



Unrealistic Realism

By Thomas Donnelly and Vance Serchuk

With his July 4, 2004, *op-ed* in the *Washington Post*, presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Senator John Kerry has attempted to lay claim to the mantle of conservative “realism” in this fall’s foreign policy debate. Certainly, there is a heavy dose of campaign strategy in this—the idea of “attacking Bush from the right” is just the sort of man-bites-dog angle that appeals equally to Beltway political professionals and the journalists who cover them. But the irony is that Kerry’s “realist” policy prescriptions are themselves profoundly unrealistic, taking little account of the post-9/11 world and reflecting a dogmatic, inflexible, even reactionary ideology. They likewise stand opposed to the great liberal tradition of American strategic culture—a history that links the Founders to the presidencies of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush.

Political realism arose in the aftermath of World War II as a revolutionary creed in American foreign policy theory. Led by Hans J. Morgenthau and inspired by the example of nineteenth-century statesmen like Talleyrand, Metternich, and Bismarck, its proponents argued that nations are governed in international affairs by self-interest, manifest predominantly in a Leviathan-like urge to accrue power. Rather than indulge the fantasy of an escape from human conflict—either through isolationism or supranational organizations like the United Nations—realists argued that the United States had no choice but to compete on the global stage, maintaining a balance of power among the strongest states, foremost against the Soviet Union.

While political realism played a vital role in guiding American foreign policy in the mid-twentieth century, the conduct and conclusion of the Cold War exposed its flaws—most importantly, blindness to the strategic importance of ideology. It was Americans’ faith in the universality of liberty, capitalism, and self-determination that both sustained our commitments to like-minded allies around the world and weakened—

Thomas Donnelly (tdonnelly@aei.org) is a resident fellow at AEI. Vance Serchuk (vserchuk@aei.org) is a research assistant at AEI.

and ultimately converted—the enemies to our cause. As Robert Kagan argued several years ago in a seminal essay in *Commentary*: “If there was a degree of hypocrisy and national arrogance in America’s constant equation of the world’s interests with its own, the strength of the claim also derived in large measure from the fact that so much of the world came to agree with it.”¹

Despite the end of the Cold War, realism remains a specter haunting the post-Cold War era—especially in election years. Thus in January 1996, Michael Mandelbaum—adviser to candidate Bill Clinton in 1992—wrote a stinging critique in *Foreign Affairs* of the “international social work” that the then-president had pursued in Haiti, Bosnia, and Somalia. “Whereas previous administrations had been concerned with the powerful and potentially dangerous members of the international community, which constitute its core,” Mandelbaum charged, “the Clinton administration turned its attention to the international periphery.”

Historically the foreign policy of the United States has centered on American interests, defined as developments that could affect the lives of American citizens. Nothing that occurred in these three countries fit that

criterion. Instead, the Clinton interventions were intended to promote American values.²

And what was the consequence of these policies, in Mandelbaum's view? On the one hand, "at the end of 1995 Haitians and Bosnians were better off, or at least less likely to be killed, than had been the case fifteen months earlier," but on the other, "relations with the major centers of power were worse than they had been when the Clinton administration took office."³

This remained the opposition's core complaint during the 2000 campaign. Exactly four years to the issue after Mandelbaum's article appeared, *Foreign Affairs* featured an essay by Condoleezza Rice—leading light among the "Vulcans," hard-headed foreign policy advisers to then-Governor George W. Bush—criticizing the military interventions of the Clinton years as peripheral to America's "national interest" and corrosive to its long-term military preparedness:

[The military] is not a civilian police force. It is not a political referee. And it is most certainly not designed to build a civilian society. Military force is best used to support clear political goals, whether limited, such as expelling Saddam from Kuwait, or comprehensive, such as demanding the unconditional surrender of Japan and Germany during World War II.⁴

Rice also echoed Mandelbaum's argument in pledging that, if elected, a Republican administration would "refocus the United States on the national interest," concentrating less on the stagnant backwaters of the world and more on managing relations among the great powers.

Unsurprisingly, this year's election has ushered in yet another "springtime for realism," as Lawrence Kaplan put it in a recent *New Republic* cover story.⁵ By far the hardest bloom of the season is Senator John Kerry, whose July 4, 2004, *Washington Post* op-ed uses the words "realism" and "realistic" no less than eight times to describe his position on Iraq.⁶ A Kerry adviser has pledged that his candidate would bring "a new realism" to American national security strategy, while another argued that, if elected, a Kerry administration would adopt a foreign policy that would have "a lot of similarities" with that of über-realist Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser in the first Bush administration.⁷

Kerry's embrace of realism no doubt aims to exploit blowback in the traditional foreign policy community

from President Bush's avowed "forward strategy of freedom," which pledges the United States to leverage its hegemony in favor of the forces of political and economic liberalism in the greater Middle East. Witness the creation of a Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy—encompassing a swath of Bush Doctrine dissidents, ranging from Kerry advisers like former senator Gary Hart on the left to libertarians like Christopher Preble at the Cato Institute on the right. The coalition's statement of principles warns of "worrisome imperial trends" in the Bush administration and pledges to turn back "American national security policy toward realistic and sustainable measures for protecting U.S. vital interests."⁸

Kerry's contribution to the realist camp consists of two propositions: first, that the United States should recognize and embrace the "great powers" of Europe, specifically through NATO, as a sine qua non of success in Iraq and the global war on terrorism; and second, sotto voce, that the United States should scale back its hopes to promote democracy in Iraq and the Middle East in favor of the more "realistic" goal of "stability."

Both of these arguments are consistent with past realist critiques, in essence faulting a sitting administration for a foreign policy that is excessively moralizing in tone, focused on peripheral interests, and insufficiently respectful of diplomatic relations with the major centers of power.

The only problem? In the post-9/11 world, such realism is profoundly unrealistic.

Counting on Europe

The idea of bringing NATO into postwar Iraq has been around since at least last fall, when Democratic presidential candidate and former NATO supreme allied commander Wesley Clark first began advocating it. The notion, on its face, is reasonable enough. Hence, the Bush administration's efforts at the NATO summit in Istanbul this June to secure help in developing the Iraqi security forces—a modest but sensible starting point, given the European experience training police in the Balkans.

But Kerry has taken the idea much farther, placing NATO at the very center of his postwar Iraq policy and promoting it as a magic bullet against the considerable and complicated security challenges there. Thus, "Point #1" of Kerry's "Strategy for Success in Iraq" is to "make Iraq part of NATO's global mission."⁹ Stressing that "the President must show true leadership in going to the major

powers to secure their support,” he insists that NATO could free up to 20,000 U.S. troops. Elaborating on this point in the *Washington Post*, he writes:

Our goal should be an alliance commitment to deploy a major portion of the peacekeeping force that will be needed in Iraq for a long time to come. Just as NATO came together to contain the Soviet Union and bring peace to Bosnia and Kosovo, with the right kind of leadership from us NATO can be mobilized to help stabilize Iraq and the region. And if NATO comes, others will too.¹⁰

Kerry’s emphasis on NATO has less to do with what the organization could tangibly offer on the ground in Iraq and more to do with an ideological preoccupation with the “great powers,” wherein the blessing of continental Europe is a shibboleth for the success of any international action. It is a quintessentially unrealistic, realist fixation.

First, it bears noting that fifteen out of twenty-six NATO members have already deployed troops to Iraq. Of these, there has been no indication that a formal stamp of approval from Brussels would wring out anything more. As for the other NATO member states, Germany, France, and Turkey are the only holdouts with large militaries, and none appear likely to send them to Iraq.

In the case of Turkey, Ankara already offered to dispatch troops last fall, but historical tensions with the Kurds prompted the Iraqi Governing Council to come out against the proposal. Given that the Iraqis were able to veto Turkish troops while still under U.S. occupation, it is difficult to imagine how or why—now that they are sovereign—the Iraqis would accede to any Turkish presence. Likewise, it is unclear why bringing Turkish troops in under the NATO flag would do anything to address the original Kurdish objection.

The Germans, meanwhile, under Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, have repeatedly and categorically ruled out sending any of their troops to Iraq, regardless of what NATO, the United Nations, or the Iraqis themselves might say. Speaking in Istanbul, Schroeder said: “The engagement of NATO is reduced to training and only training. We have made clear that we don’t want to see German soldiers in Iraq.”¹¹ But even if the chancellor should suddenly reverse his position, the deployable component of the German military is more or less already tapped out in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and elsewhere. And for all the *sturm und drang* of the

transatlantic debate over Iraq, the question of intentions is ultimately less important than that of capabilities.

France’s military is similarly stretched thin by its deployments to Afghanistan and Africa. And needless to say, President Jacques Chirac has been a less-than-enthusiastic booster of an Iraq mission, going so far as to oppose *any* involvement by NATO there. “I don’t think it is NATO’s purpose to intervene in Iraq,” Chirac declared at the G8 summit at Sea Island, Georgia.¹² Later, in Istanbul, he added, “Any NATO footprint on Iraqi soil would be unwise.”¹³

Amazingly, Senator Kerry has yet to acknowledge that the absence of French and German troops in Iraq has anything to do with France and Germany, preferring to castigate the Bush administration for failing to win them over. While Peter Feaver, a professor at Duke University and veteran of the Clinton National Security Council, has reasonably suggested that Kerry might “find it in his heart to express a modicum of disappointment with, say, the Germans, who for months have vowed not to provide troops even with United Nations endorsement, even if NATO authorizes them to do so,” the senator has held firm.¹⁴ “I think NATO needs to recognize its responsibility [in Iraq]. And I regret that the president hasn’t brought them to the place where they do,” he recently remarked.¹⁵

But Kerry’s NATO proposal for Iraq—and its Pollyannaish assumptions about the capabilities of the alliance—stumbles against an even harsher reality in Afghanistan. Theoretically NATO’s flagship effort to demonstrate its relevance in the post-9/11 world, Afghanistan has proven that the “great powers” of continental Europe are anything but.

While approximately 20,000 U.S. troops are fighting remnants of the Taliban and al Qaeda in the southern and southeastern provinces of the country, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) run by NATO since last August has a mere 6,500 soldiers to its name. (By comparison, there are approximately 40,000 NATO peacekeepers in Kosovo.) In what *The Economist* has termed “a disgraceful failure by NATO,” the alliance has proven unable to extend ISAF much beyond Kabul, despite an explicit mandate to do so.¹⁶

As it is, Lord Robertson, the former secretary-general of NATO, had to go hat-in-hand to drum up a measly half-dozen or so Black Hawks for the Afghan mission. “Lord Robertson had to use everything he had to bludgeon the foreign and defense ministers into committing helicopters,” said Robert Bell, a former White House and senior NATO official.¹⁷ Current secretary-general

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer echoed this experience in recent remarks to the *New York Times*, saying: “I have felt like a beggar sometimes, and if the Secretary-General of NATO feels like a beggar, the system is wrong.”¹⁸

NATO’s difficulty translating rhetorical commitments into military realities came into especially sharp relief last month in Istanbul, when Afghanistan’s president, Hamid Karzai, made an earnest plea for the alliance to send more troops to stop insurgents from disrupting the upcoming democratic election. “I would like you to please hurry,” Karzai asked the assembled heads of state. “Come sooner than September and provide the Afghan men and women with a chance to vote freely without fear, without coercion.”¹⁹

While NATO has agreed to send a few thousand extra military personnel to Afghanistan, they will likely be deployed to Kabul and the stable northern part of the country—in other words, not where they are needed most. As Hamed Elmi, President Karzai’s spokesperson, pointedly observed: “We need NATO to expand to all areas where security is not good, not just to the north.”²⁰ A proposal by the United States to deploy NATO’s Rapid Response Force (NRF) to Afghanistan to support the elections was, in turn, vetoed by France. In blocking the move, Chirac argued that, rather than safeguard democracy in Afghanistan, it would be better to keep NRF in reserve in case it was needed elsewhere. He declined to say if he had anywhere particular in mind.

None of this is to belittle the contributions that the NATO troops in Afghanistan are making—or to deny that their presence is a very good thing. Likewise, it is not to suggest that the United States should not continue to push, as it has under Presidents Clinton and Bush alike, for reform within the alliance and for the Europeans to assume a greater share of military responsibilities. But given NATO’s unfulfilled commitments and halting capabilities in Afghanistan—a place where its members all agree it should be operating—it is intellectually dishonest to suggest, as Senator Kerry does, that a “realistic” strategy for winning Iraq turns on the involvement of the Atlantic Alliance.

A NATO mission may offer the soothing illusion of burden-sharing to an American public worried that the United States should not be “doing everything” in Iraq. It might even make Americans feel less guilty for failures of security and stability—and Europeans more so. But in the end, there is no escaping the fact that America—as the “indispensable nation,” in Madeleine Albright’s memorable phrase—will carry the ultimate burden of

victory or defeat in these struggles (a fact that Senator Kerry tacitly acknowledges when he chides the Bush administration for not doing more in Afghanistan). The “realism” that preaches otherwise has less to do with any pragmatic attempt to understand what our allies can and cannot offer, and more to do with an outdated, but firmly entrenched, ideology that puts the great powers of Europe at the strategic center of global affairs.

Putting Democracy on Hold

The second plank of the new realism consists of skepticism toward President Bush’s forward strategy of freedom—specifically, the attainability and desirability of transforming the Middle East. Speaking to the *Washington Post*, Senator Kerry pledged that he would not emphasize the promotion of human rights and democracy in Egypt and Saudi Arabia as much as the maintenance of America’s traditional interests there. Writing in the *Post* in April, Kerry likewise defined his view of America’s commitment to Iraq narrowly, as helping its people to build “a stable, peaceful, and pluralistic society”—but avoiding the word “democratic.”²¹

Elaborating on this in his July 4 op-ed, Kerry described “the missing ingredient” in Iraq as “political accommodation” among Iraq’s three major ethnic groups. How exactly this accommodation should be achieved, Kerry did not say—other than to suggest that it is in tension with democratization: “Yes, let the Iraqis move forward with their schedule of elections and the writing of a constitution, but all must realize that the results of these elections and the constitution will hold only if the parties know they can protect their basic interests.”²² This is a curious opposition to make, given that the very purpose of constitutions and democratic elections is to protect a citizenry’s basic interests and foster the values of political accommodation and compromise.

Consistent with realist critique, however, Kerry seems less interested in promoting democratic values inside Iraq than in sponsoring international diplomacy with the states around it. Thus he argues for a regional conference with Iraq’s neighbors, who will “pledge . . . to respect Iraq’s borders and not to interfere in its internal affairs” in exchange for a promise by Iraq’s leaders “to provide clear protection for minorities, thus removing a major justification for possible outside intervention.”²³ Never mind that outside intervention by Iraq’s neighbors has nothing to do with protecting minorities and everything to do with thwarting democracy. Or does Kerry

seriously believe that Iran's driving interest in postwar Iraq is an altruistic concern for the safety of its Shia brethren, and Syria's for the Iraqi Sunni?

Kerry's criticisms of democratization reflect a deeper uneasiness on the part of realists about the extent to which the Iraq war—and America's foreign policy—should be guided by liberal principles. Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and a founder member of the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy, writes: "It is impossible for a foreign power—any foreign power—to impose democracy, whether at the barrel of a gun or by other means. . . . This process cannot be accelerated by outside forces practicing militarized social engineering."²⁴

The problem with this argument is that facts on the ground directly contradict it. This fall, there *will* be a democratic election in Afghanistan, and next year, there *will* be a democratic election in Iraq. These events would be unthinkable but for the removal of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein by force, and their success will be proportionate to the security made possible by the multinational forces and foreign assistance provided by the international community, foremost the United States. Likewise, while it is safe to say that the United States cannot "impose" democracy on Iraq and Afghanistan, it did install liberal-minded interim governments that are more likely than not to promote and respect it. The fact is, the United States did not endorse a Baathist strongman or an Afghan warlord.

Preble and his fellow realists are, of course, correct that the U.S. military cannot create civil society in Afghanistan or Iraq. But it can dramatically influence the conditions under which a civil society does or does not emerge. Just as importantly, experience from Latin America to Eastern Europe illustrates myriad nonmilitary means by which foreign powers can nurture the liberalization and democratization of foreign societies—financial aid, training programs, broadcasting, and diplomatic pressure, to name just a few.

Robbed of the argument that democratization is unattainable, some realists go on to argue that it is not desirable, for fear that the cost in blood and treasure may be too high, or, worse, the results will run counter to our national interest—hence the clichés about elections bringing Osama bin Laden to power. The goal then, according to this line of logic, should be to promote "stability" before "democracy."

The problem, of course, is that stability and democracy are inextricably bound together in Iraq. The U.S.

presence there has always dangled on the thread of the belief that America will ultimately help empower the Iraqi people, not consign them to life under yet another dictator. In particular, the support of Ayatollah Sistani and with him, the Shia majority, has been contingent on U.S. guarantees of democratic elections—and sooner rather than later. Should the United States retreat from these assurances, it is likely to alienate the Shia and destroy the very stability that realists prize so dearly. As Jennifer Windsor of Freedom House has pointed out: "Democracy is the only political system that can balance competing attachments and interests in Iraq today, so it is the only hope for stability."²⁵

Realism in Name Only

The failure of Iraq and Afghanistan to transform into islands of democratic peace has helped bring realism back into vogue. But ultimately, it is an ideology that can flourish only in opposition. As Lawrence Kaplan argued in *The New Republic*: "No matter what you think of Iraq, realism can't win the war on terrorism."²⁶

The attacks of September 11, 2001, did not change the world, like we so often hear, as much they changed America's perception of it. Arguably, the struggle against fundamentalist Islam is already a quarter-century old, born of a disintegrating order in the greater Middle East. It was in 1979, after all, that the Islamist revolution toppled the shah in Iran, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, Saddam came openly into power in Iraq, and Saudi extremists temporarily seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca. But it was not until Osama bin Laden struck the American homeland that the political and economic dysfunctions of the greater Middle East moved to the center of American foreign policy. In this, the president's fundamental insight—that the United States will remain under threat as long as the Muslim world remains a place of repression and hopelessness—is crucial.

To the extent that President Bush's post-9/11 foreign policy is leery of political realism, it is because political realism can be implicated in so many of America's pre-9/11 mistakes. With its emphasis on the balance of power, stability, and state actors, it led past administrations to ignore the internal politics of Saudi Arabia so long as its royal family kept the oil flowing; to support Saddam Hussein as a counterweight to Iran; to abandon Afghanistan as a strategic backwater as soon as the Russians withdrew; to downplay the threat of transnational terrorist groups like al Qaeda; and overall,

to cozy up with a rogue's gallery of regimes throughout the region, dismissing as "internal matters" their political and economic failings.

Still, there is much to debate about how the Bush administration has struggled, in the aftermath of 9/11, to implement a forward strategy of freedom to transform the greater Middle East. But this is not the debate that John Kerry and the realists appear to desire. Instead, in their fixation on Europe and their disdain for liberal principles, they offer ideological prescriptions that have little bearing on the reality of the world in which we live. It is for this reason that Senator Kerry's realism provides a singularly unrealistic approach to the serious challenges confronting us in Iraq and the broader war on terrorism.

Notes

1. Robert Kagan, "American Power—A Guide for the Perplexed," *Commentary*, April 1996.
2. Michael Mandelbaum, "Foreign Policy as Social Work," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 1, (January/February 1996) 17.
3. *Ibid.*, 30, 32.
4. Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1, (January/February 2000) 53.
5. See Lawrence F. Kaplan, "Springtime for Realism," *The New Republic*, June 21, 2004.
6. John F. Kerry, "A Realistic Path for Iraq," *Washington Post*, July 4, 2004.
7. See Dan Balz, "Kerry Uses Iraq to Make Case," *Washington Post*, June 6, 2004; and Joshua Micah Marshall, "Kerry Faces the World," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2004.
8. "The Perils of Empire: Statement of Principles by the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy," Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy website. Accessed at <http://www.realisticforeignpolicy.org/content/view/17/33/> on July 5, 2004.
9. "A Strategy for Success in Iraq," John Kerry for President website. Accessed at <http://www.johnkerry.com/issues/iraq/> on July 5, 2004.
10. Kerry, "A Realistic Path."
11. Eric Schmitt and Susan Sachs, "NATO Agrees to Help Train Iraqi Forces," *New York Times*, June 29, 2004.
12. Danica Kirka, "Gunmen Attack Police Station in Najaf; Kurdish Leaders Protest U.N. Resolution," Associated Press, June 10, 2004.
13. Eric Schmitt and Susan Sachs, "NATO Agrees to Help Train Iraqi Forces," *New York Times*, June 29, 2004.
14. Peter D. Feaver, "Go Negative on the Allies," *New York Times*, June 15, 2004.
15. David M. Halbfinger, "After Iraq Transfer, Kerry Again Prods Bush to Win Help From Abroad," *New York Times*, June 29, 2004.
16. "NATO Fails a Test," *The Economist*, June 19, 2004.
17. Elaine Sciolino, "Drifting NATO Finds New Purpose With Afghanistan and Iraq," *New York Times*, February 23, 2004.
18. Elaine Sciolino, "NATO Chief Offers Bleak Analysis," *International Herald Tribune*, July 3, 2004.
19. Carlotta Gall, "Karzai Asks NATO for Speedier Deployment," *New York Times*, June 30, 2004.
20. "Afghanistan's Karzai Urges NATO to Send Troops Now," *China Daily*, June 30, 2004.
21. John F. Kerry, "A Strategy for Iraq," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2004.
22. Kerry, "A Realistic Path."
23. *Ibid.*
24. Christopher Preble, "The Unrealism of American Empire," Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy website. Accessed at <http://www.realisticforeignpolicy.org/content/view/41/2/> on July 5, 2004.
25. Kaplan, "Springtime for Realism."
26. *Ibid.*