



Beware the Soft-Line Ideologues

By David Frum and Richard Perle

When discussing foreign policy and the war on terror, the press often divides officials into two groups: hard-liners and pragmatists. “Hard-liners” are actually far more pragmatic and realize that the war on terrorism requires vigorous, decisive action; in contrast, the policies promoted by “pragmatists” are grounded in ideological dependence upon failing international organizations and denial of the realities of the post–September 11 world.

Under the leadership of President George W. Bush, two approaches to American foreign and security policy have emerged. One approach is founded on vigorous, decisive action, including a readiness to use military power, against the terrorist enemy. Its exponents are the hard-liners. You know the names: Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Abrams, and so on.

The other approach holds that diplomacy and international organizations like the United Nations are the key to defeating terrorism. Supporting this camp of soft-liners are: the professionals at the State Department championed by Secretary Colin Powell and his deputy, Richard Armitage; some veterans of the first Bush administration like former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft; and some current and former intelligence and military officials.

There is nothing unusual about divisions of this sort among the president’s advisers. And President Bush has made shrewd and discriminating use of the advice he has received. What is unusual is that while the hard-liners have won most policy battles since September 11, the soft-liners have won nearly complete control of the way those

battles are reported. Pick up almost any newspaper account of the war on terror—such as the worshipful profile of State Department adviser retired Gen. Anthony Zinni in the Dec. 22 *Washington Post*—and you’ll learn that the hard-liners are “ideologues,” bent on democratizing the Middle East through war, heedless of the dangers in their way. The soft-liners are “moderates,” “pragmatists,” “realists,” whose hesitations, fears, and resentments are represented as subtle, nuanced foreign-policy wisdom.

Yet the truth is the opposite. It is the soft-liners who are driven by ideology, who ignore or deny inconvenient facts and advocate unworkable solutions. It is the hard-liners who are the realists, the pragmatists.

Soft-Line Success?

The soft-liners place their trust in institutions and tactics that have consistently failed in the past; it is the hard-liners who have learned from experience. In their devotion to the United Nations, their belief in the efficacy of international law, and their nostalgia for the alliances of the Cold War (and Gulf War I), the soft-liners cling to exploded illusions about the way the world should work. They protect themselves from facts with pretenses, insisting for example that negotiated successes—such as the apparent

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willingness of Libya to come to terms with the United States—are achieved by coaxing and cajoling, not toughness and credibility.

Three recent examples prove the point.

Mr. Powell's New Year's call for "dialogue" with Iran.

Suppose you were a landlord with a tenant who repeatedly broke his promises to pay his overdue rent. After being stiffed again and again, you show up at his door with an eviction notice. He swears he will pay in full next Tuesday. Would it be "realistic" to believe him?

Soft-liners tend to think that so long as we are talking with other countries, we are accomplishing something—even if everything they say to us is an obvious lie. In 2003, dissidents smuggled out proof that Iran had systematically deceived the International Atomic Energy Agency about its nuclear program. The Iranians replied with more lies—until those too were exposed by later inspection missions.

Over the last year, the rulers of Iran have confirmed that they are indeed sheltering members of Osama bin Laden's family and the senior leadership of al Qaeda. They continue to sponsor Hezbollah terror. In the summer of 2003, the mullahs unleashed brutal repression against activists calling for democracy.

Since the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, Western diplomats have again and again hailed the imminence of "reform" in Iran—and called for negotiations and Western concessions to hasten those reforms along. Again and again, the Iranian regime has revealed its true character. Mr. Powell's December 30 announcement of a "new attitude" in Iran that opens the way to a dialogue is only the latest episode of this embarrassing story.

Aren't the real "ideologues" the people who refuse to let hard facts and adverse experience alter their thinking or change their behavior?

Tyranny and democracy. Hard-liners are constantly accused of seeking to impose democracy by force out of blind ideological zeal. Against this, the soft-liners congratulate themselves on their prudent emphasis on continuity and stability. But by now it should be clear that there is no form of government less stable than autocracy. On Christmas Day, two suicide car-bombers crashed into the motorcade of General Pervez Musharraf. The blast killed sixteen people. Suppose Pakistan's president had been one of those killed? Where would we be then? The U.S.-Pakistani alliance depends on the actuarial chances of one brave man—how is it prudent to rely on those?

Hard-liners are not bent on imposing democracy on anybody. But it is realistic to notice the connection between Middle Eastern tyranny and Middle Eastern terrorism; and it is realistic too to understand that it is sometimes true that societies that yearn for freedom are denied it by force—as Iraq was by Saddam's force. The United States may not be able to lead countries through the door to democracy, but where that door is locked shut by a totalitarian deadbolt, American power may be the only way to open it up.

The demise of the "road map." In March 2003, the Bush administration presented Israel and the Palestinian Authority with a "road map" to peace. The idea was that Israel and the Palestinian leadership would each take immediate steps to reduce tensions, with an eye to an agreement in principle on a Palestinian state by December 2003 and a final settlement in 2005.

Not one milestone on the road map has yet been traversed. The very first item listed on the text is this: "Palestinian leadership issues unequivocal statement reiterating Israel's right to exist in peace and security and calling for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire to end armed activity and all acts of violence against Israelis anywhere. All official Palestinian institutions end incitement against Israel." Well, that has not happened. Nor have the Arab states cut off funds to anti-Israel terror groups. Nor have there been free elections in areas of Palestinian jurisdiction. Nor have . . . well, you get the idea.

Three successive U.S. administrations have sought to broker a peace. All three have made the same assumption: that the Palestinian leadership had abandoned its hope of destroying Israel and was ready to make peace. The job now was simply to negotiate the terms. It is now clear that this assumption was false. The Palestinian leadership's minimum demands, as articulated most recently in last month's Geneva Accord, include control of the Jewish holy sites in Jerusalem and an undefined but ominous "right of return" for the children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the refugees of 1948. No Israeli government could accept these terms.

Role Reversal and Political Reality

When William James and Charles Peirce coined the term "pragmatism" 150 years ago, they meant something more than mere "practicality." James and Peirce were making a point about the nature of "truth." Truth, they

argued, isn't some transcendent thing that exists beyond human experience. Truth is found right here on earth. If belief in an idea leads to positive results, then the idea is true; if belief in an idea leads to negative results, then it is false.

The belief that Yasser Arafat's Palestinian leadership will ever sign an agreement that permits Israel to live in peace and security has been tested over the years. The test has ended in the catastrophe of Arafat's terror war. Yet America's professional diplomats, especially those we hire to be knowledgeable about the Middle East, continue to cling to this belief despite its proven and total

and repeated failure. If this is "pragmatism," what do the ideologues believe?

U.S. foreign policy will always be debated from different points of view. That is as it should be. But is it too much to ask for a little truth-in-labeling? We'd recommend that the next time a journalist sits down to report a foreign policy story from Washington, he try it this way: "Washington remains divided between two major factions: the pragmatic, neoconservatives and their opposite numbers, the soft-line ideologues." Of course, this story line too is an over-simplification. But at least it is not an outright rejection of reality.