
American Statesmanship: Contrasting Views of Leadership

Michael P. Federici

Middle Tennessee State University

As George Washington contemplated attending the Constitutional Convention in 1787, he worried that if the meeting failed it would stain his reputation and jeopardize his place as father of the American republic.¹ Given the support for and failures of the Articles of Confederation, Washington had good reason to worry that either the convention would not produce an alternative to the Articles or that it would produce one that was as ineffective and short-lived. However much Washington may have been motivated by vanity, he was predisposed to expect that failure was a common outcome of politics, in some cases because providence or fate controlled the outcome, not human agency. In instances when and to the degree that outcomes depended on human agency, Washington knew that human beings were prone to vices that were contrary to the higher ends of politics. Thus, he was not inclined to overestimate the possibilities of politics even though he had reasons to believe that providence was on his side. As a young special envoy appointed by Lieutenant Governor Robert Dinwiddie, he had escaped a near point-blank assassination attempt in the back woods of Pennsylvania. A change in weather at Brooklyn Heights, early in the War for Independence, had provided the cover needed for nearly ten thousand American troops trapped by British forces to escape without a single fatality.² In one of his most remarkable achievements, he had presided over a poorly trained

MICHAEL P. FEDERICI is Professor of Political Science and chair of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Middle Tennessee State University.

¹ Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2010), 520-524.

² *Ibid.*, 36, 249.

and equipped army that defeated a superior British military force in the War for Independence.

Washington was not always blessed with good fortune; he experienced his share of setbacks and challenges as commander of the American military. Battles were lost when his orders and instructions were disobeyed. Traitors, like Benedict Arnold, jeopardized American troop positions and plans by revealing them to the British. Washington's own troops mutinied, looted, deserted, and were stubbornly difficult to train. Rivals for his position undermined his authority, went behind his back to Congress, and refused to follow orders. A group of officers engaged in a conspiracy to carry out a coup that Washington famously stopped with an impassioned speech at Newburgh, New York. Through it all, Washington typically maintained his composure, avoided cynicism, and was firm in enforcing demanding standards, including those that required the execution of British spies or disobedient American soldiers. At the same time, he was acutely aware of his shortcomings, which included a volatile temper and a tendency to emotional excess. He relied on others, like Alexander Hamilton, to compensate for his poor communication skills. Washington was self-confident but cognizant of his limitations. He exhibited a habit and disposition of mind consistent with a sober view of politics and human nature.

In a different context, George Kennan, like Washington, understood the limits of power and politics. He, too, displayed a habit and disposition of mind that reflected a sober philosophical anthropology. Kennan's *American Diplomacy* provides a review of twentieth-century American diplomacy and lessons learned from it. Of particular note is Kennan's conclusion that American statesmen have "failed to appreciate the limitations of war in general—any war—as a vehicle for the achievement of the objectives of the democratic state." He suggests that American statesmen have greatly overestimated the degree to which "force and coercion" can advance the ends of democracy.³ Much of Kennan's book is a reminder of what Thucydides concluded about the Peloponnesian War, that hubris is the undoing of great powers.

Overestimating the possibilities of politics is all too common in political history. The reasons why human beings are prone to romanticize politics, to expect more than it can deliver, include self-conceit and a lust for power as well as a desire for progress that brings glory. Kennan identifies the psychological desire for conquest and empire—what Irving

³ George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 88.

Babbitt calls “expansive eagerness”⁴ and John Dickinson terms “thirst of empire”⁵—that motivated the American expansionists who supported the Spanish-American War. He remarks that the expansionists “liked the smell of empire and felt an urge to range themselves among the colonial powers of the time, to see our flag flying on distant tropical isles, to feel the thrill of foreign adventure and authority, to bask in the sunshine of recognition as one of the great imperial powers of the world.”⁶

One of Kennan’s primary concerns is the effect imperial expansion will have at home. Will it change the disposition of political leaders and citizens that engendered modest republicanism and that makes it possible? What will be the consequence of military success that inflames “public imagination”?⁷ Kennan’s worry is that Americans would ignore the realities of failed policies and embrace the abstraction of a benevolent American empire intent on doing good in the world by using its might to do for others what it has done for itself: free human beings from despotism and unleash the forces of economic prosperity. In other words, the public is more apt to see the good intent, the idealistic justification for a failed policy, as defining the possibilities of politics rather than the failed policy itself, the bad outcome. Recognizing the limits of power, especially coercive power, requires coming to the realization that one’s country is flawed and makes mistakes that can cost lives and deplete resources as well as undermining the national interest. While political leaders commonly cloak their policies and actions in the rhetoric of the public good, they have been known to disguise self-serving motives and intentions. A pseudo-patriotism, American exceptionalism, a form of national conceit, creates a predisposition to believe grand narratives that cast the nation in the starring role of history as a redeemer nation, a shining city on a hill. This predisposition provides support for leaders who do not intend what is good for their nation or who exercise poor judgment in its pursuit. Walter McDougall’s *The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy*, Richard Gamble’s *In Search of the City on a Hill*, and Justin Litke’s *Twilight of the Republic* trace and identify this tendency in American history. All three consider American exceptionalism to be an unhealthy civil religion that undermines the realistic assessment of political power advocated by Kennan.

⁴ Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979), 226.

⁵ John Dickinson, “Fabius” Letter VII, in *Friends of the Constitution: Writings of the “Other” Federalists 1787-1788*, ed. Colleen A. Sheehan and Gary L. McDowell (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 489.

⁶ Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

Why have American political leaders frequently conducted politics without Washington's regard for the possibility of failure or Dickinson's "animated moderation"⁸ and without heeding Kennan's warnings about the limits of power? Why has American exceptionalism been such an alluring temptress? Some may argue that fear of failure impedes success in politics, that, to be successful on the world stage, it is necessary to play the role with a certain bravado and intimidating self-confidence. Yet Washington was as accomplished as any American soldier or statesman, in part because he learned from his mistakes, and he was realistic about the limits of military power. He was a master of using power effectively both as a military commander and as president. His view of power not only was consistent with but contributed to his greatness. It helped to ground him in the sober realities of historical experience and enabled him to resist the temptation to view politics through the romantic lens of American exceptionalism.

Woodrow Wilson and WWI

In contrast to Washington and Kennan, American presidents in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are insufficiently skeptical about their ability to accomplish extraordinary political feats. The greater the objective, the less likely that fear of failure is present. For example, Woodrow Wilson was confident that American entry into World War I not only would turn the tide of the war but would transform the world in the aftermath of Allied victory. He was certain that the U.S. was purely benevolent in its motives and guided by divine will.⁹ In his "War Message to Congress," he declared that:

We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no domination. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.

Wilson stated as one of the objectives of American entry into the war to "make the world itself at last free."¹⁰ As the war progressed and its casu-

⁸ Dickinson, "Fabius" Letter VII, 501.

⁹ It is interesting to note that Washington and Wilson shared an aversion to mixing soldiers and alcohol, but there is a telling difference. Washington limited the army's consumption of alcohol and used alcohol rations to motivate and reward his troops. Wilson's administration added a clause in the Selective Service Act that made it a federal "crime to sell or give a drink to a serviceman." See Chernow, *Washington*, 334, and Thomas Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory: America in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 120.

¹⁰ Woodrow Wilson, War Message to Congress, in *Woodrow Wilson: The Essential*

alties were counted in tens of millions, his enthusiasm for final solutions did not diminish. In his “Fourteen Points” speech to a Joint Session of Congress (January 8, 1918), he anticipated that the “moral climax of this the culminating and final war for human liberty, has come.”¹¹

Wilson’s statements regarding the purpose and meaning of the war are an extraordinary display of national conceit and progressive idealism. There is not a hint of Kennan’s skepticism about war power or a recognition of the limits of war as an instrument of politics. A certain degree of rhetorical excess is expected in the context of war mobilization, but Wilson’s description of American motives and expectations are so far outside the realm of the reasonable and realistic that they rise to what Eric Voegelin calls a “metastatic dream,”¹² a component of political religion. Political religions are characterized by a belief in the transformation and possible perfection of the world in history (i.e., “immanent salvation”).¹³ They conflate the transcendent ends of the afterlife and the earthly ends of politics. The inclination toward metastatic faith is inspired by an impatience with the world as it is, an unwillingness to accept the imperfections of political life as known and experienced in history. Rather than a ground for expansive expectations from politics, historical experience provides examples of the failure to live up to the metastatic dream. The metastatic dreamer is in revolt against the ground of being, the structure of reality that limits the possibilities of human existence. History is construed as validating the dream of immanent salvation. In the articulation of the dream, the meaning and direction of history are revealed.

The American Framers’ Conception of Politics

There are, admittedly, competing conceptions of politics that to varying degrees accept the limits of what can be accomplished through the use of political power. The American Framers were by no means monolithic in their conceptions of politics, but they tended to be sober in their expectations, as were Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison. In *Federalist* 76, Hamilton places human nature in-between “universal venality” and “universal rectitude.” Individuals who take human

Political Writings, ed. Ronald J. Pestritto (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 256.

¹¹ Wilson, “Fourteen Points” Speech, January 8, 1918, in *ibid.*, 264.

¹² The concepts “metastatic faith,” “metastatic dreaming,” and “metastatic imagination” are used by Eric Voegelin to describe a characteristic of political religions/ideologies, a tendency to believe in the transformation of the human condition. See Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, ed. Maurice P. Hogan (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 506-519.

¹³ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics in The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 5: *Modernity without Restraint* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 194.

nature “as it is, without either flattering its virtues, or exaggerating its vices,” will “see” the necessity of constitutional checks and restraints.¹⁴ His assessment emanates from a disposition grounded in human experience. Like Kennan and John Dickinson—who held that experience may teach what reason alone cannot—Hamilton bases his view of politics on historical experience. He suggests in *Federalist* 15 that “the best oracle of wisdom” is experience.¹⁵ Wilson, by contrast, seemed to gauge the possibilities of politics from the realm of romantic or metastatic dreaming and ahistorical abstraction—an imaginary world of peaceful democratic states where once tyrannies existed—rather than historical experience or historically grounded theory.

Madison shared Hamilton’s general philosophical disposition and expressed it most notably in *Federalist* 51 in distinguishing between angels and humans. A society of angels needs no government and would not need checks on government if it had one. Humans need both government to check the lower inclinations of their nature and checks on government to safeguard power and prevent tyranny. Especially revealing is Madison’s discussion of factions in *Federalist* 10 and what it indicates about his conception of politics. Factions are characterized as groups of individuals who “are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” Factions are not mere interest groups. They are inspired by “zeal,” “speculation,” and attachment to leaders competing for power. They are “inflamed” with “mutual animosity” and more likely to “vex and oppress each other, than to co-operate for their common good.” Madison adds that factions are easily triggered into violent action over “frivolous and fanciful distinctions.”¹⁶ His description of typical political rivalry and competition rules out an idealistic or metastatic dream. Immanent salvation is precluded by his theory of factions and constitutional government.

So unflattering is Madison’s view of factions that, for him, the central concern of government should be to regulate them so that they do not destroy the common good. Reaction to Madison’s rather dark portrayal of politics, or any such portrayal, can vary. One can imagine a temptation to eliminate the evil of factions, to dream of worlds outside of history

¹⁴ Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist* (The Gideon Edition), ed. George Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 395. References to *The Federalist* are to this edition.

¹⁵ Hamilton, *Federalist* 15, 73.

¹⁶ Madison, *Federalist* 10, 42-49.

as if they could be realized in history. A Wilsonian zeal for transforming politics inspires and invites such temptation. Removing factions from political life would eliminate one of the great causes of political strife, and violence. Yet Madison rejects the option of eliminating factions. Why? Because their causes are “sown in the nature of man.” To eliminate factions would require “destroying the liberty” that allows them to exist. Another way to remove them would be to try to give citizens the same opinions, passions, and interests: what might be called the totalitarian option. The first option is “worse than the disease”; the second is “impracticable” and “unwise.” Madison implies that overestimating the possibilities of politics leads to failure, making a bad situation worse regardless of the goodness of intentions.¹⁷

So Madison’s solution to the problem of faction is not to eliminate factions but to control their effects by multiplying them in an extended republic and to filter their vexatious and hateful views through representatives who can refine and enlarge them. Madison’s solution means living with factions and all that they imply. It involves the imperfect republican virtue of representatives who, he admits, may betray the public good and true interest of the people. The best persons will not always be at the helm. All that can be done is to minimize the effects of factions, a way of dealing with the problem that will not satisfy more idealistic thinkers like Woodrow Wilson, who desire and expect more from politics. They are inclined to promote impossible dreams, aspiring to a more hopeful, if not historically and eschatologically transforming, vision of politics. For Madison and the Framers, politics is the art of the possible, which means acknowledging that evil is a permanent part of political life and that the best that is possible is to minimize it. Hamilton asks in *Federalist* 6:

Have we not already seen enough of the fallacy and extravagance of those idle theories which have amused us with promises of an exemption from imperfections, the weaknesses, and the evils incident to society in every shape? Is it not time to awake from the deceitful dream of a golden age, and to adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our political conduct, that we, as well as the other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue?¹⁸

Publius’ political theory is consistent with an older, more sober view of politics that has some commonality with Machiavelli’s political theory. These thinkers search for ways to minimize evil while accepting its

¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹⁸ Hamilton, *Federalist* 6, 25.

inevitable, permanent role in political life. Madison's *Federalist* 10 is consistent with Aquinas's comment that "human laws cannot prohibit everything that the natural law prohibits."¹⁹

The difference in the expectations of politics that separates Publius' and Wilson's view of politics is due, in part, to the views of morality held by each side. The view of morality that serves as the foundation for the American Framers' moral realism is rooted in the old classical and Judeo-Christian tradition as well as more recent influences. The Wilsonian view stems from a much different understanding of human nature and politics that shares many characteristics with the Enlightenment and with the moral and political theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The older view of human nature and politics assumes that human beings are innately flawed. They experience an abiding tension between higher and lower inclinations, and, consequently, they cannot be trusted with unchecked power. Because the American Framers embraced this view of human beings and politics, they went to great lengths to safeguard liberty against arbitrary power. They created a constitution that, first and foremost, separated power among different branches and levels of government. In addition, they limited government by specifically denying it powers that were deemed too dangerous for it to exercise. They decentralized power to prevent its accumulation in the hands of one person or one group of people. Even the concentration of power in the hands of the people, even as a consequence of democratic election, they saw as a source of tyranny. Checks and balances were introduced to maintain separated powers over time and to use the self-interest and ambition of political leaders to check the self-interest and ambition of leaders in other branches and levels of government. Hamilton noted in *Federalist* 28 that power is the rival of power, and Madison wrote in *Federalist* 51 that "[a]mbition must be made to counteract ambition."²⁰

The Framers' constitutional system does not rely solely on institutional structures and self-interest to safeguard power. They were aware that the highest aspirations of politics require character traits above mere self-interest. In fact, constitutional politics functions as intended only when individuals of sound character set the tone in government and society. Madison states the point clearly in *Federalist* 57: "The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first, to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on Law*, trans. with an Introduction by Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 55.

²⁰ See Hamilton, *Federalist* 28, 136, and Madison, *Federalist* 51, 268.

good of the society; and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous, whilst they continue to hold their public trust."²¹ In a different context, Hamilton and Washington declared in the latter's "Farewell Address" that, "[o]f all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens."²²

How, then, do character and a morally realistic view of human beings and politics relate to statesmanship and the conduct of foreign affairs? The restrained view of power embraced and practiced by Washington and Hamilton and expressed by Dickinson, Madison, and Kennan is derived from this older view of politics and morality. It shapes the sober expectations that restrain the temptation to use power expansively and contrary to fundamental security needs and the national interest.

By contrast, the expansive view of politics and foreign affairs exhibited by most twentieth- and twenty-first century American presidents stems from a very different view of human beings and politics. The idealistic view ignores or rejects the permanent tension in human beings between good and evil and the corresponding need to control will and appetite. Rousseau professed that humans are born free and without the stain of sin; they are naturally good. Evil is the consequence of conventions and institutions, which imbued the structures of society with injustice. Contrary to Madison, evil is not sown into human nature. Consequently, improving society does not require reforming the self but remaking conventions and institutions.

War is but an extreme method of making these reforms; inspired by metastatic dreams, it becomes the instrument of revolutionary change. Moreover, its destructive capacity becomes more likely to be tolerated in that the reward is believed to be an end to evils that have plagued humanity for millennia. One central dividing line between the older school of moral realists and progressives is the latter's confidence in the ability of human beings to control their circumstances and fate. Progressives tend to believe that the meaning of history is fully knowable and that humans can set the direction of history.

Expectations of politics thus shape the conduct of politics. If Wilson had not expected American entry into WWI to have a globally

²¹ Madison, *Federalist* 57, 295.

²² George Washington, "Farewell Address," in *Liberty and Order: The First American Party Struggle*, ed. with a Preface by Lance Banning (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), 219.

transforming effect and viewed it as a war to end all wars, he, like Washington and Hamilton, might have avoided intervention in European disputes, or he may have set different conditions for success. He had, after all, opposed American entry into the war in his first term as president.

The actions of presidents over the past century suggest a pattern of rising, arguably utopian, expectations, indicating a break with the sober realism of Washington, Dickinson, Hamilton, Madison, and Kennan. As a reaction to war and terrorism, Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and George W. Bush turned the Great Rule established by Washington and Hamilton on its head. Rather than seeing American meddling intervention²³ in the world as a threat to the security and vitality of the republic, recent presidents have tended to see American intervention as a way to protect the national interest. There may be some truth in such claims stemming from significant differences between the situations existing in the eighteenth century and those of the contemporary world. What is arguably different is the emergence in the twentieth century of an ideology that was in its infancy in the eighteenth century—evident in the writings of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine—that insists that democracy can survive at home only if it is spread abroad. Wilson was a liberal internationalist who believed that democracies are intrinsically peace loving—hence the spread of democracy would increase the likelihood of international peace—a point that was contradicted by Hamilton in *Federalist* 6.²⁴

FDR and WWII

FDR's "Four Freedoms" speech in January 1941 strikes a similar liberal internationalist chord. As the United States considered the consequences of war on multiple continents, Roosevelt set the stage for American intervention. He characterized his opponents who wanted to keep the U.S. out of war as isolationists who wished to "lock us in behind an ancient Chinese wall while the procession of civilization went past." Isolationism may have served the national interest in the past, but in the twentieth century ideological powers intent on global domination threatened American security. In a refrain that gets repeated by

²³ Some readers are apt to read "meddling intervention" to mean any intervention. What is being opposed here, however, is not every instance of American intervention in foreign affairs, but intervention that is inspired by metastatic dreaming and American exceptionalism.

²⁴ Hamilton, *Federalist* 6, 20-26.

liberal internationalists and neoconservatives throughout the twentieth century, isolationism leads to appeasement and the spread of tyranny. Security depends on the protection of democratic regimes and the defeat of sinister imperial regimes. The failure of the peace of Versailles was the failure of democratic nations to engage in “world reconstruction.” FDR expressed the view that would echo throughout the twentieth century: “I find it unhappily necessary to report that the future and the safety of our country and of our democracy are overwhelmingly involved in events far beyond our borders.” Roosevelt is confident that “the justice of morality must and will win in the end.”²⁵

The point here is not that the U.S. should not have intervened in World War II, or that it should never intervene. Rather, what is being argued is that political leaders do well to assess the prospects of success in a realistic manner when contemplating the use of force and to be sober about what constitutes success in international politics. They should take account of historical evidence and the limits of military power before using it and avoid conflating the ends of politics (the things of Caesar) and the ends of religion (the things of God). Doing so will likely avoid the kind of mistakes that FDR (and Harry Truman) made when insisting on unconditional surrender and total war.²⁶ There were ways to participate in the war that would have sought to achieve more limited ends and used deadly force in a more economical, and thus humane, way.

LBJ and the War in Vietnam

During the Vietnam War, President Lyndon Johnson gave an address at Johns Hopkins University on April 7, 1965, entitled “Peace Without Conquest” that reprised the utopian themes of Wilson’s War Message to Congress. Johnson connected the war in Vietnam with the American Civil War, and he echoed the sentiments of Wilson and FDR in suggesting that American freedom and security are dependent on the freedom and democratic self-determination of every nation:

Tonight Americans and Asians are dying for a world where each people may choose its own path to change.

This is the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania. It is the principle for which our sons fight tonight in the jungles

²⁵ Franklin Roosevelt, “The Four Freedoms” (January 6, 1941), in *The American Nation: Primary Sources*, ed. Bruce Frohnen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008), 564-565.

²⁶ For FDR’s insistence on unconditional surrender and total war, see Thomas Fleming, *The New Dealers’ War: Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the War within World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

of Viet-Nam. . . .

Why must we take this painful road?

Why must this Nation hazard its ease, and its interest, and its power for the sake of a people so far away?

We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny. And only in such a world will our own freedom be finally secure. . . .

But we will always oppose the effort of one nation to conquer another nation. We will do this because our own security is at stake. For most of history men have hated and killed one another in battle. But we dream of an end to war. And we will try to make it so.²⁷

Rather than describing the Vietnam intervention as intended to achieve a limited goal, such as blunting Soviet expansionism, LBJ, like Wilson and FDR, asserted that peace and international order depend on universal democracy and the realization of a dream that reveals the direction of history. He insisted that democracy is a global ideology to which all nations will eventually convert. Like Wilson and FDR, LBJ thought that he knew the purpose and direction of history and that the U.S. when it used military force to spread democracy was on the right side of history.

Yet there are reasons to be skeptical about both the claim to know the purpose and meaning of history and the claim to be on the right side of history. The notion that Vietnam was ripe for democracy, although it did not possess the cultural prerequisites for constitutional government, and that American culture, politics, and ideology could be successfully exported to such nations is closer to a dream than to a realistic policy objective. Proponents of global democracy insist on three pillars of progress: democratic political institutions, social-contract-based natural rights, and free economic markets. Trying to impose these features of democratic life on nations ill-equipped to implement them is akin to believing that democratic politics can function free of factious disorder. In both instances, an idealistic philosophical anthropology substitutes for a sober one, a metastatic dream substitutes for an experientially grounded assessment of what can be accomplished by war.

It is one thing to be the well-wisher of and exemplar for other nations. It is possible, as John Quincy Adams put it, to support movements toward democracy and independence without going abroad “in search of monsters to destroy.”²⁸ Yet, LBJ, like Wilson and FDR, was engaged in

²⁷ Lyndon Baines Johnson, “Peace Without Conquest,” April 7, 1965: <http://www.lbjlibrary.org/exhibits/the-presidents-address-at-johns-hopkins-university-peace-without-conquest>.

²⁸ John Quincy Adams, “Speech to the U.S. House of Representatives on Foreign

a war that aimed to slay tyrants and bring American-style democracy to a people who were threatened by tyrants. Some will argue that Johnson's idealistic rhetoric was necessary to win public support and mobilize a nation for the hardships of war. If such was the case, one wonders what had happened to the American public imagination that required idealistic obfuscation to win support for what was supposedly a defense of vital American interests. That such appeals to grandiose transformations of the globe were necessary indicated that Americans, like their political leaders, had increasingly become idealistic, even utopian, in their conception of politics. Inspired by metastatic imagination and faith, they believed that human beings could leap beyond the limits of the human condition, including the limits of politics. The spread of American exceptionalism, and prideful nationalism generally, helped to dissolve the reticence toward interventionism of Washington's Great Rule and Hamilton's *Pacificus* essays. As the twentieth century progressed, Americans were losing their grip on, and memory of, the older view of politics expressed by Publius that informed the Constitution.

George W. Bush and the War on Terror

The thread of idealism and metastatic faith that runs through Woodrow Wilson, FDR, and LBJ is evident in George W. Bush's reaction to 9/11. It should be noted, however, that, as Phillip Henderson has shown, neoconservatives in the Bush administration were planning an invasion of Iraq long before 9/11.²⁹ The Bush Doctrine, although perhaps in muted form, would likely have existed without 9/11. The intellectual chasm that separates McDougall's *Promised Land, Crusader State and The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy* from Robert Kagan's *Dangerous Nation* and *The Jungle Grows Back* existed long before 9/11. Bush's Second Inaugural Address echoes the sentiments of Wilson, FDR, and LBJ. That speech is delivered a little more than three years after 9/11. Explaining the agenda for his second term, the president defines the special role of the U.S. in the grand sweep of history. Bush begins by referring to the historical moment and the duties it brings to the U.S.

At this second gathering, our duties are defined not by the words I use, but by the history we have seen together. For a half century, America defended our own freedom by standing watch on distant borders. After the

Policy," July 4, 1821: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-4-1821-speech-us-house-representatives-foreign-policy>.

²⁹ Phillip G. Henderson, "Anatomy of a National Security Fiasco: The Bush Administration, Iraq, and Groupthink," *Humanitas* XXXI, nos. 1 & 2 (2018): 46-80.

shipwreck of communism came years of relative quiet, years of repose, years of sabbatical—and then there came a day of fire.

The day of fire is, of course, 9/11. It defines the foreign policy challenge of Bush's presidency. It is to deal with a global, violent ideological movement that has replaced communism as the paramount threat to American security, democracy, and human rights. How should the U.S. respond to the historical moment? Bush answers: "We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world." Global democracy responds to the need in this historical moment. Bush endorses a universalist American ideology that, he believes, informed eighteenth-century Americans in their quest for independence and in their efforts to frame a constitution.

America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.³⁰

The policy implications of Bush's characterization of American historical identity are sweeping. He explains that "it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."³¹ Unlike Madison in *Federalist* 10, who responded to the problem of faction with a more limited view of the possibilities of politics, Bush, like Wilson, FDR, and LBJ before him, suggests a permanent and final solution to the problem of terrorism and tyranny more generally. His solution is to expand the scope of America's reach in the world and expand its ambitions, which is to push the older, modest view of American politics further into the recesses of the American mind, making it appear pusillanimous by comparison.

Conclusion

The argument provided here has established a sharp contrast between Washington, Dickinson, Hamilton, Madison, and Kennan on the

³⁰ George W. Bush, Second Inaugural Address (January 20, 2005): <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/inaugural-address.html>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

one hand and Wilson, FDR, LBJ, and Bush on the other. The differences between the two groups of statesmen can be classified in different ways, but one striking difference concerns what they regard as the proper scope and expectation of politics and military force. The first group can be classified as moral realists. Political and military power can achieve only limited objectives, and they have a corrupting effect on statesmen due to the weaknesses of human beings. The more ambitious the objective, the greater the power needed to accomplish it. The greater the power, the more likely it is to exceed the boundaries of republican and constitutional government and strain the moral capacity of flawed human beings. Failure is common in politics, and there is reason to be cautious and skeptical about relying on military power in particular. Prudent statesmanship involves an economy of violence, not its proliferation. The second group of leaders expresses no concern about exceeding the constitutional limits of power. They are confident that they, as statesmen, and America, as a nation, have only good motives. They overestimate their ability to use political power to realize justice and eliminate evil from the world. The difference between the two groups of leaders is one of scope, of how the possibilities of politics, power, and leadership are viewed. It is a difference of imagination.

A second difference between the moral realists and idealist globalists is that the first group does not embrace a political eschatology, a political religion according to which human beings can be delivered permanently from evil. For the moral realists, not only is failure possible, even when objectives are modest, but there are no final, complete victories over evil in politics. Global idealists, by contrast, act as though eradicating evil—which is what, in one form or another, Wilson, FDR, LBJ, and Bush expect from the use of violent power—is not only possible but part of the historical, providential, divine calling of America. If a similar claim is made about Marxism, which clearly has eschatological expectations, most readers will nod in agreement. The suggestion that there are elements of eschatological expectation in twentieth-century and twenty-first-century American foreign policy is likely to elicit a different reaction.

Consequently, this second point requires clarification. What is claimed here is not that the U.S. is an evil empire like the former Soviet Union. The point is akin, rather, to what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn conveyed in his “A World Split Apart” speech at Harvard—a “bitter truth” offered by a friend. The West contains some of the same ideological forces of self-destruction as its rivals. They are part of the *zeitgeist* inhabiting this particular historical epoch. Solzhenitsyn claims that the West suffers

from “spiritual mediocrity.” He reminds us that “truth seldom is sweet; it is almost invariably bitter.”³² Here countervailing tendencies among American statesmen have illustrated that the better side of the American tradition lives in tension with eschatological tendencies. In fact, these tensions are present within some leaders. George W. Bush, for example, campaigned for the presidency as an opponent of nation-building. He seemed, at least during the October 11, 2000, presidential debate with Vice President Al Gore, to embrace a more modest and realistic view of American foreign policy.

In every age, statesmen are required to navigate the streams of competing political visions that are given force and direction by intellectuals, the media, political leaders, and the circumstances of the times. The temptation is to swim with the strongest current. Yet the best statesmen are usually those with the intuition that the times call for them to swim against the prevalent current and to have the fortitude to try to change its direction. For at least a century, American politics has been dominated by types of idealism on the political left and right that are motivated by political religion, metastatic faith, and metastatic dreaming. Sound statesmanship needs to learn from men like Washington, Dickinson, Hamilton, Madison, and Kennan, whose view of politics is grounded in historical experience and thus in realism and modest expectations. Some may ask, “Where is the glory and greatness in using power with modesty and restraint?” Individuals cannot be great unless their states are great, and great states shape the world. Yet greatness should not be measured by the GDP, military might, or influence alone. If the tradition of Washington is the measure, then greatness is measured by the degree to which rulers and nations comply with and contribute to the creation and maintenance of civilization. Prudence, the paramount political virtue, dictates whether in given circumstances this standard requires military force or restraint, intervention or benign neglect. Washington’s greatness was forged, in part, by his ability to resist the temptation to aggrandize power. George III remarked that by foregoing both military and political power Washington was “the greatest character of the age.”³³ His greatness stemmed from his being grounded in historical experience, his philosophical realism, and his refusal to conflate the things of God and the things of Caesar. Especially if they aspire to greatness, contemporary American leaders need to follow his example.

³² Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart: Commencement Address Delivered at Harvard University June 8, 1978* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 19, 1.

³³ Quoted in Chernow, *Washington*, 757.