How Bush's Bad Ideas May Lead to Good Ones

By ALAN WOLFE

If, like me, you are in the business of ideas, the presidency of George W. Bush is a dream come true. That is not because the president is fond of the product I produce; on the contrary, he may be the most anti-intellectual president of modern times, a determined opponent of science, a man who values loyalty above debate among his associates. But governance is impossible without ideas, and by basing his foreign and domestic policies on so many bad ones, President Bush may have cleared the ground for the emergence of a few good ones.

Two recent books by writers long identified with conservative points of view — one dealing with foreign policy, the other with domestic concerns — suggest just how bad the ideas associated with the Bush administration have been.

It would be wrong to blame the war in Iraq, and its dreadful results, on the military; if anything, professional soldiers raised serious questions about whether the United States could achieve its objectives in Iraq. The fault lies with thinkers rather than doers. A determined group of neoconservative intellectuals developed the theory (preventive warfare), the objective (toppling Saddam Hussein), the strategy (a unilateralist coalition of the willing), the tactics (massive firepower and limited numbers of troops), and the rationale (Saddam's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction).

Now one of those neoconservative intellectuals, Francis Fukuyama, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University, has had second thoughts. America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy (Yale University Press, 2006), his mea culpa, reminds us of the degree to which this war was hatched in academe and its affiliated think tanks. Fukuyama, however, discredits the once-popular notion that the philosopher Leo Strauss was the man behind America's war effort. But he leaves no doubt that other intellectuals were.

He writes that one of them, the mentor to so many of today's neoconservatives, was Albert Wohlstetter, a mathematician who became a RAND Corporation international-relations theorist in the 1950s and 60s. Wohlstetter made his mark by arguing for a more aggressive nuclear strategy against the Soviet Union than "mutually assured destruction." MAD, which presumed that our nuclear capability would prevent the Soviets from launching a nuclear war against us, just as theirs would have the same impact in reverse, could only work if the two sides were rational. But the Soviet Union was too expansionist, as well as too evil, to be treated as a rational actor, in Wohlstetter's view. He also argued that increased technological capability would enable the United States to rely on precision bombing as a weapon of war, thereby enabling it to use force without the risk of losing large numbers of ground troops in intensive, land-based combat. Late in life, Wohlstetter became interested in the Middle East and the Arab world. "He and his students," Fukuyama writes, "played a critical role in translating a broad, general set of neoconservative ideas into specific foreign-policy preferences."
Three of Wohlstetter's students were instrumental in applying his principles to the situation in Iraq: Richard Perle and Paul D. Wolfowitz, at the Department of Defense, and Zalmay Khalilzad, first an envoy to Afghanistan and now ambassador to Iraq. All three, along with William Kristol, Robert Kagan, and, for that matter, Fukuyama himself, signed a 1998 letter to President Bill Clinton, which viewed Iraq the same way foreign-policy hardliners had once viewed Communism; like America's previous enemy, they argued, Saddam Hussein was too irrational to be deterred by normal diplomatic means, and the only effective alternative was to remove him from power. In the wake of September 11, 2001, President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney quickly bought into those neo-Wohlstetterian ideas. So did Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who believed that the United States could win in Iraq without deploying vast numbers of troops.

The failure of the United States to achieve its objectives in Iraq is thus a failure of the ideas that led to the war, Fukuyama argues. We have learned, at great cost to ourselves, that multilateral efforts work better than unilateral ones to ensure global stability, that launching preventive wars depends upon good intelligence and the willingness to be guided by it, and that building democracy abroad, however valuable in itself, does not necessarily protect us against terrorism.

As Fukuyama's book makes clear, the "Bush doctrine" of preventive war lies in shatters. No future administration is likely to invade a country without committing requisite numbers of troops to finish the job. Most important, hawkishness itself lies in considerable disrepute; to fight terrorism effectively, the United States needs the very approaches the neoconservatives rejected: public diplomacy, multilateralism, the "soft power" of America's humanitarian reputation, and expertise in the religion, language, and culture of particular places.

Just because ideas are bad does not mean they will disappear; many of Fukuyama's former neoconservative colleagues are brazenly advocating for Iran the same toxic brew they cooked up for Iraq. But if American foreign policy is to protect American national security, better ideas than those of the neoconservatives will have to be found. Fukuyama offers some of his own; he calls for a "dramatic demilitarization" of American foreign policy, points out that Islamic terrorism is more of a threat to Western Europe than the United States, and notes that instead of relying on an inefficient and corrupt United Nations, the United States should approach multilateralism multilaterally that is, it should rely on a wide variety of international institutions. Fukuyama worries that neoconservatism's failure could lead Americans to withdraw from the world, when what they really need are more credible ideas about how to engage it.

Fukuyama's book is elegantly and concisely argued. His call for "realistic Wilsonianism" — a mixture of realism, which seeks only to advance the national interest, and idealism, which holds that the United States should pursue democratic and humanitarian goals — is just right, even if Fukuyama does not fill in the details or offer convincing examples of how his doctrine could be put into effect. Still, those details can come later. Once we fully appreciate the notion that force can take American foreign policy only so far, the way is cleared for new — or, as the term "Wilsonian" suggests, old — ideas to emerge and evolve.

Bruce R. Bartlett, like Fukuyama, is something of a renegade; an economist and a former official in the Reagan administration, he was fired from the nonprofit National Center for Policy Analysis in 2005 when he began to criticize President Bush. His book, *Impostor: How George W. Bush Bankrupted America and Betrayed the Reagan Legacy* (Doubleday, 2006), is a devastating treatment of the domestic-policy failures of the current president. Among other things, Bartlett praises President Clinton for his fiscal restraint, suggests that President Bush's Medicare reform may be "the worst legislation in history," and heaps disdain on the political strategies developed by the White House to push for Social Security privatization.
Also like Fukuyama, Bartlett is an intellectual who emphasizes the degree to which Bush's failures were caused by his fatal attraction to bad ideas. The president and his Republican allies, according to Bartlett, were convinced that cutting taxes would starve the beast of government and force cutbacks in public expenditure. But, as he points out, empirical evidence on behalf of that idea is nonexistent; if anything, Bartlett continues, "tax cuts actually seem to cause government spending": Politicians persuaded that cutting taxes have shrunk government spend more freely.

Precisely because it is written from the viewpoint of the political right, Bartlett's book is a powerful exposé of the intellectual shabbiness and sloppy reasoning of the Bush administration's approach to domestic policy. The only open question, in Bartlett's mind, is whether Bush himself will pay the political price for his irresponsible ideas or whether the future tax increase made necessary by his lack of fiscal discipline will have to be proposed by one of the presidents who follows him. At some point, however, reality will intervene, and when it does, we will need more sophisticated economic analysis to repair the damage.

Serious questions can be raised about Bartlett's own ideas. More a libertarian than a conservative, he still believes that radical tax cuts, even if they do not starve the beast of government, can stimulate economic growth in the long run, thus shrinking deficits by raising revenue. That idea used to be called "supply-side economics." Originally developed by the economist Arthur B. Laffer, supply-side economics is as unproven as the starve-the-beast hypothesis. If one believes that government can play a positive role in providing health care or protecting the natural environment, moreover, Bartlett's faith in laissez-faire is also dangerous, threatening, as it does, the sense of fairness that makes democratic government legitimate. Still, even if Bartlett's own ideas are debatable, he does such a good job demonstrating the pernicious consequences of Mr. Bush's bad ideas that he forces readers to think about better ones.

It is beyond my powers to know whether America's next president will be a Republican or a Democrat. But I do know that some future president will be faced with undoing the damage of a man sufficiently lacking in intellectual curiosity to question the bad ideas upon which he built his administration. Academics and intellectuals with an independent cast of mind — whether liberal or conservative — have played little role in the Bush administration, given, as it is, to reiterating talking points and insisting on absolute loyalty to the man in charge. But that is all the more reason why academics and intellectuals will find themselves in great demand when the leaders of this country eventually decide that their foreign and domestic policies will have to confront the real world around them, not the imaginary one bequeathed to them by their ideology. When that happens, future historians will look back on the Bush years as paving the way for a golden age of intellectual inquiry.

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