

Understanding President Bush and His Foreign Policy

by

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For

Vantage Point

Now that President Bush has won re-election, the world needs to better understand him and his foreign policy. There is no other option. Many people around the world, including almost half of the Americans who voted in the 2004 presidential election, do not like him or his policies. Nevertheless, the majority of Americans who voted gave him four more years in office.

Accent on Continuity

Already President Bush's intentions regarding foreign policy have become quite evident. Essentially, he will accent continuity over change. Bush has decided that the shortcomings of his first administration were a consequence of some of his Cabinet members' errors, not a result of his policies. He has already moved to replace some Cabinet members, most notably Secretary of State Colin Powell, while retaining his previous policies.

Bush's foreign policy priorities will remain: the defense of the United States, the pursuit of the war on terrorism and the countering of weapons of mass destruction. Britain and Japan will remain his primary allies. Concerns about the Middle East, particularly the insurgency in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, will consume most of Bush's attention, US military resources and diplomatic energy. North Korea's nuclear weapons development program remains a priority concern, but ranks much lower than Iraq.

But merely listing President Bush's foreign policy priorities will not further our comprehension of his foreign policy. He must examine the motives behind his decisions. Obviously, US national interests drive his foreign policy. Our aim here is to better understand the philosophy that shapes his personal view of reality.

Christianity

President Bush is a devout evangelical Christian. As a devout Christian, Bush believes God guides his actions as president. This is the source of Bush's self-confidence. So long as he tunes his thinking and deeds to what he considers "God's will," Bush believes God will guide him to do what is right and best as the president of the United States.

Reflecting this personal conviction, Bush claimed during the presidential debates this past October that he could not think of having made any serious errors during his first presidential term. In Bush's mind, he is not being arrogant. Instead, he believes that God is infallible. Thus, so long as he subordinates himself to "God's will," Bush believes he will be guided to make the right decision.

Patriotism

Passionate patriotism also dominates Bush's view of the world. For him, America is great because it is "God's chosen land." American values, according to Bush's thinking, reflect God's most cherished values. He believes God "blessed" America with an unsurpassed wealth of natural and human resources so that it could fulfill America's "manifest destiny" of spreading democracy and capitalism around the world. God temporarily anointed him, Bush is convinced, to defend America from "evil" and promote "good."

Bush's patriotic Christian view of the United States coincided with some of the strategies his most trusted advisers then advocated. These included National Missile Defense (NMD) and the US right to unilaterally attack nations who possessed a threat to the United States (the essence of his "Strategy for the Counter-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction" announced in December 2002). These "America-first" impulses garnered Bush widespread criticism early in his first term, particularly from allies in Europe and Northeast Asia.

The tragic events of September 11, 2002, merged and intensified Bush's Christian values and patriotism. It also quieted many of his foreign critics. Ever since, Bush has asserted an unrelenting resolve to defend America from the evil of terrorism and the nuclear threat of the "axis of evil." He proclaimed that nations were either with the United States, and thus opposed to "evil," or they would be labeled supporters of evil.

Bush personalized evil by creating a list of "bad guys." They include Al Qaeda's Osama bin Laden, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and North Korea's Kim Jong Il. Other bad guys merely became faces on a deck of playing cards distributed to the American soldiers who overran Iraq in the spring of 2003. Terrorists, naturally, are "bad guys. By concentrating on their elimination, Bush believes he can destroy evil and promote good, the core of his apparent strategy to pursue the war on terrorism and to end the insurgency in Iraq.

People Must Change, Not Policies

President Bush recently demonstrated a similar tendency regarding his preferences for policies and staff. During his first post re-election press conference on November 4, 2004, Bush indicated that he believed he had won two mandates on election day: one from God and the other from the American people. The election, from his point of view, confirmed to him that both God and the American people approved the policies of his first term in office.

Thus he sees no need to alter his policies. After all, Bush believes God guided him in forging these policies. Instead, as Bush indicated at his November 4 press conference, he believes he erred in the selection of some Cabinet members. He subsequently decided to re-shuffle his foreign policy team. He began by accepting Colin Powell's resignation. Powell had been the voice of dissent during Bush's first term. Bush promptly replaced him with a loyal team player, Dr. Rice. Bush's choice broadcast a clear message to other cabinet members. He expects not only effective implementation of his policies, he insists on compliance with his wishes and loyalty to his views. After all, from Bush's point of view, he is following "God's will" and combating evil for the sake of defending America. No loyal American should, in his view, challenge his judgment.

"Top Down" Management

President Bush will also continue his "top down" management style, something he most likely learned at Harvard Business School. He runs the US government like the chief executive officer of a large multinational corporation. The United States is the corporation's home office. His political advisers in the White House resemble his Board of Directors. They advise but do not manage him. Government bureaucrats serve as rank and file staff. Their job is to implement his policies. Their advice is neither sought nor welcome. The American people are like stock holders. They get to comment on the president's performance so he listens to them. As for the other nations of the world, Bush expects them to either support his policies, and thus earn dividends from the United States, or be excluded from the United States' circle of allies and friends. Such a perception became evident when shortly after the US military forces had destroyed the Saddam Hussein regime, the United States announced that only business firms from nations that had contributed to the US led military coalition would be eligible for contracts to participate in Iraq's re-construction.

Restraints

President Bush, at least for the present time, seems intent upon continuing his foreign policy with minimal change. This implies that he expects the world to adjust to his preferences, a rather unrealistic assumption. Persistence in this regard could significantly impede the successful pursuit of his otherwise well intended foreign policy program, one that is clearly aimed at promoting peace and prosperity around the world.

Nevertheless, President Bush cannot escape entirely other strong currents in American political culture. Americans prefer pragmatism over dogmatism and harbor a compelling dislike for authoritarian style government. Bush's focus maybe on the next four years, but other ambitious members of his political party will also be looking toward the next presidential election. They will not want their incumbent president to estrange their party from the majority of American voters.

Meanwhile, Bush and his political party must remember that nearly half the American people neither supported him or his policies. Should President Bush continue to alienate

them, plus a small minority of his current supporters, his political party could lose the next election. The mid-term Congressional election two years hence will be a litmus test of how well President Bush is doing in the eyes of the American voters.

At the same time, the success or failure of President's foreign policy agenda hinges significantly on the extent to which he can rally international support for his policies. During his first term, he failed to achieve any significant accomplishments in foreign policy. Any future success will be possible only if he demonstrates a greater willingness to work with more allies and friends around the world. Otherwise, his war on terrorism, efforts to nurture political stability and freedom in the Middle East, and to blunt North Korea's nuclear program will falter.

Bush and the Korean Peninsula

President Bush's foreign policy toward the Korean Peninsula has hindered more than helped both Koreas. His inflexibility toward North Korea regarding the nuclear issue has impeded progress in the Six Party Talks. His disdain for North Korea's leader and form of government has likewise complicated reconciliation between the two Koreas. Yet Bush is not likely to alter either policy, at least not in the foreseeable future.

The two Koreas would do well to consider the current reality of Bush's foreign policy, and its anticipated continuity, as an opportunity to promote their own long cherished goal of reconciliation and economic cooperation. After all, Bush is hardly likely to break off the US alliance with South Korea just because it persists in pursuing reconciliation with North Korea. At the same time, economically prosperous and militarily sophisticated South Korea should not fear North Korea. If anything, the two Koreas could take matters into their own hands and, working with their neighbors Japan, China and Russia, begin to forge their own resolution to the nuclear impasse. This is exactly what members of the European Union have begun to do regarding Iran's nuclear program.