

The end of the “freedom century”

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Many intellectuals saw the post-cold-war world as the dawn of a new era of freedom and democracy. The war on Iraq is forcing a rethink and a retreat. Two new books – Paul Berman's "Power and the Idealists" and Francis Fukuyama's "America at the Crossroads" – attempt to make sense of what went wrong. Ivan Krastev assesses them.

The historical arc that reaches from the end of the cold war to the launch of the "war on terror" and the invasion of Iraq has created new uncertainties and arguments among intellectuals as well as nation-states and their publics. A fascinating aspect of this collision of ideas and power – which encompasses a new field of foreign-policy discussion about neo-conservatism, realism, liberal interventionism, armed force, civil society, and "democracy promotion" – is the way that it has supplemented older divisions between friends and enemies with fresh lines separating friends from ex-friends.

Everywhere, it seems, people are settling accounts with the past (including their own); everywhere, the sense of the end of a geopolitical cycle and the dawn of a new, more complex and challenging one is pervasive. The controversy in Britain over the publication by a group of liberal-left thinkers of the "Euston Manifesto" is just one indication of a wider, international rethinking and repositioning on a cluster of related issues: United States policy after 9/11, the Iraq war, radical Islam and the Enlightenment inheritance, the nature of democracy itself and whether and how it should be "exported".

Two new books offer revealing reflections of this current intellectual condition. Yet Paul Berman's book-

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length essay *Power and the Idealists* and Francis Fukuyama's policy proposal *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power and the Neoconservative Legacy* also bring to mind C Wright Mills's insightful observation that it is difficult to define a problem until we know whose problem it is. For three years after the US invasion in Iraq, a prominent pro-war liberal (Berman) and one of the few anti-war neocons (Fukuyama) are in ostensibly puzzling agreement that the age both of humanitarian interventionism and of democracy-promotion and global civil society are effectively over.

What explains this agreement, and what follows?

The return of realism

The reasons for the authors' pessimism are evident. The experience of Iraq – the United States's failure to find the much-vaunted weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the tortures at Abu Ghraib, the signals of civil war in Baghdad (as well as the prospect of an extension of war to Iran) – has made even the true believers highly sceptical of revived democracy-promoting Wilsonianism of the sort proclaimed by George W Bush's State of the Union address in 2004.

Moreover, as Americans themselves lose faith with the Bush project, global opinion polls indicate that the

US's "soft power" is in decline and anti-Americanism is on the rise around the world. The "cartoon wars" that shook Europe and the middle east in February 2006, mobilising (in Faisal Devji's argument) a new "global Islam" that contests liberal democracy's self-understanding, sent a warning that worse was to come.

In the context of such worrisome developments, it is not surprising that a Kissinger-style foreign-policy realism is back, presenting itself as the only reasonable and responsible approach for addressing the multiple crises of the global political world. But *this* is the problem – for Berman and Fukuyama, liberal interventionist and (reformed) neo-conservative alike. The comeback of foreign-policy realism as the dominant paradigm in international politics terrifies Berman and Fukuyama; and this is the proper context for reading their two very different books. The authors strongly agree that the return of the realist paradigm is a dangerous trend that should be resisted. Where they disagree is over who is to blame for realism's revival, and what is to be done in the face of it.

Paul Berman – a card-carrying liberal "hawk" and author of the influential post-9/11 book *Liberalism and Terror* – believes that it is not Bush and his failed policies in Iraq that are primarily responsible for defeating the cause of humanitarian interventionism, but the European politicians of the generation of 1968. It was the decision of the "68ers" in power to oppose the Iraq invasion – most prominently, the then German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer – that turned the American intervention into a wrong war led by the wrong people. For Berman, if Europeans had decided to join America in toppling Saddam Hussein, everything would have been different.

Francis Fukuyama until recently a card carrying neo-conservative and author of the 1990s neocons' bible *The End of History and the Last Man* – blames the decision of the Bush administration to invade Iraq for the defeat of the Wilsonian promise once held out to the new century. What links these two conflicting perspectives on the Iraq tragedy is that both represent the pained protests of dissidents who chose to oppose established opinion among their own intellectual and political circles. The authors took the grave risk of being hated and misunderstood not by their traditional opponents but by their closest friends. In the present period of in-house conformism and out-of-house militancy, this behaviour deserves intellectual recognition and moral admiration.

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A philosophical rift

Berman's essay is the story of the political zigzagging of the generation of the stone-throwing radicals of 1968. It traces its evolution from anti-imperialist leftism, vocal anti-Americanism and pacifism to ardent advocacy of liberal anti-totalitarianism and support for Nato war for Kosovo in 1999. For Berman, the politics of humanitarian interventionism was a generational project, and the Kosovo war was the war of the 1968 generation – one on behalf of those who are "not like us" and in a place without oil or geopolitical significance.

Kosovo, in short, was unthinkable in the terms of foreign-policy realism. "Genocide is not the enemy of the realists", as Berman repeats in several parts of his book. His beautifully written pamphlet goes on to voice esteem for those 68ers outside of offices of power (such as André Glucksman, Bernard Kouchner and Adam Michnik) who chose to support America's decision to topple Saddam Hussein, and accuse the 68ers in power at the time (like Joschka Fischer and the member of the European parliament, Daniel Cohn-Bendit) of betraying the ideals of their generation by opposing Bush's Iraq war.

The problem with Berman's position is that it offers only a few answers to the questions he himself raises. An unsympathetic reader could note that Berman's efforts to justify the war in Iraq are dangerously reminiscent of pamphlets written by Jean-Paul Sartre and his friends in the wake of the Soviet invasion in Hungary in 1956. In addition, Berman fails to explain convincingly why the Kosovo coalition of liberal interventionists and neo-conservatives collapsed over Iraq.

The new disagreement between these components of the coalition goes far deeper than broken moral commitments, uneasy biographical choices or the pedestrian anti-Americanism that remains alive among some at least of the European 68ers. It is at root ideological and historical, stretching back beyond the 1960s to the 1930s and the conflicting attitudes to the Weimar republic in Germany.

Neo-conservatives, influenced by their formative thinker Leo Strauss, see the Weimar republic as a cause and legacy not worth defending. They see in it an emblem of liberalism's infirmity, and of liberals' misguided understanding of the nature of the political – both of which lay at the root of the collapse of Europe's democracies between the two world wars.

Liberals, by contrast, see the Weimar republic as eminently worth defending. They see its death, and the rise of Hitler and all that followed, as the work of an unholy coalition of the radical left and radical right. Neo-conservatives blame liberalism for the rise of totalitarianism in the 1930s; liberals blame unrestrained capitalism and absolutist temptation.

The split between liberals and neo-conservatives over Weimar was in the early 2000s remade, Hollywood-style, in United States public debate. The war on terror launched after 9/11 was for the neo-conservatives also a war on liberalism. Neo-conservatives and their allies dismiss liberalism as a doctrine of toleration that amounts to capitulation; they regard it as flawed because it lacks a proper definition of a key category in any security framework: the enemy.

For neo-conservatives, to be liberal means to live in denial of the danger facing the world and America; and thus by extension, liberalism becomes a danger in itself. In the spirit of Carl Schmitt's critique of liberalism, neocons argue vigorously that the prevailing pre-9/11 ideology (and, indeed, the indirect cause of the attacks) was the liberal mindset where "the very concept of the enemy had been banished from our moral and political vocabulary". For liberals, in the powerful phrase of Lee Harris (author of *Civilization and its Enemies: The Next Stage of History*), "an enemy was just a friend we hadn't done enough for yet."

It was this philosophical rift in the relationship between democracy and liberalism – more than concrete policy differences on issues such as the Kyoto treaty on climate change, the death penalty, or even doctrine of pre-emptive wars and unilateralism – that divided liberal interventionists and neo-conservatives on the eve of the invasion in Iraq. The neocons, who in the 1970s and 1980s still insisted on their liberal origins and often invoked the self-description "liberals mugged by reality", behaved after 9/11 much more as ex-liberals mugged by power and arrogance. The "war on liberals" began even before the "war on terror".

A doctrine, not a persuasion

Francis Fukuyama differs from Paul Berman in being strikingly disinterested in the "blame game" now underway in Washington. His fears that the neocon implosion will result in regained influence for realists over American foreign policy are more practical (if no less personal). In Fukuyama's view, the failure in Iraq wholly delegitimises the neo-conservative approach to foreign policy; what America risks in the aftermath is the rise of *anti*-neo-conservatism.

What makes this rise problematic for Fukuyama is the belief that in the context of American foreign policy in the early 21st century is that in some key respects the neo-conservatives were right and their opponents wrong. For the author of *The End of History*, the strategic challenge is to preserve the relevant, reclaimable part of the neo-conservative agenda after the fall of the larger ideology in which it was encased. Indeed, and in another of history's ironic twists, Fukuyama's struggle for the soul of neo-conservatism is painfully suggestive of the struggle between theory-minded Marxists and adventurous "Leninists" that frames the intellectual history of communism.

Fukuyama does not share the doubts of many of his ex-allies that neo-conservatism is doomed to fail; he does not deny the neo-conservative origins of the Iraq war or the scale of the war's failure. His purpose, more than to contest the neo-conservative legacy, is to make sense from and strategy out of it. For him neo-conservatism remains more than a "persuasion": it is a consistent doctrine.

Fukuyama identifies four principles of neo-conservative thought in the area of foreign policy:

- the conviction that the internal character of regimes matters, and that American foreign policy in relation to them must reflect the deepest values of liberal-democratic society
- American power has in the past and could be again used for moral purposes
- distrust of ambitious social-engineering projects
- scepticism about the legitimacy and effectiveness of international law and institutions to achieve either security or justice.

In Fukuyama's analysis, the tragic mistake of neo-conservatives in Iraq can be explained by their failure to recognise the ongoing conflict between two principles at the heart of neo-conservative thinking: foreign-policy activism, and mistrust and rejection of social engineering. Neo-conservatives who in the 1960s were among the first to point out to the unintended consequences of the grand social projects in Lyndon B Johnson's America have turned into the ultimate social engineers committed to nation-building in Iraq and the democratic transformation of the middle east.

Each of Fukuyama's principles can imply policy choices different from those practiced in recent years: for example, belief that American power can be used for moral purposes does not entail subscribing to the

notion of the US's benevolent hegemony, and scepticism about the ability of international law and institutions to deliver global justice does not translate into automatic support for unilateral actions. What Fukuyama's vision does emphasise is the need to combine attentiveness to the internal reality of states with a commitment to the goals of development and institution-building. Fukuyama, still the author of *The End of History*, believes that "democracy is likely to expand universally in the long run"; but the universal nature of democratic aspirations does not justify a bullying approach to democracy-promotion. In this reappropriation of the better insights of modernisation theory, Fukuyama is promoting a more development-focused foreign policy alert to the proper conditions for the success of democracy. This is a significant distance from the doctrine of the global promotion of freedom promoted by the Bush administration.

After defeat

Is Fukuyama fighting an already lost battle? History teaches that the original insights of dissidents who become disillusioned are lost and buried as the dissidents' party heads for defeat. Yet these insights are also critically needed – and this is what makes Fukuyama's book important. Those who belong neither to the pro-war liberal or the anti-war neocon camp can also fear the return of foreign-policy realism. After all, only "common-sense realism" is needed to understand that a return to Kissingerian moral relativism and trust in the "rationality" of the state will not necessarily make the world a safer place.

Meanwhile, though Berman is in my view wrong in his judgment that intervention in Iraq was desirable, he is certainly right in stressing the importance of the war of ideas and the urgent need to understand the ideological objectives and origins of political Islam. The west may be governed predominantly by post-ideological elites, but in other parts of the world leaders and political movements do take ideas seriously.

In this large frame, the soul-searching books of a pro-war liberal and an anti-war neocon convince the sympathetic reader that the deepest wound to the "freedom century" project lies in misinterpreting the end of the cold war and the "accidental" nature of the Kosovo intervention. These two historic events were in

a sense miracles. Fukuyama himself writes that one can react to a miracle either dramatically raising expectations for a repeat-effect or by being grateful, pocketing one's luck, and reflect on the uniqueness of circumstance. Unfortunately, both liberal interventionists and neocons shared the first reaction, and tried to turn the miracle into a natural law.

The political imagination of those contesting the freedom century has populated the world with Polands (the optimists) and Serbias (the realists). The global democratic revolution was envisioned as a version of the Sleeping Beauty fairytale where it is enough for the Prince of Freedom to kill the dragon and kiss the princess in order to awake the sleeping global liberal majority.

This version of the story turned out to be wrong. And this is true with respect to the possibilities both of a global democracy-promotion campaign and of large-scale humanitarian wars. In this sense, the liberal interventionists and the neo-conservatives alike fell victim to the universalisation of east-central European political experience since the mid-1980s. The end of the cold war and the democratisation of east-

central Europe that led to the emergence of pro-American liberal democracies and market economies was a model that could not be replicated in regions like the middle east.

Victors are not curious, Carl Schmitt once wrote; and (as on many occasions where fundamental questions were not at stake) he was right. The victors in the cold war have long lost their curiosity. The careless wielding of vague concepts like tyranny and totalitarianism has made them blind to the specific characteristics of the variety of repressive regimes around the world. The global rush for democratisation discarded sensitivity to context.

This outcome makes Berman's eulogy of the political legacy of the 1968 generation and Fukuyama's reconceptualisation of the neo-conservative legacy an essential read for democracy-makers. But neither has written or could write a work still missing on the bookshelf: the east-central European perspective on the premature end of the "freedom century". For this was also, arguably more than anything else, the east-central European century. And it is over.

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