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Accountable to the People

The Imperial Presidency and Unilateralist U.S. Foreign Policy

By Polly Diven

Both the office of the president and the current president exercised excessive foreign policy powers long before September 11th -- in essence we already had an imperial presidency. Although the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon may have allowed the current president to exercise unusual foreign policy power, the movement began at least two decades before September 11th, 2001. What is important about 9/11 is the opportunity it represented for the current president to do two things.

President Bush in Grand Rapids, Michigan

First, September 11th provided the president with a lot of nationalist, American support to pursue a more imperialist foreign policy. Second, the international swell of approval and goodwill toward the U.S. provided the administration with the opportunity to alter the course of the presidency that was already headed down the unilateralist path. We had the opportunity after September 11th to take advantage of a lot of goodwill and support, but this administration decided not to take that course.

We live in a system of checks and balances and there should be the ability for the public the check the exercise of presidential power when it becomes too extreme. What we have seen in the United States is that with respect to foreign policy, at least, the people and the Congress have been unwilling to check the power of the imperial presidency. This predates both the Iraq war and the Bush Administration. We are seeing a long-term phenomenon in the United States whereby the American public has become increasingly disinterested in foreign policy. In an interview he gave prior to September 11th, 2001, a top executive at MSNBC was quoted as saying, "the American people are blanketed in a national fog of materialism and disinterest and avoidance." Perhaps we have slightly more interest and awareness after September 11th, but it is very superficial and very easily led by the Bush Administration. "The price of democracy is vigilance," Thomas Jefferson once said. The large majority of Americans today are unwilling to pay that price.

The majority of the members of Congress, realizing voters are not sensitive to foreign policy issues, have let presidential popularity and presidential persuasion determine their foreign policy perspectives and votes. In case after case, from Bosnia to Iraq, Congress has quite often ceded its foreign policy power to the president. I was struck by the parallel between the 1964 decision of Congress to give power to Lyndon Johnson to wage war in Vietnam and the almost unanimous vote in support of giving President Bush power to wage war in Iraq in October 2002. The president has exercised more imperialistic foreign policy powers in recent years, though policies have been made with the consent of Congress and the American people.

During his first two years in office, the Bush Administration walked away from a number of international treaties to control world traffic in small arms -- the treaty to eliminate land mines and the Biological Weapons Convention. These are all things that happened before September 11th. After September 11th you have the addition of breaking the Anti-Ballistic Missiles Treaty, the rejection of the International Criminal Court, and so forth. In his foreign policy, George Bush has clearly been a president who is willing to set the United States above -- to act more unilaterally and to reject multilateral agreements.

In domestic policy, as well, the president had made it clear he was going to protect American industry while calling our trade partners protectionists. In 2001, President Bush initiated legislation which protected U.S. steel production by adding a 30% tariff on all steel imports. In the same year, the president introduced a farm bill that provided the largest farm subsidies in recent history. European, Asian, and developing country producers of steel and agriculture products viewed these acts as aggressive and unilateralist foreign policy.

Then came September 11th and a tremendous outpouring of support for the United States ensued. From around the world there were expressions of sympathy and offers to help in what George Bush called the War on Terrorism. This was an opportunity to work with allies. But rather than use this opportunity to work together, the Bush administration has really squandered a lot of international support and instead lead many citizens of the world to a more firm position of anti-Americanism. The American public -- which was rightly outraged by terrorism, not particularly well-informed about foreign affairs, and prone to these surges of nationalism -- embraced the administration's War on Terrorism and did not really question the administration's doctrine of preemptive strikes. Later, the beginning a war with Iraq did not really have serious questions attached to it either.

The rest of the world, however, has been more alarmed by the hegemonic power which is increasingly arrogant in the United States. President Bush's disrespect for the UN and the war in Iraq have taken anti-Americanism in Europe to new heights. A number of countries from all around the world overwhelmingly show a decline in support for the United States among the general public. The rhetoric of the War on Terrorism and a controversial war in Iraq have widened the rift between the U.S. and the rest of the globe, further inflamed the Muslim world and weakened the conditions that we needed to fight any War on Terrorism. The administration is making the U.S. and the world more dangerous and it is a recipe for more terrorism, not less.

Many Americans are wondering what happened to that wave of sympathy and the stockpile of goodwill that we encountered after September 11th, and the United States has actually lost the sympathy and become more universally reviled in the world perhaps than at any other time in this recent history. Robert Keegan, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, says in an article in *Policy Review*,

> *The divide between the United States and Europe is getting wider than ever as the continents go their separate ways. One operating on a foreign policy based on unilateralism and coercion, that's us, and the other on diplomacy and persuasion. Europeans have come to view the United States simply as a rogue colossus, in many respects a bigger threat to their specific ideals than Iraq or Iran.*

Similarly Clyde Prestowitz, a former Reagan official wrote in his book *Rogue Nations*, wrote that seen from abroad, the U.S. is "selfish, erratic, hypocritical, muscle-bound, and a bad citizen of the world." Neoliberalists argue that the hegemony by definition is in a precarious position. In this case their simple-system structure can explain anti-Americanism. After all, the U.S. had held its superpower status for many years. The rise of anti-Americanism is really dramatic.

A host of foreign policy analysts, including Henry Kissinger and Stanley Hoffman, have agreed first that the current administration needs to realize how important allies are in the post-Cold War, interdependent world. The consensus is that for all its might, the U.S. cannot go it alone. Globalization of the world's economy means that our futures are linked and that we literally cannot afford to offend the rest of the world. Secondly, as September 11th clearly demonstrated, even with overwhelming military superiority we are vulnerable. In a war against terrorism allies may be just as important as firepower.

Ultimately, it is the role of Congress and the electorate to weigh in on the imperial presidency and its unilateralist foreign policy. After all, as the president said in another of his less articulate moments, "I'm mindful not only of preserving executive powers for myself but for my predecessors as well." Can we really expect a standing president to shrug off power ceded to him by Congress and the people? No, I doubt it. President Bush probably does not care very much about his polls in Europe or in Asia, but he is sensitive to polls at home. Only when the American people become better informed and more vigilant to U.S. foreign policy will presidents have to be more mindful of its imperialist image.

This essay was adapted from a lecture Polly Diven delivered at a conference put on by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies.