

Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive, LLC

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Source: *Foreign Policy*, No. 125 (Jul. - Aug., 2001), pp. 80-82

Published by: [Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive, LLC](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3183332>

Accessed: 16/05/2011 13:50

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Faux Realism

Spin versus substance in the Bush foreign-policy doctrine

By Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik

The Bush administration has coined a foreign-policy doctrine. President George W. Bush, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and Secretary of State Colin Powell herald “the new realism.” Think you know what they are up to? OK, then fill in the blank: The “new realism” is _____. If you find the blank hard to fill, don’t worry; so would most of today’s international-relations scholars. Indeed, one fundamental problem with the Bush

administration’s new doctrine is that “realism” no longer has any real intellectual coherence.

Until recently, realism was a venerable school of thought with a distinct thrust. Realpolitikers such as E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz visualized world politics as an anarchic realm in which the struggle for survival required prudent management of material (generally military) resources, and where the balance of power ultimately determined outcomes. Realists chastised “liberals,” “legalists,” and “idealists,” who believe that material and military power are secondary to factors such as the form of domestic government (democratic or authoritarian), the mutual advantages of economic interdependence, the functional benefits of international institutions, and the sway of national and transnational beliefs.

Yet a funny thing happened on the way past the Cold War. While still attached to the realist label,

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many realists have abandoned their distinctive realpolitik precepts. International-relations scholars today are far more inclined to accept that major trends—European integration, global trade liberalization, the surprising power of small countries in limited wars such as Vietnam, the impact of human rights and environmental norms, and the spread of a “democratic peace”—are not shaped simply, or even primarily, by power. Balance-of-power calculations are often trumped by imperatives rising from economic globalization, political democratization, particular belief systems, and the role of international law and institutions.

Realists have broadened their definition of “realism” in an attempt to embrace this smorgasbord of factors. But the consequence has been conceptual incoherence. Why does the Bush administration associate itself with an academic theory that no longer seems to mean anything in particular? Aside from the chance that George W. Bush has not been keeping up with *International Security*, two broad possibilities stand out:

One is that “realism” gives good spin. The administration employs the term as if its opposite

were “idealism,” “self-delusion,” or, as Rice would have it, “romanticism” (as practiced, of course, by the previous administration). The implication is that realism is primarily about seeing and telling the hard truth—a conceit common among realists of the 1930s and 1940s. Peripatetic pessimist Robert Kaplan updates this view of a realist theory that can “grapple with how the world actually works” and confront the “unrelenting record of uncomfortable truths.” This tough talk dovetails with Dubya’s

huddle around publications like *The Weekly Standard* and the *National Review* fearing that the United States will find itself militarily unprepared for a coming battle for global hegemony with great powers such as China and a united Europe.

A second and more thoughtful reason the Bush administration may be attracted to the realist label is that the administration does indeed place a greater emphasis on accumulating and wielding military power. While the threat percep-

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own rhetorical style. As the president states, “I’m a straightforward person [and]... represent my country’s interests in a very straightforward way.”

Such realist rhetoric makes for great sound bites. (The English theorist Herbert Butterfield once remarked that realism was more often a boast than a philosophy.) But it signifies little. Realism cannot just be a commitment to being “realistic” about the world, pursuing the national interest, and being willing to say so. What president has not claimed that mantle, even if each perceived reality with a different emphasis?

Properly understood, realism offers clearer answers: Reality is material power, and the national interest is to accumulate and balance that power. Yet, as was the case with its immediate predecessor, the Bush administration’s global threat perception has little to do with power balancing. Where in W’s world are the great powers that could tip the global balance: countries like Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Indonesia, and India? Among great powers, the administration singles out only China (with finger waving at Russia), throwing it in the rogues’ clubhouse with North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Cuba, Afghanistan, and Libya. These picayune foes are targeted not because they are the most powerful—or even minimally powerful—but because they are the least democratic and propagate the most hostile ideologies. This choice of adversaries unites the current administration and its predecessor against the only remaining pure “realists” in America, who

tion of the Bush team is based largely on ideology, it remains skeptical of strategy and tactics not closely linked to military dominance. The two improbable pillars of the administration’s policy—national missile defense (NMD) and the Powell Doctrine—are linked in this way. Other examples include the administration’s commitment to NATO expansion; departure from the long-standing policy of strategic ambiguity on Taiwan; initial unwillingness to help broker a solution in the Middle East; a stated interest in pulling U.S. troops out of the Balkans; the discounting of the foreign public relations effects of stridently self-interested rhetoric; the slashing of funds to secure Russia’s loose nukes (and loose nuclear scientists); and the president’s declaration that Africa “doesn’t fit into the national strategic interests.”

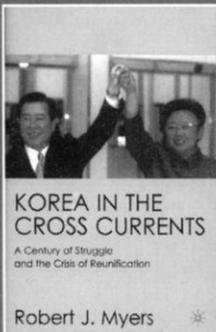
Most striking, however, is not the Bush administration’s defense of realist tactics per se, but its belief that such tactics foreclose other promising means of promoting the national interest, among them, democracy promotion, economic integration, nonmilitary foreign aid, adherence to human rights, or multilateral cooperation. Consider the quick quashing of a deal, all but reached by South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung, for a far-reaching détente on the Korean peninsula, including significant restrictions on the North Korean nuclear program. Unfortunately, such a deal, designed to spur a positive evolution in North Korea’s behavior, fit neither the administration’s

reliance on military deterrence nor its justification for NMD. The administration may indeed have adhered to a minimalist notion of realism, but at a significant potential cost.

If the academic debates between “smorgasbord” realists and their critics have one thing to teach us, it is that realism’s simple solutions to policy dilemmas are misguided. The empirical research that has undermined academic “realism” demonstrates that complex, multicausal processes underlie most important events. Power still matters. But countries do not consistently bend to great-power desires, even when backed by a credible deterrent; an indirect approach of persuasion, negotiation, and, above all, the encouragement of positive domestic change, are also potent tools of statecraft. Any policymaker who relies only on the “realist” management of military power reveals a greater faith in simplistic theories than do academics themselves.

So don’t be surprised if the “new realism” starts to look a bit different this autumn. New-born administrations tend to exhibit steep learning curves as their staffs fill out, they reach bureaucratic compromises, and practical solutions to complex global realities displace simple campaign promises. The Clinton administration moved in the opposite direction, pulling back from some bold international rhetoric. By the end, it pursued (and this is one of the leading criticisms Rice and others make of their predecessors) a highly pragmatic policy. If the Bush administration remains attuned to global reality, it is likely to become more pragmatic as well, expanding tactical options beyond decisive and unilateral military action. Bush and company may continue, of course, to label their hybrid doctrine as the “new realism.” But outside the academy, at least, a misleading label is a small price to pay for a sensible foreign policy. **FP**

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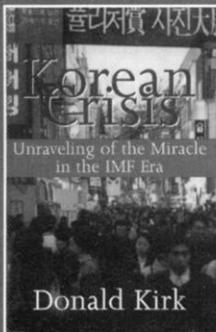
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