

Understanding American Policy

By

William R. Polk

Traveling around Europe, the Middle East and America in recent weeks, I find people everywhere baffled by American policy. They want to know how it is really made, who makes it, what “worldview” influences it and, finally, what the long-term purpose is.

Dozens of articles have appeared in the American and European press in recent weeks exploring how and why “the Bush Doctrine,” has taken its present shape and attempting to identify its authors. The Bush administration has reacted with anger at these attempts and more than any previous American administration has sought to keep outsiders, including the American public, in the dark on its decision makers and how they operate.

What cannot be hidden is what the Administration is now doing. Three aspects of its policy are already evident: first, in foreign military affairs, the administration began in the war against the al-Qaida movement of Usama bin Ladin and the former Taliban government of Afghanistan and carried to Iraq what President Bush has called a crusade “to rid the world of evil.”

Second, in both domestic and international legal affairs, the administration has moved away from constitutional and treaty constraints on its freedom of action by refusing to join the movement to create an international court of justice, by abrogating treaties and by taking actions which many scholars, judges and lawyers believe violate the U.S. Constitution. It has announced its determination to implement its decisions

wherever and whenever it wishes by force if diplomacy fails. It will not just react but will pre-emptively seek out what it sees as dangers to America and against these, whether by states or nongovernmental organizations, will, as President Bush has proclaimed, “export death and violence to the four corners of the earth in defense of this great country and rid the world of evil.”

Third, the administration has embarked upon a fiscal program that is drastically altering the domestic division of the burden of taxes and the benefits of social welfare and engaging abroad in large-scale, military-related and other programs in the quest for allies.

So how were these policies devised, who devised them and what are they expected to achieve? To get answers I believe we must look at five groups of Americans and their interests or ideas.

The first group is the Republican Party. President Bush, his supporters in Congress and office holders throughout the land are determined to get re-elected next year. More than anyone else, the man who determines what will achieve this fundamental objective is Karl Rove. Rove has been called “Bush’s brain.” He is a master at reading “the American mind” (as indicated by public opinion polls); as political strategist, his task is to tell the President what will win the next election.

The second group is less concerned with what the American public wants. It is the inner group of the Republican Party which has always been the party of “big business.” Many of the key players in the Bush administration, led by Dick Cheney, are deeply involved with the oil industry. Even as Vice President, Mr. Cheney is drawing an undisclosed amount, thought to be approximately \$1 million a year, in deferred payments

from Halliburton Corporation which he headed before re-entering the government. Outside government are major contributors to the Republican Party's re-election funds; they are owners of corporations that are now receiving billions of dollars worth of contracts and are themselves getting favorable treatment in tax policy. They are determined to pursue policies that enhance their interests and to build into the political system anchors (like federal judges who are appointed for life) to protect over the long term what they have won.

The third group is made up of men and women who are guided by the resurgence of Christian religious fundamentalism. Forty six percent of Americans questioned in a December 2002 Gallup poll described themselves as "born again" Christians. President Bush embodies their movement. After a wild and dissolute youth, typified by wild binges of liquor and drugs, he was "born again." As a Christian fundamentalist, he believed, he said, that "God wants me to run for president." Now, as president, he is determined to carry out what he thinks of as "God's Master Plan." Convinced by what he thinks of as his direct communication with God, he is undeterred by the strong criticism of his actions by the leaders even of his own (Methodist) church, nor by the World Council of Churches and certainly not by such distant figures as the Pope.

The President's "point man" in domestic affairs is Attorney General John Ashcroft, an evangelicalist who is pushing a new bill designed to restrict civil liberties even further than the "USA Patriot Act." While promising that the Justice Department would protect any official who refused requests for disclosure of government actions as required under the Freedom of Information Act, he has moved to restrict still further publicly

available information on government actions even in such fields as agriculture and the environment. He has proclaimed his intent to follow Bush in the presidency.

The fourth influential group has been inspired by another form of conversion, from Trotskyism to the radical right. The two dozen or so “Neoconservatives” around the President dominate the Department of Defense and encircle the Secretary of State. As Ari Shavit, without fear of being denounced as an anti-Semite, wrote in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, “The war in Iraq was conceived by 25 neoconservative intellectuals, most of them Jewish...” They include Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, William Kristol, Elliot Abrams and a few others less well known.

Two things unite this group: First, they are graduates of the 1930s American Jewish Trotskyite movement; their neoconservative movement has been termed “inverted Trotskyism.” Whereas Trotsky saw his purpose as one to uplift the masses, they aim at imposing domination. But, they have retained from Trotsky’s movement the idea of an international crusade and the desire for radical, even revolutionary, transformation, two objectives Trotsky termed “permanent revolution.” As John Judis wrote in the influential American journal *Foreign Affairs*, “They saw themselves as a cadre in a cause...”

And, second, they evince a passionate attachment to the cause of Israel, especially of its right wing party the Likud, equal to or greater than their loyalty to America. Beginning years ago, they won to their cause such men as Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the designated pro-consul for Iraq, “Star Wars” advocate, staunch supporter of Israeli militarism and sometimes arms dealer, General Jay Garner. They got President Bush to call Ariel Sharon “a man of peace,” to continue to support the settlements program and to defer or cancel attempts to bring about

the creation of a Palestinian state. They also convinced him that while Iraq might not have been a threat to the United States, it was a threat to Israel and so, the group argued in a 1996 paper, must be attacked. In 1998, they offered to support Bill Clinton if he would agree to their policy.

The leaders of this group form an interlocking directorate in such pro-Israeli and lavishly endowed “think tanks” as The American Enterprise Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs.

The fifth set of people, interests and objectives, which mingles in a curious way elements of the other four – determination to stay in power, belief in the capitalist system, religious fundamentalism and messianic Judaism – is what has been called Christian Zionism.

Christian Zionism is not just leading the charge against the forces of evil in Afghanistan or Iraq: it is mounting a crusade that will be carried, as President Bush has said, “to the four corners of the earth.” Along the way, it will inevitably overturn governments – Syria, Iran and North Korea are probable early targets – and seek to reconstitute whole societies. Permanent revolution indeed.

But its focus will remain the Holy Land. There it will support Israel to the hilt. Not only the U.S. Government but individual Christian fundamentalists pay for the establishment of Jewish settlements on Palestinian land. These Christian Zionists believe that the Palestinians have no rights and that, therefore, no mercy should be shown them: any weapons, even nuclear weapons, can morally be employed against them and Israel is right to expel them because it has “a covenant with God.” It is all in the Bible.

But, there is a stinger in the tail of Christian Zionism's program – one that the Israelis, however delighted they are by Christian Zionism, will not relish. In the last act after Armageddon, after evil is banished from the world and the Messiah returns, the Jews must become Christian. Were he to see the curtain come down on this last act of his “permanent revolution,” Trotsky would have been horrified – or perhaps just amused.

© William R. Polk, April 10, 2003

William R. Polk is a director of the W.P. Carey Foundation. A graduate of Harvard (BA and PhD) and Oxford (BA and MA), he taught Middle Eastern politics and history and Arabic literature at Harvard University until 1961 when President Kennedy appointed him a Member of the Policy Planning Council of the U.S. Department of State. There, he was in charge of planning American policy for most of the Islamic world until 1965 when he became professor of history at the University of Chicago and founded its Middle Eastern Studies Center. Later he also became president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. Among his many books are *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century*; *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs*; *Polk's Folly, An American Family History* and *The Birth of America*.