# Liberal Internationalism Forgotten: Myth and Memory in the Legacy of George H. W. Bush

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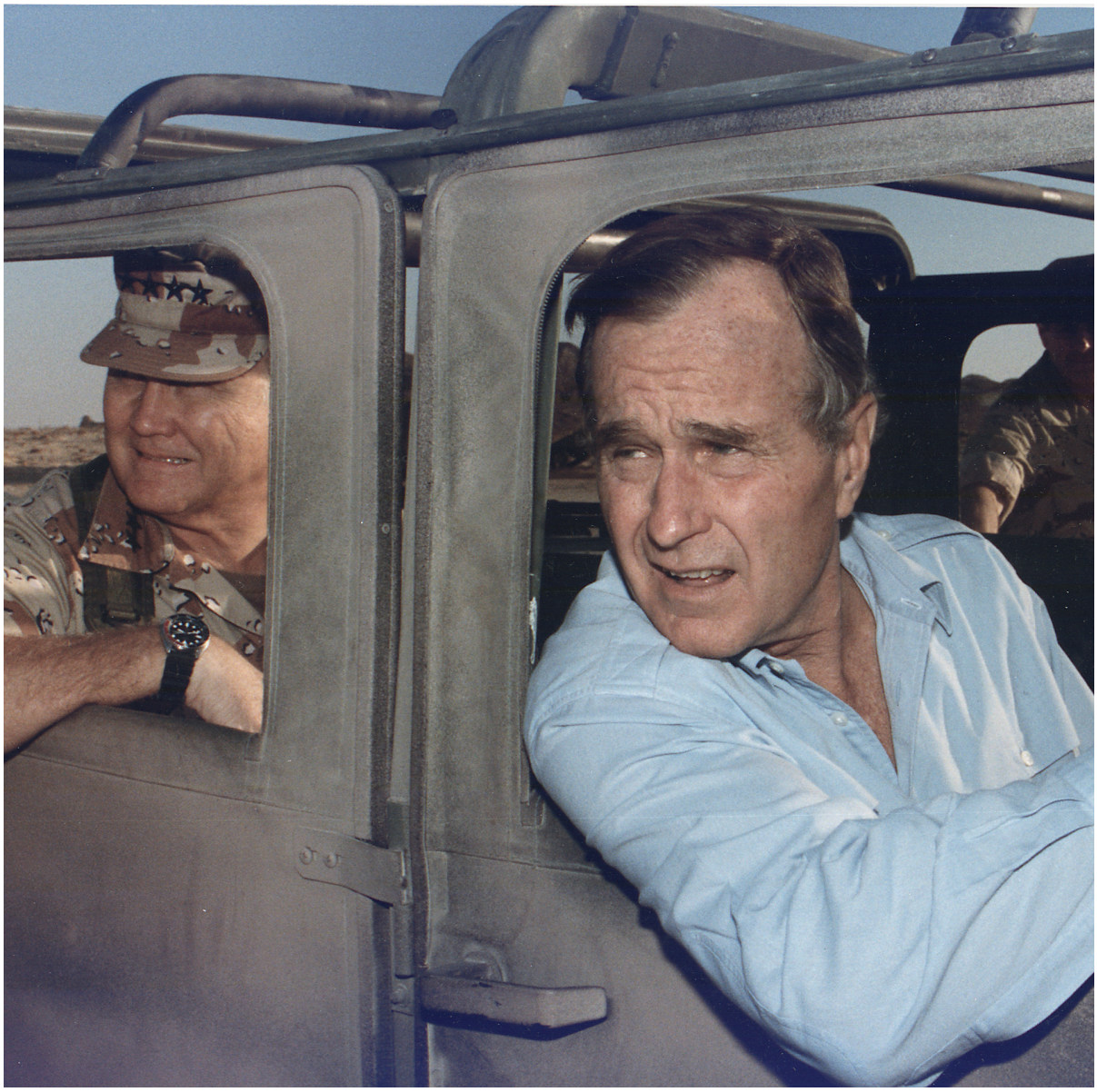

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**This article challenges the dominant portrayal of George H. W. Bush as the exemplar of a realist president. The image of Bush as a cautious realist was less a reflection of his record than the product of partisan and scholarly mythmaking. In the 1990s, Republicans cast Bush as a realist foil to Clinton's liberalism; in the 2000s, critics of George W. Bush's "freedom agenda" reinforced the same narrative. Yet the elder Bush's actual policies reflected a sustained liberal internationalist orientation. He invested in multilateral institutions, empowered the United Nations, promoted democracy in Eastern Europe, and justified the Gulf War as part of a broader "new world order" rooted in law, institutions, and humanitarian principles. His approaches to China, Lithuania, and the Middle East, as well as humanitarian interventions, likewise reflected liberal internationalist commitments, even if they were tempered by prudence. Recognizing Bush's "forgotten" liberal internationalism corrects the record and guards against theoretical distortions and flawed contemporary analogies.**

In contemporary debates about US grand strategy, George H. W. Bush is widely remembered as the exemplar of realism. Barack Obama, reflecting on his own foreign policy legacy, told Jeffrey Goldberg that he admired the "foreign-policy realism of President George H. W. Bush."[1] John Mearsheimer praised Bush's leadership of a "paradigmatic realist administration."[2] Elbridge Colby, who as of this writing serves as the under secretary of defense for policy and an influential strategist in the second Trump administration, invoked Bush alongside Eisenhower as embodying a "previous strain of Republican realism" to which he wanted to return.[3] Over the past decade and a half, calls for a "return to realism" have consistently pointed to Bush's presidency as the benchmark for restrained, realist statecraft.[4]

Yet this conventional wisdom obscures more than it reveals, and has not been explored systematically. Recent archival research conducted on the George H. W. Bush presidency has highlighted liberal internationalist, or even "Wilsonian," aspects of his foreign policy.[5] Presidents are not international relations theorists, and Bush's policies, like those of all presidents, displayed elements of realism, but at its core, Bush's foreign policy was clearly liberal. He invested deeply in multilateral institutions, including the United Nations, NATO, and new trade and economic forums such as NAFTA. He supported the peace process in the Middle East and democratic transitions in Eastern Europe, South Africa, and Latin America, and pursued cooperative security agreements. Humanitarian interventions in Iraqi Kurdistan and Somalia underscored this liberal orientation. Bush's own rhetoric reinforced a liberal vision, from his inaugural declaration that "freedom works" to his call for a "new world order"

1 Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2016.

2 Danny Postel, "Realistpolitik," *The American Prospect*, April 16, 2004, https://prospect.org/dispatches/realistpolitik/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

3 Michael Hirsh, "Why Everyone in Washington Is a 'Realist' Now," *Foreign Policy*, August 8, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/08/08/washington-realist-united-states-dominant-power/?tpcc=recirc_more_from_fp051524.

4 See, for example, Adam B. Kushner, "James Baker on the Return to Realism," *Newsweek*, March 13, 2010, https://www.newsweek.com/james-baker-return-realism-78471; Emma Ashford, "The US Needs a Return to Realism," *Financial Times*, August 21, 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/3ae78a93-231b-4006-8739-5738cc367cac.

5 For recent work with the George H. W. Bush–era archives, see Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H. W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); Samuel Helfont, *Iraq Against the World: Saddam, America, and the Post–Cold War Order* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Daniel Chardell, "The Gulf War: An International History, 1989–1991," PhD diss., Harvard University, 2023; Spencer D. Bakich, *The Gulf War: George H. W. Bush and American Grand Strategy in the Post–Cold War Era* (University Press of Kansas, 2024). For a reference to Bush as a "Wilsonian," see Bakich, *The Gulf War*, 65.

in which international law would supplant the "rule of the jungle."[6]

The incongruence between this liberal internationalist record and Bush's reputation as a realist poses a significant puzzle. Why did the liberal elements of Bush's record disappear in the formation of his legacy and subsequent discussion of it? The answer lies less in Bush's actual statecraft than in the politics of US foreign policy after his presidency. In the 1990s, Republican critics of Bill Clinton cast Bush as the realist foil to Clinton's liberal internationalism. In the 2000s, critics of George W. Bush's "freedom agenda" reinforced the myth by contrasting his administration with his father's supposed realism. For critics of liberal internationalism, the presidency of George H. W. Bush became a "usable past," but that usefulness depended on forgetting the liberal internationalist dimensions of his actual statecraft. Over time, this partisan narrative migrated into scholarly typologies, crystallizing into an academic and popular consensus.

This misclassification is not merely semantic. Scholars portraying Bush as the exemplar of realism do not just fail to account for his liberal internationalist tendencies, but they also risk drawing false conclusions about the relative success of realist versus liberal grand strategies in the early post–Cold War era. Perhaps most importantly, they develop false dichotomies between liberalism and prudence. The widespread invocation of Bush as a realist is not just a matter of historical interpretation. It reflects and reinforces a broader tendency in contemporary US grand-strategy debates to treat liberal ambition and strategic prudence as opposing impulses. Yet this framing rests on a false dichotomy. As the historical record of the Bush administration suggests, liberal ends and prudent means need not be in tension. Bush pursued liberal objectives like support for democracy, collective security, and a rules-based international order. At the same time, he remained acutely aware of the limits of American power and the risks of overextension. Where democratization was unlikely, he worked with illiberal partners toward other liberal goals. His foreign policy offers an alternative synthesis that has largely disappeared from contemporary debates: liberal internationalism practiced with strategic discipline.

More broadly, his presidency and its legacy also demonstrate how domestic politics can shape the scholarly categories through which we evaluate foreign policy, distorting both theory testing and policy lessons. Revisiting Bush's foreign policy thus serves not only to correct the record, but also to highlight how political mythmaking influences international relations theory and to caution against misguided calls to "return" to Bush-style realism in contemporary debates over China, Russia, and global governance.

## Liberal Internationalism and George H. W. Bush

Before discussing liberal internationalism in Bush's foreign policy, it is important to provide a baseline for both liberalism and realism in international relations theory. Realism encompasses various subtrends with diverse ideas about international politics, but it almost always emphasizes the enduring condition of anarchy in world politics. With no supranational authority to enforce order, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." According to realists, this has been the way of world politics since the ancient Athenians imposed that logic on the Melians, and will remain so for the foreseeable future.[7] As such, states must rely on self-help, balancing against rising power, or in some versions of the theory, rising threats to their security.

Realists tend to treat states as unitary "black boxes or billiard balls," focusing on material capabilities and relative power rather than regime type or ideology.[8] The balance of power, or, in Stephen Walt's formulation, the balance of threat,[9] is the central mechanism for stability. Whether in classical (Hans Morgenthau),[10] structural (Kenneth Waltz),[11] offensive (John Mearsheimer),[12] defensive (Robert Jervis; Walt),[13] or neoclassical (Rose)[14] variants, realism emphasizes that international politics takes place under Hobbesian anarchy, which imposes con-

6 George H. W. Bush, "January 20, 1989: Inaugural Address," Miller Center, University of Virginia, January 20, 1989, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-20-1989-inaugural-address; George H. W. Bush, "September 11, 1990: Address Before a Joint Session of Congress," Miller Center, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-11-1990-address-joint-session-congress.

7 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley, in *Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (Touchstone, 1996), 352.

8 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W. W. Norton, 2001), 11.

9 Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell University Press, 1987).

10 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (Knopf, 1978).

11 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison-Wesley, 1979).

12 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

13 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976); Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

14 Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 144–72.

straints on state behavior, even if different strands highlight human nature, systemic pressures, or domestic-level filters as the key drivers of outcomes.

**While realism and liberalism are primarily theories of international relations, both can also be applied to foreign policy.**

Liberal internationalism, by contrast, is a "family of evolving . . . ideas, doctrines, projects, and movements" asserting that the dilemmas of anarchy can be mitigated through institutions, trade, law, and norms.[15] Liberal internationalism thus contains several sometimes competing, or even contradictory, approaches to international relations. Some strands of liberalism emphasize that international institutions can reduce transaction costs, provide information, and create expectations of reciprocity, thereby enabling cooperation and collective security; liberal theorists tend to focus on the absolute gains that cooperation can provide, rather than the relative gains that realists fear will shift the balance of power unfavorably. Thus, they contend that liberal states have incentives to build a rules-based international order (Robert Keohane; G. John Ikenberry).[16] Other liberals draw from democratic peace theory and focus on regime type and domestic preferences. Unlike realists, they emphasize the role of democracy, human rights, and markets in producing peace (Michael Doyle; Bruce Russett).[17]

While realism and liberalism are primarily theories of international relations, both can also be applied to foreign policy. Realist statecraft tends to focus on the careful alignment of commitments with vital interests. It relies on steps intended to maintain a balance of power, rather than institutions or democracy, to maintain global peace and stability, and it often focuses on what George Kennan called "strongpoints" rather than being everywhere at all times.[18] Liberal statecraft, sometimes described as "Wilsonianism," is the attempt to build an international order based on self-determination, democracy, open diplomacy, collective security, and rules rather than raw balance-of-power politics. The promotion of democracy and human rights can at times clash with norms of sovereignty and non-intervention, producing tensions within liberal practices. Liberal statecraft is often forced to prioritize some aspects of liberalism over others.[19]

Liberalism also provides a normative assessment of how the world ought to be. Such normative imperatives can sometimes lead liberals to be less cautious than realists about aligning means and ends. John F. Kennedy promised to "pay any price, bear any burden" to protect "liberty" around the world.[20] However, there is no contradiction between prudent means and liberal ends. Ultimately, the main distinction between liberal and realist ends is what will keep the peace. For realists, the balance of power does so. For liberals, some combination of institutions, rule of law, democracy, and human rights does so—and liberal internationalists therefore focus on bringing these conditions into existence around the world.

There are three analytically distinct elements of this liberal internationalist tradition: (1) institutional liberalism, which emphasizes multilateralism, collective security, and international law; (2) democratic liberalism, which treats democracy and human rights as relevant for security; and (3) humanitarian interventions, designed to protect civilians. George H. W. Bush's outlook evolved over time, but by the end of his presidency he had settled on an approach that embraced democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention, while insisting that these objectives be pursued through, and not at the expense of, multilateral institutions (particularly the United Nations). The Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, by contrast, placed greater weight on humanitarian intervention and democracy promotion, even when these came at the expense of multilateralism and international institutions. In that sense, the elder Bush's liberalism differed from that of his successors, but remained grounded in the liberal internationalist tradition.

15 G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (Yale University Press), 14.

16 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton University Press, 1984); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

17 Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (1983): 205–35; Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post–Cold War World* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

18 On strongpoints, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (Oxford University Press, 1982), 58.

19 For examples of tensions within liberal internationalism, see Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

20 John F. Kennedy, "Inaugural Address," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, January 20, 1961, https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/inaugural-address.

Presidents are not international relations scholars. They do not adhere strictly to theory. Moreover, distinguishing realist and liberal approaches can be difficult because they are not always contradictory, and policies can often be explained by both schools of thought. Because of the overlap in realist and liberal explanations for many foreign policies, we must pay particular attention to the reasoning that Bush provided for his policies. However, we cannot simply rely on public rhetoric, which could be misleading because, as some realists contend, American statesmen may employ "liberal talk" but "realist thinking."[21] As such, we must focus on Bush's actions when he was faced with choices between approaches that could be coded as liberal or realist, as well as what Bush said behind closed doors. In that sense, the most important evidence for liberal internationalism comes from the combination of Bush's actions and his explanations for those actions.

As realists might predict, Bush placed great emphasis on power and maintaining stability. At the end of the Cold War, according to Serhii Plokhy, Bush was worried that the "drives for independence" among former Soviet republics would lead to the dispersal of nuclear weapons and the potential for civil war. Thus, Bush "did much to prolong the life of the Soviet Union" even in the face of calls for self-determination and democracy in the Baltics and central Asia.[22] Especially early in his presidency, senior Bush administration officials were also acutely aware of the US-Soviet force distribution in Europe, and tried to negotiate arms control agreements that would allow for relative US gains against the Soviets. For example, the Bush administration negotiated to lower the ceiling for combat troops in Europe to 275,000 for each side. That meant a 325,000-troop reduction for the Soviet Union but only a reduction of 30,000 for the United States: an example of the zero-sum thinking and focus on relative gains that is typical of realism.[23] Hawks in Bush's Pentagon also developed a controversial "Defense Planning Guidance" that was designed to ensure that no rival could challenge US power. The plan's bluntness spooked US allies and was abandoned before it could be implemented, but it was not an outlier in the Bush administration's worldview.[24]

At times, especially early in his presidency, Bush bucked international law in pursuit of US interests. For example, he ordered a US military operation to overthrow Manuel Noriega in Panama in the face of strong opposition from the United Nations and US allies. And in the Gulf War, the Bush administration attempted to weaken Iraq's military capabilities while still maintaining the balance of power within the region.[25]

Many of these policies, however, had liberal explanations, too. Some dimensions of Bush's cautious approach to foreign affairs, especially in places like Europe and China, were designed with liberal international ends in mind. Bush later recalled: "I hoped to encourage liberalization as rapid[ly] as possible without provoking an internal crackdown."[26] In other words, he claims that his prudence was not a sign of realism, but rather a strategy to achieve liberal internationalist objectives around democratic liberalization in communist Europe and China. Bush claimed to be intervening in Panama in 1989 in support of democracy, after Noriega ousted the prime minister and annulled an election.[27] Even his focus on ensuring US dominance, such as in the controversial Defense Planning Guidance, "advance[d] a strategy of liberal internationalism." As Hal Brands notes: "It emphasized maintaining US leadership of alliances and other institutions, promoting liberal norms, and fostering an open and inclusive international order, in part by ensuring that America retained the preponderant military power and strategic influence needed to accomplish these goals."[28]

Some of the Bush administration's top officials were clearly more realist than Bush himself. Bush's national security advisor Brent Scowcroft evoked "balance of power" and "equilibrium" in places like Europe and the Middle East.[29] Yet Bush was more inclined than either Scowcroft or Secretary of State James Baker to support democratization and self-determination in Europe at the expense of power considerations with the Soviet Union, and when his ideas clashed with those of his advisors, he overruled

21 John J. Mearsheimer, "Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking," *University of Chicago Magazine* 94, no. 3 (February 2002), https://magazine.uchicago.edu/0202/features/index.htm.

22 Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (Basic Books, 2014), xxix.

23 George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 81.

24 Hal Brands, "Choosing Primacy: US Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post–Cold War Era," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 2 (February 2018): 10.

25 Chardell, "The Gulf War," chapters 5–6.

26 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 38.

27 Engel, *When the World Seemed New*, 250; Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 23.

28 Brands, "Choosing Primacy," 27.

29 Engel, *When the World Seemed New*, 77; Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 399.

them.[30] Moreover, even his more realist advisors were often caught up in the high idealism of the moment. "Both the President and I," James Baker argued in June 1992, "have talked about a 'democratic peace' that can integrate Russia and Eurasia into the Western community of nations, creating a zone of peace and prosperity that stretches from Vancouver to Vladivostok." Baker averred that "even in the Middle East and Africa we're seeing signs of growing interest and stirrings in favor of democracy."[31]

Bush's rhetoric throughout his presidency was idealistic, sometimes even utopian. He began his presidency with an inaugural speech that anticipated the arguments Francis Fukuyama would make in his famous "end of history" article later that year.[32] As Bush stated: "We know what works: Freedom works. We know what's right: Freedom is right. We know how to secure a more just and prosperous life for man on Earth: through free markets, free speech, free elections, and the exercise of free will unhampered by the state." And he insisted: "For the first time in this century, for the first time in perhaps all history, man does not have to invent a system by which to live. We don't have to talk late into the night about which form of government is better. We don't have to wrest justice from the kings. We only have to summon it from within ourselves."[33] Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, who both worked in his administration, argue that Bush's foreign policy was designed to create a "global commonwealth of free nations."[34]

Later in his presidency Bush's rhetoric became even more soaring. In an address to both houses of Congress in 1990, he announced a "new world order" that promised

> *a new era—freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony. A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace, while a thousand wars raged across the span of human endeavor. Today that new world is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we've known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak.*[35]

Bush did not consider states to be black boxes or billiard balls. He regularly evoked the "democratic peace," suggesting that liberal democracies acted differently and were less of a threat than their nondemocratic counterparts.[36] Moreover, when Henry Kissinger counseled him that relationships between leaders "are no substitute for deep national interests," Bush disagreed.[37] Both Bush and Scowcroft also disagreed with a realist, zero-sum characterization of international politics. The end of the Cold War, they argued, "could have led to world catastrophe" but "we molded it so there were no losers, only winners."[38]

Looking at Bush's approach to the main international challenges of his administration makes clear the influence of liberal internationalism in his policies.

## Europe

The end of the Cold War in Europe was the most pressing foreign policy challenge for Bush. While traveling through the transitioning states of Eastern Europe early in his presidency, he made his worldview clear. In Poland, he repeated the Fukuyama-esque lines from his inaugural address about the superiority of freedom and its inevitable triumph.[39] Then, in Prague, he asserted: "We will continue along the road mapped out by our Presidents (Woodrow Wilson and Tomas Masaryk) more than 70 years ago, a road whose goal was described by Woodrow Wilson: 'to bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.'"[40]

30 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 188, 225.

31 "JAB Notes from 6/6/92 Alumni Faculty Forum at Princeton During the 40th Reunion of Class of '52," James A. Baker III Papers, Princeton University Library, box 111, folder 2, number 1.

32 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.

33 George H. W. Bush, "January 20, 1989: Inaugural Address."

34 Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *To Build a Better World: Choices to End the Cold War and Create a Global Commonwealth* (Twelve, 2019), 11.

35 Bush, "September 11, 1990."

36 George H. W. Bush, "Remarks at Texas A&M University," Miller Center, University of Virginia, December 15, 1992, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-15-1992-remarks-texas-am-university; George H. W. Bush, "Address at West Point," Miller Center, University of Virginia, January 5, 1993, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-5-1993-address-west-point.

37 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 60–61.

38 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, xiv.

39 George H. W. Bush, "Remarks at the Solidarity Workers Monument, July 11, 1989," in George H. W. Bush, *Speaking of Freedom: The Collected Speeches* (Scribner, 2009), 73–78.

40 George H. W. Bush, "Remarks at a Ceremony Marking the End of Communist Rule, Prague, Czechoslovakia, November 17, 1990," in Bush, *Speaking of Freedom*, 147–50.

This Wilsonian rhetoric was matched by policy. Perhaps the most perilous issue Bush faced was the collapse of East Germany and the prospect of German reunification. At the end of the Cold War, the leaders in Europe and the West had lived through the most recent fight against a united Germany, and many of them invoked realist concepts like balance, stability, and equilibrium to argue against reunification. In a conversation with Bush, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher "emphasized once more that change could take place only in an environment of stability, and that meant NATO and the Warsaw Pact stay." She was against German unification too. Taking a similar approach, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev stated that "the Germans could forget about reunification."[41] French President François Mitterrand cautioned against German unification, as it threatened to disrupt the "equilibrium" on the continent.

Yet, as Jeffery Engel notes: "Bush alone among the big four leaders embraced unification from the start."[42] And in contrast to his peers, Bush cited liberal internationalist concepts when he discussed the issue. Bush "believed that four decades of democracy had buried any authoritarian impulses, and that a Germany that remained within the Western community and alliance system would hardly be a threat to peace."[43] Moreover, he was loath to stand in the way of the self-determination of a democratic state. Others in the Bush administration were more skeptical that this approach could maintain the peace; Scowcroft later recalled that he "was not as optimistic as the President about the outcome [of German unification]."[44] Ultimately, however, Bush overruled the skeptics in his administration and pressured his allies to adopt his position.

Thus, in what was perhaps the most important foreign policy issue of his presidency, Bush was presented with two approaches. First, there were realist assumptions that a balance of power would be difficult to maintain in Europe with a strong, united Germany at its center, and that peace and security required a divided Germany. Second, there were liberal assumptions that peace and security could be maintained by democracy in Germany and Germany's inclusion in international institutions like NATO. Bush rejected the approach that scholars normally code as realist, and pursued an approach that he claimed was based on liberal internationalist foundations.

A crisis in Lithuania offered another test for Bush's worldview. The United States had never recognized the inclusion of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union, but Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders considered the Baltics to be an integral part of their state. When Lithuania declared independence in March of 1990, a crisis developed: The Soviets cut off Lithuania from energy and other resources it needed to survive. Moscow threatened and eventually attempted a military crackdown to force Lithuanian leaders to renounce independence.

The US-Soviet relationship was at a critical stage, and threatening US-Soviet relations at this critical juncture over a small, Baltic state like Lithuania, in which the United States had no material interest, would be difficult for a realist to justify. Bush needed Moscow's support in managing events in Europe and then its backing in the Gulf crisis of 1990–91. As Kristina Spohr argues, Bush did not want "to resort to threats that made it 'difficult for Gorbachev to relent without losing face at high political cost.'"[45] In other words, Bush did not want to provoke Moscow in a way that would set back his liberal objectives instead of advancing them.

Nevertheless, when he was eventually faced with a choice between supporting Lithuanian freedom or appeasing Moscow, Bush chose the former.[46] In a private letter to Gorbachev at the height of negotiations over the future of Europe, he warned that Soviet policy in Lithuania "poses real risks to what you have achieved, and hope to achieve, not only in our relations but in your relations with other countries in the West."[47] Then, as Scowcroft stated, when the United States "had need for [Soviet] solidarity at a crucial moment in the Gulf conflict," Bush "sent Gorbachev a letter warning that we would freeze economic ties and would not support special associate membership for the Soviet Union in the IMF and World Bank if the violence in Lithuania continued."[48] Baker and the economic team had argued against sanctions as "excessive." Yet Bush claimed he was "dissatisfied" with that recommendation, "since it did not point to action,

41 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 192–93, 196.

42 Engel, *When the World Seemed New*, 277–78.

43 Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: US Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post–Cold War Order* (Cornell University Press, 2016), 286.

44 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 192–93.

45 Kristina Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square: How Bush, Gorbachev, Kohl, and Deng Shaped the World After 1989* (Yale University Press, 2020), 294–95.

46 Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square*.

47 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 219.

48 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 497.

and I wanted to take action. Our principal goal was to show support for the Lithuanians."[49]

These policies and strategies were developed in private and sometimes did not move as fast as some of Bush's critics wanted; he has been accused of sacrificing liberal principles for the sake of stability in his policies toward breakaway Soviet republics.[50] "To outsiders," Brands notes, Bush seemed "a caricature of a president so 'prudent' that the world was passing him by."[51] Bush, however, did not agree with these depictions of his approach. He might have been prudent and cautious, but to claim he was adopting realist-style realpolitik at the expense of liberalism was to confuse ends, ways, and means. He addressed such confused reasoning during his presidency: "I am committed personally—and the Administration is committed—to Lithuanian freedom. We can argue about the methodology, but please understand what the heartbeat is."[52]

**Nevertheless, when he was eventually faced with a choice between supporting Lithuanian freedom or appeasing Moscow, Bush chose the former.**

Bush's policies in Europe illustrate a liberal internationalism centered on democratic outcomes. Bush rejected the realist logic of maintaining the balance of power in Europe. Instead, he prioritized democracy and self-determination in places like Germany and Lithuania. At times he acted with restraint and prudence, deliberately limiting humanitarian or coercive intervention. This approach, however, did not stem from a realist disregard for liberal ends, but rather from the concern that imprudence would threaten his liberal internationalist goals of strengthening liberal democracy and allied institutions as a source of security.

## Tiananmen Square

The crackdown by the People's Republic of China (PRC) on protesters in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 was another important crisis for Bush and his administration. Bush came under intense pressure to take a hard line against China in support of the protesters. Yet, as M. E. Sarotte has argued, it "soon became clear from Bush's own actions that . . . his intentions were conciliatory, not punitive."[53] His approach roiled his detractors. Some realists, by contrast, praised his restraint.[54]

However, interpreting Bush's prudence in China as realism again confuses ways, means, and ends. He did not adopt a conciliatory approach because he accepted the legitimacy of Chinese authoritarianism. "Things are going our way," Bush often repeated while in office. "Democracy, freedom?" he would ask rhetorically. "They are moving our way." As Engel notes, Bush believed "his job was to keep them going in that direction."[55] At the time, China's failure to join the wave of democratic reform sweeping through the communist world did not seem inevitable. Zelikow and Rice point out that China, not Eastern Europe, had the "largest mass movement for democracy in the world."[56] And Brands notes that during the Ronald Reagan administration, there was an expectation that the political reforms would follow the economic reforms Beijing had begun in the late 1970s. Once the Chinese people had their "first taste of freedom," President Reagan remarked, political liberalization would soon follow.[57] In China, as in the Soviet Union, Bush believed the best policy was, first, not to do anything to cause a reversal in the momentum toward liberalization, and second, to bring these nondemocratic regimes into a US-led liberal-democratic order through which they would naturally liberalize and become less of a threat.

Bush therefore felt the need to support a Chinese transition to liberalism and democracy. As he wrote in his diary about his policies toward China: "We've got to stand for what this country believes in—human rights, right for peaceful protests, etc."[58] He felt that China was moving in that direction, and to ensure

49 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 225.

50 Plokhy, *The Last Empire*, xxix.

51 Brands, *Making of a Unilateral Moment*, 285.

52 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 226, 229.

53 M. E. Sarotte, "China's Fear of Contagion: Tiananmen Square and the Power of the European Example," *International Security* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 177.

54 David Skidmore and William Gates, "After Tiananmen: The Struggle over US Policy Toward China in the Bush Administration," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 517–19.

55 Engel, *When the World Seemed New*, 7.

56 Zelikow and Rice, *To Build a Better World*, 413.

57 Brands, *The Making of a Unipolar Moment*, 220.

58 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 102.

that it continued to do so, he needed to maintain US-China relations despite what his critics might say. Bush noted "that commercial contacts between our countries had helped lead to the quest for more freedom," and "if people have commercial incentives, whether it's in China or other totalitarian systems, the move to democracy becomes inexorable."[59] As he later explained: "To many it appeared that reform was merely a sham, and that China was still the dictatorship it had always been. I believed otherwise."[60]

At times, Bush did use the language of interests: "We've got to get the relationship back on track. It's in our strategic interest; it's in our cultural interest; it's in our commercial interest."[61] However, he did not discuss US interests in China as the type of zero-sum contest that realists describe. For Bush, maintaining relations with China and helping it to reform was in the US interest because a liberal China would be an important partner for both peace and trade. For Bush, a stronger China was not a threat, because as it integrated with the United States economically, it would inevitably continue to reform its political and economic system toward liberalism and democracy.

The liberal foundations of Bush's policies in China can also be seen through some of the realist critiques of his approach during his presidency. Realist critics pointed out that the original logic of supporting China was to balance against the Soviet Union, but that the end of Cold War tensions had removed that logic.[62] Moreover, realists saw increasing Chinese power as a real danger. In 1992, Ross Munro accused Bush of ignoring this threat and instead prompting a policy of "unreality," because, he charged, Bush assumed "that US trade and investment dollars will aid China's economic growth," which would somehow "have some positive impact on Chinese politics in the future." Munro asserted that it was "hard to imagine a flimsier rationale for US China policy."[63]

Bush's approach to the Tiananmen crisis illustrates a liberal internationalism centered on democratic ends. There was a realist logic for attempting to limit Chinese power, especially once it became clear that Washington no longer needed the PRC to balance against the Soviet Union. Bush discounted these concerns and instead attempted to manage the threat of a growing China with liberal internationalist strategies of engagement and institutional integration. He deliberately limited humanitarian and punitive responses to the Tiananmen crisis—not out of amoral, realist concerns, or because he conceded to an authoritarian China as the "only realistic option."[64] He believed doing so would counterproductively harden authoritarianism and undermine Beijing's path toward liberalization. Again, Bush employed prudent means toward liberal ends.

## The Gulf Crisis

Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein precipitated a major international crisis on August 2, 1990, when he invaded his oil-rich neighbor to the south, Kuwait. Bush organized a large international coalition to drive the Iraqi military out of Kuwait. In many ways, his conduct in this conflict adhered to realist principles. Leaders in the United States had long considered the free flow of Persian Gulf oil to be a vital national security interest, and had worked to maintain a balance of power in the region. Launching a war to secure access to this oil and restore a balance of power would seem to align with realist policies. Moreover, the war was limited. The US military and its coalition partners stopped after expelling the Iraqis from Kuwait. They left a repressive, illiberal regime in control of Baghdad, a decision that maintained the regional balance of power.

Access to internal US archival records, however, reveals important liberal internationalist motivations for Bush's approach to the crisis. Oil is an important consideration for any US policy in the Middle East, including the Gulf crisis, but the United States did not launch a war against Iraq in 1991 simply for oil. In fact, Bush's National Security Council considered a war for oil in the days after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and decided that such a war would not be worth the expected costs. The initial sentiment among Bush's top advisors was: "Hey, too bad about Kuwait, but it's just a gas station, and who cares whether the sign says Sinclair or Exxon? Anyway, what can we do? Doesn't Iraq have the Middle East's largest army and aren't we a long way from the scene?"[65] The world needed Kuwaiti oil, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney mused, but it did not need Kuwait. Thus, whether Iraq or Kuwait sold the oil on the open market did not really affect US interests. The chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, Gen. Colin Powell, did not think the United States should "go to war over Kuwait." At one point he even asked: "Does anybody really care about Kuwait?"

59 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 89.

60 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 98.

61 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 157.

62 Roger W. Sullivan, "Discarding the China Card," *Foreign Policy* 86 (Spring 1992): 3–23.

63 Ross H. Munro, "Awakening Dragon: The Real Danger in Asia Is Coming from China," *Policy Review* 62 (Fall 1992): 10–16.

64 Sarotte, "China's Fear of Contagion," 181.

65 Dan Goodgame, "What If We Do Nothing?," *Time* 137, no. 1 (January 7, 1991).

Other administration officials divorced liberating Kuwait from the policy of protecting Washington's much larger, oil-rich ally, Saudi Arabia.[66]

Bush, however, was unhappy with this analysis. As Scowcroft later noted, he and Bush worried that it focused too much "on the price of oil" and on regional security. They were more worried about "the ramifications . . . on the emerging post–Cold World order."[67] Bush brushed aside the analysis of his senior advisors and decided on a military response, declaring: "What we're doing is going to chart the future of the world for the next hundred years. . . . It's that big."[68] Oil was therefore one of many factors, but not enough on its own to justify a war.

Instead, Bush's reasons were grounded in liberal principles and concern about the emerging world order. As he explained to US troops in Saudi Arabia on Thanksgiving in 1990: "It is fair for Americans to say, why are we here." He then stated matter-of-factly that "it isn't all that complicated," and gave three reasons: "We're here to protect freedom, here to protect our future, and here to protect innocent lives."[69] Two of those reasons, protecting freedom and protecting innocent lives, were clearly rooted in liberal inclinations.

In his diary, Bush became emotional when discussing the suffering of Kuwaitis under a brutal Iraqi occupation, and he claimed that Iraqi atrocities were forcing his hand. "I've just read a horrible intelligence report on the brutal dismembering and dismantling," he wrote on September 22. "Unless something happens soon, there may not be a Kuwait—there may be no records—no one will know who Kuwaiti citizens are."[70] Realists are not immune to such feelings, but they believe that they must divorce them from policy calculation. Bush, by contrast, allowed his visceral and moral reaction to Iraqi atrocities to shape his decisions. He began to see the crisis not simply as a geopolitical struggle between black boxes or billiard balls, but as a matter of good and evil. As he confided to his diary: "I have Saddam Hussein now as clearly bad and evil as Hitler and as the Japanese war machine that attacked Pearl [H]arbor. And I say, check him now, check him now."[71]

66 Engel, *When the World Seemed New*, 386.

67 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 317–18.

68 Engel, *When the World Seemed New*, 396.

69 George H. W. Bush, "Remarks to Coalition Troops in the Persian Gulf Area on Thanksgiving Day," November 22, 1990, in Bush, *Speaking of Freedom*, 153.

70 Chardell, "The Gulf War," 278.

71 Jon Meacham, *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush* (Random House, 2016), 455.

Under the third heading, "protecting our future," Bush justified his policies in terms that could be coded as realist, explaining the importance of the region's oil and observing that he considered energy security to be national security. Even here, however, he framed oil prices and energy security as necessary for preserving the gains of liberalism in places like Czechoslovakia, rather than as merely a windfall for the US economy. He declared: "We're not talking simply about the price of gas; we're talking about the price of liberty."[72]

**Following the Cold War, Bush wanted to place the United Nations at the center of this new world order, and the Gulf Crisis provided an excellent opportunity to do so.**

When Bush met Gorbachev in Finland on September 9, 1990, he told Gorbachev: "I think there is an opportunity to have develop out of this tragedy [in the Gulf] a new world order."[73] Gorbachev eventually agreed.[74] Two days later, Bush went public with this reasoning during a widely publicized speech in front of both houses of Congress. He asserted that the "crisis in the Persian Gulf, as grave as it is, also offers a rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation." Then he stated that a "new world order," in which the rule of law would supplant "the rule of the jungle," was one of the objectives of the impending conflict.

Following the Cold War, Bush wanted to place the United Nations at the center of this new world order, and the Gulf crisis provided an excellent opportunity to do so. He and Secretary Baker worked to pass an unprecedented string of binding resolutions in the UN Security Council (UNSC). As a result, historian Paul Kennedy argues, the Gulf crisis became "the perfect example of what the [UN] planners of 1944–45 contemplated" in enforcing international law.[75] Bush told world leaders in private that "sanctions have failed in the past because countries did not stand together in enforcing them."[76] Baker repeated this line of reasoning in his conversations with his counterparts around the globe. "Iraq's unprovoked invasion and continued occupation of Kuwait," he insisted, "is a political test for how the post–Cold War order will work."[77] And he made clear "what is at stake: Shaping the post–[C]old [W]ar world and whether there will be basic civilized ground rules of behavior."[78]

Thus, the Gulf crisis became the catalyst for Bush's new world order. That order was liberal, rooted in collective security, international institutions, and law. The pursuit of this new, liberal international order made the war worth the expected costs. As a recent book on the subject by historian Spencer Bakich argues: "A thoroughgoing analysis of the Persian Gulf War must begin and end with an accurate contextualization of the conflict in terms of what the Bush administration was attempting to achieve in the world—not just the region—and how it worked to secure those big objectives." In that sense, he continues, "the Persian Gulf War was the product of . . . George Bush Senior's 'New World Order grand strategy,'" which Bakich describes as "Wilsonian."[79]

Bush did stop the war without toppling Saddam Hussein's regime, and as Scowcroft explained, the administration did hope to preserve "the balance of power in the Gulf."[80] However, liberal justifications for limited war aims were mixed with such realist considerations. Bush later stated that "I firmly believed that we should not march into Baghdad. Our stated mission, as codified in UN resolutions, was a simple one—end the aggression, knock Iraq's forces out of Kuwait, and restore Kuwait's leaders. To occupy Iraq would instantly shatter our coalition, turning

72 George H. W. Bush, "Remarks to Coalition Troops in the Persian Gulf Area on Thanksgiving Day," November 22, 1990, in Bush, *Speaking of Freedom*, 162.

73 "Memorandum of Conversation: The President's Meeting with President Gorbachev of the Soviet Union," George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, September 9, 1990, 1–2, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1990-09-09--Gorbachev%20[1].pdf.

74 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 364.

75 Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations* (Random House, 2006), 64. The desires of the UN's founders were more complicated than Kennedy's analysis. For a contrasting view, see Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

76 "Memorandum of Conversation: Telephone Call to President Turgut Ozal of Turkey," George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, August 4, 1990, 2, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1990-08-04--Ozal.pdf.

77 "Intervention by North Atlantic Council Ministerial Meeting," NATO HQ, Brussels, Belgium, September 10, 1990, James A. Baker III Papers, Princeton University Library, box 109, folder 5, number 12.

78 "Notes from 9/7/90 Remarks to USAF Personnel Stations at Ta'if, Saudi Arabia," James A. Baker III Papers, Princeton University Library, September 7, 1990, box 109, folder 5, number 16.

79 Bakich, "The Gulf War," 6.

80 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 399.

the whole Arab world against us, and make a broken tyrant into a latter-day Arab hero. It would have taken us way beyond the imprimatur of international law bestowed by the resolutions of the Security Council."[81] Thus, Bush's restraint appears to have been at least partially determined by the institutional and legal constraints of liberal internationalism and a pragmatic sense of the strategy he deemed most likely, long-term, to achieve the world order he was pursuing. In this case, and in others, Bush prioritized institutional and legal constraints when they were at odds with more expansive liberal principles like humanitarianism and democracy, but without losing sight of the longer-term project this pragmatism was intended to advance.

Moreover, while Bush did not want to march on Baghdad or occupy Iraq, the outcome of the war can misleadingly exaggerate perceptions of his restraint. Bush later claimed to have "miscalculated" in his assumption "that Saddam could not survive a humiliating defeat." He lamented that the United States "could have done more" to weaken his regime and ensure a regime change.[82] Bush's orders to the military in the classified National Security Directive 54 did not include regime change unless Saddam employed WMD or destroyed Kuwaiti oil (which did in fact occur, but did not trigger this clause). As Cheney plainly stated, however, the US military had targeted Saddam from the first day of the conflict,[83] and operational planners made clear that "the target is Saddam Hussein's regime."[84] Saddam remained in power at the end of the war, but that was not Bush's intent. How much further Bush would have gone had he understood that Saddam would survive is impossible to know.

As such, while realist concepts of balance of power, restraint, and energy security played a visible role in the Bush administration's approach to the Gulf crisis, so did liberal inclinations to strengthen international institutions and the rule of law, as well as to address humanitarian concerns. Indeed, the Gulf crisis illustrates a liberal internationalism centered on institutions, law, and collective security. Bush treated democratic and humanitarian objectives as central to the war's purpose, but insisted they be pursued through UN authorization and coalition consensus, which in turn structured and limited US war aims. His restraint reflected not realist indifference to outcomes, but a commitment to institutional legitimacy as a binding constraint on the use of force.

## Humanitarian Interventions and the United Nations

After the Gulf War, liberal internationalist desires to strengthen the United Nations, international law, and center humanitarianism in US strategy moved to the forefront of the Bush administration's foreign policy. The Gulf War ended with a ceasefire agreement that was codified in the longest, most detailed UNSC resolution in history.[85] Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who was elected to be the UN's secretary general at the end of 1991, argued that it "sent the United Nations into uncharted territory in many areas."[86] The United States soon pressed for even more radical action to empower the United Nations.

Following the war, anti-regime uprisings erupted all over Iraq. These were particularly intense in the Kurdish north and the Shia-dominated south. Saddam's regime regrouped and launched a ruthless counteroffensive to put down the insurrection. In northern Iraq, tens of thousands of Kurds fled to the border of Turkey and Iran.[87] The Iraqi government argued that this was a domestic concern, and since the Security Council's mandate was limited to issues of international peace and security, the international consensus was that Iraq's actions fell outside UNSC purview. When thousands of Kurds showed up at the Turkish border, however, Ankara argued that refugee flows did indeed represent a breach of international peace and security. The United States under Bush backed Turkey, and made a push to have the UNSC address the humanitarian situation in Iraq. Speaking for the United States, Ambassador Thomas Pickering praised the Security Council's "condemnation of the Iraqi Government's continued violence toward its own people" and emphasized that "the resolution insists that Iraq meet its humanitarian responsibilities." Although Pickering attempted to downplay the revolutionary nature of the resolution, bringing humanitarianism within the council's mandate clearly set a precedent that would have long-term implications.[88]

81 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 464.

82 James Gerstenzang, "Bush Airs Thoughts on End of Gulf War," *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 1996, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-01-15-mn-24868-story.html.

83 "Oral History: Richard Cheney," *PBS Frontline*, January 1996, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/cheney/1.html. For analysis, see Donald Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and US Strategy from the Korean War to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 195–96.

84 Eliot A. Cohen, ed., *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, vol. 1: *Planning and Command and Control* (US Government Printing Office, 1993), 92–93.

85 "United Nations Security Council Resolution 687," S/RES/687, April 8, 1991.

86 Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "Introduction," in *The United Nations and the Iraq-Kuwait Conflict 1990–1996,* The United Nations Blue Books Series IX (Department of Public Information, United Nations,1996), 29.

87 Scott Peterson, "Kurds Say Iraq's Attacks Serve as a Warning," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 13, 2002.

88 "Provisional Record of the 2981st Meeting," UN Security Council, S/PV.2982, April 5, 1991; *UNSC Records*, 53.

The United States, the United Kingdom, and France used Resolution 688 to launch Operation Provide Comfort in northern Iraq. The United Nations authorized a humanitarian intervention to provide food and medicine to Iraqi Kurds, but the United States and its allies expanded the operation into no-fly zones, which protected a now-autonomous Kurdish Region of Iraq from the Iraqi military. In 1992, this coalition launched another no-fly zone over southern Iraq to protect the Shia populations.

Throughout 1991 and 1992, diplomats at the UNSC continued to debate the appropriateness of humanitarianism in the council's agenda, and the United States continued to insist that Iraq meet its obligations under UNSC resolutions to ensure the "welfare of the Iraqi population."[89] In August 1992, the Bush administration spearheaded an effort to further blur the lines of the Security Council's mandate when it invited the rapporteur from the General Assembly's Human Rights Council, Max van der Stoel, to brief the UNSC on the situation in Iraq. Several states, including China and India, protested this attempt to integrate the work of the Human Rights Council into the Security Council, because they insisted that humanitarianism and human rights fell outside the council's mandate. As a compromise, van der Stoel was permitted to address the Security Council as a guest of the United States, but in a private capacity rather than as an official representative of the Human Rights Council.[90]

The Bush administration's actions set the stage for humanitarian interventions and eventually the liberal concept of the Right to Protect (R2P) in post–Cold War politics. For example, when the United States invited van der Stoel to brief the Security Council, the Austrian representative stated matter-of-factly that "Austria's aim in participating in this debate is of a principled nature, not confined to matters related merely to Iraq. Humanitarian and human rights questions are important for peace and stability equally in all parts of the world."[91] Indeed, as a former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations has argued, Iraq became a test case and a precedent for addressing post–Cold War humanitarian crises in places like Somalia, the Balkans, and Haiti.[92] These issues became the cornerstones of liberalism in the post–Cold War order.

Before Bush left office, he led another purely humanitarian intervention, this time in Somalia, beginning with modest air support in August of 1992 and increasing to a large ground operation later in the year. After the ruling regime in Somalia collapsed, famine set in. The UN began a relief effort to deliver food, but it was stymied by the various gangs and militias who looted the food and threatened the aid workers. UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali saw an opportunity not only to help the Somalis but also to further entrench humanitarian intervention into the post–Cold War international order, and so did the Bush administration. On December 3, 1992, the UNSC echoed the controversial reasoning it used to intervene in northern Iraq when it found that the famine in Somalia constituted a breach of international peace and security. It voted unanimously to authorize "all necessary means to establish as soon as possible a secure environment for humanitarian relief operations in Somalia."[93] In a televised address to the nation on December 4, Bush announced the deployment of tens of thousands of US troops to Somalia to secure humanitarian operations there.[94]

In a conversation with Boutros-Ghali just prior to his televised statement, Bush made clear his enthusiasm for these operations. "[I am] so proud of your leadership," he told the UN secretary general. Boutros-Ghali was even more elated: "No, I want to thank you very much. This is the first time collective action will be taken on purely humanitarian grounds. . . . This is important for the future of international relations."[95] In a separate conversation a few days later, Boutros-Ghali told Bush that "you will go down in history as the initiator of the first humanitarian intervention in history. This is very important for the world community, and for the United Nations."[96]

Strengthening the United Nations and demonstrating its ability to carry out humanitarian intervention was a key part of Bush's thinking in launching the Somalia campaign. As he told other world leaders in private conversations earlier in 1992, he believed they were "at a turning point in

89 "Provisional Record of the 3059th Meeting, UN Security Council," S/PV.3059, March 11, 1992; *UNSC Records*, 47.

90 David M. Malone, *The International Struggle over Iraq: Politics in the UN Security Council, 1980–2005* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 98.

91 "Provisional Record of the 3105th Meeting," UN Security Council, S/PV.3105, August 11, 1992, *UNSC Records*, 51.

92 Malone, *The International Struggle over Iraq*, 86.

93 "United Nations Security Council Resolution 794," December 3, 1992, 3.

94 "December 4, 1992: Address on Somalia," Miller Center, University of Virginia, December 4, 1992, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-4-1992-address-somalia.

95 George H. W. Bush, "Memorandum of Conversation with Boutros-Ghali," December 4, 1992, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1992-12-04--Boutros-Ghali.pdf.

96 George H. W. Bush, "Memorandum of Conversation with Boutros-Ghali," December 8, 1992, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1992-12-08--Boutros-Ghali.pdf.

history," and wanted to "stress the importance of the UN." When Boutros-Ghali was elected secretary general, he brought a mandate to transform the United Nations into a critical force in international relations and a pillar of the post–Cold War order. Bush made clear that he supported those efforts.[97]

At the end of Boutros-Ghali's first month in office, an extraordinary meeting of the Security Council convened: The heads of state and heads of government represented their countries for the first time in history. The meeting was designed to show an unprecedented level of support for Boutros-Ghali and the Security Council in the post–Cold War era. Bush made his views clear in his statements at the meeting, saying: "Never before has the United Nations been so ready, and so compelled, to step up to the task of peace-making." He placed liberal internationalism and humanitarianism at the center of his strategies for a new order, arguing: "As conflicts are resolved and violence subsides, then the institutions of free societies can take hold. As they do, they become our strongest safeguards against aggression and tyranny. Democracy; human rights; the rule of law—these are the building blocks of peace and freedom." He continued: "Human dignity, the inalienable rights of man: these are not the possessions of the State. They are universal. In Asia, in Africa, in Europe, in the Americas the United Nations must stand with those who seek greater freedom and democracy. That is my deep belief, and that is the belief of the American people."[98]

These episodes in the latter half of Bush's presidency reveal that he placed humanitarian and democratic liberalism at the center of his post–Cold War vision, but saw these as operating through the framework of international institutions like the United Nations. He actively expanded the UN's role in addressing internal violence and humanitarian crises, pressed to bring human rights and civilian protection within the Security Council's remit, and embraced interventions justified on humanitarian grounds. At the same time, Bush consistently treated the United Nations and international law as indispensable sources of authority and legitimacy, insisting that humanitarian action be embedded in collective decision-making rather than pursued unilaterally. Even when these initiatives stretched existing legal boundaries, Bush sought to strengthen the United Nations as the primary vehicle for liberal order-building, rather than to bypass it.

**Strengthening the United Nations and demonstrating its ability to carry out humanitarian intervention was a key part of Bush's thinking in launching the Somalia campaign.**

This promotion of assertive humanitarianism, paired with support to strengthen international institutions and legal considerations, distinguishes Bush's liberalism from later approaches that elevated humanitarian imperatives while weakening or circumventing multilateral constraint. For example, following the Gulf War, Bush wanted to solve the humanitarian crisis in Iraq by removing Saddam Hussein from power. As Bush told the German foreign minister Hans Dietrich Genscher on March 1: "With all of the atrocities and the damage he has done to the environment, it will be impossible for us to do anything constructive with Iraq as long as he is there."[99] When the Security Council rejected this approach in June 1991, however, Bush backed down from a policy of regime change, which he saw as a humanitarian imperative and a key US interest.[100] Similar constraints were evident in Bush's policies in Bosnia: While Bush supported humanitarian intervention there, he was not willing to do so in the face of opposition at the UNSC.[101] This prioritization of international institutions and legal concerns over humanitarianism and democracy stemmed from tensions *within* liberal internationalism, not between liberal internationalism and realism. Thus, Bush giving precedence to institutional legitimacy leaves him firmly within the liberal internationalist tradition.

It should therefore come as no surprise that during Bush's presidency, contemporary commentators recognized his liberal internationalist inclinations. In fact, in the summer of 1991, Walter Russell Meade lamented the "lack of US realism" in Bush's foreign

97 George H. W. Bush, "Memorandum of Conversation: Meeting with Prime Minister Rao of India," January 31, 1992, Waldorf Astoria, New York, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1992-01-31--Rao.pdf.

98 "Provisional Verbatim Record of the Three Thousand and Forty-Sixth Meeting, Held at Headquarters, New York, on Friday, January 31, 1992."

99 Joseph Stieb, *The Regime Change Consensus: Iraq in American Politics, 1990–2003* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 64.

100 Helfont, *Iraq Against the World*, 66–67.

101 On Bush's reluctance to launch an operation in the Balkans absent a UNSC resolution, see George H. W. Bush, "Remarks on the Situation in Bosnia and an Exchange with Reporters in Colorado Springs," George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, Public Papers, August 6, 1992, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/4645.

policy.[102] Earlier that year, a senior official from within the Bush administration commented anonymously to the *Los Angeles Times* that Bush's new world order was "Wilsonian nonsense." Former US ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, claimed that "George Bush is dreaming the Wilsonian dream." She stated that "I don't say that in a negative way," but she made clear that "Bush had ceded more responsibility . . . to the UN Security Council than she thought wise."[103] A separate *Los Angeles Times* article from the fall of 1990 claimed that Bush's "rhetoric bore the marks of Wilsonian and Rooseveltian idealism."[104] *The Boston Globe* stated that "the similarities between the idealism Wilson articulated then and the idealism Bush" expressed in the Gulf crisis were "striking."[105] *The New York Times* said Bush sought to "make the world a better, freer place—an idea not so very different from Wilson's campaign to make the world safe for democracy."[106]

Conservative proponents of what would become Trump-era realism were also fierce critics of Bush during his presidency. In 1991, Patrick Buchanan accused Bush of being a "globalist" who believed in "some Pax Universalis" and who put "American's wealth and power at the service of some vague New World Order." Buchanan, by contrast, promised to "put America first."[107]

Some commentators still pointed to realist aspects of Bush's policies, especially early in his term when they argued that he took a cautious approach to the Soviet Union and China. Even these commentators, however, often recognized that as the Bush presidency progressed, especially during and after the Gulf crisis, it became more idealist. As another *New York Times* article exclaimed: "The pragmatic President who plied *Realpolitik* for the first two years of his Administration is suddenly on a moral crusade."[108] That these depictions of Bush as a liberal internationalist were so prevalent at the time of his presidency but are mostly absent thirty years later demands an explanation.

## Opposition to Clinton and the Origins of a Myth

The transformation of Bush's legacy began with critics of Clinton's foreign policy. Not only were liberal international aspects of Bush's records erased or downplayed during this period, but they began to be misrepresented. While Bush's legacy remained mixed and contested, the outlines of the realist myth began to take shape. Ironically, the Clinton administration came to office committed to continuing Bush's foreign policies. Even before his inauguration, Clinton sent private envoys to places like the Middle East to assure skittish rulers that he intended to maintain the same course as his predecessor.[109] Clinton's secretary of state, Warren Christopher, said that while the new administration planned to make some tweaks, he "felt the Bush Administration had left us a solid policy foundation."[110]

Clinton faced a major crisis in October 1993, when a battle in the Somali capital of Mogadishu left eighteen soldiers dead and dozens more injured. Partisan critics wanted to blame Clinton for the failure, but the fact that Bush had launched the operation proved inconvenient. As such, they attempted to distinguish Bush's policy in Somalia from Clinton's. John Bolton, who had served in Bush's state department, penned an article in *Foreign Affairs* titled "Wrong Turn in Somalia" shortly after the incident. He argued:

> *What President Bush originally decided and what the Clinton administration later did represent fundamentally divergent approaches. The Bush administration sent US troops into Somalia strictly to clear the relief channels that could avert mass starvation. It resisted UN attempts to expand that mission. The Clinton administration, however, set about pioneering "assertive multilateralism" and efforts at nation-building that led to the violence and embarrassment that ultimately ensued.*

102 Walter Russell Mead, "The Bush Administration and the New World Order," *World Policy Journal* 8, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 396.

103 Doyle McManus, "Bush's Vision of a 'New World Order' Still Unclear Policy," *Los Angeles Times*, February 18, 1991.

104 William Pfaff, "On Putting Money Where Bush's Mouth Is," *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 1990.

105 Mary Curtius, "Evoking the Memory of Wilson and 'A New World Order,'" *The Boston Globe*, September 12, 1990.

106 R. W. Apple Jr., "Confrontation in the Gulf," *The New York Times*, January 16, 1991.

107 Patrick J. Buchanan, "A Crossroads in Our Country's History," *The American Cause*, December 10, 1991, https://buchanan.org/blog/a-crossroads-in-our-countrys-history-158940.

108 Maureen Dowd, "The World; Bush's Holy War: The Crusader's Cloak Can Grow Heavy on the Shoulders," *The New York Times*, February 3, 1991.

109 "Letter from James C. West to William J. Clinton," January 13, 1993, Warren Christopher Papers, Hoover Library and Archives, Stanford University, box 18, folder 1.

110 Warren Christopher, *In the Stream of History: Shaping Foreign Policy for a New Era* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 11.

For Bush, Bolton continued, the American-led operation was "limited in mandate, time, and geographical scope." As such, "there was no consideration of disarming the various Somali factions . . . , there was no mention whatever of 'nation-building,'"[111] which he argued had doomed the Clinton administration's approach.

Although Bolton exaggerated the differences between Bush's and Clinton's policies in Somalia, there were grains of truth in Bolton's analysis. The United Nations was operating in Somalia when Bush decided to intervene, but could not do so safely because aid workers were attacked by local militias and gangs. Bush hoped to demonstrate the capacity of the United Nations to carry out humanitarian interventions in Somalia. His plan was for the US military to create a safe corridor for the United Nations to operate and then hand the mission over to the UN. Bush resisted efforts by Boutros-Ghali to expand the operation "to disarm the lawless gangs."[112] In a private letter to Boutros-Ghali, Bush insisted that "the mission of the coalition is limited and specific: to create security conditions which will permit the feeding of the starving Somali people and allow the transfer of this security function to the UN peacekeeping force."[113] Bush's disagreement with Boutros-Ghali was not over policy, but rather what was required to implement that policy. As Boutros-Ghali warned Bush, without disarming irregular forces and gangs, "I do not believe that it will be possible to establish the secure environment called for by the Security Council resolution or to create conditions in which the United Nations' existing efforts to promote national reconciliation can be carried forward."[114] As such, Boutros-Ghali was not asking Bush to expand his objectives; he was telling Bush what was needed to achieve them, and his advice proved correct. Bush ignored the advice and passed the problem to Clinton a month later.

Clinton appeared to share Bush's concern about an open-ended operation, but to achieve the objectives to which Bush agreed, he could not ignore the militias and gangs on the ground. His administration concluded that they would have to be disarmed. (Bush might have pulled the plug on the operation and given up on his policy objectives instead of expanding to this mission, but we have no way of knowing.) When the time came to hand the mission back to the United Nations, Clinton did so, just as Bush suggested. To maintain security on the ground, however, US forces had to stay engaged. Clinton did not simply turn over US forces to the United Nations in an assertive multilateral strategy. Instead, the US military created various rapid reaction forces that operated unilaterally under US rather than UN command. One of these independent US units, Task Force Ranger, was conducting a raid in Mogadishu when their mission went wrong and US troops were killed. The issue was, therefore, not "aggressive multilateralism" as Republican critics maintained, because Task Force Ranger was not a multilateral force. Instead, it operated under the same type of unilateral US command authority that Bush had authorized.[115] Moreover, throughout the spring, summer, and early fall of 1993, the Clinton administration pushed Boutros-Ghali to transition the mission quickly back to the United Nations and then wrap it up as soon as possible.[116] In that sense, Clinton echoed the same approach as Bush had adopted. The differences between US operations in Somalia under Bush and Clinton were therefore not as "fundamentally divergent" as Bolton suggested. Nevertheless, critiques about Clinton's "multilateralism" and "nation-building" stuck and gained increasing traction among his Republican critics. Perhaps Clinton's biggest critic, and the Republican Party's most prominent voice on foreign policy, was Senator Jesse Helms, who chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for much of the 1990s and harangued Clinton for his liberal internationalism. He considered the United Nations "a longtime nemesis of millions of Americans," and pushed for "deep slashing cuts" in foreign aid.[117] Helms became a fierce critic of "this so-called nation building," which he called "fanciful rhetoric for fleecing the American taxpayers."[118] He also attempted to differentiate Bush's approach from Clinton's; while he had almost nothing good to say about the

111 John R. Bolton, "Wrong Turn in Somalia," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 1994.

112 "Letter: Boutros Boutros-Ghali to George H. W. Bush," December 8, 1992, US National Archives identifier: 366552047, local identifier: 91154-010, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/366552047.

113 "Letter: George H. W. Bush to Boutros Boutros-Ghali," December 4, 1992, US National Archives identifier: 366552047, local identifier: 91154-010, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/366552047.

114 "Letter: Boutros Boutros-Ghali to George H. W. Bush," December 8, 1992.

115 See Richard W. Stewart, *The United States Army in Somalia, 1992–1994* (United States Army Center of Military History, 2003).

116 National Security Council and NSC Records Management System, "Declassified Documents Concerning UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Somalia," Clinton Digital Library, January–September 1993, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101838.

117 Stephen Glain, *State vs. Defense: The Battle to Define America's Empire* (Crown Publishers, 2011), 368.

118 "Congressional Record Volume 142, Number 53, Tuesday, April 23, 1996," S3892–S3893, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-1996-04-23/html/CREC-1996-04-23-pt1-PgS3892-4.htm.

United Nations overall, Helms contrasted, without explanation, how "admirably" it had performed under Bush during the Gulf crisis with how it was being used by Clinton.[119]

**The Bush administration was also not a critic of nation-building.**

The distinction between the liberal internationalist Clinton and the more restrained and "realist approach" of Bush increasingly emerged as conventional wisdom among critics of Clinton's foreign policy.[120] Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* in 1997, Robert Manning from the Council on Foreign Relations and Patrick Clawson from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy claimed that the "Somalia effort was begun by President Bush. But Mr. Clinton changed the mission from humanitarian relief to nation-building."[121] By the end of Clinton's second term, the Republican Party platform read that the operation in "Somalia was escalated thoughtlessly into nation-building at the cost of the lives of courageous Americans."[122]

These depictions of Bush as someone who opposed assertive multilateralism and nation-building are distortions of his record. Bush was a strong proponent of multilateralism. Together with Scowcroft, he made clear that he "believed that the United States should not go it alone, that a multilateral approach was better."[123] Bush did as much as any president to empower the UNSC. As mentioned above, Bush traveled personally to New York to represent the United States on the Security Council, where he argued that "never before has the United Nations been so ready, and so compelled, to step up to the task of peace-making—both to resolve hot wars and to conduct that forward-looking mission known as preventive diplomacy."[124] In fact, during his presidency, Bush was criticized for ceding too much authority to the United Nations.[125]

The Bush administration was also not a critic of nation-building. It promoted the concept and used the term "nation-building" to describe some of its overseas operations.[126] Bush himself supported the idea, and in June 1990, he instructed his National Security Council to develop plans for "enhancing" the US ability to carry out "nation-building" operations as it looked to future contingencies.[127]

While both Bush and Clinton fell within the liberal internationalist traditions, there were differences between their foreign policies—just not the ones often claimed. Some of the critiques of Clinton from Republicans overlooked the evidence that Bush was, in some ways, even more committed to multilateralism than Clinton. In balancing different elements of liberal internationalism, Bush proved more reluctant than Clinton to allow democracy promotion or humanitarian intervention to undermine multilateral frameworks and international institutions. Clinton, in contrast, supported international institutions but was more willing than Bush to override institutional constraints in the face of humanitarian urgency. In the Balkans, Clinton authorized NATO intervention despite Russian opposition and without Security Council authorization—an approach Bush had consistently resisted.[128] In Iraq, Clinton launched multiple strikes without new UN resolutions, straining relations with France and Russia and weakening the institutional consensus Bush had worked to preserve.[129] These cases illustrate a shift within liberal internationalism in US foreign policy, as humanitarian imperatives increasingly displaced multilateral authorization as the decisive criterion for action. They do not, however, invalidate the principles of bolstering multilateralism and liberal institutions that clearly fell within the liberal internationalist tradition.

119 "Visit of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations to the United Nations: Address Before the UN Security Council by Senator Jesse Helms, Chairman," January 20–21, 2000, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-106shrg62154/html/CHRG-106shrg62154.htm.

120 Skidmore and Gates, "After Tiananmen," 517–19.

121 Robert Manning and Patrick Clawson, "The Clinton Doctrine," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 28, 1997, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/clinton-doctrine.

122 "2000 Republican Party Platform," July 31, 2000, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2000-republican-party-platform.

123 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 491.

124 "Provisional Verbatim Record of the Three Thousand and Forty-Sixth Meeting, Held at Headquarters, New York, on Friday, January 31,1992."

125 McManus, "Bush's Vision of a 'New World Order' Still Unclear Policy."

126 See, for example, "Statement by Stephen M. Duncan, Assistant Secretary of Defense (Reserve Affairs), to the Defense Subcommittee, Senate Appropriations Committee," April 24, 1990. Republished in *Defense Issues* 5, no. 24 (1990): 8, US National Archives identifier: 323153182, local identifier: 13744-004, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/323153182.

127 George Bush, "National Security Review of Low Intensity Conflict," June 11, 1990, US National Archives identifier: 446394975, local identifier: 90007-023, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/446394975.

128 George H. W. Bush, "Remarks on the Situation in Bosnia and an Exchange with Reporters in Colorado Springs."

129 Helfont, *Iraq Against the World*, chapters 6–7.

Although Bush and Clinton both pursued liberal internationalist policies, by the late 1990s critiques of liberal internationalism as a hallmark of Clinton's policies developed into a key plank of the Republican Party's platform. In this political context, senior members of the Bush administration attempted to downplay some liberal internationalist policies they had previously enacted. In Bush and Scowcroft's joint 1998 memoir, *A World Transformed*, Scowcroft claimed that too much was made of the phrase "new world order." He argued that "it has since been applied to a range of circumstances far different from our conception," and that "the phrase, as we thought of it, applied only to a narrow aspect of conflict—aggression between states."[130] In an interview with Fareed Zakaria in 1998, Scowcroft attempted to minimize the importance of the "new world order" concept for the administration and eventually disavowed the term, telling Zakaria that "I wish I had never thought of" it.[131]

It is difficult to square these statements with the historical record. The new world order played a major role in Bush's diplomacy. He brought up the term in private meetings with his foreign counterparts,[132] and in his administration's *National Security Strategy* in 1991, Bush wrote a preface titled "A New World Order." Clearly it was an important concept to him. Despite Scowcroft's assertions in the late 1990s, the concept applied to more than "aggression between states." In Bush's speech in which he announced a new world order, he spoke of opposing "tyranny," of "shared responsibility for freedom and justice," and of "human decency."[133] In his preface titled "A New World Order," Bush claimed that it was

> *shaped by what we are as a people, for our values are the link between our past and our future, between our domestic life and our foreign policy, between our power and our purpose. It is our deepest belief that all nations and peoples seek political and economic freedom; that governments must rest their rightful authority on the consent of the governed, and must live in peace with their neighbors. The collapse of the Communist idea has shown that our vision of individual rights—a vision imbedded in the faith of our Founders—speaks to humanity's enduring hopes and aspirations.*[134]

Not everyone in the 1990s accepted the rebranding of the Bush administration as purely realist. Henry Kissinger, who knew Bush well, continued to describe his foreign policy as Wilsonian.[135] One *Los Angeles Times* headline from 1994 read: "Despite GOP Attacks, Clinton Foreign Policy Echos Bush's."[136] At the end of Clinton's presidency in 2000, the editors of the magazine *Foreign Policy* rejected attempts to distinguish Bush's and Clinton's foreign policies, retorting that "the essence" of Clinton's "vision was not so different from the one offered by his predecessor, President George Bush."[137] Others pointed out the clear partisan nature of attacks on Clinton that tried to distinguish him from Bush.[138] Yet it took another president, another string of crises, and another generation of critics to solidify Bush's legacy as a realist.

## Opposition to George W. Bush and the Solidification of a Myth

When George W. Bush was elected president in 2000, he adopted the dominant foreign policy narratives of the Republican Party at the time. In reaction to the Clinton administration's liberal internationalism, Bush, like most Republicans, put forward a realist platform. In the presidential debate focused on international affairs, Bush repeatedly insisted that "interests" should be the guiding principle of foreign policy and argued, "I don't think our troops ought to be used for what's called nation-building." He stated rather bluntly that "I'm not so sure the role of the United States is to go around the world and say this is the way it's got to be," and then, even more forcefully: "One way for us to end up being

130 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 355.

131 "Interview with Brent Scowcroft," George H. W. Bush Oral History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia, November 12–13, 1999, 52.

132 For example, "Memorandum of Conversation: The President's Meeting with President Gorbachev of the Soviet Union," September 9, 1990, 1–2, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1990-09-09--Gorbachev%20[1].pdf.

133 Bush, "September 11, 1990."

134 *National Security Strategy of the United States* (The White House, August 1991), v.

135 Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (Simon & Schuster, 1994), chapter 31.

136 Robert L. Borosage, "Despite GOP Attacks, Clinton Foreign Policy Echos Bush's," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1994.

137 "Clinton's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy* 121 (November–December, 2000): 18.

138 Michael Kinsley, "Is There a Doctrine in the House?," *Slate*, August 8, 2000, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2000/08/is-there-a-doctrine-in-the-house.html.

viewed as the ugly American is for us to go around the world saying, we do it this way, so should you."[139]

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, George W. Bush and his administration reassessed their policies and strategies. By the time the Bush administration launched the Iraq War in 2003, liberal internationalist ideas such as freedom and democracy had emerged in presidential rhetoric. In February 2003, less than a month before he launched the invasion of Iraq, Bush told a supportive audience at the American Enterprise Institute that "Iraq—with its proud heritage, abundant resources and skilled and educated people—is fully capable of moving toward democracy and living in freedom." He insisted that "human cultures can be vastly different," but "the human heart desires the same good things everywhere on Earth. In our desire to be safe from brutal and bullying oppression, human beings are the same." For these "fundamental reasons," Bush concluded, "freedom and democracy will always and everywhere have greater appeal than the slogans of hatred and the tactics of terror."[140]

By the end of the year, he had made these ideas the basis not only of his policies in Iraq, but toward the entire Middle East. In a landmark speech on November 6, 2003, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, he proclaimed: "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty."[141] Such ideas became the basis of what the George W. Bush administration called its "freedom agenda," and they would dominate Bush's foreign policy for the rest of his first term in office.

This reversal led to consternation among realists. John Mearsheimer had supported George W. Bush in the 2000 election precisely because of his realism during the campaign. In the fall of 2002, however, he joined with thirty-two other prominent realist scholars to take out an advertisement in *The New York Times* arguing: "War with Iraq Is Not in America's National Interest."[142] To oppose Bush's policies, Mearsheimer joined realist scholars like Andrew Bacevich and Steven Walt, along with like-minded politicians and think-tank fellows, to form the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy. Contrasting the recklessness of the younger Bush with his more realist father became a way to discredit the policies of the former. In making his case against George W. Bush in 2004, Mearsheimer argued that George H. W. Bush's presidency had been a "paradigmatic realist administration," and that George W. Bush's policies had "looked a lot like Bush I" until 9/11, when he flipped.[143] Neither of those assertions was true.

Yet a string of articles in the popular press began making similar contrasts between Bush senior and Bush junior. The *Los Angeles Times* pitted the "hawkish idealists" of the George W. Bush administrations with George H. W. Bush, who they claimed "fell squarely into Nixon's realist tradition."[144] *The American Prospect* claimed George H. W. Bush was an "icon of realism."[145]

There were indeed significant differences between the foreign policies of George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush. The elder Bush, especially at the end of his term, was much more committed to a form of liberal internationalism that bolstered the United Nations and international law. As mentioned, he backed down from his push to remove Saddam Hussein from power in the summer of 1991 once the UN Security Council rejected that approach. When the younger Bush faced a similar lack of support for regime change in Iraq at the United Nations, he executed a war without UN support, based on a "coalition of the willing." In that sense, George W. Bush pushed further than Clinton in pursuing a liberal internationalism that supported democratization and humanitarianism, by force, if necessary, even if it undermined multinational institutions like the United Nations.

The senior President Bush ("41") was also much more deliberate, prudent, and cautious in his strategies than the younger President Bush ("43"). At times, the younger Bush pressed forward without much deliberation. Senior members of George W. Bush's national security staff later argued that the costs and benefits of the 2003 Iraq War "were not being discussed, or when discussed, not re-

139 "October 11, 2000 Debate Transcript," Commission on Presidential Debates, October 11, 2000, http://www.debates.org/?page=october-11-2000-debate-transcript.

140 George W. Bush, "President Discusses the Future of Iraq," February 26, 2000, http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030226-11.html.

141 George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy," US Chamber of Commerce, November 6, 2003, George W. Bush White House Archives, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-3.html.

142 "War with Iraq Is Not in America's National Interest," paid advertisement, *The New York Times*, September 26, 2002.

143 Postel, "Realistpolitik."

144 Doyle McManus, "Bush Pulls 'Neocons' Out of the Shadows," *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 2005.

145 David Runciman, "On Realism, Old and New," *The American Prospect*, October 30, 2014, https://prospect.org/world/realism-old-new-d3/.

solved."[146] The elder Bush designed his National Security Council to prevent exactly that type of ad hoc decision-making, but these were differences in policy process, not the principles that guided American strategy and foreign policy.

**Mearsheimer's depiction of Bush as a realist only occurred at the height of debates over the 2003 Iraq War.**

These differences between the two presidents also cannot account for the depictions of Bush senior as a realist. On closer examination, people like Mearsheimer clearly altered their characterizations of George H. W. Bush in light of his son's policies. In Mearsheimer's 2001 book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, written just before 9/11, he hardly mentioned George H. W. Bush, and when he did, it was not as a realist. In fact, one of the few references to the elder Bush's policies in the book was to his "new world order" idea, which was, in Mearsheimer's view, an example of the fallacy "that great powers can transcend realist logic by working together to build an international order that fosters peace and justice."[147] Such a depiction is at odds with Mearsheimer's 2004 discussion of George H. W. Bush as a "paradigmatic" realist.[148] (Interestingly, by 2019, when the politics of the moment had passed, Mearsheimer again discussed Bush in much more nuanced terms, as someone who took the "realist Western order and spread it across the globe, transforming it into a liberal international order . . . what Bush called the 'new world order.'"[149]) Mearsheimer's depiction of Bush as a realist only occurred at the height of debates over the 2003 Iraq War. In the absence of those contentious politics, he presented Bush as more balanced.

As is often the case, politics was well described by satire. In 2006, the Pulitzer Prize–winning political cartoon *Doonesbury* quipped that "some years back," it had been "a little rough on the first president Bush." However, George H. W. Bush had since become great because he was "everything in fact, his son is not."[150] The cartoon's punch line centered the desire to reinterpret George H. W. Bush's legacy as a means to critique his son.

The most obvious points of comparison between the two Bush administrations were the Gulf War of 1991 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. While the Gulf War was not as successful as some popular narratives have depicted it,[151] it was well managed at the operational and tactical level, it was built on a strong multilateral and legal foundation, and the George H. W. Bush administration provided the appropriate number of troops and resources to accomplish the stated objectives. The 2003 Iraq War, by contrast, was ill conceived and carried out on shaky legal grounds with a fraction of the troops and resources necessary for success.[152] The Gulf War was quick and cost very few American lives, and for the United States, almost no money. The 2003 Iraq War cost thousands of American lives, and by some estimates, trillions of dollars.

Some of the comparisons, however, went well beyond these factors to present the George H. W. Bush administration not only as more competent, but also—inaccurately—as realist. Richard Haass, a realist scholar-practitioner, who served in both Bush administrations but turned against the latter Bush administration after leaving government and becoming a critic of the 2003 Iraq War, has offered comparisons between the two wars that engage in some of this historical revisionism. His narratives of the Gulf War have emphasized realist ideas like balance of power and hegemony, but downplayed the importance of things like the United Nations that suggest the importance of liberal internationalism for the war.[153] In making explicit comparisons between the wars in 1991 and 2003, he has portrayed the Gulf War in 1991 as "a limited, in many ways traditional war, one that sought to reverse Iraq's external aggression and restore the status quo ante." He characterizes the 2003 war, by contrast, as "an ambitious, even radical, initiative designed to oust

146 Melvyn P. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 158.

147 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 48.

148 Postel, "Realistpolitik."

149 John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 21–22.

150 "Doonesbury Archive," *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2006, https://www.washingtonpost.com/doonesbury/strip/archive/2006/02/12.

151 Samuel Helfont, "The Gulf War's Afterlife: Dilemmas, Missed Opportunities, and the Post–Cold War Order Undone," *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 25–47.

152 Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (Penguin, 2006); Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (Pantheon Books, 2006); George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005); Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (Simon & Schuster, 2004).

153 Richard Haass, "The Gulf War: Its Place in History," in *Into the Desert: Reflections on the Gulf War*, ed. Jeffrey A. Engel (Oxford University Press, 2013), 68–71.

and replace Iraq's leadership and, in so doing, create the foundations for a very different Middle East."[154]

Again, such comparisons do not match the historical record of George H. W. Bush's vision for the Gulf War. Bush's objectives for that conflict went well beyond limited, realist depictions of them. He planned for it to be a vehicle for both regional and global transformation, and his new world order speech called it "a rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation."[155] In the fall of 1990, George H. W. Bush told the UN General Assembly that "in the aftermath of Iraq's unconditional departure from Kuwait, I truly believe there may be opportunities for Iraq and Kuwait to settle their differences permanently, for the states of the Gulf themselves to build new arrangements for stability, and for all the states and the people of the region to settle the conflicts that divide the Arabs from Israel."[156] Even within the Middle East, then, the elder Bush's vision actually closely resembled Haass's depiction of the 2003 war: a catalyst for transformation of the region.

In fact, the Gulf War as a catalyst for regional transformation was central to the George H. W. Bush administration's diplomacy throughout the Gulf crisis. Secretary Baker told the Saudis that the crisis would shape "the post–Cold War world." Success, he asserted, would make "clear that Saddam Hussein is not the wave of the future" and "that moderation can prevail and Middle East peace can be achievable."[157] According to Baker, the Saudis saw a "potential for new thinking [and] broad consensus."[158] Similarly, Baker told Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy that "if the US can hold the Arab coalition together, it will help shape Arab attitudes toward Israel. If Saddam can be made to retreat it will bolster Arab moderates."[159] This type of idealism also included states like Syria, which had been a reliable Soviet client but joined the US-led coalition in the Gulf War, and which Bush thought would enjoy "improved relations" with Washington.[160] Again, Baker echoed this analysis, arguing that President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrians "acknowledged their position on peace had changed." The Syrians were now committed to genuine peace and "not just absence of war."[161] Bush even thought that victory over Saddam "should help to alleviate the problem" of Islamic fundamentalism and the plight of Middle Eastern Christians.[162] Efforts to downplay this vision of the Gulf War as an impetus for regional transformation became more frequent following September 11, 2001. However, they echo political debates during the George W. Bush administration more than they reflect the historical record of the George H. W. Bush administration.

By the end of the George W. Bush administration, the conventional wisdom of George H. W. Bush as a realist had solidified. Barack Obama's depiction of Bush as a realist, mentioned at the beginning of this article, was accepted across the political spectrum in the United States.[163] In academic and policy journals, Bush was called "a conservative realist."[164] On cable news network MSNBC, center-left anchor Chris Matthews averred that George H. W. Bush opposed the 2003 Iraq War because "he was a realist."[165] This portrayal extends to the present; a 2025 headline in *The Boston Globe* argued that "when it comes to promoting democracy," Donald Trump's "realism" resembles that of, among others, George H. W. Bush.[166]

A handful of careful scholars have conveyed the dissonance that attaches to attempts to square accepted wisdom about Bush's realism with the historical record. Barry Posen, for example, observed that "George Herbert Walker Bush coined the phrase

154 Haass, "The Gulf War," 79.

155 Bush, "September 11, 1990."

156 "Excerpt from 10/01/90 POTUS address to 45th Session of UN General Assembly, NYC," James A. Baker III Papers, Princeton University Library, box 109, folder 6, number 8.

157 "JAB Notes from 9/7/90 Remarks to USAF Personnel Stations at Ta'if, Saudi Arabia," James A. Baker III Papers, Princeton University Library, box 109, folder 5, number 16.

158 "JAB Notes from 3/19/91 Congressional Leadership Meeting and Republican Senators' Policy Luncheon," James A. Baker III Papers, Princeton University Library, box 110, folder 2, number 2.

159 "JAB Notes from 9/5/90 Meeting with Israel FM Levy, Washington DC (JAB First Meeting with FM Levy at Department of State)," James A. Baker III Papers, Princeton University Library, box 109, folder 5, number 18.

160 "Memorandum of Conversation: Presidential Telephone Call to President Assad of Syria," George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, September 6, 1990, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1990-09-06--Assad.pdf.

161 "JAB Notes from 3/19/91 Congressional Leadership Meeting and Republican Senators' Policy Luncheon," James A. Baker III Papers, Princeton University Library, box 110, folder 2, number 2.

162 "Memorandum of Conversation: Telcon to Pope John Paul II," George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, March 5, 1991, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1991-03-06--John%20Paul%20II.pdf.

163 David Mark, "George H. W. Bush, Barack Obama Shared Realist View of Foreign Policy," *Washington Examiner*, December 1, 2018.

164 Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "George H. W. Bush: Conservative Realist as President," *Orbis* 62, no. 1 (2017).

165 Chris Matthews, "Hardball with Chris Matthews," MSNBC, November 5, 2015.

166 Jeff Jacoby, "When It Comes to Promoting Democracy, Trump Is No JFK or Reagan: The President's Foreign Policy 'Realism' Echoes That of Obama, George H. W. Bush, and Nixon," *The Boston Globe*, May 25, 2025.

'new world order,' which sounds incongruous coming from a Cold War realist and spymaster."[167] Writing for the American Enterprise Institute, Timothy Naftali noticed the incongruence between Bush's worldview and realist explanations of his policies in the Gulf War, and concluded that Bush was not personally committed to realism, but eventually adopted the policies of a "reluctant realist."[168] Historian Timothy J. Lynch cited the new world order and allowed that Bush's "public rhetoric betrayed a belief that the world was turning decisively in an American direction and entering a small 'r' republican dawn." Yet Lynch ultimately concluded that Bush was a "realist" who "believe[d] that American interests, rather than values, should drive policy," because "values are messy. They lead to bad liberal wars . . . or unnecessarily antagonized opponents."[169] These depictions offer nuance, but they ultimately deny that Bush was a liberal internationalist. Once the George W. Bush administration had begun, George H. W. Bush's legacy was overwhelmingly refracted through contemporary politics, and few commentators pointed out the liberal internationalist elements of his policies.

## Implications for the Analysis of Policy and Grand Strategy

Ongoing misclassification of George H. W. Bush's statecraft carries important implications for contemporary policy debates. Calls to "return" to Bush-style realism have become a familiar refrain in American grand-strategy discourse, often presented as an antidote to liberal overreach and neoconservative hubris. Yet these appeals rest on a false premise. What worked in the late 1980s and early 1990s was not realist retrenchment or value-neutral restraint, but a form of prudent liberal internationalism: active use of institutions, alliances, and liberal norms to consolidate an emerging post–Cold War order, while carefully calibrating costs, risks, and limits.

Misremembering Bush as a realist risks reinforcing a misleading dichotomy between liberal ambition and strategic prudence. It encourages the belief that liberal ends necessarily require expansive interventionism, or conversely, that restraint requires distancing the United States from liberal objectives altogether. Aligning means and ends is simply a question of good grand strategy.[170] There is no reason why liberalism as a grand strategy, cannot be sensitive to these questions, as the historical record of the Bush administration shows. George H. W. Bush consistently articulated liberal goals like support for democracy, the rule of law, and a cooperative international order, but simultaneously remained acutely aware of the limits of American power, the importance of legitimacy, and the dangers of overextension. His policies toward China after Tiananmen, toward the Soviet Union during its dissolution, and toward the Middle East during the Gulf crisis reflected a synthesis in which liberal aspirations were pursued through sequencing, institutional constraint, and selective engagement rather than maximalist intervention.

Bush's example thus challenges a tendency in contemporary strategy debates to frame American foreign policy choices as a zero-sum trade-off between liberalism and restraint. Recent US strategy documents have emphasized prioritization, alignment of ends and means, and avoidance of open-ended commitments. The 2025 *National Security Strategy* (*NSS*) and the 2026 *National Defense Strategy* (*NDS*), for example, repeatedly stress the need to focus on core national interests, to raise the bar for intervention, and to resist the expansion of US commitments beyond what available means can sustain. These are analytically sound concerns, reflecting a desire to correct excesses of the post–Cold War period.

At the same time, the framework through which these documents diagnose past failures risks associating liberal internationalism primarily—and unnecessarily—with overreach. They decry the pursuit of a misplaced faith that "lashed American policy to a network of international institutions" and "pledges to uphold cloud-castle abstractions like the rules-based international order."[171] In doing so, the documents treat prudence and restraint as conceptually separate from liberal order-building. Thus, while the current *NSS* and *NDS* repeatedly affirm the importance of alliances and partnerships, they do so absent expressions of a distinct liberal security community, in which institutions grounded in a shared liberal political order allow members to reduce their security dilemmas.[172]

167 Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 164.

168 Timothy Naftali, "The Reluctant Realism of George H. W. Bush," The American Enterprise Institute, February 1, 2008.

169 Timothy J. Lynch, *In the Shadow of the Cold War: American Foreign Policy from George Bush Sr. to Donald Trump* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 17, 23.

170 John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (Penguin, 2018); Hal Brands, *What Is Good Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Cornell University Press, 2014).

171 White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (The White House, 2025), 2.

172 White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 8–11; US Department of Defense, *2026 National Defense Strategy* (Department of Defense, 2026), preface.

The record of the George H. W. Bush administration suggests different lessons. For Bush, liberalism was not an alternative to prudence. Multilateral authorization, alliance consensus, and international law served American power, distributed burdens, enhanced legitimacy, and reduced the likelihood that the United States would be drawn into conflicts without clear objectives or broad support. Bush's reliance on the United Nations during the Gulf War, his resistance to unilateral regime change in Iraq absent international authorization, and his cautious approach to humanitarian intervention all reflected an understanding that institutional constraint could be a strategic asset for the United States, rather than solely a liability.

This understanding implies that liberalism should not be abandoned in the name of prudence, but also reinforces that liberal strategy must be practiced with discipline. Bush's foreign policy demonstrated that it is possible to maintain liberal ends like support for democratic norms, cooperation among liberal states, and a rules-based international order, while also accepting that American power is finite, that democratization will be uneven, and that engagement with illiberal regimes may be necessary. Recognizing this synthesis helps dissolve a false dichotomy that continues to shape strategic debate, and offers a more historically grounded model for aligning liberal objectives with restraint in contemporary US statecraft.

## Conclusion

George H. W. Bush's foreign policy has been systematically misclassified in ways that erase its liberal internationalist dimensions. This misclassification was the product of domestic politics in the 1990s and 2000s, which successfully recast Bush as a realist foil to both Bill Clinton's liberal internationalism and George W. Bush's neoconservatism. Over time, this partisan reframing migrated into scholarly typologies of grand strategy, crystallizing into both academic and popular consensus.

The implications of this finding extend beyond Bush's presidency, and inform how international relations theory conceptualizes and evaluates grand strategies. First, correcting the record is essential for testing theory. Much realist literature points to Bush's presidency as evidence that realism "worked" in managing the end of the Cold War and early post–Cold War eras. Emma Ashford claims that Bush led one of "the most realist administrations," attributing that factor to the administration's "notable policy triumphs" like "managing the peaceful breakup of the Soviet Union, winning the Gulf War."[173] *Foreign Affairs* has run articles with titles like "The Foreign Policy Genius of George H. W. Bush."[174] Elsewhere he is referred to as an "elder statesman" whose policies have "aged well."[175] Even scholars who do not explicitly praise him imply their approval on realist grounds. Steven Walt and Barry Posen, both harsh critics of US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, claim that US strategies went awry beginning with the Clinton administration, and thus suggest that a return to more prudent foreign policy would mean a return to Bush.[176]

Yet when the underlying record of Bush's foreign policies shows sustained reliance on institutions, democracy promotion, multilateralism, and humanitarianism, the foundation for these "realist" claims collapses. The realist success story of managing the end of the Cold War is in large part a myth, and one that has distorted how scholars evaluate realism's empirical validity. By contrast, the liberal internationalist tradition, often dismissed as naive or overly ambitious, emerges as a more accurate description of what guided US policy in this period.

Second, the George H. W. Bush presidency illustrates the vulnerability of international relations theory to political mythmaking. Classifying grand strategies is never a purely academic exercise. It is bound up with partisan debates, reputational politics, and the desire to claim historical legitimacy for one's preferred approach. A substantial literature in security studies has shown that strategic ideas are often filtered through politically useful myths. Stephen Van Evera's work on the "cult of the offensive," for example, demonstrated how pre–World War I military and political elites embraced exaggerated beliefs about the advantages of offensive action despite contrary evidence, with profound consequences for both policy and theory.[177] Jack Snyder has similarly shown that "myths of empire" can emerge from domestic political coalitions to

173 Emma Ashford, "In Praise of Lesser Evils," *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 5 (September/October 2022): 217.

174 Ivo H. Daalder and I. M. Destler, "The Foreign Policy Genius of George H. W. Bush," *Foreign Affairs*, December 4, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-12-04/foreign-policy-genius-george-h-w-bush.

175 Aaron Brown and Mirco Reimer, "The Elder Statesman: George H. W. Bush in Retrospect," American Diplomacy, June 2014, https://americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu/2014/06/the-elder-statesman-george-h-w-bush-in-retrospect/?utm_source=chatgpt.com; Michael Hirsh, "George H. W. Bush's Misunderstood Presidency," *Foreign Policy*, December 1, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/01/george-h-w-bush-misunderstood-presidency-death/.

176 Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019); Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014).

177 Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1984): 58–107.

shape understandings of national interest, grand strategy, and the alleged benefits of expansion.[178]

The George H. W. Bush administration points to a related but distinct mechanism. Myths generated in partisan and policy debate can migrate into scholarly categories. Once there, they shape typologies and ultimately the perceived track record of entire schools of thought. The result is not simply a mistaken interpretation of one presidency, but a distortion of the evidence on which scholars assess realism, liberal internationalism, and prudence. Recognizing this mechanism should make scholars more cautious in how they classify leaders and more reflexive about the political narratives that structure scholarly consensus.

Third, the misclassification of Bush's statecraft carries important policy implications. Invocations of Bush as a model of realism obscure the extent to which his effectiveness rested on disciplined liberal internationalism rather than retrenchment. Bush demonstrated that prudence and restraint need not stand in opposition to liberal ends, but can be institutionalized through alliances, law, and multilateral cooperation. Recovering that synthesis helps clarify what is at stake in contemporary debates over restraint, order, and American leadership.

George H. W. Bush's foreign policy provides not an example of realist restraint but of liberal internationalist order-building conducted with prudence. Recognizing this fact reshapes how we evaluate competing paradigms of US grand strategy, highlights the political processes that influence scholarly debates, and offers a cautionary note for policymakers tempted to draw lessons from a misremembered past. The case for realism's efficacy in the post–Cold War moment is weaker than often assumed, while the case for liberal internationalism's durability and efficacy is stronger. This underscores the need for scholars to interrogate how political narratives shape theoretical classifications—a lesson that is as vital for international relations theory as it is for the practice of American statecraft.

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***Opening image credit:*** *President Bush rides in a HUMVEE with General H. Norman Schwarzkopf during his visit with troops in Saudi Arabia on Thanksgiving Day.*[179]

178 Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Cornell University Press, 1993).

179 For the image, see https://catalog.archives.gov/id/186424.