

Bush's Middle East Wars In Keeping With Historic U.S. Patterns, Historian Says

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President Bush's "preventive war" strategy in the Middle East not only "comported with what most Americans believed to be desirable at the time" but followed a bipartisan American tradition in such actions, historian Melvyn Leffler writes in the current "Foreign Affairs" magazine.

Much of what President Bush did "was consistent with long-term trends in U.S foreign policy, and much has been continued by President Barack Obama," Leffler writes in an article titled "9/11 in Retrospect." Leffler is a professor of history at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

He writes those who would heap scorn solely on Bush for his attack on Iraq may have, for example, conveniently overlooked the position of then Senator Joseph Biden who said in 2002, "One way or another, Saddam (Hussein) has got to go, and it is likely to be required to have U.S. force to have him go, and the question is how to do it in my view, not if to do it."

9/11, Leffler writes, did not transform "the long-term trajectory of U.S. grand strategy." He notes the U.S. has long engaged in its "quest for primacy, its desire to lead the world...its concern with military supremacy, (and) its readiness to act unilaterally when deemed necessary..."

"Preemptive and preventive actions were not invented by Bush," Leffler writes, recalling that, a century earlier, President Theodore Roosevelt's "corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine "was a policy of preventive intervention in the Americas, as were the subsequent U.S. military occupations of countries such as Haiti and the Dominican Republic."

President Franklin Roosevelt prior to U.S. entry in World War II, issued a "shoot first" order against Nazi submarines; President John Kennedy imposed a quarantine around Cuba during the missile crisis, and President Bill Clinton in the mid-1990s signed a national security directive declaring that "the United States shall pursue vigorously efforts to deter and preempt, apprehend and prosecute...individuals who perpetrate or plan to perpetrate such attacks."

(This ukase opened the door for CIA renditions of suspect plotters, many of whom were

illegally kidnapped and are still imprisoned, having never seen judge and jury, much less a defense attorney. It also prefigured Mr. Obama's shoot-to-kill orders against suspects, such as al-Awlaki, an American citizen killed Sept. 30th in a drone attack in Lebanon.)

Historian Leffler reminds his readers that "It was during the Clinton years, not the Bush years, that the United States started spending more money on defense than virtually all other nations combined."

Bush's advisers, Leffler writes, "had trouble weaving the elements of their policy into a coherent strategy that could address the challenges they considered most urgent. It seems clear now that many of their foreign policy initiatives, along with their tax cuts and unwillingness to call for domestic sacrifices, undercut the very goals they were designed to achieve."

"Thus, U.S. primacy was ultimately damaged by the failure to execute the occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq effectively and by the anti-Americanism that these flawed enterprises helped magnify," Leffler believes.

"U.S. officials might declare the universal appeal of freedom and proclaim that history has demonstrated the viability of only one form of political economy, but opinion polls throughout the Muslim world have shown that the United States' actions in Iraq and support of Israel were a toxic combination."

As for America's "Global War on Terror," Leffler points to a 2008 report on counterterrorism from the nonpartisan Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments that concluded that war had gone badly since 2002. Any U.S. "gains" in the killing of al Qaeda leaders were "offset by the metastasis of the al Qaeda organization into a global movement" and more, CSBA reported.

Ten years after 9/11, Leffler finds, Americans "can identify the wanton brutality of others yet acknowledge that they themselves are the source of rage in many parts of the Arab world" and that their "exercise of power can grievously injure those whom they wish to help and can undercut the very goals they seek to achieve." #

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