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The New Tribalism: Cliques and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy

Profound changes in the United States' outlook and behavior toward the world have taken place in the first years of the twenty-first century. The country currently confronts perhaps its most serious direct challenge to national security since Pearl Harbor and has thus far responded in ways that have transformed the national debate. In less than five years, the United States has launched two major military campaigns, occupied two countries of extraordinary ethnic and geographic complexity, conducted the most significant reorganization of the government's national security architecture since 1947 with the creation of a new cabinet agency as well as an overhaul of its intelligence institutions, and articulated a bold agenda for the exercise of U.S. power in the world. Most analysts agree that this recent transformation of U.S. foreign policy, as well as the institutions responsible for implementing it, is nothing short of revolutionary.[1]

Accompanying these changes have been remarkable shifts in policy positions between many of those in the United States' two main political camps. A president who entered office in 2000 calling for a more humble approach to the world and greater emphasis on traditional national interests instead of "nation building"[2] has now outlined a broad interventionist doctrine of preemption, placing the promotion of democracy in the Middle East and elsewhere at the heart of the foreign policy agenda. Meanwhile, among the political Left, there is greater reluctance to embrace the "freedom agenda," a core part of Democratic Party thinking beginning with President Woodrow

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Wilson's World War I aim to make the world "safe for democracy" to President Bill Clinton's "democratic enlargement."

Similarly, the influential cadre of conservative strategic thinkers in the Bush administration who spent the Clinton years warning of "breaking" the military by taking on commitments for which the U.S. armed forces are neither properly trained nor equipped to handle at an unsustainable rate of deployment has presided over an era of tremendous strain on the fighting force. Considering the recent outcry from retired officers, it has created perhaps the greatest rupture of civil-military relations in a generation. Retired battlefield commanders, such as U.S. Army General Paul Eaton, have called Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld "incompetent strategically, operationally, and tactically," and General John Batiste describes Rumsfeld as "abusive" and "arrogant."[3]

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In response, many progressives usually considered to be more focused on "soft" foreign policy issues such as foreign assistance and development are rushing to embrace the military. The 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston was notable for its focus on military issues, including an unprecedented embrace of more than a dozen retired flag officers who took the stage to endorse the Democratic nominee for president. In Congress and around Washington, Democrats are trumpeting proposals to provide for military families and working to reach out to those in uniform and to build alliances with the recently retired.

Although the two political parties have historically been known to flip-flop on core positions in response to the prevailing political winds, the recent reversals on everything from nation building to fiscal discipline have proved particularly dizzying. With battle lines for the 2008 presidential election being clearly drawn around issues of foreign policy and national security, it seems that the ruling Republicans and the insurgent Democrats are settling into their proverbial trench warfare. The ranks of the two parties are far from cohesive or united, however, and today's national security debate is far more complex than a Manichean struggle of conservative versus liberal, Left versus Right, hawk versus dove, or red versus blue.

The New U.S. Tribalism

Inside the respective traditional intellectual communities and political apparatuses of the Republicans and the Democrats are small groupings that play an increasingly important role in the overall formulation and execution of U.S.

foreign policy. Throughout the political spectrum and within both political parties, these groupings are animated by individuals and ideologies that seek to shape the national security agenda, and one cannot properly assess the debates surrounding U.S. foreign policy without understanding these cliques.

Operating in and out of government, some seek to bring this debate outside today's polarized framework, and others seek to use the debate for partisan political advantage. Some of these cliques represent schools of foreign policy that have traditionally been represented in the national foreign policy debate, whereas others are relatively new.[4] Many of them are defined by distinct priorities and concerns, whereas some share overlapping policy prescriptions even though they might approach problems from very different outlooks. Either way, these cliques are often overlooked or misunderstood, even by close observers of U.S. foreign policy, especially during election cycles when the overall Republican-Democratic divide obscures more nuanced tribal characteristics.

Like any social cohort, national security cliques are often driven as much by personalities, friendships, and loyalties as they are by policies and ideas. Even within the dominant political and policy establishments, people tend to gravitate toward other like-minded individuals. A comment made by a Republican foot soldier just before the 2004 election reflects this reality. "I might not know exactly what my parties' position is right this instant on one issue or another," he said, "but I know who my friends are and where they are—that's where you will find me."[5] Dividing the policy world into clearly delineated tribes obviously obscures some of the nuances of political life and policy calculations, but they are an essential attribute of U.S. pluralism. Although somewhat analytically artificial, these groupings still are useful in helping to understand the sometimes confusing and contradictory array of policy choices and perspectives within each political orientation.

A (White) House Divided

After six years in power, including four years of controlling both the executive and legislative branches, the Republican Party is often perceived as unified, especially concerning national security questions. As with any party with a president in office, the responsibility of governance and the desire to hold office often cloaks internal battles and debates. In recent months, these fissures have become more apparent, and these cliques and the differences between them will become more important as the 2008 presidential race heats up. Among the Republicans, there are arguably four dominant national security cliques: Oldsmobile Conservatives, Reagan Republicans, domestic-oriented America Firsters, and Faith-Based Interventionists.

Obviously, the distinctions between these groups are somewhat arbitrary,

and seasoned practitioners often seek to avoid neat pigeonholing of their complex views. For instance, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has referred to herself as representing a hybrid, if contradictory, ideological strain of thinking as an "idealistic realist." Given the intensity of debate surrounding political positions within and among the various tribes, it is not surprising that astute foreign policy players would seek to appeal to more than one group and in the process blur the sometimes hard distinctions that divide these groupings.

Cliques are often driven as much by personalities as they are by policies and ideas.

Oldsmobile Conservatives are traditional Wall Street Republicans who believe in internationalism and the power of institutions and alliances but are traditional realists hesitant to make values, even democratic ones, a core part of U.S. foreign policy at the expense of more concrete interests such as economic wealth, resources, or strategic advantage. They tend to be skeptical of military intervention for reasons other than defense and are reluctant to shape the internal politics of other states. The catchword for these conservatives is stability.

Perhaps best illustrated by the policies of George H. W. Bush (Bush 41) and his national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, this clique spent the first years of the presidency of George W. Bush (Bush 43) on the defensive. Many of its members were in government but tended to lose the most crucial debates, a circumstance particularly true in the Department of State led by former General Colin Powell. As one of the most respected people in the United States, Powell was expected to wield tremendous influence over foreign policy. He surrounded himself with talented subordinates, such as Richard Armitage and Richard Haass, who shared his views and overall approach to governance. Yet, almost from the beginning of the administration, the Powell team found itself on the outside of Bush's innermost circle and dissenting from the major policy debates, whether it was how to approach the North Korean nuclear program or, most consequentially, how to plan for postinvasion Iraq.

Generally speaking, these traditionalists have fared poorly in the current administration, and they are anxious that their faction may be in decline or falling out of favor among the dominant interest groups within the Republican Party. Yet, some believe that the challenges of the past few years, characterized by the overreach of U.S. power and the instability that followed, offer an opportunity for a comeback. Many traditionalist ideas are championed by party leaders and possible presidential candidates, such as Senator Chuck Hagel (Neb.).[6]

Reagan Republicans, the second Republican clique, believe deeply in U.S. exceptionalism and the power of democracy and American values such as elections, freedom of speech, and market economics. They advocate using hard (military) power to promote these values but remain skeptical about international institutions, such as the United Nations. Often called neoconservatives, they are not afraid of creating short-term instability to make the status quo more congenial to U.S. interests. In terms of their operation, this group is akin to a kind of political Special Forces, small in number but with a vocal and at times lethal capacity to work in coordination to achieve larger strategic objectives.

Several key players of this group were the "Vulcans"[7] that advised Bush during his campaign for president in 2000 and then went on to dominate national security decisionmaking during the president's first term. This cadre has also developed an influential network of allies outside of government that operates in prominent think tanks and on the cable talk show circuit. These allies have worked to hit the airwaves and opinion pages to whip up patriotic fervor in support of their interests or policies. During the early years of the Bush administration, the legion of disciplined talking heads in support of foreign policy initiatives was vast and influential. With the increase in bad news coming from Baghdad and elsewhere, however, many of these supporters have become less vocal and visible. Iraq was in many ways their most important policy objective, but it is unclear how that debacle will ultimately impact their longer-term political fortunes.

The third clique, America Firsters, is very suspicious of U.S. engagements abroad and of international institutions, and it focuses on issues such as immigration and foreign ownership of U.S. assets. These U.S. nationalists also tend to focus on state-based threats, such as China. Members of this clique have a long history in the policy debates about the U.S. role in the world, sometimes being called "Jacksonians," after President Andrew Jackson, a populist school that stresses the preservation of U.S. physical security and economic well-being. They have been in retreat for many years as globalization went from being a buzzword to an accepted reality and remain relatively small within today's Washington's national security community.[8] Public anxieties about the loss of jobs to foreign workers overseas or immigrants at home and the challenges of globalization, however, have given this clique a new political relevance that was evident in recent heated debates over immigration policy on Capitol Hill.

Faith-Based Interventionists believe that the United States has a moral purpose above all else in the world and that, although the United States must fight terrorism, it also must attend to humanitarian crises in places such as Africa and North Korea. This crusading clique views many world events through a religious prism that significantly influences its views on issues such as the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[9] This group's rise

coincides with the emergence of religious conservatives and evangelicals as a powerful movement within the Republican Party and has gained increased attention with Bush's frequent reference to religion as a motivating force for his policies.[10] This clique is represented by numerous activist organizations, such as Samaritan's Purse, led by Franklin Graham, son of evangelist Billy Graham, that provide humanitarian assistance on the ground.[11]

A Fractious Opposition

The Right has seemed relatively unified until recently but is increasingly challenged by the unrelenting global bad news and the growing centripetal forces of the 2008 electoral cycle. Meanwhile, the past six years have brought intense turbulence on the political Left, especially concerning national security policy. In the 1990s, the rise of the antiglobalization movement, discontent with the Clinton administration's embrace of free trade, military interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, and the 1998 air strikes against Iraq brought to the surface the political Left's skepticism of U.S. military power, which still lingered from Vietnam, and suspicion about Clinton's rhetoric about the benefits of the global economy. These convulsions have only become more severe and divisive.

To be sure, anger with Bush and the many failures in Iraq and elsewhere, including a nuclear North Korea and perhaps an imminently nuclear Iran, a slipping Afghanistan, a collapsed global trade round, and a policy toward terrorist detainees that many condemn as torture, have exacerbated these fissures over the past six years. Yet, this discontent is aimed at more than just the current occupant of the White House. When it comes to national security issues, the Left has fractured in a way not seen since the 1970s, when the Vietnam War split the Democratic Party and sparked a reaction against the "best and brightest" establishment, those civilian war planners and elites who many hold responsible for U.S. failures in southeast Asia.

A similar dynamic is at work today, and the debate is just as bitter and divisive. A new generation of liberal activists harnessing the power of the Internet and the blogosphere is raging, not just against Bush but also against the Democratic establishment in Washington, especially when it concerns national security issues. This group sees this new establishment as too cowering and supine, willing to back Bush on too many issues, especially Iraq, and not doing enough to stand in opposition. Democratic Party officials and activists might have a greater appreciation for the importance of national security in winning elections since September 11, 2001, but this has made the debates over such policies more intense.[12] Among the Democrats, the four dominant cliques are the Globalists, Truman Democrats, Come Home Americans, and American Skeptics.

Globalists believe in the power of economic as well as technological globalization and an international progressive agenda to address the root causes of terrorism. They accept the inevitable and tolerable erosion of U.S. sovereignty. This group stresses the need for the United States to prepare for a more multipolar world with diffuse power centers and more economic players. This clique largely dominated U.S. foreign policy during the 1990s under the Clinton administration, culminating in the administration's national security strategy of engagement and enlargement. At the time, the principal threats to U.S. interests were thought to be more economic, such as the rise of Germany or Japan in the early 1990s, than security based.[13]

> There have been remarkably few members defecting from one clique to another.

Although many of these issues receded during the post–September 11 war on terrorism, they have never gone away. Greater attention to an increasingly "flat" world, rising powers such as China and India, the challenges of constructing a durable strategy to confront radical Islam, and vexing problems such as global warming have given it new momentum.[14] This clique supports the revitalization of existing institutions, such as the UN, and the creation of new ones, especially in the economic sphere, to prepare the global community (yes, Globalists use terms such as "global community") better for the inevitable transnational challenges of energy, the environment, and global disease.

Truman Democrats believe both in the example of U.S. power and the power of the United States' moral example while embracing the military as a key institution to help fulfill the nation's destiny. Their view can be summed up by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's assertion that the United States is "the indispensable nation."[15] Although they do not deny the concerns articulated by the Globalist clique and share many of their policy views, such as the importance of free trade and dealing with transnational challenges, the Truman Democrats, called "liberal hawks" by some, prioritize security threats and the hard-power tools required to meet them.[16] They prefer to act within international institutions but believe that these must be strengthened and improved and are not afraid of unilateral action when necessary. This clique also believes that the Democratic Party's reluctance to use force and degree of hostility toward the military has become politically crippling.[17]

This grouping has recently been relatively small within the Democratic Party. Thirty years ago, some in this group were known as Scoop Jackson Democrats, named after the cohort surrounding U.S. senator and presidential candidate Henry "Scoop" Jackson in the 1970s. Representing Washington State, Jackson was one of the leading hawks on confronting the Soviet Union and

greatest skeptics of arms control. He counted in his coterie such young aides as Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, who believed that the Democrats had become too weak on security issues and later rose through the ranks of the Reagan administration. Many of them today are the core of the Reagan Republican clique. This group remains influential in Washington's political establishment, recognizing the necessary contributions of military power in the current geostrategic environment. Yet, this cohort is still hugely controversial among a large swath of the political Left, as illustrated by the failure of a self-proclaimed heir to Scoop Jackson, Senator Joseph Lieberman (Conn.), to win the 2006 Democratic primary to retain his seat in Congress, therefore forcing him to leave the party and run as an independent.

The current political moment offers a unique opportunity.

Come Home Americans believe in a strong defense and the idea that some circumstances, such as the Pearl Harbor or September 11 attacks, require an active role abroad but not at the expense of fulfilling pressing domestic needs. For this group, Hurricane Katrina serves as a cautionary tale of government leaders ignoring the critical problems facing the United States at home. These homeward-looking activists are skeptical of most U.S. military interventions, being more focused on protecting against the unfairness and dangers of global trade and the exposure of middle-class Americans to the winds of the global economy. They believe that the defense budget should be reduced and that the money saved from such military programs should instead go to areas such as health care and the fight against domestic poverty. This clique is influential within the Democratic Party base and includes key interest groups such as key parts of the labor movement. They will play a powerful role in the upcoming political campaign, particularly in the Democratic presidential nomination process, in which labor unions still wield considerable influence.[18]

American Skeptics, the final Democratic clique, argue that the United States is an ordinary country and should act like one, not presuming to believe that its ideals are ones that the rest of the world necessarily shares. Like all countries, the United States is imperfect. These skeptics are suspicious of the motives and actions of U.S. institutions and centers of power, whether in politics, the mainstream media, business, or the military.[19] This tradition has its roots in the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s that rose on college campuses in response to the Vietnam War and the commercial excesses of the baby-boom generation. It warns of U.S. imperialism. With a heavy presence in academia and the alternative media but not a very active presence in Washington's political halls, many in this clique criticize the Globalists and Truman Democrats for being too close to corporate interests or for stressing the importance of spreading democratic values and norms.[20] This clique is also growing in popu-

lar support around the country on university campuses and among antiwar groups opposed to continued military involvement in Iraq.

Using Cliques to Forge Consensus

Many analysts decry the increasing polarization of U.S. politics. On many key issues, the struggle over U.S. national security has unfortunately devolved into a set of binary choices: blue or red, for or against, yes or no, Republican or Democrat. The last few years have been among the most partisan ever in terms of congressional voting patterns and polling trends. The time-honored foreign policy tradition that serious discord over foreign policy matters should end "at the water's edge" is for now a thing of the past. The profound foreign policy challenges that are confronting the United States have only served to harden positions inside the parties, causing infighting among each party's cliques, rather than leading to whole-scale shifts and compromises among like-minded cliques across party lines.

> Greater intra-communal dialogue could build a more durable foreign policy consensus.

During the current turmoil in national security, the various tribes have notably engaged in deep reflection and repositioning within themselves, but remarkably few members have defected from one clique to another. This development suggests at some level that differences transcend ideology and reside more in group identification and bonding, in some ways characteristic of army units that have experienced intense periods of combat and stress. The tragedy of the current debate over U.S. foreign policy and national security is that much of the discourse approximates an intellectual version of battlefield conditions on Capitol Hill, in the classroom, and on talk radio and cable television shows. Too often and on too many issues, there are few incentives and very little political space to achieve common ground.

During the Cold War, foreign policy and national security were two of the few issues of relative political comity between Republicans and Democrats. In the post–September 11 world of Islamic extremism and the "long war," these same issues are among the most divisive. Recent political trends, however, such as the recognition that polarization has brought significant costs and that new consensus solutions are required, as well as the enormous diversity of views within both parties, reveal prospects for cooperation and coalitions on a diverse range of issues: constructing a coherent strategy for dealing with jihadist fundamentalism, grappling with the weighty matters of global climate change, working toward viable solutions on immigration, sustaining support

for a global trade agenda, and cooperating on transnational challenges such as HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases.

For example, one could envision interventionist cliques such as Faith-Based Interventionists from the Right and Globalists from the Left forging an alliance to address issues such as stopping the genocide in Darfur, restructuring U.S. foreign assistance programs, and strengthening the UN. Similarly, Reagan Republicans and Truman Democrats have common ground on the importance of defending U.S. values and spreading democracy and could forge deeper ties. Concerning issues such as the global trade agenda and immigration, greater cooperation is already evident among those cliques most suspicious of globalization and protective of U.S. sovereignty, the America Firsters and the Come Home Americans, and it could easily grow deeper.

Prospects for cooperation and coalitions among cliques now exist on a diverse range of issues.

Whatever the combination, the current political moment offers a unique opportunity. As the debate over the post-2008 national security agenda gets underway, these cliques are operating in a political landscape that is relatively rare in U.S. history. The next presidential election will be the first since 1952 in which neither an incumbent president nor vice president is running, making 2008 a truly open race. During the next three years, members of intellectual groupings of every stripe will try to frame the debate about the U.S. role in the world. Responsible public leaders would do well to encourage dialogue among the cliques, certainly during a period in which important ideas will have significant consequence. Such intracommunal dialogue on a range of issues could perhaps build a more durable foreign policy consensus. This consensus has been profoundly lacking in these tumultuous first years of the twenty-first century, but given the challenges we face, it is desperately needed.

Notes

1. See Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); Robert Jervis, "The Remaking of a Unipolar World," *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 7–19.
2. Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1 (January/February 2000): 45–62.
3. Tom Vanden Brook, "List of Defense Secretary's Critics Gets Longer," *USA Today*, April 15, 2006, p. 6A.
4. For a discussion of competing foreign policy schools and their influence throughout U.S. history, see Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

5. Republican Party member, interview with author, Washington, D.C., November 2004.
6. See Richard Haass, *The Opportunity: America's Moment to Alter History's Course* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); Chuck Hagel, "A Republican Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 4 (July/August 2004): 64–76; Jeffrey Goldberg, "Breaking Ranks: What Turned Brent Scowcroft Against the Bush Administration?" *New Yorker*, October 31, 2005, pp. 54–65; Rich Lowry, "To Hell With Them Hawks," *National Review*, March 27, 2006, http://www.nationalreview.com/lowry/lowry200603200538.asp.
7. See James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (London: Viking Books, 2004).
8. See Mead, *Special Providence*. For a classic statement of this worldview, see Jesse Helms, *When Free Men Shall Stand* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Books, 1977).
9. For an assessment and critique of religion's role in foreign policy, see Madeleine Albright with Bill Woodward, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).
10. See Bryan Hehir et al., *Liberty and Power: A Dialogue on Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy in an Unjust World* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004); Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking Press, 2006).
11. See Peter Waldman, "Evangelicals Give U.S. Foreign Policy an Activist Tinge," *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2004, p. 1.
12. For examples, see Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, *Crashing the Gates: Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics* (White River Jct., Vt.: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2006); David Greenberg, "The Choice," *Boston Globe*, May 21, 2006, http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2006/05/21/the_choice/.
13. Jessica Matthews, "Power Shift," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 1 (January/February 1997): 50–66.
14. For two of the most important books on the subject, see Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000); Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).
15. Madeleine Albright, *Today Show*, NBC, February 19, 1998, http://www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/02/19/98021907_tpo.html.
16. See Kurt Campbell and Michael O'Hanlon, "The Democrat Armed," *National Interest*, no. 80 (Summer 2005): 93–102; Will Marshall, ed., *With All Our Might: A Progressive Strategy for Defeating Jihadism and Defending Liberty* (Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield, 2006); "Progressive Internationalism: A Democratic National Security Strategy," October 2003, http://www.ppionline.org/documents/Progressive_Internationalism_1003.pdf.
17. Peter Beinhart, *The Good Fight: Why Liberals – and Only Liberals – Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).
18. For example, see the priorities and goals of the group True Majority, a coalition of business leaders, activists, and academics, available at http://www.truemajority.org.
19. See Michael Walzer, "Can There Be a Decent Left?" *Dissent* (Spring 2002), http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=598.
20. See Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).