

[a dime's difference]

# The Next Emperor

Kerry sketches an imperial foreign policy scarcely different from Bush's.

By Christopher Layne

AS THE YEAR BEGAN, the *Economist* editorialized that the 2004 presidential campaign would provoke a wide-ranging debate not only about the direction of American foreign policy, but also about the fundamental assumptions upon which that policy is based. The Democrats disagree with the Bush administration on foreign-policy specifics, and in an election year they will play up these differences in order to distinguish their product from the administration's. But at the end of the day, there is not going to be any re-examination of basic foreign-policy predicates during this campaign because Democrats and Republicans share a common vision of America's world role.

This is not to say that there will not be fireworks. After all, when it comes to the Bush administration's foreign policy there certainly is much to criticize—especially with respect to Iraq. We now know—and should have known a year ago—that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction and posed neither an imminent nor a “grave and gathering” threat to the United States. We now know—contrary to repeated intimations by senior administration officials, including President

Bush and Vice President Cheney—that there was no alliance between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein and that Baghdad had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks. We now know that, at the least, there was a colossal failure by the U.S. intelligence community during the run-up to the Iraq War. And we now have reason to believe that the administration deliberately misled the American public about the nature of the Iraqi threat to provide a pretext for a policy decision—bringing about a regime change in Baghdad—that was made well before 9/11. We now know that the administration plunged into war without giving any real consideration to how it would win the peace in a postwar Iraq. And we now know that the administration's sledgehammer diplomacy opened a serious rift in U.S. relations with key allies, especially in Europe.

What we do not yet know is whether the administration will succeed in its goal of democratizing Iraq and the Middle East. But we do know that the odds don't look good—certainly not in Iraq, which is supposed to be the catalyst for a region-wide “democratic transformation.” Armed resistance to the U.S.

occupation continues. Sectarian and ethnic strife boils. Each passing day brings news of more obstacles frustrating Washington's attempts to hand over power to a “sovereign” Iraqi government. A fragmented Iraq, wracked by civil war, is still a lot more likely than a democratic Iraq.

It seems, therefore, that there is ample ammunition for the Democrats to challenge Bush's foreign-policy stewardship. But questions immediately arise: What is the basis of Democratic critiques of the administration's foreign policy? How valid are they? And if Bush is defeated in November, how much would a Democratic administration's foreign policy differ from the current administration's, and in what ways?

Of the serious Democratic contenders, only John Kerry made foreign policy a major focus his campaign. But his critique of the Bush administration's Iraq policy is distinctly cautious. Kerry's beef is not with the administration's decision to go to war, per se, but rather with its conduct in the run-up to the war and with the postwar occupation. In a word, the Democratic critique is “multilateralism.” That is, by plunging into

war without securing broad international backing and support, the administration condemned the U.S. to paying—in blood and dollars—the full cost of the war and to bearing, almost single-handedly, the burden of rebuilding postwar Iraq.

Nevertheless, at same time, most Democrats accept the argument that something—though they are a bit fuzzy about just what—had to be done about Saddam Hussein. For example, Kerry, who voted in favor of the Congressional resolution authorizing the administration to use force against Iraq, admitted in a December 2003 address to the Council on Foreign Relations that it was necessary “to hold Saddam Hussein accountable.”

The crux of the Democrats’ position is “we could have done it smarter and better.” That is, “multilaterally.” The United States, they say, should not have gone to war without United Nations’ approval and the backing of our NATO allies. Thus, as Kerry said, while the U.S. needed to “take the lead” in the effort to deal with Saddam Hussein, the Bush

administration more apparent that postwar Iraq is a quagmire—perhaps not a Vietnam-like military quagmire, but certainly a political one. Kerry has warned that it is imperative that Iraq “does not become a permanent quagmire.” So how would a Democratic administration deal with postwar Iraq and extricate itself from the mess-in-potamia? Not, if Kerry is president, by “cutting and running.” U.S. troops, Kerry says, must stay in Iraq to provide security so that Iraq can be rebuilt and sovereignty transferred to a democratic government. Not much difference with the administration there.

At the same time, Kerry proposes that a Democratic administration could do a smarter and better job of reconstructing Iraq by acting multilaterally. As Kerry puts it, “Nowhere is the need for the United States to reengage the world community and renew alliances more critical than Iraq.” He argues that the best chance for a successful outcome in postwar Iraq is to put the UN in charge of Iraq’s “reconstruction and governance-building processes.” This is a dog

So how does the Democratic multilateralist critique of the administration’s policy stand up?

With respect to the run-up to the war, it has considerable merit. The administration should have tried harder to rally international support before going to war, it ought to have thought through the consequences of acting without that support, and it should have realized that its failure was a red flag that its policy—and the assumptions on which it was based—was seriously flawed. With respect to postwar Iraq, the Democrats’ critique is insubstantial political grandstanding.

Looking beyond the immediate issue of Iraq, what does the Democrats’ preference for multilateralism portend if they win in November? This is hard to say because multilateralism is, at best, an uncertain guide. Multilateralism’s unspoken assumption is that the rest of the world believes that their interests are identical to America’s. If this harmony of interests really existed, conducting a U.S. foreign policy based on multilateralism would be a no-brainer. After all, there are benefits to be gained from cooperating with other states, and, when it’s possible to do so, it makes enormous sense for the U.S. to enlist partners who will share some of America’s burdens. But multilateralism often runs up against a brick wall because the harmony of interests that it presupposes just is not the way things usually are in the real world. Iraq is a great example of this.

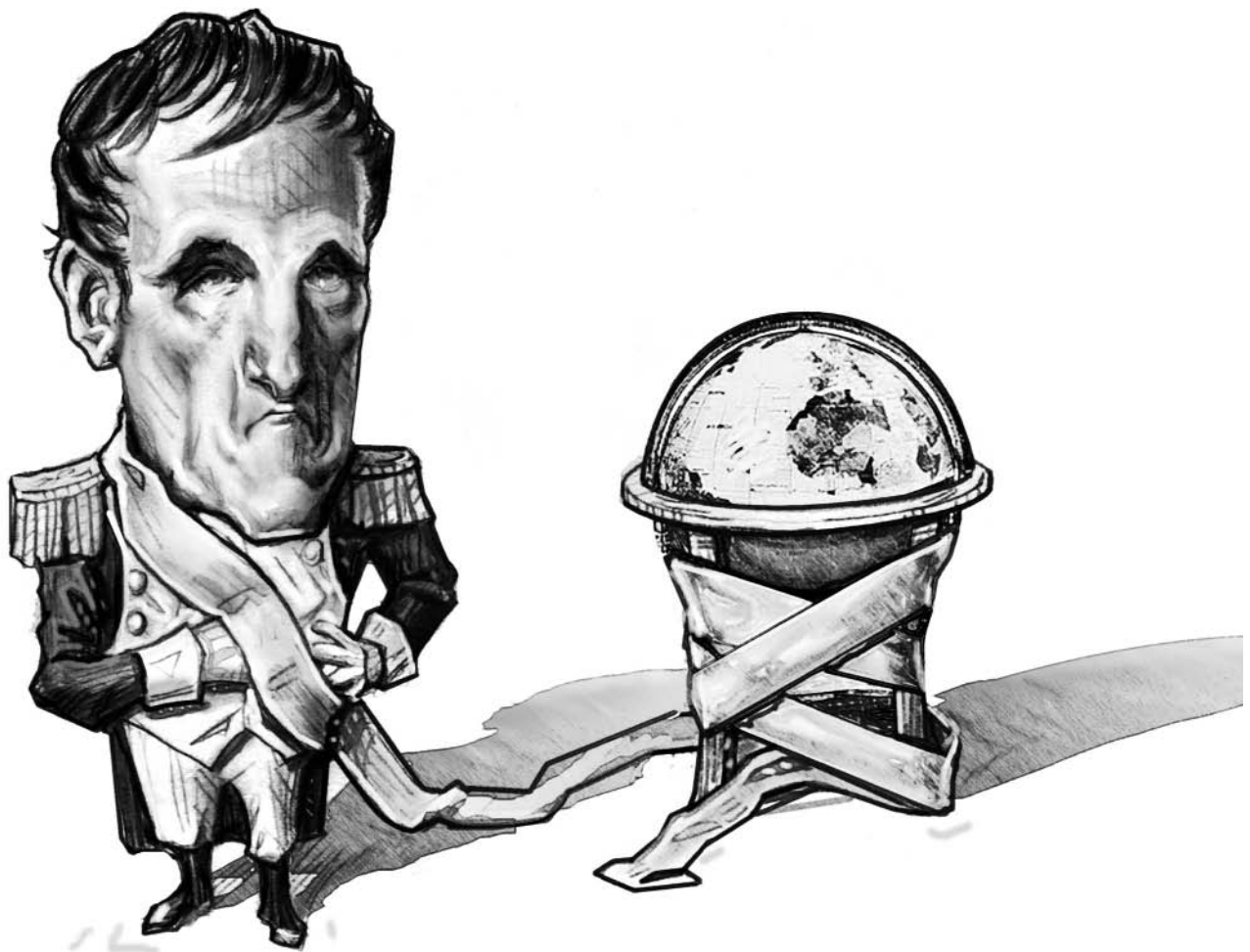
International politics today vary little from the time of Thucydides. Ours is still a world of states in which the foreign policies of all the major powers are determined by national interests. It is still a competitive world. And, in a competitive world, each state must take care of herself. In this sense, unilateralism—going it alone to defend one’s interests—is always the default option for great powers.

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administration “did it in the worst possible way: without the United Nations, without our allies, without a legitimate plan to win the peace.” The administration’s decision to act against Iraq unilaterally, Kerry alleges, “compromised American credibility and leadership.”

Now, of course, the U.S.—for better or worse—is stuck in Iraq and is footing the bill for rebuilding it. Outside of the White House and Pentagon and the coterie of neoconservative cheerleaders who egg them on, it is becoming ever

that won’t hunt, and if the Democrats win in November, they are going to have to do better once they are in office. No one is going to step up and bail out the U.S. in Iraq. And, truth be told, Washington is not going to agree to any meaningful sharing of decision-making power or influence over postwar Iraq because that would undercut one of the key strategic imperatives driving U.S. policy: using Iraq as a permanent American military base to establish uncontested control over the Persian Gulf.



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The reason the Bush administration went to war without the multilateral stamp of approval is simple. Washington perceived—incorrectly in my judgment—that U.S. interests required the use of force to effectuate a regime change in Baghdad. Other states—notably France, Germany, and Russia—saw the world differently. They believed that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was effectively contained and could only become a threat, if ever, many years down the road. They believed that their interests would be undercut by the U.S. invasion because they presciently feared chaos in postwar Iraq and greater instability in the Middle East. The same dynamics explain why other states have not exactly rushed to bail the U.S. out of its postwar problems in Iraq. And we should not hold our breaths expecting them to do so, because their view of things is pretty much “you break it, you buy it.” The United States broke Iraq by going to war unilaterally, and now we own the geopolitical equivalent of Marvin Gardens.

Beyond Iraq, the Democrats have a more fundamental indictment of the administration's foreign policy. They believe that Washington's unilateralist approach to foreign policy has driven a wedge between the U.S. and the rest of the world, alienated our allies, and triggered a tidal wave of opposition to the United States. For frontrunner Kerry, Iraq is just another example of the administration's go-it-alone approach that ruffles other nations' feathers. The administration, he says, “consistently runs roughshod over the interests of those nations on a broad range of issues—from climate change, to the International Court of Justice, to the role of the United Nations, to trade, and, of course, to the rebuilding of Iraq itself.” Again, the solution is for the U.S. to act multilaterally. As Kerry sees it, the administration has “abandoned the fundamental tenets that have guided our foreign policy for more than half a century: belief in collective security and alliances, respect for international insti-

tutions and international law, multilateral engagement, and the use of force not as a first option but truly as a last resort.”

Here the Democrats are on to something. As some Clinton administration foreign-policy officials recognized—though without acknowledging their own contributions—in the post-Soviet era, America has a “hegemony problem.” This goes a lot deeper than Bush's diplomatic arrogance. The administration's style exacerbates this, but the problem itself is fundamentally structural.

Simply put, when a single state becomes too powerful in international politics—that is, becomes hegemonic—everyone else feels threatened. And what invariably happens is that in self-defense other states band together to oppose the hegemon. American leaders and foreign policy scholars of all political stripes have concocted a number of fancy theories to explain why the U.S. is an exception to this rule. But it isn't.

Multilateralism is not a panacea, and ultimately America's hegemony problem is not going to go away. But there are bad policies, and worse policies—and, worst of all, the administration's policy. No U.S. administration should ever become so fixated on multilateralism that it allows other states and international institutions to handcuff America's foreign-policy options. But by the same token, it is extraordinarily unwise for Washington to go out of its way to antagonize other states—most especially those that at the end of the day used to back the U.S. reliably, even if reluctantly. Trying hard to co-operate with others makes a lot of sense. Indeed, while military power is—and always will be—the *ultima ratio* in international politics, it is usually a lot more effective as a supplement to diplomacy than when actually employed on the battlefield. It is in America's own interest to exercise its power with restraint and to flex its military muscles as a last resort rather than as the first one.

A Democratic administration would not be all that much different from the Bush I and Clinton administrations. Those two administrations embraced the same formulation: the U.S. will work with others multilaterally when possible, but act unilaterally to defend American interests when it is not. And the fact of the matter is that when America is clearly threatened, it usually gets a lot of support from other states. It is not a coincidence that while the U.S. has been a lone ranger in Iraq, it has received substantial active support from both old allies and new partners in the War on Terror.

In some ways, a Democratic administration would be a foreign-policy improvement over a second Bush II administration. But this is not to suggest that there are not things to worry about. The biggest is that there is a lot less daylight between the Democrats and

Republicans on foreign policy than one would think from listening to campaign speeches. The Democrats have criticized the Bush II administration for fighting a “war of choice” against Iraq. But the Clinton administration did the same thing in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

Democrats and Republicans alike are part of a broad bipartisan foreign-policy establishment, and they share the same Wilsonian worldview. They believe that dictators cause trouble and democracy causes peace. It was, after all, Madeleine Albright who coined the phrase “tyrants and terrorists” of which Bush II administration officials are so enamored. When Democrats profess to be shocked by the administration's Wilsonian zeal in going to war to spearhead a “democratic transformation” in the Middle East, they can only mean they are shocked in the same way Captain Renault was shocked

what Bush and other administration officials have said on countless occasions. Similarly, when Kerry says that American policy must prevent “global instability” (not least because it will—or so it is claimed—damage U.S. economic interests), he also is echoing Bush—and every administration since 1940. The Democrats are just as committed to American dominance—albeit with a more human face—as the Republicans. They just think they can be smarter and better hegemonists than the Bush administration.

With respect to foreign policy, the bottom line seems to be this. In some very important respects, a Democratic administration would be an improvement over the Bush II administration—if only marginally. But there is no reason to think a Democratic administration would alter the basic foreign-policy course the U.S. has charted for the last

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to learn there was gambling in Rick's Café. (Real conservatives—not the “neo” kind—on the other hand, have every right truly to be shocked. By voting for George W. Bush in 2000 it turns out they were electing Woodrow Wilson to a third term.)

The reason Kerry and other Democrats have confined their critique of the administration's Iraq policy to process rather than substance is that they share the same fundamental assumptions about America's world role as their Republican counterparts. After all, when Kerry says that the “use of American power has always been guided by values and principles,” he is only saying

60 years. Certainly there are important questions to be asked. Does America's global engagement enhance the nation's security or actually make it less secure? Should the United States be a nation or an empire? Can the U.S. really be a benevolent and successful hegemon? Does a foreign policy based on Wilsonian ideology really advance U.S. interests or does it undercut them? These are just a few important issues on which a real debate is long overdue. ■

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# Another Ayatollah

Sistani's Shia refuse to play their assigned role.

By Eric S. Margolis

IN A REMARKABLE EXAMPLE of historical irony, a scowling, black-turbaned Shia ayatollah has emerged from obscurity for the second time in a quarter century to vex and confound America's plans for the Mideast.

Twenty-four years ago, the U.S. encouraged Iraq's ruler, Saddam Hussein, to invade Iran and overthrow the new revolutionary Islamic government of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The U.S. and Britain secretly aided Iraq with arms, finance, chemical and biological weapons, intelligence, military advisors, and diplomatic support in its bloody war against Iran that lasted eight years and caused one million casualties. But when Saddam Hussein grew too big for his boots, his former U.S. and British patrons brought him down. Now, over two decades later, another powerful Muslim cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali el-Sistani, is challenging America's Mideast Raj, and Washington has reacted to this perfectly predictable event with deep consternation and confusion.

The Bush administration was assured by the neoconservatives who engineered the Iraq War that a co-operative, turban-free regime of pro-U.S. Iraqis would quickly be installed in Baghdad, led by convicted swindler Ahmad Chalabi. However, if Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress cronies failed, so much the better, went neocon thinking. Their primary objective was to destroy Iraq, not to rebuild it; for Iraq, once the Arab world's best educated, most industrialized

nation, had to be expunged as a potential military and strategic challenge to Israel. So now the U.S. has its own West Bank in Iraq.

In the 1920s, Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky called for Israel to rule "from the Nile to the Euphrates," as the famous slogan went, by smashing the fragile mosaic of its Arab neighbors into ethnic fragments, then seizing the oil riches of Arabia. So Israel's far Right and its American neocon fellow travelers are perfectly happy to see Iraq divided *de facto* into its three component ethnic parts: Shia, Sunni Arab, and Kurd. Better a feeble Iraq broken into weak cantons, like post-1975 Lebanon, than a nation united, even under a U.S.-run regime.

But while Likudniks rejoice at the destruction of their ancient enemy, the United States faces the conundrum of how to forge a seemingly democratic government in Iraq in the face of the nation's impossible ethnic-religious calculus. Installing a brutal general to run Iraq would be far more convenient. But having found no weapons of mass destruction, the embarrassed Bush administration is now touting creation of democracy as its *casus belli* and so must go through the motions of democratization.

Enter Grand Ayatollah Sistani. After his rival, Ayatollah Hakim al-Bakr, was blown to bits by a huge bomb, Sistani emerged as the leading voice of Iraq's Shia. He has so far played a cautious game, urging elections but rejecting

calls by his followers for a more overtly anti-American line or armed resistance. Any fair election will give power to Iraq's Shia, who are 60 percent of the population. If this does not happen, there will be a possible recourse to arms.

Washington has now inherited the identical problem faced by imperial Britain when, in order to control the region's recently discovered oil, it stitched together three disparate Ottoman vilyats to create the Frankenstein state of Iraq.

Britain, following its usual colonial practice of putting compliant ethnic or religious minorities in power, filled the army, police, and government with Sunni Arabs, who made up only 20 percent of the population. Sunnis ruled Iraq from the 1920s until the U.S. overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Shia were repressed, often savagely, and economically deprived. Iraq's ever-rebellious Kurds were kept under control by frequent punitive expeditions and regular bombing of insurgents by the RAF from its main base at Habbaniyah. Iraq's post-1958 regimes followed this practice. Today, U.S. occupation forces in Iraq are also conducting air pacification, this time against rebellious Sunni Arabs.

Interestingly, Britain's arch-imperialist, Winston Churchill, authorized the RAF to drop poison gas on "primitive tribesmen," meaning Iraq's Kurds and Afghanistan's Pashtun, a fact conveniently forgotten by Tony Blair and