

## **"The Bush Doctrine: Selective Engagement in the Middle East"**

**By Kenneth W. Stein** *MERIA Journal Vol.6, No.2 (June 2002), Article 6 of 7* <<http://meria.idc.ac.il>>

Abstract: This article's thesis is that the Bush Doctrine is part of a broader bipartisan American foreign policy, "Selective Engagement," emerging since the Cold War's end. U.S. willingness to be involved abroad are based on whether such an effort is in the national interest, can be shared with a coalition, costs acceptable amounts of money and potential casualties, and will leave the region better off. It discusses the Bush Administration's Middle East policy in this context, especially regarding the move toward higher degrees of apparent involvement in coping with the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

### **THE BUSH DOCTRINE: SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST** **By Kenneth W. Stein\***

During the 2000 American presidential election campaign, George W. Bush gave one foreign policy address. Not unexpectedly, domestic priorities prevailed at his Administration's outset: education reform, the environment, private school vouchers, faith-based initiatives, energy sources and production, creation of prescription drug benefits, tax relief, an economic stimulus package, health care, values, ethics, and propounding a philosophy of "compassion in government." Domestic issues which contained foreign policy components--such as illegal drugs, trade questions, terrorism prevention, immigration concerns, energy matters, and currency stability-- also had some priority, but only if they affected the lives and immediate economic or physical well-being of Americans. Consequently, during his first months in office, Bush was chided not for his lack of interest in foreign affairs but lack of knowledge about the world. In a tongue-in-cheek humor, the Economist magazine showed a picture of an American astronaut on the moon with the caption, "Mr. Bush goes to Europe." An editorial within noted that "many Europeans believe that he is uninterested in cooperation...that he had appointed a host of officials who reject multilateralism." It concluded, however, that even without a common Soviet enemy, Europe and America had "common values and a common interest in upholding them."<sup>(1)</sup> The aftermath of the September 11, 2001, assault on America changed the Administration's agenda. Europeans voiced their strong support for the United States to a far greater extent than they had backed the 1990 coalition to counter Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The military attack on the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan was endorsed by 40 countries compared to 28 in the earlier case. And that response came only 26 days after the September 11 attack, not the 165 days it took to act after the initial invasion of Kuwait. Unlike in 1990 also, there was no partisan debate in the U.S. Senate about whether force should be used. The President and the American people who had little interest in foreign affairs were suddenly thrust into an international crisis. But the longer-term question was the extent to which this development changed the style and substance of America's selective engagement policy in foreign affairs? Would unilateralism or multilateralism play a greater role in American preferences? Was it

unilateral policy for the President of the United States to declare on dozens of occasions that “either you are with us or against us in the war against terrorism” What change, if any, did articulation of this doctrine have on American foreign policy toward the Middle East in general and toward Arab-Israeli conflict in particular? The Bush Doctrine was not an advocacy of a clash of civilizations or a Western crusade against Islam. It articulated specific goals. International terrorism would be isolated; the Taliban and al-Qaeda networks were to be destroyed. This doctrine’s duration and effectiveness remained open-ended but it had specific goals and set limitations. The goal was not to change the Middle East or to launch a major economic development program. There was no stated intention to continue intervention or maintain additional forces in the region longer than was absolutely necessary. The United States checked, evaluated, tested, and when possible improved bilateral relations with those willing to help in this effort. Since the Cold War’s end and Soviet Union’s demise, and during the terms of Presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, the United States developed an over-arching bipartisan foreign policy best described as selective engagement. It was neither unilateral nor multilateral in definition or application. It was a concept applied with differing degrees of intensity depending on the issue, moment, and the President’s personal preferences. While holding the precepts of defending democratic freedoms, protecting human rights, and encouraging free enterprise, there remained historical American reluctance to be engaged abroad, unless an international situation challenged American national interests. On entering office, though, the Bush Administration found the United States with unchallenged military and economic strength dominant in a unipolar world. America was the sole superpower, without any foreseeable competition on the horizon, and living in a relatively peaceful Western hemisphere. Being the sole superpower did not automatically make Americans or their Presidents accept the responsibility as world leader, as others would have wanted or feared. Under the Clinton and first Bush Administrations, the United States did not flaunt its power by pushing around less powerful countries; it remained content to manage world affairs and become involved on the limited occasions when that was deemed necessary or desired. America was being choosy about where and when to become involved abroad.(2) But what was meant by choosy? In a broader perspective, since the late 1980s, four criteria emerged in defining America’s selective engagement abroad: 1. Are there sufficient moral imperatives or strategic needs that require protection of the national interest? 2. What are the costs in American lives and will American physical engagement be for a limited period of time? 3. Are there potential allies elsewhere, and especially in the region of possible engagement, which would form a working coalition with Washington to share the human, financial, and physical burdens? 4. Is there a viable exit strategy from the area which would leave the local political environment more stable than prior to engagement? Can that strategy include building, revamping, or expanding bilateral U.S. strategic relationships with coalition partners? Richard Haass, head of the Policy Planning Staff in the Bush State Department, defined selective engagement in July 2001, as “a la carte multilateralism.”(3) After the September 11, 2001, terrorist assault on America, Secretary of State Colin Powell refused categorization of American foreign policy as “unilateralist,” though Washington did disassociate itself unilaterally (but after consultations with the Russians) from the anti-ballistic missile

treaty. The charge of acting unilaterally had begun well before September 11, as the Bush Administration had unilaterally pulled out of the Kyoto Treaty and had refused to ratify the convention to establish a permanent war crimes tribunal. Powell, in December 2001, explained that the United States was "interested in pulling together coalition [but] where [U.S.] national interests are not served by being multilateral or participating in something that we know is not in our national interest and we don't think serves the purpose that others think it serves, we have to speak out." In short, the United States would prefer to find allies but would go it alone when necessary.(4) And that is what the United States did after September 11. Unlike ten years earlier, when the U.S. prepared its action against Saddam Hussein with UN resolutions as mandates for action, this time, against the Taliban and al-Qaeda network, Washington made no effort to look for international justification for action. The United States was confident that, pressed to make a choice, countries would be more likely and faster to take its side. Thus, Bush repeated over and over again, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."

**FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST U.S. INTERVENTION ABROAD AND IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN PARTICULAR**

Acting as the world's policeman or intervening abroad were not the immediate priorities for the Bush Administration. When it looked at the Middle East on September 10, 2001, there were at least five reasons not to be overly engaged in diplomacy there. First, there was the President's own predisposition to remain distant from foreign affairs. The President's coolness to engagement in foreign affairs stemmed from his immediate political experience and background. Former governors who become presidents take a longer time to dive personally into the complexities of foreign affairs than do presidents whose political skills are honed with prior military, Washington, or congressional career backgrounds. As former governors, Presidents Roosevelt, Carter, Reagan, and Clinton were less schooled in international affairs prior to their swearing-in than were Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and George Bush Sr., all of whom had foreign policy experience.(5) Second, the composition of an almost evenly divided Congress elected in November 2000 meant that any political currency remaining from the hard-fought presidential victory should be translated into momentum for pushing the domestic agenda forward. With an almost even split between Democrats and Republicans in the House of Representatives and the razor-thin Republican majority in the Senate, the Administration had to move forward on its domestic priorities hoping to keep its majorities from eroding in the 2002 Congressional elections. The change of one seat through the defection of Senator James Jefford from the Republican Party in May 2001 altered the Senatorial committee structure and the priorities of the Senate agenda. Historically, the party that wins the White House usually loses seats in the subsequent congressional election two years later. One could have argued before September 11 that only after the Bush Administration dealt with domestic legislation would it find foreign affairs issues less contentious and more palatable than doing battle with a Democratic-dominated Congress. The more the Administration was frustrated on domestic issues, the greater the likelihood it might focus on foreign affairs. With the economy still sagging after the December 2000 tax cuts, Democratic majority leader Senator Tom Daschle fiercely challenged the wisdom of Bush's economic stimulus package as unemployment levels did not diminish. The Democrats

seemed poised to make the state of economy the major issue in the 2002 campaign. Third, the Middle East remained in a relatively permanent state of flux but did not seem to pose an overt threat to the national interest that demanded engagement. There was little, if any, potential for interruption in the flow of Middle Eastern oil to the United States or its European and Asian allies. Oil was selling at bargain prices. There was no indication from moderate Arab states in North Africa or the Middle East that they wanted American or Western assistance in changing their governmental systems. Moderate Arab states were relatively stable, though their economies were in sad shape. Saddam Hussein continued to be a nuisance but no more than he was during the last months of the Clinton Administration. During its early days, the Bush Administration shared its predecessor's reluctance to wage a large attack to topple the Iraqi leader. A wait-and-see attitude was also applied to Iran. The Middle East remained a region where weapons of mass destruction were produced and stockpiled, delivery systems acquired, and nefarious war technology was imported or domestically developed. Other international issues involving the Middle East included terrorism, drug production and smuggling, and radical Islamism as a basis for revolutionary movements. Terrorism was a threat to Americans and U.S. installations abroad but bureaucratic hesitancy in the American military and government discouraged pre-emptive assaults against al-Qaeda or other terrorist networks.<sup>(6)</sup> The complexity and risks involved in handling these issues discouraged a new U.S. President from bold action or deep involvement. Any possible success would require an enormous amount of ingenuity, vast financial investments, good luck, and most importantly willing regional actors. Nonetheless, Clinton's legacy to Bush in the Middle East, especially outside the Arab-Israeli theatre, included elements of both constructive and preventive diplomacy. U.S. assets included economic assistance to Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority (PA); military assistance and security arrangements with Israel and many Arab states; information-sharing on international terrorism, narcotics, and weapons of mass destruction activity. Without abandoning the U.S. position that human rights, a free press, and democratic institutions were preferable, the United States did not pressure states to an extent that would create bilateral antagonisms. Nor did the United States act to prevent or pressure states that criticized U.S. policy on Iraq and other issues. As Middle Eastern leaders had done for centuries, rightfully or wrongfully, they felt free to heap blame on a foreign power, in this case the United States. Fourth, on the field of Arab-Israeli diplomacy, the Bush Administration could not have inherited a negotiating process more unlikely to succeed. There seemed no reason to believe that January 2001 was a good time to become actively involved in this issue. Judiciously, the Bush Administration chose caution. It faced an enormous headwind of opposition to diplomatic progress. The level of violence, distrust, and political disagreement seemed to unravel the previous American diplomatic advances. Even so, the Bush Administration still put forward the Mitchell Report, Tenet cease-fire proposals, and Anthony Zinni's negotiating mission. Even during massive Palestinian suicide attacks against Israelis in December 2001 and the revelation in January 2002 of a 50-ton arms shipment smuggled by the PA on a boat, the United States stayed engaged. In April 2002, Powell made an 11-day visit to Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East to investigate the chances for linking up a ceasefire, Israeli withdrawal from urban PA

areas, and progress on negotiations. The U.S. government also put forward the idea of an international conference. But it could not bridge the gap between the local parties which had become substantially wider than at any time during the Clinton Administration. The Bush Administration looked back at the personal, political, and professional capital expended by the Clinton Administration which had ended in diplomatic stalemate and bloody violence. When it took office, there was little hope to justify an Oval Office leap into either Syrian-Israeli or Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. Clinton was fully engaged and dedicated to working on Arab-Israeli issues in a way equaled only by Jimmy Carter's presidency.(7) Personally, Clinton set new records in the time he spent in meetings and visits, including the first presidential trip to the PA. He presided over more summits and made more phone calls to Middle Eastern leaders, and spent far more time on Syria-Israel negotiations than any other president. Clinton stayed actively engaged until his very last day in office. After Clinton failed to achieve a breakthrough in high-level Syrian-Israeli talks in Washington in late 1999 and Shepherdstown in early 2000, he had tried again in a meeting with Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad in Geneva in March 2000. In the end, all these efforts failed. He then turned to Israeli-Palestinian talks, culminating with the July 2000 Camp David summit.(8) The failure there was followed by the outbreak of violence in late September, the October 2000 Sharm al-Shaykh summit (which laid the basis for the Mitchell Commission), and the December 23, 2000 Clinton plan.(9) Even on January 7, 2001, just two weeks before leaving office, Clinton was still campaigning for his framework.(10) Clinton proposed a Palestinian state alongside Israel, land swaps, refugee resettlement in the Palestinian state, security guarantees for Israel, the removal of the vast majority of settlements, an international presence in Palestine to provide border security along the Jordan Valley and to monitor implementation of the final agreement, and an end to the culture of violence and incitement.(11) With uncharacteristic praise, a United Arab Emirates (UAE) editorial writer characterized these last-ditch Clinton efforts as evidence of a "fighter who never gives up...resilient, stubborn and strong-willed...even when all the odds are against him."(12) The Palestinians rejected Clinton's far-reaching proposals, which had gone significantly beyond those proposed at Camp David the previous summer in outlining a possible two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Even Prime Minister Sharon eventually expressed willingness for the establishment of a Palestinian state. On this basis, the Bush Administration, no matter how reluctant to become engaged in active diplomacy, during its first year in office advocated the establishment of a Palestinian state as part of a peace deal ending Israel's control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Compared to Carter's call for a "Palestinian homeland" in March 1977, which was met with incredulity and anger from virtually every quarter supporting Israel,(13) the Bush Administration's declaration at his address to the UN on November 10, 2001, advocating a Palestinian state alongside Israel barely received any domestic criticism even from pro-Israel quarters. What is astonishing is that the Bush Administration advocated a Palestinian state at precisely the time when much of the Arab press was stinging the United States with angry and inciteful language while American public opinion toward Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinians showed incredibly sharp declines in approval. In the Zogby International poll taken in October 2001, only 38 percent of Americans indicated a favorable view towards Egypt, while 34 percent held

a negative view; only 24 percent shared a favorable view toward Saudi Arabia and 58 percent had a negative view of the kingdom. The numbers on Saudi Arabia were a complete reversal of American attitudes held in January 2001, when 56 percent viewed the kingdom positively and only 24 percent negatively. Israel came out with a favorable rating of 59 percent; the PA was seen favorably by only 10 percent of the U.S. public and negatively by 72 percent.(14) In the meantime, public opinion on both sides had shown major shifts and mechanisms built up during the peace process collapsed. About 500,000 Israelis who had voted for Barak in 1999 switched to support Sharon only 18 months later.(15) While in June 2000, Palestinian public support for the Oslo agreements was at 57.6 percent, by April 2001, it had dropped to 40.4 percent. Further, 80 percent supported continuation of the intifada.(16) Fully aware of the difficulties of the situation and the high likelihood of failure of any diplomatic initiative, the Administration, despite constant prodding by European and Arab leaders alike, said it would wait for the violence to subside before sending another group of mediators. However, this stance would change quickly. Having inherited the Mitchell Committee from the last months of the Clinton Administration, Bush Administration officials attempted to use that committee's report as a springboard for America's re-engaging in the Arab-Israeli negotiations. Emerging from the agreement reached at Sharm al-Shaykh in October 2000, the Mitchell Report investigated the underlying causes of the intifada, suggested ways to prevent violence from recurring, and offered ways to reduce tensions and build confidence between Palestinians and Israelis. The report, issued in April 2001, noted that "the only one way to bring peace, justice and security in the Middle East [was] through negotiation." Though the report investigated the causes for the outbreak, it carefully avoided assigning responsibility. Concluding, the Mitchell Report recommended an end to the violence and rebuilding confidence, all with the objective of resuming negotiations. Powell subsequently adopted the report as the U.S.'s road map for traveling from an end of the violence to reaching an agreement. The Administration attempted to use the momentum created by the Mitchell Report by sending CIA Director George Tenet to broker a cease-fire in June 2001, followed by Powell's second trip to the Middle East. Yet while it did not get the ceasefire, the Mitchell Report remained the Administration's blueprint. In appointing Zinni as his special adviser, Powell was testing to see if Arafat was willing to rein in the violence and put a cease-fire in place, and whether Sharon would freeze settlement activity once that had occurred. Zinni needed to learn of long-term Palestinian and Israeli intentions, but his first trip to the region in December 2001 was punctuated and truncated by Palestinian suicide bombings in Jerusalem, Haifa, and in the West Bank. Zinni returned to the region at the end of March and negotiated the outlines of a new but unrealized cease-fire, per the Tenet plan. The Israeli seizure of the Palestinian arms ship in January 2002 and documents in Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah four months later (in addition to those discovered in the PLO's Orient House in Jerusalem) which reportedly included Arafat's signature for payments of the ship's cargo and for support of Palestinian suicide bombers gave the Bush Administration strong reason to believe that Arafat was not a viable interlocutor for negotiations leading to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Still, urged on by Arab leaders, especially King Abdullah of Jordan, Egypt's President Mubarak, and Crown Prince Abdallah of Saudi Arabia, Powell saw Arafat in April on the heels of a massive Israeli

military effort to destroy the terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank. Powell's intervention was unilateral, but his efforts to find diplomatic solutions to the impasse were multilateral. A diplomatic coalition was in creation. Before, during and after this visit, the Bush Administration willingly accepted the active diplomatic intervention of Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Their support of the March 2002 Beirut Arab summit declaration which among other things called for Israeli withdrawal and resolution of the refugee problem, also spoke about recognizing Israel's existence. Abdallah took the lead in the diplomatic campaign to end as promptly as possible Israel's siege of West Bank cities, prevent Arafat from being side-stepped by the Americans, and support renewed negotiations. Middle Eastern Arab partners were sought to support these diplomatic efforts. In his April visit to the Middle East, Powell carried with him the support of a U.S.-Russian-UN-EU declaration<sup>(17)</sup> Back in the United States, Powell again met in early May with representatives of these three partners "on ways to end the violence and move towards peace in the Middle East."<sup>(18)</sup> Adopting a multilateral rather than unilateral approach would avoid accusations of Washington acting alone, ensure cooperation with other key forces, and bring in local Arab partners whose interests were served by reducing the violence. The U.S. reluctance to become engaged in Arab-Israeli diplomacy were also caused and reinforced by other regional problems which seemed too great to be cured by any foreign power. Thus, while such issues as oil, stability, and concern over Iran and Iraq kept the United States engaged in the region, other factors pulled in the opposite direction. Washington policymakers understood that while the region was crisis-prone, its states always seemed to muddle through these problems.<sup>(19)</sup> Economic problems were very serious but there were no easy solutions the United States could bring. Currencies tended to remain weak, under-employment and unemployment stayed high, populations increased, and economies were unable to absorb many talented and eligible workers. While development remained slow, indigenous bureaucracies remained large and growing and countries did not make changes to adjust to globalizing markets. Western investment capital focused on eastern European market economies where once they had rushed into the Middle East. If populations throughout the region clamored for change, they also were constrained by custom and the existing regimes.

#### THE BUSH DOCTRINE, SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT, & MIDDLE EASTERN REALITIES

When President Harry S. Truman addressed a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947, he asked for \$400 million in military and economic assistance for Greece and Turkey to help them resist an expansion of Soviet influence and Communism. Known as the Truman Doctrine, this approach guided American diplomacy for the next 40 years. Declared Truman, "It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." That doctrine signaled America's post-war embrace of global leadership and ended its previous peacetime policy of isolationism. Was something so dramatic ready to grip the United States after September 11, 2001? Would the Bush Doctrine emerge to dominate the definition of American foreign policy for a sustained period of time? Or would it be just another soon-forgotten presidential statement about American interests in the Middle East like the Eisenhower or Carter Doctrines? Would change in the international status quo and consequent implementation of the Bush Doctrine witness a concerted American mediation of bilateral disputes elsewhere, like

the long Indian-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir? Or perhaps the United States would once again upgrade mediation efforts in the Arab-Israeli conflict? Would areas of South Asia and the former republics of the Soviet Union slowly become sites for American military presence as occurred in Arab Gulf countries during the decade after the end of the 1991 Gulf War? Save for some incidental exceptions, this was the first time the mainland of America was attacked by a foreign power since the War of 1812. In declaring the War on Terrorism, President Bush said on September 27, 2001, to a joint session of Congress:

We will direct every resource at our command--every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war--to the destruction and to the defeat of the global terror network...We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime. Our nation has been put on notice. We're not immune from attack. We will take defensive measures against terrorism to protect Americans.

By the time he made the speech, Congress had earmarked, not \$400 million but \$40 billion dollars to offset the attack on America and launch the war against terrorism. In 1947, the American people were reluctant to take on European Communism alone. Then-Senator Vandenburg zealously demanded a leadership role for the UN; in September 2001, no such voices were heard in the halls of Congress.(20) As the Bush Doctrine became operative, coalition-building and multilateral cooperation were encouraged by a combination of need and justification. Among those actively participating in the war against terrorism were Pakistani, Turkish, Jordanian, Italian, German, British, French and other European and Middle Eastern leaders. A coalition had come into being in large part because countries recognized a common threat and common interest. Each state defined its own relationship to the coalition in conjunction with the United States, taking into account the degree of closeness desired with the United States, domestic public opinion, and what it could contribute. Some provided personnel, material, and information; others provided logistics, over flight rights, port-of-call privileges, stationing of troops, or money. Similarly, countries wanted or demanded different things from the United States, ranging from better trade relations, financial assistance, debt reduction, or concessions on other issues. For the second time in a decade, then, the United States became the leader of a complex international coalition. As always in that decade, the United States remained deeply engaged in the Middle East. The degree and direction of involvement would be determined by the intersection between the Bush Doctrine and the doctrine of Selective Engagement.---

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## NOTES

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confrontation in the Middle East, and Secretary of State Colin Powell's Remarks, with Foreign Minister of Spain Josep Pique, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan Foreign Minister of Russia Igor Ivanov, and European Union Senior Official Javier Solana, April 10, 2002, <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2002/9232.htm>>.18. Remarks by Secretary of State Powell with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov of the Russian Federation, Foreign Minister Josep Pique of Spain in the capacity of EU Presidency and Javier Solana, High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU, May 2, 2002, <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2002/9917.htm>>.19. For a review of excellent articles focusing on the political contours of the Middle East at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries, see Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Middle East States and the Approaching 21st Century," MERIA Journal, 4:7 (December 1997), at <<http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/meria.html>>; Muhammad Sh'aban, "The Sources of Struggle in the Middle East During the 21st Century (2)," al-Ahram, Cairo, June 21, 1999; Barry Rubin, "The Politics of the New Middle East," MERIA Journal, Vol. 1, No. 3 (September 1997).

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