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Strategy and the Idea of Freedom

By Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith, for the Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., Monday, November 24, 2003.

My association with the Heritage Foundation goes back a ways, twenty-six years, to 1977, when you were still located on Stanton Park at 5th and C, Northeast.

That was a time when we neo-cons, of which I was a junior member, and the folks we called the paleo-cons, made common cause: to support beleaguered democracies, to beleaguer the Soviet empire, and to advocate a US foreign policy of peace through strength.

The Heritage Foundation helped create the alliance of the neo-cons, those of us who started our political lives as Democrats, and the old-fashioned conservatives. It was an alliance of the profoundest type, anchored in philosophical principles. It was not tactical, not a political marriage of convenience.

The realignment of US politics that joined William Buckley with Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz – that bound together supporters of Barry Goldwater with supporters of Scoop Jackson and Hubert Humphrey – has helped change our country and the world. At home, it made the conservative slice of the political spectrum a lively place, intellectually scintillating, creative, ambitious to transform government, attractive to young people, and decidedly non-stodgy.

Abroad, the makers of the Reagan Revolution – with the Heritage Foundation as a key node in the network – elevated the status of ideas as weapons in the arsenal of democracy. The Reaganites understood Realpolitik; they grasped the importance of guns and money and the other "hard" realities of world affairs. But they appreciated also the potency of the human desire for freedom.

They saw the Cold War not as a balance-of-power exercise between two "superpowers" – much less an arms race between "two apes on a treadmill" – but as a noble fight of western liberal democracy against Soviet communist tyranny. They abraded conventional sensibilities by speaking of an "evil empire" and insisting that the truly representative voices in that empire were those of Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, Andrei Sakharov, Anatoly Sharansky and their fellow dissidents.

This engagement in philosophical warfare, I need hardly remind folks at the Heritage Foundation, created no small controversy in the politics and diplomacy of the western world. President Reagan's talk of democracy and good-versus-evil and his exhortation to tear down the Berlin Wall were widely criticized, even ridiculed, as unsophisticated and de-stabilizing. But it's now widely understood as having contributed importantly to the greatest strategic victory in world history: the collapse of Soviet communism and the liberation of the peoples of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe without war.

As we develop and execute our strategy today in the Global War on Terrorism, there is much to be learned from the Reagan era about the power of ideas. With President George W. Bush having just returned from Britain, I'd like to recall the remarkable speech that President Reagan gave on June 8, 1982 to the British parliament.

In it, he challenged the pessimism about the future of liberty that was common in the 1970s: "Optimism is in order," he said, "because day by day democracy is proving itself to be a not-at-all fragile flower. ... the regimes planted by totalitarianism have had more than thirty years to establish their legitimacy. But none – not one regime – has yet been able to risk free elections."

President Reagan recognized that democracy is not the preserve of one people or one cultural group. He said that democracy [quote] "already flourishes in countries with very different cultures and historical experiences. It would be cultural condescension, or worse, to say that any people prefer dictatorship to democracy."

Accordingly, President Reagan proposed a program "to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means."

That program grew into the National Endowment for Democracy, which recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary. President Bush spoke at the celebration of that anniversary a few weeks ago, recalling Ronald Reagan's words as "courageous and optimistic and entirely correct."

In the last few weeks, in his National Endowment for Democracy speech, and in his speech in London, President Bush carried forward Ronald Reagan's ideas and applied them to the Middle East and the Muslim world generally.

In President Bush's words: "The good and capable people of the Middle East all deserve responsible leadership. For too long, many people in that region have been victims and subjects – they deserve to be active citizens."

As in the case of President Reagan's 1982 speech, George W. Bush's advocacy of democracy serves a number of purposes: The "advance of freedom" is, President Bush said, not only the "calling of our time, ... it is the calling of our country."

But there's more at work here than just idealism. All free peoples have a practical stake in the spread of democratic institutions and the rule of law. Promoting freedom is fundamental to this Administration's policy in the Middle East, and in the Muslim world in general, and in the war on terrorism.

The Bush Administration's strategy in the war on terrorism has three parts:

- First, disrupting and destroying terrorist networks and infrastructure.
- Second, the protection of our homeland.
- And third is the intellectual component of creating a global anti-terrorist environment. We call this third part the "Battle of ideas."

Our aim in that battle is to de-legitimize terrorism as an instrument of politics. This means working to change the way people think, making toleration of terrorism – let alone support for it – unacceptable to anyone who wishes to be regarded as respectable. As President Bush's National Security Strategy says: People everywhere should put terrorism in the same despised category as slave-trading, piracy and genocide.

President Bush alluded to this point in London last week when he noted that American "zeal" has been inspired by English examples and he cited "the firm determination of the Royal Navy over the

decades [of the early nineteenth century] to find and end the trade in slaves."

If the United States and its Coalition partners are to succeed in changing the way the world thinks about terrorism, we'll have to ensure that terrorism is punished rather than rewarded and that state sponsors of terrorism pay a price for their activities. (The Taliban and Saddam Hussein regimes have paid an especially large price.)

But our efforts also have to target the recruitment and indoctrination of terrorists. No matter how successful we are at killing and capturing terrorists, or intercepting their weapons and funds, we can't win the war on terrorism unless we can reduce the supply of new terrorists. So, what are the circumstances that create fertile ground for the recruitment of terrorists?

I see many of the usual answers as off the mark.

Consider, for example, the phenomenon of suicide bombers -- terrorists who perform attacks that they know they cannot survive. Many commentators have asserted that such terrorists don't calculate the benefits and costs of their actions. Westerners commonly assume that only a person ensnared in deep despair could do such a thing.

This diagnosis implies its own solution -- that the world should address what are called the "root causes of terrorism," the poverty and political hopelessness that many people imagine are the traits and motives of the suicide bombers. This diagnosis, however, doesn't correspond to our actual experience. And it blinds us to opportunities we have to confront terrorism strategically.

When we look at the records of the suicide bombers, we see that many aren't drawn from the poor. Mohammed Atta, for instance -- a key figure in executing the September 11 attack -- was a middle-class Egyptian whose parents were able to send him to study abroad. And his education meant that he could look forward to a relatively privileged life in Egypt -- hardly grounds for extreme despair.

Rather, what characterizes terrorists seems to be a strange mixture of perverse hopes:

First of all, some bombers cherish a perverse form of religious hope. The promise of eternity in paradise is a tenet of many faiths, a noble incentive and consolation to millions of people. It's as cynical as it is sinister that leaders of al Qaida, Ansar al-Islam, Hezbollah, Hamas and other groups convince young people that eternity in paradise is available as a reward for murder.

Second, there is the bomber's hope of earthly glory and reward -- praise as a hero from political leaders and honor for one's parents.

Third, there is the bomber's political hope. Suicide bombing is what defense analysts categorize as a form of asymmetric warfare, a means for the weak to fight the strong. Some terrorists are motivated by their hope that it is a winning strategy.

This suggests a strategic course for us: attack the sources of these malignant hopes.

Regarding the religious hope: Many Muslim religious leaders disapprove of suicide bombing -- but many have been silenced or intimidated to voice support for the terrorists. The civilized world can do more to support moderate clerics, defend them and provide them with platforms on which to protect their religion from extremists who want to distort and hijack it.

The civilized world should also deal with political leaders who heap honor (and money) on the suicide bombers and their families. President Bush, speaking of suicide bombers, said: "They are not martyrs. They are murderers." Other world leaders have the responsibility to reinforce this message.

Finally, as to the suicide bombers' political hopes, it is important that terrorism be seen as a losing

strategy. It is of strategic importance that neither in Iraq nor Afghanistan nor elsewhere will the terrorists achieve success.

In addition to batting down these perverted hopes, our mission is to create the conditions in which the people of the Middle East and elsewhere in the Islamic world can cherish the humane aspirations of free people everywhere for liberty and an opportunity to use their talents to win a measure of prosperity for themselves and their families.

As President Bush noted: "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe – because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export."

We're now engaged in creating the conditions for freedom in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Although there is much to be said about Afghanistan -- in my remaining time, I'll confine myself to a brief review of the situation in Iraq.

Our work in that country is guided by President Bush's idea that a successful, new Iraq could serve as a model to the Arab and Muslim worlds of modernization, moderation, democracy and economic well-being. A free and prosperous Iraq could provide tens of millions of people with an alternative way to think about the future: Life doesn't have to be dominated by fanaticism and tyranny.

We want to give the Iraq people the opportunity to create a new and thriving Iraq – but we can't create it for them. The problems are many and large. We should not play Polyanna. But substantial progress has been achieved.

Iraq's national Governing Council is the most representative government Iraq has ever had – and it's gaining acceptance at home and abroad. It's appointed interim ministers, who run the ministries, setting budgets and making policy. Local councils and officials are beginning to exercise power – countering Iraq's history of extreme centralization.

Last week, the Governing Council, working with Ambassador Jerry Bremer, announced a process and timetable for creating a transitional government, electing the members of a Constitutional Convention, drafting and ratifying a new constitution and holding elections under it to elect a permanent government for Iraq.

In addition to the national Governing Council, there are over 250 governing councils functioning at the municipal and provincial levels throughout Iraq. This is a development of high significance, though generally under-reported.

The problem that dominates the news reports from Iraq is, of course, security. It's a problem that's interwoven with political and economic developments in Iraq, but I'll offer a few comments specifically about the military dimension, which is under the responsibility of General John Abizaid, the Commander of US Central Command.

General Abizaid is an intelligent and tough-minded commander who knows the region, has analyzed the various elements that compose the enemy forces and has devised an aggressive strategy to defeat them. The strategy includes offensive pressure, precise and relentless, to capture or kill enemy leaders and fighters, to disrupt and defeat their operations, to cut off their sources of supply and support and to extract and exploit intelligence. We are applying technology to counter the enemy's improvised bombs, mortars and other weapons. Our forces are adapting continually to counter enemy tactics.

Our enemies in Iraq are not numerous and not popular. Only a small portion of the Iraqi population has any desire to see the return of Baathist tyranny or the establishment of a government of extremist

jihadists. But our enemies are well-financed, well-armed and motivated by the recognition that the success of Iraqi democratic political reconstruction will end or severely damage their several causes. No one should underestimate the difficulty of our mission. But no one should doubt that the US-led Coalition will succeed.

Our strategy aims to put the Iraqis in a position to run their own lives, manage their own government and provide for their own security – and to leave as soon as we have done so.

Thus, we have a dual message to convey to the Iraqi people:

- First, that we in the Coalition will stay the course and see the job through until Iraq is well-launched on the path to freedom and prosperity.
- But second, that we have no ambition to rule the Iraqis and intend to hand their country back to them as soon as we can.

Fundamental to our strategy is getting more Iraqis trained and equipped to provide security for their own country. We are creating a new force, the Civil Defense Corps, which will perform combined operations with US and Coalition forces. We are also rebuilding the Iraqi police force, which disintegrated with the old regime's collapse. Re-training will also be necessary – the old Iraqi police force was not a capable institution: the real work of "law enforcement" (if one can call it that) under the old regime was done by the now-disbanded internal security services, using means that can have no place in a free Iraq.

Even as the new Iraqi security forces are being trained, they can take over some tasks, such as fixed-site security. Highly-skilled U.S. troops are not needed for such missions. US troops can more efficiently be kept in reserve to provide a quick reaction force that can deal with situations that go beyond the Iraqi forces' abilities.

As more Iraqis function in the various security forces, they will improve the Coalition's intelligence, which is the key to dealing with former regime loyalists and with terrorists. Knowledge of the terrain, of the society and of the language are all advantages that an indigenous force will have over any outside force, no matter how well-trained or technologically advanced.

Although we are on the right tracks in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is no doubt that we still face difficulties in both countries. But it bears recalling that, in 1982, when President Reagan gave the London speech from which I quoted earlier, we also faced difficult, even frightening, national security problems, and bitter controversy over the prudence of our policies and their chances for success.

Now, when we look back twenty years, the Cold War's successful conclusion appears not just brilliant but inevitable. Indeed, many Americans across the political spectrum now recall the Cold War with a sort of nostalgia as a time when the nature of the enemy was clear and our key foreign policy choices were obvious. But, as this audience knows, it was nothing of the sort – there were intense debates and doubts about the course President Reagan took in those years, especially what was criticized as his moralistic approach to confronting the Soviet empire.

I believe that, twenty years from now, President's Bush strategy – the actions in the war on terrorism that I have been discussing and other initiatives that I haven't mentioned, such as the transformation of our alliance structures and the transformation of our military forces – will also appear excellent, inevitable and perhaps even obvious. We'll look back at them with pride and satisfaction, knowing that the United States rose to the challenge of the defense of our freedom with skill, moral clarity, determination – and success.

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