American Maximalism

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As long as you act daringly, you will be able to succeed very quickly . . . . You need to . . . feel superior to everyone, as if there was no one beside you. . . . [J]ust act recklessly and it will be all right.

—Mao Zedong

AMERICAN FOREIGN policy of the past four years, both defenders and detractors agree, has been based on radical views about how the United States should conduct itself in the world. Some scholars call the diplomatic operating principles of the Bush presidency a "revolution." And those few who see continuities with past practice reach back to the 19th century for their antecedents.

Yet the case that George W. Bush's foreign policy marks a dramatic departure from that of his predecessors has been greatly exaggerated. Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton all repeatedly ignored the dissents (and domestic political difficulties) of allies, rejected compromise with adversaries, negotiated insincerely, changed the rules, rocked the boat, moved the goal posts and even planned inadequately to deal with the consequences if their policies went wrong. The three of them, moreover, had the same reason for doing these things: They had chosen more far-reaching, destabilizing goals than their allies were happy with (or than their adversaries generally understood). And they believed that the only way to achieve these goals was to keep others from having too much influence over American policy. To look at how the Bush Administration's immediate predecessors dealt with the most important international challenges of their time is to see the true maximalist tradition of our diplomacy. The current administration has put its own stamp on this tradition; it did not originate it.

Just because other presidents pursued strategies like those for which George W. Bush is criticized hardly means that his policies are sound. The more continuity we find with earlier administrations, the greater the burden on the current one to explain why it has paid such a high price for doing much the same thing. President Bush and his advisors clearly believe the opposition they have stirred up is the inevitable result of doing things differently. If, however, their policies are less revolutionary than they claim, their record has to be judged by traditional standards of success and failure.

Critics too may find it difficult to adjust to the idea that the current administration's policies fit squarely within the norms of the last quarter century. They argue that the United States has needless-

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ly abandoned a record of international achievement based on building consensus and playing by the rules. If this were true, it would be clear enough what would have to be done to put current policy back on a more successful footing. But what if past presidents produced good results by doing the very things that have gotten President Bush into trouble—reaching further than allies wanted, defining struggles with adversaries in all-or-nothing terms, accepting instability and tension as the price of boldness—and by making the preservation of American power and influence the ultimate policy goal? What if the administration's critics ignore essential ingredients of the most successful quarter century of foreign policy in American history?

THE CONTINUITY of U.S. policy over the past several decades is all the more striking because the problems that each administration of this period had to solve were so different. The early Reagan years were marked by a revival of Cold War confrontation and public fear of nuclear war. In the first Bush presidency, East-West tension was replaced by uncertainty about new dangers—and new powers—that were emerging in its place. The Clinton Administration focused on how to deal with seemingly endless conflicts in the Balkans. Yet each president responded to the prime security problems of his day in a broadly similar manner: pursuing policies designed to achieve a strategic breakthrough, to transform a worsening situation into one more likely to sustain American influence over the long term.

No episode illustrates this pattern more clearly than the great East-West confrontation of the early 1980s over whether the United States should deploy intermediate-range missiles in Europe. The controversy arose from the fear of Western governments that the new Soviet SS-20 missile force would undermine America's nuclear commitment to its allies. Believing that credible Western defenses had to include weapons of comparable range and capacity, NATO made its famous "dual-track decision" of 1979—which combined a (relatively slow) schedule for deploying an American intermediate-range nuclear force (INF) with an invitation to the Soviets to negotiate limits on each side's missiles.

If the INF decision displeased Moscow, it nevertheless reflected an attempt to sustain the détente of the 1970s. (Zbigniew Brzezinski has written that the Carter Administration considered the "Euromissiles" militarily superfluous but necessary to win allied support for the SALT II treaty.) Reagan embraced the missiles, but with a new rationale: Restoring the nuclear balance in Europe became part of a policy of *scrapping* détente, which the new president saw as a misguided failure. Secretary of State George Shultz argued that cooperating with the Soviets had not produced restraint. The time had come to push back. Arms control was to be matched by a faster American military build-up. The goal of negotiation was no longer to assure "stability", but to force the Soviets to abandon their most threatening weapons. Under Reagan, the Carter Administration's aid to the Afghan resistance became a program of global support for insurgencies opposing Soviet client regimes. And human rights rhetoric challenged the legitimacy of the entire Soviet system.

The Reagan Administration's turn-up-the-pressure strategy did not keep the United States and its allies from agreeing in 1981 on an INF negotiating position—the so-called "zero option"—that called for eliminating all Soviet intermediate-range missiles worldwide in exchange for canceling American deployments. But they supported the formula for quite different reasons. President Reagan and his hard-line advisors liked the idea that the Soviets would have to forfeit every one of

their brand-new missiles. For many allied governments, by contrast, the appeal of "zero" was that it made American deployments unnecessary. They supported "zero" as a goal because they expected it to neutralize political opposition. When it failed to do so, they fell back on less ambitious alternatives. Most European leaders believed that political support for deploying the new missiles would unravel unless the United States proved that it was negotiating in good faith. When the zero option was first proposed at the end of 1981, German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt considered the deployments "doomed" unless rapid progress could be made toward an agreement. U.S. negotiators would therefore have to compromise.

Schmidt himself turned out to be the Euromissiles' first casualty. Before the first year of talks was over, his coalition partners, the Free Democrats (led by Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher), brought down the West German government, having concluded that Schmidt would not be able to overcome opposition to deployment within his own party. But pressure for compromise was not limited to the anti-nuclear Left. When Schmidt's successor Helmut Kohl made his first visit to Washington, his message to Reagan was that he too needed serious negotiations—"not a show." Margaret Thatcher gave much the same advice.

The American national security elite was also divided. William Hyland (soon to become editor of *Foreign Affairs*) predicted that the zero option would "end in disaster." At the State Department, many believed that the United States could not hold to a transparently non-negotiable position. Paul Nitze, the chief INF negotiator, was convinced that the German government would not go ahead with deployments without the political cover of an agreement with Moscow. Unless, therefore, the United States quickly struck a deal, Moscow would simply watch the alliance collapse.

Nitze's worry led him to explore the so-called "walk in the woods" formula, a compromise that abandoned zero in favor of equal levels for both sides. But he failed to persuade the president. Reagan would not accept a formula that obliged the United States to give up the most potent missiles in the proposed INF force. In a famous face-to-face Situation Room exchange, he told Nitze to inform Soviet negotiators that he worked for "one tough son of a bitch." As for the allies, the United States did not even inform them that a compromise plan had been broached, and they learned of it only later, from leaks reported in the American media. (By then out of office, Schmidt was indignant, believing that Nitze had proposed a "good deal.")

The Reagan Administration's view was that success *depended* on inflexibility. Another split-the-difference arms control agreement, leaving the Soviets with most of what they had, would not put East-West relations on a new footing. As Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger sniffed, "The alliance needs leadership, not compromise." Adjustments in the U.S. bargaining position were therefore cosmetic at best—the bare minimum needed to deflect opposition within Western electorates. In the run-up to deployments, with European opinion worrying over the seeming breakdown in communication between Moscow and Washington, Vice President Bush was sent to Europe to advertise a constructive-sounding invitation from Reagan to General Secretary Yuri Andropov to meet to resolve the INF dispute—but only by agreeing to the zero option. After the Soviets walked out of the talks, Reagan claimed the U.S. position was no "take-it-or-leave-it" proposal; he favored a real dialogue on nuclear issues. Yet he repeatedly refused to offer a specific compromise proposal for anything other than zero. And his Strategic Defense Initiative underscored how much more radical U.S.

strategy had become since NATO made its original INF decision.

Such inflexibility led many allied governments to question U.S. policy. Although the Soviet buildup had begun the confrontation, and Soviet rhetoric was more blood-curdling than Washington's, American deployments were the focus of European protests. Opposition to the Euromissiles produced the largest political demonstrations of the postwar period, and allied unity began to fray. The Dutch parliament's vote on deployment was cancelled when the government realized it lacked a majority. Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi also broke ranks, saying that deployments should be postponed and diplomacy given more time. George Shultz's memoirs record "deep desperation" among European leaders, who believed, as late as 1986, that U.S. positions were too unrelenting.

Despite all this, the policy held. Britain and Germany were the critical INF battlegrounds, and Thatcher and Kohl were politically strong enough to keep deployments on schedule. From that moment on, Soviet leaders had little choice but to climb down from confrontation. They returned to the table after Reagan was re-elected in 1984, and at his first meeting with Reagan in November 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev downplayed the INF issue. Two years later, he signed a treaty based on the "non-negotiable" zero option.

After losing power, Gorbachev always rejected the idea that American pressure had led to *perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet he was more flexible in acknowledging what produced new directions in Soviet foreign policy. The turning point, he told Genscher, was the lost battle with NATO over nuclear missiles in Europe.

SIMILARITIES IN the international strategy of George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan are no surprise: President Bush himself asserts them. But surely the diplomacy of George H. W. Bush belongs in a different category—less ideological, more measured, more consensual? In 1989 the new president and his advisors were not happy with the strategy of the departing administration (just as their predecessors had disdained Carter's). But their complaint is too little remembered. Under Ronald Reagan, they believed, American policy had become too passive and conciliatory toward the Soviet Union.

The new Bush Administration feared that, in the euphoria that Gorbachev had created, the Soviets would manipulate European politics to their advantage, weakening the Atlantic Alliance and luring West Germany into semi-neutralism. The United States had to pre-empt such initiatives and throw Moscow back on the defensive. If Washington did not "regain the lead", the president fretted, "things will fall apart."

Seeing the status quo as dangerous, Bush and his advisors wanted to redefine Western goals in more ambitious terms that Moscow could not counter. That meant going beyond arms control to demand a broader pull-back of Soviet power, and with it, liberalization in the Eastern bloc. As Secretary of State James Baker read the political trends, the German question was rapidly "coming back", and the United States had to "grab it first." The effort was not lost on Soviet leaders. After Bush's first European swing in June 1989, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze queried Genscher about the new American rhetoric. Why, he asked, was Bush risking stability by "fanning the flames against East Germany?"

Even before the communist regimes of Eastern Europe collapsed in the fall, then, the United States had taken a contentious stance on the question of German unity. And once the Berlin Wall came down, Washington did not develop a new strategy so much as radicalize the one it was already following—to consoli-

date America's position in Europe by promoting far-reaching transformation. This was no abstract ideological posture. It meant supporting, and even stimulating, German ambitions on the central issue of reunification, as well as on lesser but still critical questions: how quickly West Germany should absorb the East, and with what guarantees for European states that feared German domination. On each question, the Bush Administration placed itself in direct opposition to almost all its own allies, as well as the Soviet Union.

It took considerable boldness to think that the objections of the other major powers could be overcome. François Mitterand had told George Bush months earlier that German reunification—a "*casus belli*", he said—would put Europe back where it was in 1913, on the eve of war. The Soviet position was angrily dismissive: Since no European country favored reunification, it was "not on the agenda." Thatcher, who saw Germany as "by nature a destabilizing factor in Europe", sought American agreement on a principle that would stall reunification for years. Before anything else happened, she insisted, East Germany had to create, and then sustain, a working democracy.

And the American response? From the president on down, it usually amounted to respectful listening, followed by actions that paid little or no attention to what other governments said. When Bush received Thatcher's letter presenting her thoughts about East Germany, he phoned her with the cheery promise to "[put] our feet up at Camp David for a really good talk." Pledges made were abandoned as soon as doing so looked convenient. In December 1989 Bush promised Gorbachev that he would not "recklessly accelerate" unification. Yet just a month later the United States decided to "hit the accelerator"—go all out for reunification on the fastest possible timetable. (Not surprisingly, neither Gorbachev nor anyone else was advised of the change.) American officials were convinced that a rapid pace was the best way to reduce the bargaining leverage of other powers and to head off what they saw as the growing risk of chaos in East Germany. Most European governments, large and small, believed they would get adequate guarantees for themselves only by slowing down the process of reunification. To block them, the United States sought a *fait accompli*. (American policymakers actually tried to speed up the very trend that other governments feared most—the collapse of the East German regime. Robert Zoellick has written that the Bush Administration's rhetoric deliberately encouraged East German voters to believe that rapid unification was possible, and to vote out leaders who favored gradualism.[1])

The United States did not, of course, trumpet its intention to ignore other governments' views, and it even proposed the so-called "Two Plus Four" framework—whose ostensible purpose was to fashion a result satisfactory to both German states and all the World War II victors. Yet the American aim in doing so was to *deny* the Four Powers a serious role, while keeping control for itself. As Baker recalls it, "Two Plus Four" was a device to keep other governments in line, to see what cards they were holding, and to block any separate policy initiatives. The details of unity were to be worked out by the two German states, and then bilaterally between Germany and other powers, with the United States acting as Bonn's protector at each stage. This American calculus was completely vindicated by events. The diplomacy of reunification is still associated with "Two Plus Four", but not one significant issue was handled in this forum.

By keeping other major powers from acting in concert, the United States achieved reunification without paying any significant price to allay their concerns. At

[1]See his "Two Plus Four", *The National Interest* (Fall 2000).

different points in the diplomatic process, both Britain and the Soviet Union put forward the bizarre idea that Germany should remain—for an indefinite transitional period—a member of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact. But despite the preferences of Gorbachev and Thatcher, no constraint on Germany's full membership in the Atlantic Alliance was accepted. The United States did draw up a list of measures to reassure Moscow that German unity would not threaten Russian security, but these were all vague and relatively minor steps that, as Baker noted, the United States would have favored anyway. Even the pledge, adopted at the NATO summit of June 1990, that the alliance would begin a process of (undefined) "change", was rammed through by the United States without the time-consuming consultative courtesies that are NATO's hallmark. (President Bush's memoirs note that the issue was "too important to review with allies in the usual way.")

What explains Bush's pursuit of rapid and unconditional German reunification? Contrasting his own outlook with that of friends and allies who had suffered at German hands through two world wars, the president recalled that he had "a comfort level" about reunification. If others did not trust Germany, that was their problem, not his.

Yet trust was not the crucial element of American policy. U.S. officials understood that Germany's direction was unpredictable. Chancellor Kohl drove that point home when, less than three weeks after the Berlin Wall came down, he publicly set out his views on reunification without consulting Washington—or even his own foreign minister. Polls showing that 58 percent of Germans wanted to withdraw from both alliances deepened Washington's concern, as did the prospect of social unrest in East Germany. President Bush and his advisors were just as determined to constrain Germany's future options as any European leaders were. But all others aimed to do so by preserving Germany's existing second-class status, imposing limitations on it that—in Washington's view—were certain to be resented and could not be expected to last. The United States, by contrast, believed that the best way to keep its ally confined within NATO over the long term was to support its geopolitical aims in the short. Only the United States considered itself strong enough to remain the patron of a united Germany.

To create a framework that would protect long-term U.S. interests, American policymakers accepted an increase in tensions with other governments. Others felt that gradual change would involve less risk to their security, and show more respect for their sensitivities—and to a point the United States tried to soften these disagreements. But the administration did not make a single major adjustment in its policy to please or conciliate others. Its basic, and typically American, argument, formulated by Secretary Baker, was that change need not be destabilizing. In fact, stability *depended* on it. As in the early 1980s, the United States alone had real confidence that it could control the process of change—that it could stimulate an international upheaval and come out better off.

The unification of Germany in 1990 is widely regarded as a masterpiece of the diplomatic art—a brilliant response to major unexpected developments that left Europe "whole, free and at peace." It *was* a masterpiece—not, however, because the leading participants worked so harmoniously together, but rather because they were so suspicious of each other, so emotional in their fears, so divided in their aims and so confused about how to achieve them. The United States steered the process to a positive result by exploiting its partners' disarray, by setting a pace that kept them off balance, and even by deceiving them. The outcome provides a notable contrast to the other major pro-

ject of the Bush Administration, the Gulf War. As that war ended, the United States deferred to its allies and pulled back from full exploitation of its victory. In their European diplomacy, the first President Bush and his advisors enjoyed a comparable victory but denied American allies the same influence in shaping it.

Years after reunification, during which she served as a midlevel NSC official, Condoleezza Rice reflected on what this success might teach future policymakers. The main lesson, she wrote, was to select "optimal goals even if they seem politically infeasible at the time." In a major negotiation among many players who are all vying for different goals, single-mindedness is a huge asset. For Rice, a government that "knows what it wants has a reasonable chance of getting it."

LIKE THE two preceding administrations, the foreign policy team of the Clinton Administration believed that its own predecessor had responded inadequately to emerging threats. In particular, the new president held that firmer American leadership was desperately needed in the Balkans. Without it, Bill Clinton told his first NSC meeting, "nothing happens."

The Clinton Administration explored a more ambitious Balkans policy, but soon reverted to the Bush approach. It had wanted to help the Bosnian Muslims and put more pressure on the Bosnian Serbs, but it would not risk a major breach in the Atlantic Alliance merely to stop interethnic atrocities. Between 1993 and 1995, European objections to American proposals repeatedly led Washington to back down. Reluctant to make Bosnia the "manhood test that breaks NATO", the administration settled for more modest objectives—to contain the spread of violence and hold the alliance together.

When it became clear, however, that not even these minimal goals were being achieved, American policy changed again. Merely choosing not to argue with allies had not prevented an alliance crisis. In the spring of 1995, with a four-month winter ceasefire expiring, a widely anticipated Bosnian Serb offensive seemed likely to bring new mass killings and to dramatize Western impotence. This prospect led the United States to stop seeing Bosnia as a containable second-tier issue on which second-best results were acceptable. It became instead a major problem that had to be solved. And to solve it, the Clinton Administration revived those premises that had guided its predecessors in addressing their own biggest problems.

The first of these premises would have been familiar to the Bush team that put German reunification on a fast track. The president told his advisors, "we have to seize control of this." The status quo was "doing enormous damage to U.S. standing in the world." The administration concluded that the best way to overcome the intra-alliance disagreements that had kept NATO from acting was to stop listening to allied views in the first place. Instead, it chose to deliberate internally and then send senior officials to European capitals to inform them of the president's decision. Allied acquiescence was expected. The United States, in the words of National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, was "the big dog", and on an issue this important, the smaller dogs would surely follow, as long as the United States set a firm enough example.

To its newly decisive style, the administration added more ambitious substance. "Containing" Balkan instability was discarded as an acceptable goal. American planners were urged to work backwards from a desirable and sustainable end-state. A major initiative had to promise a better outcome than merely keeping genocide at manageable levels. The contrast with European policy was striking. In mid-1995, the French were also preparing to involve themselves more deeply in Bosnia and deployed thousands

of new troops to defend peacekeepers already in place. But the purpose of Europe's so-called "rapid reaction force" was not to implement a new strategy, only to shore up the old one.

Like previous Bosnian "peace plans"—and indeed like most American diplomatic initiatives—the new U.S. strategy began with a call for negotiations. But the Clinton Administration told both its allies and the warring parties that if a peaceful solution were not quickly accepted by all sides, it would turn to coercive military action (training and arms for Bosnian Muslims, air strikes to repel Serb advances, removal of European peacekeepers so as not to inhibit NATO operations). This two-step approach—an offer to talk, plus a quick timetable for action—echoed the 1979 INF decision. As their predecessors had done in responding to the Soviet SS-20s, American policymakers proposed to negotiate, but they did not expect diplomacy to succeed until they changed realities on the ground.

Their expectations proved truer than they knew: NATO began attacks on Bosnian Serb positions (in reply to the so-called Sarajevo "marketplace bombing") before U.S. proposals had been laid out and the parties had reacted to them. Having resorted to force as a matter of retaliation, U.S. negotiators kept using it as a bargaining tool. They saw bombing as the most effective way of softening up the other side and increasing chances of diplomatic success.

With America's full entry into the Balkan arena, its diplomatic aims escalated. In preparing the Dayton conference, American negotiators resolved to make maximum use of the opportunities military power had created. Their working assumption was that anything not nailed down at Dayton would never be agreed on at all. Success did not mean one more thinly disguised ceasefire, but a breakthrough agreement creating as many of the elements of a single Bosnian state as possible. Richard Holbrooke summarized his go-for-broke strategy this way: "Better a high benchmark than a weak compromise."

The same approach was evident in the administration's debate about the role of NATO peacekeepers after Dayton. Self-described "maximalists", who favored an ambitious mandate encompassing all the tasks of social reconstruction, were pitted against "minimalists" who focused narrowly on maintaining order. Characteristically, the maximalists succeeded in keeping the mission's goals broad, while minimalists (primarily Pentagon opponents of "nation-building") limited the resources available to realize them.

IN ITS confrontation with Milosevic over Kosovo four years later, the Clinton Administration employed the same strategy it had developed earlier in Bosnia. Confident that they now knew what made Milosevic tick, American policymakers were unwilling to let him exploit negotiations to deflect pressure. Diplomacy alone was, they believed, certain to fail; force, by contrast, would produce quick success. Accordingly, the only real point of talking to Milosevic was to show that talking was pointless. As one official described American aims at the unsuccessful multilateral conference on Kosovo at Rambouillet in February 1999, it was to "get the war started with the Europeans locked in."

This conviction was so strong that, when Milosevic responded to an eleventh-hour visit by Holbrooke with unexpected flexibility, the prospect of a deal had no effect on American decision-making. A leader who had one genocide on his record was not entitled to the benefit of the doubt. The war therefore commenced immediately, without even a *pro forma* round of further deliberations within NATO. The American goal was not to squeeze incremental improvement out of diplomacy. It was to alter an unsatisfacto-

ry status quo.

When its bombing campaign failed to produce quick success, the Clinton Administration was criticized for providing an inadequate rationale for war, for failing to anticipate its course, even for making the status quo worse. (Does this sound familiar?) Yet despite deep internal discord, early military reverses, and an acute humanitarian crisis created by the war itself, American policy hardened once hostilities were underway. Issues on which the United States had been prepared to compromise at Rambouillet (such as whether all Serb forces had to leave Kosovo) became non-negotiable. Allied suggestions for a bombing pause were ignored. Senior policymakers who had had doubts about the war began to favor a full-scale ground invasion. "Failure", they said, "was not an option." And when Chancellor Schröder announced that Germany would block an invasion, the administration countered that such objections would not prevail. Only Milosevic's abrupt and essentially unconditional surrender saved the Clinton Administration from having to roll over its ally's dissent.

American aims, it should be added, kept escalating after the war ended. Believing that the Balkans would be unstable as long as Milosevic remained in power, policymakers focused on "regime change"—and only when he fell in October 2000 were the crises of the Yugoslav break-up thought at last to be over.

The conduct of the Kosovo War, and the diplomacy that preceded it have been judged harshly by many. The leading history of the episode, while sympathetic to American aims, is disparagingly entitled *Winning Ugly*, and former Senator Bob Dole has seen in the story the lesson that "half measures yield half results." Yet viewed at a greater distance, the record looks both more positive and more consistent with the American experience of recent decades. Clinton's zig-zag route to success was guided by a determination to preserve America's leadership position in Europe—and to secure victories big enough to make a difference.

OVER THE past quarter-century, American presidents have regularly responded in the same way to fundamental international challenges. What energized them was, typically, an extreme reading of the status quo. Events, they believed, were heading in the wrong direction and would, if not reversed, set back American power and influence. In response, they favored large, even risky strategies. They rejected approaches that offered incremental improvement and did not mind if the actions they took made matters worse at first. Creating a new and better international framework was the only means by which policymakers expected to prevent the erosion of America's position. This outlook led them to attack problems head-on—not "manage" them at some acceptable level of cost and risk, not pretend that gradualism would work, and not confront danger only when it became more acute.

Negotiations have frequently had a place in these American strategies, but rarely as the main instrument of problem-solving. Presidents and their advisors have commonly thought of diplomacy as a tool with which to expose an adversary's unreasonableness—and to build support for stronger action against him. When dealing with an unprincipled or unpredictable foe, they believed that negotiation would work only after they had created more favorable "facts on the ground." Illusory talks could not be allowed to block the effort to throw adversaries on the defensive and to improve the balance of power. This outlook frequently discomfited certain allies, stimulated anti-Americanism and increased international tension. Yet American policymakers were ready to pay the price. Madeleine Albright explained

their confidence: "We see further than other countries into the future."

MAXIMALISM, THEN, is the modern American norm. Advancing national interests by overturning a deteriorating status quo is not "revolutionary." It has been the repeated practice of American diplomacy for decades. It has always made allies nervous, but one administration after another has expected them to defer, grumbling or not, to big American goals, even to big American risk-taking. The pattern is so consistent that it can help us piece together the half-spoken assumptions of current strategy as well. When Paul Wolfowitz observed that September 11 made it unacceptable to "just sit and live with the Middle Eastern status quo", he was not simply boiling down into one the many rationales of policy toward Iraq. He was expressing the thinking that also guided past policy. The historical record offers at least as much clarity about the transformational aims of recent American policy as its spokesmen have given us.

It is a peculiar feature of the maximalist tradition that every administration takes pride in rescuing it from a predecessor's neglect. The current administration is no exception. Its strategic outlook represents a particularly hard-edged culmination of past practices, but a culmination all the same. The fact that the president and his senior advisors do not present their policies in this light—that they would probably be indignant at the very suggestion—cannot obscure the deep continuities between them and previous administrations.

Sometimes, of course, a policy tradition achieves a radical culmination only at the moment when it has ceased to be viable. Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam policy is the outstanding example—a failure not because it embraced a new strategy but because it pushed old assumptions too far. Some make the same case about American maximalism today. The decades during which it dominated represent an era that is now over, and its lessons are seen as an inadequate guide for future policy. Disagreements between the United States and its European critics have allegedly become harder to control or resolve than in the past, when discord was limited by Europe's reliance on American protection against Soviet military might. In this setting, the very idea of maximalism—to say nothing of any hope that American allies might again defer to it—seems out of date.

The historical record we have examined provides many reasons to be skeptical of this argument. It has already been a long time since the Soviet threat was Europe's prime worry. Certainly under Bill Clinton, the Cold War was a rapidly receding memory; violence in the Balkans held center stage. When George H. W. Bush was president, our European allies were preoccupied with the rise of Germany. They believed that the United States, far from guaranteeing their security, was jeopardizing it; they were relaxed enough about Soviet power to seek Moscow's help in turning American policy around. And even in the early 1980s, with the Cold War still going strong, what many Europeans wanted from the United States was not just protection but policies less likely to drag them into a nuclear war. They had begun to doubt that Washington saw the world the way they did. Twenty years before the United States invaded Iraq on a wave of Manichean rhetoric, Egon Bahr, Helmut Schmidt's national security advisor, complained that American neoconservatives had put world peace at risk by seeking "victory over evil."

American maximalism, in other words, could easily have splintered the Atlantic Alliance far sooner than it did. There are many reasons why it did not, ranging from habit and inertia to the diplomatic skill with which leaders on both sides of the Atlantic kept disagree-

ments from going too far. And yet the most important reason that maximalism never completely lost allied support was the fact that it was so consistently successful. Reagan's confrontational strategy was validated first by Gorbachev's *perestroika* and then by the Soviet collapse. Fears of a united Germany dissipated as it became clear that George H. W. Bush had not pushed Europe back into the past, but propelled it into the future. And Bill Clinton carried NATO's "little dogs" with him through two wars by showing that military action alone could stop ethnic conflict in the Balkans.

Maximalism's success was no accident. The policymakers of previous administrations believed that they had reversed negative trends, even changed history's direction, precisely by demanding ambitious results. They had seized control of policy and made it work. Reagan had a far deeper impact on Soviet actions, and prevented a more dangerous unraveling of Western unity, by rejecting compromise in the INF talks. Bush was clearly right to ignore the go-slow strategy toward German reunification that all other European powers favored. Their approach would have kept Germany in a geopolitical limbo and weakened American influence. As for the Clinton Administration, had it not abandoned "containment" in the Balkans, the region would still be draining American resources, credibility and presidential attention.

UNDERSTANDING OUR maximalist tradition clarifies much about the current predicament of American policy that might otherwise remain mysterious. It suggests that the virulent European response to the diplomacy of the Bush Administration may be the result not only of its shocking novelty, but also of its familiarity. President Bush and his colleagues would have been better prepared to deal with our allies had they understood that the latter have faced many previous American efforts to overturn the status quo. The United States was not in uncharted territory: Europeans have been on the verge of wandering off the reservation for a long time.

Re-examining the record of previous administrations also suggests how difficult it will be for the current one to act differently. The maximalism that has been described here—and that characterizes current policy as well—is our tradition. It represents the way the United States reacts to big international problems. In a crisis, it's what American policymakers—not just the current ones—fall back on. It's how they expect to succeed. History does not support the idea that the Bush Administration has only to drop its revolution and come home to a tradition of international consensus and compromise.

Finally, the record of previous presidencies must caution all who believe that consensus and compromise are the key to successful problem-solving. Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton remind us of what maximalism can achieve. That the United States has been in a position over many decades to take periodic responsibility for overseeing a shake-up of the international status quo has produced consistently positive results. Had the most controversial American policies of this period been more thoroughly compromised—had they, to be blunt, been diluted by the counsels of allies—they might easily have failed.

George W. Bush's predecessors left him fewer problems to deal with because they aimed high and acted decisively. Seeing this, he may well derive renewed confidence that he is doing the right thing. But he might also reflect on his responsibility as custodian of this tradition. It will not be much of a legacy to be the president who, after decades of success, gave maximalism a bad name. □