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America's Middle East experience

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Understanding the limits of power: America's Middle East experience

MAXIMILIAN TERHALLE*

Abstract. The main thread of this review article is to identify the reasons of how to account for the trajectory of American power in the region. Leaving behind the vast amount of highly politicised and hastily compiled volumes of recent years (notwithstanding valuable exceptions), the monographs composed by Lawrence Freedman, Trita Parsi and Oliver Roy attempt to subtly disentangle the intricacies of US involvement in the region from highly distinct perspectives. One caveat for International Relations theorists is that none of the aforementioned authors intends to provide theoretical frameworks for his examination. However, since IR theory has damagingly neglected history in the last decades, the works under review here, at least in part, compensate for this disciplinary and intellectual failure.

In conclusion, Freedman's in-depth approach as a diplomatic historian, with its underlying reference to the various traditions in US foreign policy thinking, is most illuminating, while Parsi's contestable account focuses too narrowly on the Iran-Israel relationship. Roy's explications fail to show how and why the 'ideological' element in US foreign policy came to carry exceedingly more weight after 2001 than it did in the 1990s.

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Oliver Roy, *The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East*, trans. Ros Schwartz (New York: Columbia University Press. In association with the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Paris, 2008).

Parsi Trita, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the US* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007).

Freedman Lawrence, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs 2008).

The subtle disentanglement of the Middle East's regional complexities, particularly with regard to their distinctive relations to the realm of international politics, has often confused international relations theorists and area experts alike. Moreover,

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recent years have witnessed the proliferation of hastily composed volumes (with notable exceptions) trying to explain political events in the Middle East without adequately contextualising the underlying problems.

The works reviewed here, succinctly written by French, British and American-Iranian scholars, present a strong contrast to this mainstream thinking. Though adopting highly distinct approaches, they are loosely connected by the question of how to account for the trajectory of American power in the region.

In brief, their arguments can be outlined as follows. Oliver Roy identifies a powerful and long-standing ideological element in US foreign policy throughout the 1990s, reflected in its democratisation policy, which has prompted chaos in the Middle East, especially since 2003.

Trita Parsi argues that the US' relative power began to decline following its defeat of Iraq in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. This war turned Iran and Israel – previously alleged allies – into vicious rivals attempting to shape a new regional order after the end of the Cold War. The US has been incapable of preventing this dangerous competition. Parsi suggests that, on the contrary, the US further compounded this state of affairs by forcefully changing Baghdad's regime in 2003.

Lawrence Freedman attributes the US' dramatic failure to the heightened neo-conservative penetrability of George W. Bush's decision-making in the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001. His limited political experience did not provide him with the knowledge exhibited in his father's 'realist,' restrained, and diplomatic approach to foreign relations. This led G. W. Bush to succumb to more ideological arguments. A closer analysis of these accounts reveals the consistency and validity of their respective approaches.

Roy presents a short essay on his explanation of 'the politics of chaos in the Middle East.' His remarks aim to '[demolish] the idea that there is a 'geostrategy of Islam' that would explain all the present conflicts.'¹ What precisely he attempts to convey with the term 'geostrategy of Islam' remains unclear. However, he seeks to deny the degree of unity among Islamic forces that is inherent in the term 'war on terror'. Roy does not see the link between the US' involvement and the tensions among the different regional players. This immediately raises the question of why Washington has not been able to take advantage of these rivalries in recent years. He prefers to deal with these two realms separately.

When considering why the US invaded Iraq in 2003, Roy is keenly interested in why the '[f]ailure of top-down democratization'² was predictable. Roy views this failure as the outcome of an 'ideological vision of international relations',³ while leaving aside other possible explanations. Precisely how the White House arrived at its policy conclusions in 2003 is not further explained by Roy, although the unique motivation of this war stands out. Before exploring this ideological moment, he carefully emphasises that – notwithstanding the importance Israel played in the policy promoted by neo-conservative politicians and organisations – one must not make the mistake of inferring that the war was conducted for the sake of Israel alone. Rather, the US' vision was ideological in that there was (and will be) a belief, 'pushed to the extremes' by neo-conservatives, that 'Western

¹ Roy, *Politics*, p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

values are universal and must be promoted.⁴ Therefore, he employs a rare degree of scrutiny when it comes to the origins of the democratisation policy.⁵ Having been an OSCE representative, charged with building up civil societies in Central Asia, he neatly shows how this belief was promoted by US foundations in the 1990s and is ‘still the doctrine of major development institutions’ such as the UN and the World Bank. Based on the three pillars of civil society, privatisation and good governance, this ‘doctrine reclaimed the concept of civil society as a society outside the state and even against it.’⁶ While this explanation helps illuminate the critical detachment of US efforts from local politics, which in part accounts for the civil-war like situation in Iraq between 2003 and 2007, it does not travel very far since it is disconnected from its impact on US grand strategy and its evolution. Roy does not analyse how this ideology came to be perceived much more positively in 2003 than it had been during the 1990s.

He then sets out to depict the region’s fragmented conflicts and emerging fault lines. Crucially, Roy discerns a ‘tectonic upheaval’ of Shia against Sunnis, precipitated by the invasion of Iraq, which is supposed to have ‘major repercussions’.⁷ Like Vali Nasr and Anoushiravan Ehteshami before him, he cannot specify which shape these purported convulsions will take.⁸ However, he briefly acknowledges that ‘the Shia Arabs are not necessarily pro-Iranian.’⁹ Since the main beneficiary of the last Afghanistan/Iraq wars has clearly been Iran, Roy reiterates Tehran’s long-standing ‘objective [...] to be the dominant power in the Middle East and in particular to acquire a sort of patronage over the Gulf states.’¹⁰ In order to achieve this, ‘Iran is playing two cards: the Shia axis in the Gulf and the Israel refusal front – in other words, Arab nationalism and pan-Islamism.’¹¹ In practice, Iran therefore aspires to ‘smash the front of Arab nationalist, Sunni militants and conservative monarchies that resulted in [Iran’s] isolation.’¹² It becomes clear that this logic is meant to be applied by the reigning conservatives (for example, Khamenei) and radicals (for example, Ahmadinejad). However, it should be said that neither Iran’s cooperation with Syria nor Khatami’s foreign policy fits neatly into Roy’s pattern.

The ‘chaos’ that is intended by this strategy is alluded to in the title of the book. As Roy stresses, using evidence from Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan, it is in the incumbent president’s ‘interest for all the conflicts [...] to be interconnected, by bringing together the refusal front and the “Shia axis.”’¹³ While Roy thereby outlines the idea behind these rejectionist dynamics, he puts little emphasis on the constraints this policy encounters. This ‘Shia rise’¹⁴ is undermined by factional infighting, Shia Arab nationalism, the contested notion

⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 27–48.

⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

⁷ Ibid., p. 109.

⁸ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, ‘The Middle East Between Ideology and Geopolitics’, in Mary Buckley and Robert Singh (eds), *The Bush Doctrine and the War in Terrorism* (London: Routledge 2006), pp. 104–20.; Vali Nasr, ‘When the Shiites Rise’, in *Foreign Affairs*, 85:4 (2006), pp. 58–74.

⁹ Roy, *Politics*, p. 109.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 116.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 117.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Maximilian Terhalle, ‘Are the Shia Rising?’ in *Middle East Policy*, 14:2 (2007), pp. 69–83.

of Iran's regime type (*vilayat-e faqih*), the acceptance of Iran's Supreme Leader as the 'source of imitation' (*marjaiyyat*), the regional states' iron grip on power and patronage networks, and the lack of regional economic interdependence.

Nonetheless, reflecting their deep-rooted fear, the Gulf monarchies have engaged in regional diplomacy in an attempt to avoid a US-Iran military clash. Roy suggests here that, in addition to diplomacy, the Sunni states revived the 'alliance that supported the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s [...] with probably the same pernicious effects: a radicalization that eludes the control of its promoters.'¹⁵ This is precisely where a second reading of the title seems reasonable. Notwithstanding the deep divisions among Middle Eastern states before 2003, the immense degree of 'chaos' also needs to be attributed to the US intervention. A revival of Sunni anti-Shia politics, backed by a bogged-down US, reflects the knowingly dangerous means that remain in Washington's regional, diplomatic tool-case. Even though the rejection of Sunni militants' violence in many Middle Eastern countries undermines Roy's description, these examples explicitly show the dramatic trajectory of a state which was once welcomed in the region.¹⁶

Trita Parsi's revised PhD thesis, written under Francis Fukuyama, examines what he calls a 'treacherous alliance' between Israel, Iran and the US. Since he assumes that only 'very little has been written about Israeli-Iranian relations',¹⁷ he neglects those key works that have analysed related issues in Middle East politics.¹⁸ To fill this presumed gap in knowledge, he conducted 130 interviews with diplomats, military officers and politicians. Albeit legitimate, their authenticity should be questioned on two accounts. Firstly, the events partly date back four decades. Secondly, the interviews were undertaken at a time (2004) when the US' hostile stance toward Iran likely affected the interviewees.

He argues that 'the major transformations of Israeli-Iranian relations are results of geopolitical – rather than ideological – shifts [...]'¹⁹ In particular, the 'current enmity between the two states has to do more with the shift in the balance of power in the Middle East after the end of the Cold War and the defeat of Iraq in the first Persian Gulf War than it does with the Islamic Revolution in 1979.'²⁰ Though most Middle East scholars would agree that the Cold War's influence on the Middle East was limited, Parsi divides his book into 'bipolar' and 'unipolar' time periods. He suggests that, until 1991, Israel's strategic thinking was mainly guided by Ben-Gurion's 'periphery doctrine',²¹ which forced together the two non-Arab states Iran and Israel. Despite the Islamic revolution, 'Iran's geopolitical

¹⁵ Roy, *Politics*, p. 119.

¹⁶ See, for example, Robert Allison, 'Postscript: Americans and the Muslim World – First Encounters', in David W. Lesch (ed.), *The Middle East and the United States: A Historical and Political Reassessment* (Boulder: Westview Press 2003), pp. 491–502.

¹⁷ Parsi, *Alliance*, p. xii.

¹⁸ Key works in comparative (domestic) politics and international relations that are not mentioned include (but are not limited to) the following: Owen, Roger, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (London: Routledge 2000); Zubaida, Sami, *Islam, the People & the State* (London: I.B. Tauris 1995); Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005); Louise Fawcett (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005); L. Carl Brown (ed.), *Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers* (London: I.B. Tauris 2001).

¹⁹ Parsi, *Alliance*, p. 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

realities remained largely immune to the worldviews and ideologies espoused by Tehran's new leadership.' Israel therefore viewed Tehran's deteriorating international relations as an opportunity 'to cultivate ties with Iran's angry ayatollahs.'²²

To underline his argument that the mullahs 'comfortably put ideology aside to advance their own security',²³ Parsi points to Israeli behaviour at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war. For example, Moshe Dayan had asked Washington 'three days after Iraqi troops entered Iranian territory [...] to help Iran keep up its defenses.'²⁴ Moreover, Iran provided Israel with intelligence information before the bombing of Osirak in June 1981. Furthermore, their arms deals continued until 1982/83, notwithstanding the outstanding though episodic reflection of *realpolitik* in the Iran-Contra affair in 1986.

Yet does Parsi's evidence mean that this alliance was bound to operate outside any constraints? Firstly, though both superpowers sided with Baghdad in the Security Council in 1980 (Parsi assumes that Saddam Hussein went to war 'to resurrect the ancient glories of Iraq.'²⁵ Rather, it has clearly been shown that he did so to buttress his yet uncertain grip on domestic power),²⁶ neither superpower wholeheartedly supported Iraq before the summer of 1982. Instead both assumed a wait-and-see position. Only when Iran succeeded on the battlefield and advanced its troops into Iraq did they back Baghdad. Importantly, this coincided with the period in which Israeli arms deals were put to a halt. Secondly, Khomeini's decision to enter Iraqi territory after the successful battle of Khoramshar in June 1982 was based on purely ideological, not strategic grounds. Had the grip of strategic thinking been as tight as Parsi suggests, Iran may have acted differently. Thirdly, Iran's longstanding support of Hezbollah in Lebanon was not viewed benignly by Israel nor dismissed as a minor issue in the broader strategic relationship between the two countries. Consequently, while the 'periphery doctrine' operated very effectively under the shah, the changes that occurred during the Islamic revolution preclude the explanation that 'no force in Iran's foreign policy is as dominant as geopolitical considerations.'²⁷

Consequently, Parsi has to portray the defeat of Iraq in 1991 as a 'geopolitical tsunami.'²⁸ He attempts to convey that the 'periphery doctrine' had lost its core and that therefore 'the two former strategic allies were caught in a vicious rivalry for the future order of the region.'²⁹ Intuitively, since the periphery doctrine was directed against Arab states, it is inconclusive to suggest that the collapse of the USSR would alter it, as Parsi emphasises. Indeed, any supposed regional hegemon

²² Ibid., pp. 92, 94.

²³ Ibid., p. 95.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 105.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 97.

²⁶ See, for example, Gregory Gause, 'The International Politics of the Gulf', in Fawcett, *International Relations*, pp. 263–81. A second example is Parsi's assertion that when invading Kuwait 'Saddam killed Pan-Arabism' (p. 148). A third is his statement that '[b]y offering the GCC states bilateral security deals, Washington pre-empted a common Persian Gulf security arrangement and managed to continue Iran's exclusion from regional decision-making' (p. 147).

²⁷ Parsi, *Alliance*, p. 263.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 139.

²⁹ Ibid.

would have had to rest on the unlikely acceptance of large Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Additionally, Iraq had by no means departed the regional theatre; it was momentarily set back.

While all of this reflects Parsi's tendency to debate the issue at hand from an Iran-Israel perspective, he clearly loses sight of the US' impact on the region since 1990. The key consequence of the war was not Iraq's expulsion from Kuwait, as Parsi narrowly implies. Rather it was Washington's ascension to the centre stage of Middle East politics and its increasing ability to influence, *eo ipso*, any state's freedom to act. This inattention to the US prompts Parsi to overlook the evolution of this key player's role to the region.

The US' relationship with both Israel and Iran intensified in the early 1990s. The George H. W. Bush administration vigorously pushed Tel Aviv to complete a peace agreement between Palestinians and Israelis. On the other hand, there was never a sense in Washington that the US would abandon its special relationship with Israel. Of equal importance, Rabin's and Peres' promotion of Iran as the evil Islamic enemy, pursued in order to generate 'a rationale for Washington to continue the strategic relationship',³⁰ did not resonate with Pennsylvania Avenue. With regard to Iran, Washington showed some respect to Tehran after Iran allowed the US to use its airspace during the campaign against Iraq. In general, though, Bush remained distrustful of Iran and showed his disinterest by not inviting Rafsanjani to the Madrid Conference in 1991. This, however, did not translate into a pointedly hostile relationship. Rather, an anaemic and passive policy of dual containment was continued under Clinton.

The extent to which Parsi overestimates the implications of the 1991 defeat of Iraq is further evidenced by the swift reversal of Israeli politics under Netanyahu in 1996. He initiated the 'return to the doctrine of the periphery' because he saw no benefit in 'any unnecessary provocations against Iran.'³¹ Had he shown more interest in the crucial feature of Iranian politics, factionalism, he would have realised that Tehran had various views on regional politics to offer, not all of them directed at a 'vicious rivalry'. At its core, the constant foreign policy battle between deeply antithetical factions in Iranian politics favours more conservative decisions. The unequal weight of their constitutional base allows the more conservative elements to reign in the policies of a more moderate (elected) president, such as Khatami, since they are only responsible to the Supreme Leader. How and why the US did not fully recognise (and take advantage of) these differences is not explored. Parsi also does not link his ideas to the Capitol Hill debates of the 1990s.

When Khatami was elected president in 1996, the state of affairs between the US and Iran improved, culminating in the bilateral Petersberg talks in 2001 and Tehran's negotiation proposal in May 2003. The latter fell victim to Washington's hubris. If there was a true turning point in Middle East politics, then it clearly occurred in 2003 and not in 1991, as Parsi repeatedly argues.³² Israel has been on high alert since the negotiation proposal dissolved and Iran's nuclear ambitions were made apparent. However, while Parsi offers some suggestions on how to

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 199, 198.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 262.

resolve the tensions between Tel Aviv and Tehran (specifically by promoting the idea of an unspecified 'integration' model),³³ his emphasis on this relationship leads him to overlook the source of Iran's utmost concern: Iraq.

Unfortunately, some other central questions remain unanswered as well. Firstly, how and why are the Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan issues interconnected and durable? Secondly, will a regional hegemon, similar to what was termed a 'regional influential' in the 1970s,³⁴ emerge in a region now dominated by the US?

By singling out the undisputed conflict between Tehran and Tel Aviv, Parsi loses sight of the broader framework in which this conundrum has evolved. Why and how the US has been unable to translate its massive military presence in the region into greater political authority, as well as why this degree of involvement was deemed necessary is not explained. Despite the merits of his work, like Roy, Parsi cannot provide deeper insights into these topics. Lastly, while Doran's power cycle theory is only mentioned in a footnote,³⁵ the more complex theoretical frameworks provided by Nonneman and Fawcett,³⁶ for instance, might have helped to substantiate his arguments.

Lawrence Freedman offers with *A Choice of Enemies* 'a reasonably thorough account of how successive presidents, from Carter to the younger Bush, engaged with the Middle East.'³⁷ The overall analytical framework of his carefully written 'political history' is provided by 'a tension in the American approach, torn between the traditional instinct of a Great Power to protect the *status quo* from aggressive states and radical movements and an underlying dissatisfaction with the *status quo*.'³⁸ Due to the monograph's sheer size of some 600 pages, it is deemed helpful to select certain sections and neglect others. In line with the aforementioned tension in Washington's approach, the presidencies of George H. W. Bush and his son, George W. Bush, might help to illustrate the strengths of Freedman's analytical framework. For example, consider the variation between each Bush's policy decisions in Iraq. Why did G. H. W. Bush allow Saddam Hussein to remain in power in 1991, while G. W. Bush pursued regime change in 2003? This question can be answered by drawing on Freedman's claim that US policy towards the region has been alternately driven by more traditional as well as more interventionist approaches.

Addressing first the more traditional approach, Freedman introduces the elder Bush and explains that his career was 'tantamount to a training in realism.'³⁹ He underlines the very divergent points of intellectual departure for both members of the Bush family. Freedman emphasises the implications of the term 'realism' for conservative practitioners. To them, 'realism may mean little more than dealing with matters as they are found rather than how one might wish them to be. The first responsibility of government is to contain, deter, or deflect threats to national

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

³⁴ Roger Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984).

³⁵ Parsi, *Alliance*, p. 291, fn 10.

³⁶ Gerd Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe* (London: Routledge 2005), pp. 6–17; Fawcett, *International Relations*, pp. 173–93.

³⁷ Freedman, *Choice*, p. xxv.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxvi (both quotes).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

security, through a combination of military strength and artful diplomacy, acquiring allies and partners where possible while avoiding creating unnecessary enemies. Realists accept that they cannot be too choosy [...] for they know all about human imperfection.⁴⁰ Moreover, serving as the US ambassador to the UN and China and as the director of the CIA under the 'realist' administrations of Nixon and Ford shaped Bush's views on world politics. Against this backdrop, and also following his work as vice president under Reagan, Bush chose likeminded aides (for example, Baker and Scowcroft) to serve under him as president.

The importance of this mindset becomes clear when Freedman shows how Saddam Hussein's stark violation of Kuwait's territorial integrity in 1990 immensely helped the administration build up a broad alliance of Western and Arab forces under the auspices of the UN Security Council in 1991. Why, though, did G. H. W. Bush not topple his fleeing foe after Hussein's expulsion from Kuwait? Freedman puts forward several reasons, again in line with a more conservative approach. Firstly, '[o]verthrowing Saddam was a result that could not be guaranteed; a drive to Baghdad would be a tougher fight than the liberation of Kuwait and would confirm accusations of neocolonialism.'⁴¹ Secondly, restraint was demanded internationally and domestically. For instance, China and the Soviet Union made clear that their cooperation in the Security Council was imperative. Also, Turkey and Iran expressed apprehension with regard to the 'consequences of dismemberment.'⁴² Domestically, Congress had authorised the use of force only to implement the Security Council resolution. Thirdly, Bush was convinced that the Iraqis themselves had to bring down the dictator. 'We are not in this war to destroy Iraq',⁴³ he told reporters in 1991. After all, in strategic terms this decision should be seen in light of the Vietnam experience. Freedman mentions this briefly.⁴⁴ The revised strategy, which came to be known as the 'post-Vietnam doctrine', required 'getting in with ample force, achieving the military objective quickly, and getting out once it was accomplished'.⁴⁵ This was precisely what Bush did when he assumed that his enemy had been weakened to such a degree that his subjects would get rid of him easily. Bush underestimated the Iraqi president's bloody ambition to stay in power. The then-secretary of defense, Dick Cheney, agreed with Bush, stressing that 'if Saddam wasn't there [...] his successor probably wouldn't be notably friendlier to the US.'⁴⁶ Accepting realities and exercising restraint despite having the world's largest military would come to be one key criticism the so-called neo-conservatives levelled against the realists.

Turning to the more revisionist approach of Bush's son, Freedman does not easily succumb to the widely held view that 'history had started afresh on 9/11' and that this was 'the moment for bold and imaginative policies.'⁴⁷ Rather, Freedman traces the historical origins of G. W. Bush's Iraq policy, which eventually led to the overthrow of Saddam in 2003. Freedman contrasts the younger Bush's

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 246.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 247.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 235, 379–80.

⁴⁵ Gordon Craig and Alexander George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press 1995), p. 269.

⁴⁶ Freedman, *Choice*, p. 253.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

approach with his father's. Why did G. W. Bush set out to topple the Iraqi dictator? Freedman advances his argument straightforwardly: in line with Roy's observations, regime change 'had long been [a US goal] for Iraq, but [not by] means of invasion. The key question is therefore not why did the US seek to change the regime, but rather why at this time and by this means?'⁴⁸ He offers the following answer: 'What appears to be the case is that after 9/11, an established policy of regime change in Iraq was given added salience to the point that it was possible to contemplate military action to achieve this, and by the spring of 2002, military action was starting to appear to be the only credible option.'⁴⁹

Certainly, neo-conservative initiatives failed to initiate the forceful overthrow of Saddam in Clinton's Middle East policy throughout the 1990s. Their failure and frustration with this campaign was reflected in the Republican Party's 2000 platform, which suggested the removal of the dictator but did not specify a method.⁵⁰ However, 9/11 undoubtedly meant that 'worst-case analyses had gained a new credibility'⁵¹ and thereby paved the way for the 'third radical wave',⁵² also known as the 'Bush revolution'.

Here, Freedman could have underlined the attempts of more traditional adherents, such as Brent Scowcroft, Stephen Walt, Robert Jervis and others, who urged G. W. Bush to show restraint after the campaign against Afghanistan. If unexplored and certainly contestable, the parallels to other decision-makers who also continued their wars despite the fact that good opportunities existed to end them inevitably come to one's mind (Khomeini 1982, Hitler 1940). However, at this point the White House thought that the term 'war on terror' was too loosely defined to provide a thorough strategy. This is why Iraq was reintroduced to the debate at the end of 2001 as one of the states 'that held weapons of mass destruction.'⁵³ Certainly, the neo-conservative promotion of the Iraq issue of the 1990s had paid off.

Freedman avoids falling into the trap of the storyline that portrays G. W. Bush as a newborn neo-conservative who blindly followed the ideas of people like Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle. On the contrary, he makes clear that at times the president took decisions against the suggestions of Rumsfeld and Cheney; for instance, in September 2002 he accepted Colin Powell's argument to 'go back to the UN and build up a coalition against Saddam.'⁵⁴ Yet, Bush's constant depiction of US policy as the fight of 'good against evil,' or 'freedom against terrorism', made him highly receptive to the anti-realist proposition that the 'lack of democracy' was the key reason 'to explain American dissatisfaction with the Middle Eastern *status quo*.'⁵⁵ Bush's decision to go to war was reinforced when Saddam insufficiently complied with UNSC resolution 1441 on 7 December 2002 and when '[i]nitial reports from the UN inspectors confirmed this attitude.'⁵⁶ The

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 398.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 401.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 406.

⁵² Ibid., p. 508.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 403–4.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 409.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 508.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 417.

critical spin that was given to important secret evidence could have been examined more closely, especially since the flimsiness of such evidence immensely tarnished the US' reputation once it was revealed.

It is at this point that Freedman's underlying analytical framework reveals its strength, though. While George H. W. Bush's practices were deeply entrenched in the knowledge gained by a long career in foreign policy and buttressed by a realist belief in the *status quo*, his son was not as deeply rooted in such thinking as his father. Though he was not a puppet, as he has often been depicted, he was more susceptible to neo-conservative influences. Thus Bush took America to war against Saddam Hussein because he held a 'genuine conviction' which led him 'to play the part of the radical'⁵⁷ intent upon eradicating sources of 'evil' and constructing a new Middle East. Freedman could have discussed at greater length how George W. Bush became increasingly ideologically penetrable, in order to better explain how and why the US' Middle East policy turned from conservative to revisionist.

Today, the US seems to have reluctantly given up the core of its missionary zeal. It may have been forced to do so in the wake of unintended consequences of US actions. There should be no doubt, however, that these ideas, which propelled this unprecedented enterprise in Iraq, have disappeared only temporarily. Therefore, Freedman strongly encourages the view that the 'big lesson from past experience is the need to understand the limits of power.'⁵⁸ The obstacle here is that '[f]orce is justified to right wrongs and defeat evil, not to correct a power balance out of kilter.'⁵⁹ This, in turn, 'inhibits dialogue with those castigated unworthy.'⁶⁰ Looking ahead, the only way forward with regard to Iran is 'to reduce the symbolic significance of the fact of conversation and present it as no more than normal diplomacy.'⁶¹

As a final word, the overarching theme of how to account for the downward trajectory of the US' standing in the region has been well captured by Freedman, while Parsi's contestable account focuses too narrowly on the Iran-Israel relationship. Roy's explanations fail to show why the 'ideological' element in US foreign policy came to carry much more weight after 2001 than it did in the 1990s.

Yet one could argue that there is more to it. Precisely because the realist approach has always lacked a future vision,⁶² this otherwise favourable approach may not offer easy solutions to the intrinsic problems of the region that cannot be solved by the use of violence. These include, but are not limited to, resistance to globalisation, poverty, lack of education, and the *causa* Palestine. Nonetheless, even if the US' reputation has been fatefully tarnished, she can still exert a higher degree of influence than most other countries – *nolens volens*.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. xxiii, 508.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 505.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 506.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 506–7.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 507.

⁶² Edward Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (Houndsmills: Palgrave 2001), pp. 84–8. Though, for a statesman to draw from a vision is a widely acknowledged necessity. See Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1994), p. 836.