Kristol may overstate the universal appeal of "democracy" and the role that American power can play in promoting it around the world. That is surely a question for debate and discussion. But they are decent men who have never claimed that moral considerations can be suspended in pursuit of utopian ends.

Moreover, the neoconservatives are wrestling with a real problem made more pressing by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—namely, the multiple ways in

which social stagnation and political authoritarianism conspire to reinforce fanaticism throughout the Arab Islamic world. And however “muscular” their approach to foreign policy, they have not advocated the indiscriminate use of military power or succumbed to the illusion that democracy can simply be imposed from “the barrel of a gun.” To suggest otherwise is to engage in wild caricatures of a serious, if flawed, approach to the conduct of American foreign policy.

There is thus something unhinged about John Gray’s recent suggestion in the pages of *The American Interest* (Summer 2006) that “neoconservatism” represents the continuation of the Marxist-Leninist project and that it will inevitably lead to the same tragic consequences. These extreme formulations—worthy of an ideologue and not a political philosopher—would be easy to dismiss if they did not also recur with alarming regularity in “realist” and “paleoconservative” criticisms of neoconservatism in general, and the Bush foreign policy in particular. President Bush is the first conservative president to be regularly castigated as a “Jacobin” and “Leninist” by a significant number of critics within the conservative intellectual community. Such criticisms paradoxically obscure the genuine weaknesses of the Bush Doctrine by attributing mere fanaticism to a foreign policy that in truth has equal measures of strength and weakness.

A Neoconservative Foreign Policy?

The critics of current American foreign policy tend to presuppose that the Bush administration is carrying out a plan of action that was designed in advance by neoconservative intellectuals. In this view, President Bush is somehow a captive of a cabal of ex-Leftist Jewish intellectuals, students of Leo Strauss, and a group of writers and thinkers around William Kristol’s

Weekly Standard. It is conveniently forgotten or ignored that none of the principals in the administration is a neoconservative—with the arguable exception of Vice President Cheney, who indeed moved closer to neoconservative positions during his tenure at the American Enterprise Institute in the 1990s. It must be remembered that neoconservative advocates of a militarily assertive neo-Wilsonian foreign policy were initially wary of George W. Bush and tended to support the internationalist John McCain in the 2000 Republican primaries. As a candidate, Bush repeatedly expressed his suspicion of humanitarian interventions abroad and called for greater “humility” in the conduct of American foreign policy. The first eight months of the Bush Presidency were dedicated to a domestic agenda of “compassionate conservatism” centered around education reform and “faith-based initiatives.” Bush’s initial instincts about foreign policy—he did not articulate anything as systematic as a doctrine or a grand strategy—were undoubtedly unilateralist, but they were by no means unduly interventionist. In this regard at least, 9/11 did indeed “change everything.”

Bush never became a neoconservative—he operates too much on an instinctual plane to join an intellectual party of any sort—but he formed a tactical alliance with those who provided a theoretical rationale for a more assertive foreign policy. The so-called Bush Doctrine “called for offensive operations, including preemptive war, against terrorists and their abettors, more specifically, against the regimes that had sponsored, encouraged, or merely tolerated, any ‘terrorist group of global reach.’”² If preemptive action (not necessarily of a military sort) against terror-supporting “rogue states” was the weapon of choice of the new strategic doctrine, the promotion of democratic “regime change” provided the moral compass for a foreign policy that

aimed to take the fight to an unscrupulous and nihilistic enemy. Its proponents vigorously defended support for democratic transformation in the Middle East as a new kind of realism rather than an ideological crusade motivated by abstract or utopian considerations.

It is hard to deny that this overall project is informed by a strong dose of realism and contains no small element of daring and moral nobility. For too long the United States coddled corrupt, autocratic regimes in the Middle East as long as they kept the oil flowing or served our strategic interests. The new approach provided a comprehensive framework for navigating the post-9/11 world and a sense of mission to an America that had been awakened from her somnolence by the surprise assault on our national soil. President Bush was no doubt inspired by the idea of striking at the very sources of tyranny and terror in the Arab Islamic world. But his decency and respect for common humanity, undeniable virtues in a democratic statesman, led him to exaggerate the prospects for self-government in a region where secular and religious authoritarianism too often compete to shape the destiny of peoples. In addition, President Bush is a moralist who clearly relishes an unequivocal confrontation with political evil. He is inclined to see any qualification of doctrinaire universalism as a choice for “relativism” rather than a salutary recognition of the undeniable *fact* that self-government has crucial historical, moral, cultural, and spiritual prerequisites.

Strengths & Limits of the New Approach

The Bush administration is not wrong, of course, to recognize important parallels between Jihadist radicalism and the politi-

cal religions of the twentieth century. Whatever the differences between the “pious cruelty” of the Islamists and the atheistic tyrannies of the twentieth century, both ideological currents disdained bourgeois democracy and repudiated the moral law in the name of ostensibly more sublime aspirations and goals. In his latest book, however, Fukuyama rightfully questions whether Islamism poses the same kind of “existential threat” to Western civilization that was posed by Communism and Nazism. With its open contempt for rationality, civil society, and ordinary morality, and its disdain for less virulent currents of Islam, Jihadist extremism mainly appeals to the marginal and dislocated, to those who have been



U.S. Soldiers in Iraq

uprooted by the whirlwinds of globalization. It will never attract the sympathy of Western intellectuals as Communism did during the long social crisis that dominated the first half of the twentieth century. The West must prepare itself for a protracted struggle with a fanatical international movement that aspires to force the whole of humanity to live within “the house of Islam.” With such a movement there can be no compromise or negotiated settlement. Still, it is difficult to argue that in this struggle the West’s very existence—or the moral legitimacy of liberal democracy—is genuinely at stake.

To be sure, any adequate response to the terrorist threat demands a mixture of civic and martial fortitude and political dexterity that goes far beyond the anemic police measures favored by quasi-pacifistic Europeans today. But inexact talk about an open-ended “war on terror”—which in truth implies war without end—does not adequately convey the unsettling gray zone between war and peace that will characterize the international situation for the fore-

seeable future. Nor is it self-evident that democracy, especially electoral democracy, can provide the antidote to the Islamist virus.

After 9/11 the Bush administration lost an opportunity to articulate a textured anti-totalitarianism on the model of the old neoconservatism, one that combined principled opposition to despotism with a carefully calibrated politics of prudence. Instead, President Bush increasingly defined the global political alternatives in a starkly Manichean way as a choice between democracy and tyranny. His understanding of the contemporary world rests on a doctrinaire political science that in the end recognizes one and only one path to human freedom and flourishing. This is the downside of a positive feature. As we have seen over the past five years, Bush's clear-sighted recognition of Good and Evil is the major source of his principled tough-mindedness as a statesman. He is to be applauded for his ability to forthrightly name the *enemy* (and to recognize that the West continues to confront deadly enemies) in a democratic world that is increasingly prone to take for granted the spiritual unity of the human race. But this admirable clarity about the moral dimensions of the struggle also leads the President to be too dismissive of the gray middle ground that more often than not defines the art of statecraft. Bush and his neoconservative allies paradoxically share no small measure of the humanitarianism that they rightly castigate when it emanates from anti-political European and American leftist intellectuals.

It should be acknowledged that the Bush administration's instincts and policies are often significantly more prudent than its official rhetoric and doctrine suggest. The administration has no doubt been chastened by the difficulty of pacifying Iraq and of introducing lawful government in a country wracked by tribal passions and sectar-

ian divisions. Through bitter experience, it has come to appreciate the profound difficulties entailed in bringing self-government to another people, especially one that has been deeply scarred by despotism and is bereft of a settled national consciousness. The administration surely has arrived at a more sober appreciation of the sheer intractability of a part of the world deeply rooted in spiritual sources that are alien to the Western experience. Contrary to what its more fevered critics suggest, it has no stomach for organizing a global democratic imperium or embarking on new "wars of choice." While the administration continues to put too much emphasis on the centrality of electoral democracy, it knows how to work with "authoritarian" allies who oppose Islamist fanaticism or who, in its judgment, provide the best hope for political stability and gradual liberalization.

Conservatism and the Rhetoric of Democracy

But the administration's official rhetoric continues to be marred by a tendency to treat modern democracy as a self-evident desideratum, even as the regime "according to nature." As friendly critics such as Fareed Zakaria have pointed out, both the administration and its neoconservative allies woefully underestimate the despotic propensities inherent in electoral democracy, and this despite the rising electoral fortunes of Islamist parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas in the Middle East and of a Leftist authoritarian like Hugo Chavez in Latin America. They continue to speak ritualistically about "democracy" when what they must really have in mind is that complex synthesis of the rule of law, constitutionalism, federalism, and representative government that Zakaria calls "constitutional liberalism." Their "democratic" monomania marks a break with an

older conservative tradition which always insisted that Western liberty draws on intellectual and spiritual resources broader and deeper than that of modern democracy. The idioms of constitutionalism and representative government have little room in a doctrine that places such inordinate emphasis on the love of liberty in the human soul and its natural expression through majority votes.

Critics who raise perfectly legitimate and necessary questions about the cultural prerequisites of democratic self-government are summarily dismissed by President Bush or Prime Minister Blair as cultural relativists, or even as racists—as if “democracy” arises automatically once impediments are removed. As ominously, the partisans of “global democracy” turn a blind eye to the historical evidence that suggests it is not from authoritarian regimes, but from weak and fledgling “democracies,” that totalitarianism arises: consider Russia in 1917, Italy in 1922, and Germany in 1933.³ The best conservative thinkers of the last two centuries have been wary of unalloyed democracy precisely because they cared deeply about the preservation of human liberty and recognized the powerful affinities between mass democracy and modern totalitarianism. There are totalitarian propensities inherent in what the French political philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel once called “sovereignty in itself”: the illusion that the “sovereign” human will is the ultimate arbiter of the moral and political world.

We are confronted, then, with a foreign policy that in many respects operates within sober parameters of principle and prudence—but which is expressed in a self-defeating rhetoric that both encourages overreach and leaves the administration vulnerable to tendentious criticism. When the administration works with moderate pro-American autocrats such as General

Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan it is inevitably accused of hypocrisy. Putting inordinate stress on the necessity of building *democracy* in Iraq and Afghanistan—rather than speaking more modestly about strengthening lawful and representative institutions in both countries—creates unreasonable expectations that are bound to be disappointed. Such “democracy” rhetoric also disarms the United States’ legitimate concerns about religious extremism (e.g. the imposition of *Sharia*) when it is legitimized through the electoral process. Who are we to challenge the sovereignty of a *democratic* people? A more calibrated rhetoric, one that emphasizes the need to gradually introduce lawful and non-despotic political orders in countries ravaged by despotism or beset by corruption and authoritarianism would be less dramatic and perhaps less inspiring. But it would better describe the more modest and often quite realistic hopes that drive *actual* American policy in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Excessively doctrinaire rhetoric about democracy also creates misplaced pressures to confront non-totalitarian regimes, such as Vladimir Putin’s Russia, with demands for “liberalization” that have nothing to do with America’s legitimate national interests and everything to do with the view that Western-style liberal democracy provides the *only* legitimate model for political development in our time. This necessarily puts the administration in binds. The Vice-President of the United States followed up a May 4, 2006, speech in Vilnius, Lithuania—one which implicitly threatened Russia with a “color revolution” of its own if it did not move in a more “democratic” direction—with trips to Kazakhstan and Khirgistan to do business with the local tyrants. Such a brazen act of double-dealing confirms the suspicions of skeptics who are already convinced that American “universalism” is little

more than a cover for national egoism and will-to-power. The spirited resistance to tyranny that has been the hallmark of administration rhetoric since 9/11 needs to be moderated and complemented by a greater awareness of local conditions and a greater modesty about America's capacity to judge—and dictate—the appropriate conditions for self-government abroad. In Russia, “National Bolsheviks” of the most unsavory sort, not Western-style liberals, are the real alternative to Putin's comparatively liberal regime.

And in truth, the vituperative exchanges between neoconservatives and paleoconservatives, and between foreign policy “realists” and “idealists,” do little to contribute to the articulation of a politics of prudence worthy of the name. Both the administration and the full array of American conservative intellectuals need to learn how to judiciously combine spiritedness and moderation, Churchillian fortitude and prudent self-restraint, in a way that does justice to the perils that stem from both too much and too little national self-assertion.

The Second Inaugural:

Nature, History, and the Human Soul

The democratic universalism of the Bush Doctrine is expressed with particular lucidity in the Second Inaugural Address delivered by the President on January 21, 2005. That speech is the best single articulation of the moral and philosophical premises underlying contemporary American foreign policy—or at least of the official doctrine that animates it. But it also reveals some of the deeply problematic assumptions informing the administration's policy “to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” That heady goal is presented as a fully practical ideal even if Bush conceded on that occasion that

it is likely to be the “concentrated work of generations.” That perfunctory concession to gradualism in no way qualifies the President's “complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom” or his belief that democracy, and democracy alone, is the regime that most fully coheres with the nature and needs of human beings. For President Bush, democracy has the support of the deepest longings of the human soul and of a Providential God who is also the “Author of Liberty.”

To be sure, President Bush acknowledges that democracy can take a variety of local or cultural expressions. He denies that the United States has any interest in “impos(ing) our own style of government on the unwilling.” Still, he fully identifies democracy as a political form with the imperative of self-government. Whatever latitude is left to citizens and statesmen has to do with the *kind of democracy* that will protect human rights and human dignity within particular historical or cultural settings. President Bush implicitly affirms that the whole of humanity should and will eventually live under the liberal democratic dispensation. To that extent at least, he shares the Kojèvean-Fukuyaman premise that the “mutual recognition” of man by man will inevitably culminate in a “universal and homogenous state.”

In the Second Inaugural, Bush speaks grandiloquently about “the global appeal of liberty” and makes no distinction between support for liberty and the promotion of a rather ill-defined “democracy.” The President simply ignores or disregards everything in modern historical experience that suggests that modernization is compatible with various forms of “democratic despotism.” The defeat of Communism is interpreted as definitive proof that “the world is moving toward liberty,” since “the call of freedom comes to every mind and every soul.”

In his quite complimentary remarks to the people of Hungary delivered on June 22, 2006, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution, President Bush makes a similar claim that, “the desire for liberty is universal, because it is written by our Creator into the hearts of every man, woman, and child on the Earth.” In this speech, Bush pays eloquent tribute to the noble struggle of Hungarians in 1956, all the while treating that “anti-totalitarian revolution” (as Raymond Aron called it at the time), that collective revolt against the ideological “lie,” as evidence of the inevitable triumph of democracy over “dictatorship.” In doing so, however, he risks rendering that great event banal by turning it into one more illustration of the “Whig” version of history. The specificity of Communist totalitarianism, the Christian and European character of the Hungarian people, and the fact that Hungarians themselves took the initiative to restore their national independence and the authentic meaning of words are all overlooked in this rendering of events. The Hungarian Revolution instead becomes raw material for the inevitable victory of democracy in every time and place.

As hortatory rhetoric, the President’s words are undoubtedly stirring and even ennobling. As political reflection, they reveal a shallow understanding of the complex passions, interests, and motives that move human beings. President Bush dogmatically presupposes that love of liberty is the predominant, even the overarching motive of the human soul. He not only downplays the cultural prerequisites of ordered liberty or democratic self-government but abstracts from the sempiternal drama of good and evil in each and every human soul. The President’s unqualified universalism abstracts from the fact that hatred of despotism by no means automatically translates into love of liberty or a

settled and disciplined capacity for self-government. It ignores Tocqueville’s profound insight that the pure love of liberty—the passion for political freedom and of “government of God and the laws alone”—is a “sublime taste” reserved for a few souls and incomprehensible to “mediocre” ones.⁴

To be sure, Bush sometimes recurs to the best conservative wisdom and acknowledges that self-government necessarily entails “the governing of the self.” He rightly asserts that human rights are “ennobled by service, and mercy.” But he more characteristically makes extravagant claims about love of liberty being the incontestable motive of thinking and acting man. As Charles Kesler has observed, Bush ignores the palpable fact that while “‘people everywhere prefer freedom to slavery’...many people everywhere and at all times have been quite happy to enjoy their freedom and all the benefits of someone else’s slavery.”⁵ Self-government is a disposition of the soul that finds powerful support in the soul’s refusal to be tyrannized by others. But the two are not equivalent. President Bush is not wrong when he argues that despotism violates the moral law and mutilates the wellsprings of the human spirit. But he is too quick to identify human nature with a single overarching impulse or desire, and he goes too far in conflating the ways of Providence with the empire of human liberty.

Near the end of the Second Inaugural, Bush anticipates some of these criticisms. While continuing to express “complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom” he attempts to distance himself from arguments about historical inevitability. “History” by itself determines nothing. Instead, our confidence in the universal triumph of liberty must be rooted in the fact that freedom is the “permanent hope of mankind” and the most powerful “longing of the soul.” These poetic invocations do not adequately take into account the decid-

edly “mixed” character of human nature. The President should not be expected, of course, to speak with the precision of a political philosopher. Still, this President of deep Christian conviction paradoxically shows little appreciation for the tragic dimensions of history and the pernicious and permanent effects of original sin on individual and collective life.

Humanitarian Democracy versus the United States

Moreover, the reduction of the political problem to the categorical imperative of promoting democracy abroad leaves the administration and the country vulnerable to those on the Left who identify democracy with a project to emancipate human beings from traditional cultural, moral, and even political restraints. For the partisans of “postmodern” or “humanitarian” democracy, the United States falls far short of the “democratic ideal.” As the French political philosopher Pierre Manent has recently written, European elites “are trying to separate their democratic virtue from all their other characteristics,” such as tradition, religion, and especially from the political framework of the nation-state. They have succumbed to what might be called the “postpolitical temptation.” At the same time, “Americans seem more than ever willing—and this disposition extends well beyond the partisans of the current administration—to *identify* everything they do and everything they are with democracy, as such.”⁶ But what is to prevent the partisans of humanitarian democracy from denying the democratic *bona fides* of a self-governing people that remains attached to national sovereignty and still acknowledges the importance of traditional arrangements to a regime of self-government? By validating democracy as the *alpha* and *omega* of politics in our time, the Bush Doctrine leaves America vulnerable to delegit-

imization at the hands of more radical and “consistent” forms of democratic affirmation. In any case, deference to humanizing universal moral and political truths in no way means that any particular country gives humanity *unmediated* access to the universal. Abraham Lincoln, the noble poet-statesman of the American experiment, beautifully captured this tension when he spoke of Americans as an “almost-chosen people.” The United States (and the Western world in general) would cease to be true to itself if it repudiated the universality of its principles. But America surely also owes much of its greatness to particular national characteristics, to what Orestes Brownson has suggestively called our “providential constitution.” Otherwise America is in principle “the world,” the prototype of a unified humanity, and is destined to be swallowed up by a global imperium that more fully embodies the “democratic” aspirations of the whole of mankind.

President Bush may not be a neoconservative in any narrow political or even ideological sense. But his Second Inaugural Address perfectly mirrors the contradictions at the heart of the second neoconservatism. Like President Bush, neoconservatives are proud defenders of the prerogatives of the United States as a free, independent, and self-governing national community. At the same time, they are deeply suspicious of any other national self-assertion, however moderate or humane, that declines to “identify American democracy with the universal as such.”⁷ At the rhetorical level at least, the second neoconservatism and the partisans of European humanitarian democracy ultimately differ more about means than ends. They are “frères-ennemis” who promote two distinct paths to the same destination, the “universal and homogenous state.”

As I have tried to suggest, neocon-

servatism's misplaced one-sided emphasis on democracy may be more the rhetorical scaffolding than the heart and soul of neoconservative wisdom. But this democratic monomania acts as an acid, eating away at the coherence of a current of thought whose patriotism, good will, and commitment to the cause of liberty should in no way be doubted. Alas, it cannot provide the basis for a politics of prudence in our time.

1. See Aurel Kolnai, "The Meaning of the 'Common Man,'" in Kolnai, *Privilege and Liberty*, ed. by D.

Mahoney (Lexington Books, 1999), 64.

2. Charles Kesler, "Democracy and the Bush Doctrine," *Claremont Review of Books* (Vol. V, Number 1, Winter 2004), 18.

3. This point was central to Charles de Gaulle's famous "Bayeux address" of June 16, 1946.

4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Regime*, trans. by Alan S. Kahan (University of Chicago Press, 1998), Book Three, Chapter Three, 217.

5. Kesler, 20.

6. Pierre Manent, *A World Beyond Politics?: A Defense of the Nation-State*, trans. by Marc LePain (Princeton University Press, 2006), viii.

7. *Ibid.*

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