

## **Abandoning Strategy: Assessing Negative Feedback and the Bush Doctrine**

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**Abstract:** This paper compares theories of grand strategy feedback by analyzing the Bush Doctrine during Bush's second term. By the time of his 2008 State of the Union address, George W. Bush had scaled back both his rhetoric and his willingness to apply assertive, unilateral pressure around the world. Why? Conventional wisdom suggests that external costs—particularly related to the Iraq War—progressively constrained the administration's capacity to act. Yet theories of foreign policy and grand strategy change propose a range of other explanations for what type of feedback most profoundly affects a state's grand strategy. These include domestic political calculations, public opinion, economic interest groups, active veto players, rational analyses and systemic pressures. In order to determine which feedback source most influenced the Bush administration, I compare predicted values on each of these explanations with actual policy outcomes and debates during a series of salient decision-making periods. Findings suggest that domestic variables such as public opinion, veto players and economic interests mattered less than 1) elite perceptions of a gap between strategic goals and reality and 2) exogenous, systemic pressures. Nevertheless, the paper also concludes with a call for theory that integrates these competing explanations.

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This case study analyzes why George W. Bush's "Freedom Agenda" declined as an active grand strategy during the president's second administration. While the analysis of foreign policy and grand strategy change is a robust field, few studies to date have focused on Bush's second term or systematically analyzed why the administration ultimately abandoned the most ambitious elements of its grand strategy. The following case study introduces the question and competing explanations; describes the overall method and plan of the study; presents accounts of three salient periods of strategic decision making; and, finally, presents findings.

### **Introduction**

Most observers agree that the Bush Doctrine, as a grand strategy concept, reached its most expansive phase as Bush was reelected and articulated an ambitious vision in his second inaugural address. Scholarly and popular consensus also suggests that by the last eighteen months of Bush's second term, Bush's ambitious strategy had given way to both muted policy decisions and rhetoric. As one journalist noted in 2007, by sending a letter directly to North Korea's Kim Jon Il on nuclear cooperation, the White House was "accelerating its reversal on numerous foreign-policy fronts," while Bush's former United Nations ambassador and one-time administration insider, John Bolton, lamented, "Our foreign policy is in free-fall."<sup>1</sup>

Jeffrey Legro's theory of idea change suggests that this kind of grand strategy abandonment occurs when elite policy makers perceive a clear gap between their expectations and the reality generated by the grand strategy.<sup>2</sup> In other words, while policy entrepreneurs were able to engineer a change in both the conceptualization and the practice of US grand strategy, that strategy's inability to produce promised results or even maintain the status quo led all but its

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon 2007, A9

<sup>2</sup> Legro 2005, 13-16

most ardent supporters to abandon the strategy. Overall, the theory holds that new strategies are implemented on a trial basis, and if they fail, policy makers return to something familiar.

This approach may seem intuitive, but the implicit assumption here is that elite policy makers are generally rational regarding cost-benefit analysis: they observe a strategy or belief system in action and then make adjustments or changes if the expected mode of success does not follow. By contrast, other research finds that policy makers may hang on to a policy or strategy even when it is failing because political, ideational and psychological inertia make change difficult. Similarly, Legro's explanation does not necessarily account for political calculation. Policy makers, for example, may be more concerned about public opinion or domestic coalitions than whether or not a strategy is working as predicted. Alternatively, economic interests or exogenous geopolitical calculations may dictate grand strategic decision-making. For instance, one can imagine a scenario in which leading figures of the administration believed that key goals of the Bush Doctrine, such as expanding democracy, were being achieved but that the threat of allies and adversaries forming a balancing coalition forced those decision makers to abandon the strategy. As one voice of conventional wisdom, Fareed Zakaria, pointed out in 2007, when Bush was "loaded with political capital" in 2002 and 2003, he "embarked on a series of ideological exercises that severely diminished American influence and prestige." Later, "battered by failure," Bush "moved toward more sensible policies ... But the president is now walking alone, with few supporters at home or abroad, and little capital that he can draw on to execute any of his new approaches."<sup>3</sup> In this narrative, Bush tried to press forward with his grand strategy, but resistance at all levels made success nearly impossible as domestic and international actors, not necessarily the administration, responded to apparent failure. "The question," declared one

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<sup>3</sup> Zakaria 2007, 36. Schier (2009, 149) reaches the same conclusion after applying a more explicit theory of political capital. He argues that by 2007, Bush had resorted to relying upon his formal powers rather than his political authority to govern.

observer, “is not whether the president and most of his team still hold on to the basic tenets of the Bush doctrine—they do—but whether they can sustain it. They cannot.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most common view was simply that, as Woodward argues, “Because Iraq had consumed so much attention, money, military force and political effort ... the result was that the United States had no choice but to engage in diplomacy. It was about the only tool left, for example, in dealing with North Korea and Iran.”<sup>5</sup> Notably, again, in this account, key decision makers were not actively analyzing the gap between their expected outcomes and reality; rather, they ran into resistance and grudgingly acceded to reality.

### **Method and Plan**

This case study, therefore, sets out to determine whether Legro’s theory offers the best, or at least a strong, explanation for grand strategy change during Bush’s second term. It will use a congruence method to compare predictions based upon competing theories. Specifically, I first describe what each competing theory predicts observers should find in this case if the theory is true. Second, I identify the most salient periods for grand strategy and use public statements, personal accounts, scholarly material, and contemporary print media to determine whether those variables predicted by the theories, such as active veto players or strong public opinion, are in fact present. I am seeking to observe whether and how the theories are congruent with reality during select periods of policy salience. In other words, do their variables appear as predicted? Along the way, I construct a broad narrative account of the rise and decline of Bush’s doctrine during this period, and I focus specifically on the most senior and central grand strategy decision makers, such as the president, national security advisor, secretary of defense and secretary of

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon 2006A, 75

<sup>5</sup> Woodward 2006, 316

state.<sup>6</sup> At the end, I analyze the congruence findings in a table and apply the narrative to reject any obviously implausible or improbable explanations that the congruence method may fail to identify.

The following section describes the key salient periods for grand strategy during Bush's second term. After that, the chapter outlines empirical expectations from each of the theories compared in this study. Stated differently, it lays out the hypothesized results from each theory. Third, I construct narrative case studies of the policy positions and debates Bush and his core advisors articulated as well as the pressures and crises they faced during those periods. Using that material, I then determine whether and to what degree the competing theories' predicted variables appear. In other words, to reiterate, which predictions are most congruent with reality?

### *Salient Periods*

I identify three periods of grand strategy salience during the Bush administration. Specifically, I focus on times when the president makes a major policy statement that coincides with unexpected challenges and crises. During these periods, elite administration officials are either actively reconsidering current policies, or they are defending those policies against officials who are. The first period centers on Bush's second inaugural, when the administration perceived an endorsement for its domestic and foreign policies and set out to expand its strategic vision. The second period begins with Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 and extends for several months, until March 2006, when Sunni militants bombed the Golden Dome Mosque in Samarra, Iraq. While no one event stands out during this period, it is defined by a series of challenges—such as Iran breaking IAEA seals at a nuclear facility and Bush feeling compelled to outline a “comprehensive strategy” for Iraq—that challenged the administration's proactive vision of

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<sup>6</sup> As Walton points out (2012, 87), “it is clear that in American strategic culture the imperial presidency is regarded as an essentially legitimate institution.” Regarding the Bush administration's foreign policy, Rodman (2009, 247) finds that “the pivotal factor was always the president.”

progress. The third period centers on the November 2006 midterm election, when the Republicans suffered major losses. Already, the administration had implemented a series of strategy reviews as Iraq, over the summer, appeared to enter a civil war, and by January 2007, Bush officially announced a major new strategy for the US war there. By the end of 2007, supporters were charging that Bush had abandoned his previous foreign policies, while critics were noting that Bush had moved toward a more conciliatory and cooperative stance on foreign affairs. 2008, in turn, was defined by, at home, the presidential election and, abroad, attempting to manage old concerns and a few crises such as the Russia-Georgia war of August. In other words, by early or mid-2007, the Bush administration appears to have made important defenses of changes to its grand strategy, but after that time, the administration made little effort to do more than manage its existing positions.

#### *Congruence Method and Comparing Theories*

In order to determine whether Legro's theory explains change better than its competitors, this case study compares it to expectations from other, leading theories: *failure perception*, *external conditions*, *economic interests*, *veto players* and *public opinion*. The more frequently and the more strongly a predicted variable appears, the more likely it is that the given theory explains grand strategy feedback and change. With this "congruence method," the researcher asks, "Which theory's predictions most closely match reality?" Under this approach, I construct each case study, then I assess whether each proposed source of feedback presented was congruent ("yes"), not congruent ("no") or "inconclusive." Details on how I operationalize and assess each stream appear below. Streams that consistently code as "no" are unlikely to have affected decision makers because this outcome is not congruent with the dependent variable (an abandoned or marginalized grand strategy). By contrast, consistently "yes" feedback is strong

evidence that this stream affected policy maker decision-making. Finally, a mixed result or a consistently “inconclusive” result fails to disconfirm a hypothesized influence, but it does suggest that stream may only wield some influence on the ultimate outcome of a grand strategy. In other words, theories behind each proposed source of feedback predict that their preferred variables will register as “yes” in all or most instances, so I am testing whether these claims are congruent with reality.

In order to identify the streams within each case study, I define and operationalize them as follows:

*Elite perceptions of Failure:* President’s and his closest advisor’s stated beliefs regarding whether and how there exists a gap between strategy and reality regarding the issue at hand. If the amended version of Legro’s theory proposed in this project is effective, the salient periods should contain 1) at least semi-public acknowledgements from elite policy makers that they believe there existed a gap between strategic expectations and reality and 2) discussions and steps to methodically “fix” that gap or unwind the new strategy. Fundamentally, Legro’s theory holds that policy makers and interested parties will rationally evaluate a new strategy’s success or failure.<sup>7</sup> They may not explicitly acknowledge “failure,” but they are likely to extend their evaluations of a strategy’s success or failure beyond merely private conversations.

/Figure 1 about here/

*Shifting external conditions:* Realists maintain that policy makers ultimately respond to external pressure, so if their predictions hold, the salient periods will display responsiveness to events and perceived structural changes in the international system.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, researchers should expect to observe 1) explicit statements accounting for and responding to the distribution

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<sup>7</sup> As Gaddis (2005, 3) argues, the gap between intentions and actual outcomes is likely to reveal “where changes will—or at least should—take place.”

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Doran 1991, 60-69; Miller 2010, 35-36; Montan 2005, 116.

of power in the international system or 2) changes to grand strategy in direct response to real or perceived threats from peer competitors. In fact, the concern for power distributions should weigh heaviest in forming grand strategy because while states may face transient threats from terrorists, for example, the truly fundamental threats emanate from peers and rivals.

*Veto Players:* Major bureaucratic and political players whose support is necessary for a strategy's successful implementation and whose positions are typically shaped by their respective bureaucratic and political positions.<sup>9</sup> Here, the study will conclude that veto players were a relevant and possibly decisive variable if, during a period of policy debate, 1) a policy entrepreneur or bureaucratic player either (a) promotes a strategy change that the president initially rejected but ultimately accepted or (b) opposes a change that the president supports but ultimately drops; or 2) the president actively courts a policy entrepreneur's or bureaucratic player's support in order to advance and implement a grand strategy change. The point here is that veto players, including Members of Congress, are likely to matter to the degree that their advocacy is congruent with outcomes.

*Public Opinion:* The degree to which policy makers explicitly cite public opinion as a relevant factor in policy decision or perceive public opinion to be rising or falling during a decision period.<sup>10</sup> If public opinion is a source of negative feedback, the researcher will observe policy makers explicitly citing public opinion as a relevant factor in policy decision or perceive public opinion to be rising or falling during a decision period. Similarly, do policy makers cite or appear to directly change strategy in tandem with electoral trends? Notably, this stream of feedback focuses on elite perceptions rather than, per se, specific polling numbers.

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<sup>9</sup> Tsebelis (2002, 1-3) examines some of these "veto players" in a monograph. See also Bueno de Mesquita 1999, 150-151; Schweller 2008, 11-12; Vasquez 1985, 660.

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Aldrich et al. 2006; Jacobs and Page 2005, 357-359; Knecht 2010, 5; Powlick and Katz 1998, 29.

*Parochial Economic Interests:* Degree to which President and other key decision makers either consult (or are pressured by) major economic and business interests or include economic policies in major national security statements.<sup>11</sup> If economic interests dominated grand strategy decision making, observers should find (as with shifting external conditions) either 1) changes to grand strategy in direct response to unexpected economic developments or 2) stated acknowledgement of economic interests as relevant to adjusting or building a security strategy. In both cases, observers are also likely to observe a high degree of lobbying by economic interest groups when grand strategy is salient.

### *Analysis and Application*

Overall, analysis may show that all or none of these variables was decisive. Rather than seek to prove one over the others, this case study aims to determine which predicted variables are present as well as most plausible. In other words, which theory or theories offer the strongest probabilistic account of grand strategy change? Along the way, though, the study does seek to highlight whether or not the Legro theory offers greater explanatory power relative to the competing explanations.

### **Second Inaugural**

The Bush doctrine reached its furthest rhetorical aspirations in the Second Inaugural. Reading November's solid electoral victory as a strong endorsement, particularly in foreign affairs, Bush sought to push his view of international affairs to its fullness. "It is the policy of the United States," he declared, "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."<sup>12</sup> Already, the administration listed two successful regime changes on its resume, and it had

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<sup>11</sup> For example, see Lobell 2003, 2-3; Narizny 2007, 17; Snyder 1991, 13-17.

<sup>12</sup> Bush 2005, "Second Inaugural Address"

justified and executed a vision of preemption new to U.S. foreign policy. Protecting “freedom” and promoting “democracy” was integral to this policy since at least 2002, but now Bush, expressly directing and approving his speechwriter’s bold formulation of U.S. foreign policy, committed the U.S. to a revolutionary—not simply status quo—role in world affairs. The administration almost immediately sought to reign in expectations and calm concerns about this expansive vision, but the months surrounding Bush’s second inaugural display an ambitious effort to make adjustments and set precedents for the second term.

### *Success and Confidence*

Reelection seemed to confirm Bush’s confidence in his administration’s strategic trajectory. In an interview, he observed, “We had an accountability moment, and that’s called the 2004 elections. The American people listened to different assessments made about what was taking place in Iraq, and they ... chose me.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, along with increasing Republican majorities in both Congressional houses, about 43 percent of the electorate cited “terrorism” as the most important issue at stake, and of those people, a vast majority believed the Iraq War was worth its cost.<sup>14</sup> Bush attributed his reelection to a reputation for toughness on terrorism and public willingness to support the Iraq War, both core elements of the Bush Doctrine.

After the election, neither events nor Bush’s personnel changes seriously challenged this strategy. Bush replaced nine of 15 cabinet members, but most accounts agree that he was laying groundwork for an ambitious policy agenda rather than responding to perceptions of failure.<sup>15</sup> In fact, noted an observer, Bush considered his foreign policy team successful and was seeking to “replicate the formula he used to reshape foreign policy” by centering more decision-making

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<sup>13</sup> Van de Hei and Fletcher 2005

<sup>14</sup> Klinker 2004,

<sup>15</sup> Wolffe 2005; Woodward 2008, 27

power in the White House and elevating individuals personally loyal to the President.<sup>16</sup> Still, the Bush foreign policy team did not reject all change. As consensus among academic observers like Joseph Nye suggested, Bush administration principals appeared to believe that their “often-brusque style has been counterproductive” and that while Bush’s basic security strategies remained in place, “there *has* been a change in atmospherics” toward a more diplomatic approach.<sup>17</sup>

Supporters and critics could agree that the administration had been ambitious. Bush was blamed by his opposition for bold but dubious achievements like cutting taxes and expanding the deficit during war and recession, as well as initiating a “war of choice” instead of focusing on al Qaeda and undermining core alliances.<sup>18</sup> Yet, supporters argued, “the ledger shows more assets than liabilities” with new regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, Libyan *détente* and continued homeland security.

### *Expanding Agenda*

Approaching the second inaugural, these broad ambitions came into focus as administration elites sought to expand rather than moderate their second term agenda.<sup>19</sup> The long-term question on both sides involved whether and to what degree Bush’s political capital would remain intact. Even with reelection, Bush’s approval rating rarely rose above 50 percent, and even the Republican Congress was increasingly “restive” with its less than popular president.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Bush forged ahead with an ambitious strategic vision for his second inaugural, a move he later recalled was “one of my most consequential decisions as president.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Van de Hei and Allen 2004. See also Woodward 2006, 354

<sup>17</sup> Kitfield (2005B, 109-110) quoting Joseph Nye and Danielle Pletka, respectively.

<sup>18</sup> Editorial *WSJ* 2005

<sup>19</sup> Wolffe 2005

<sup>20</sup> Wolffe 2005; Harwood 2005A

<sup>21</sup> Bush 2010, 398

To articulate his vision, Bush tapped a trusted speech writer, Michael Gerson, who believed that “Bush’s goal now was to dramatically alter the American foreign policy mind-set as radically as it had been changed at the beginning of the Cold War.”<sup>22</sup> He and Bush wanted to formulate a vision between constant crusading, which Gerson believed led John F. Kennedy into Vietnam, and disengagement, which Bush believed allowed Islamic extremism to metastasize.

Ultimately, “freedom,” “liberty” or variations of these concepts appeared 44 times in Bush’s second inaugural. Crucially, he said, “The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, he explained, “America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one.” No part of the world was irrelevant: America’s vulnerability, Bush explained, lay in “whole regions of the world [that] simmer in resentment and tyranny.” Still, Bush focused particularly on Iraq, where Americans “will see progress being made toward an objective which will make this world a better place.” Bush predicted frustration in the short term, but “it is the long-term objective that is vital, and that is to spread freedom.” In effect, Iraq became both the test case and central battle ground, as well as the symbolic embodiment, of Bush’s grand strategy to protect the U.S. by transforming the world.

In following weeks, Bush expanded on the substance of this grand strategy. It would ensure long term security by altering the structure of the international system from a pair of competing camps—democratic versus unfree states—to one in which democracy is the standard and peoples are able to pursue their interests as they see fit.<sup>24</sup> He also made a related but secondary case for a “more flexible, more innovative, and more competitive” economy to preserve America’s economic lead.<sup>25</sup> Notably, these economic interests appear to function with

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<sup>22</sup> Woodward 2006, 371

<sup>23</sup> Bush 2005, Second Inaugural

<sup>24</sup> Bush 2005, State of the Union

<sup>25</sup> Bush 2005, State of the Union

ease in conjunction with Bush's larger "freedom agenda." Overall, Bush presents a seamless continuum between U.S. security and economic interests, fostering universal democracy and the interests of all people. "I think America is at its best when it leads toward an ideal," he explained.

### *Moderating the Vision*

Immediate reactions to the inaugural speech proved strong, and the administration quickly backed away from the speech's activist, even crusading, implications. In the administration, Hadley and Rice concurred that "something big has happened," partly because, as Rice argued, Bush had joined a "long line of American leaders who believed that U.S. interests, in the long run, are best secured by the advance of freedom," while Gerson believed that "every future president would have to take the Bush Doctrine seriously."<sup>26</sup> Despite strong support from the neoconservative establishment, some conservatives like conservative columnist Peggy Noonan, were left with "a bad feeling" that the White House was on a mission and "has put the world on notice."<sup>27</sup> Bush maintained that his strategy was rooted in existing policies. During the State of the Union a week later, Bush insisted that the US had "no right, no desire, and no intention to impose our form of government on anyone else."<sup>28</sup> Rather, American policy was to preserve and build upon the existing community of democracies, which, in turn, would lead to an expanded zone of peace. As journalist Richard Wolffe observed, "it turned out at that those vital interests were more like a 'long-term goal' that would 'require the commitment of generations.'" In other words, it was "a steady-as-she-goes course, not a radical shift."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Woodward 2006, 378; Rice 2011, 325

<sup>27</sup> Woodward 2006, 378; Editors, *National Review*, 2005; Barnes 2005

<sup>28</sup> Bush 2005, State of the Union

<sup>29</sup> Wolffe 2005

The administration appeared, perhaps awkwardly, to be espousing radical ambitious but eschewing radical methods. Rice, as she transitioned from National Security Advisor to Secretary of State, defended Bush's Freedom Agenda as "American Realism."<sup>30</sup> Still, Rice also acknowledged a pressure, as Britain's *Economist* put it, to "unite" America's allies and, as historian John Lewis Gaddis told her, to recognize that "this is the time for reassurance" after years of "upheaval."<sup>31</sup> In her Senate confirmation testimony, Rice elaborated on these themes. "America is safer and the world more secure," she argued, "whenever and wherever freedom prevails."<sup>32</sup> She insisted that the US would first rely upon and support the long-standing web of democracies, economic agreements, legal agreements and international institutions that the US had established. Secondly, she said, the US would equip democracies to fight security threats and "alleviate the hopelessness that feeds terror" as well as, finally, "spread freedom and democracy around the globe." Stated differently, Rice wanted to embrace—or perhaps take for granted—America's preexisting liberal internationalist structures and relationships as well as take proactive steps to expand that zone.

Both Bush and Rice traveled to Europe for their first international trips. Bush, Rice recalled, believed the Secretary of State was "setting exactly the tone that he'd hoped; it was time to move on from the wounds of the Iraq split and unite the alliance in the cause of promoting shared values."<sup>33</sup> Several weeks later, as the *National Journal* observed, "in choosing Europe for his first post-inaugural trip, President Bush will put the capstone on an aggressive campaign of outreach across the Atlantic that began even before he was elected."<sup>34</sup> Observers

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<sup>30</sup> Rice 2011, 325

<sup>31</sup> Rice 2011, 290-291

<sup>32</sup> "The Nomination of Condoleezza Rice," 2005

<sup>33</sup> Rice 2011, 323-324

<sup>34</sup> Kitfield 2005A, 516; see also "What's News" 2005

seemed to agree that while the administration had alienated even its allies in the Iraq War, it now recognized that neither side could “get anything constructively done” unless they cooperated.<sup>35</sup>

Regarding Iraq and the Middle East, senior administration officials intensified their rhetoric but enacted few policy changes. Rice reasoned that the US was now redefining its interests in the region as freedom rather than mere stability; thus, despite subsequent challenges, “the strategic decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein was the right one.”<sup>36</sup> Still, even Rice’s own fact-finding envoys, Philip Zelikow and Ray Odierno, found that Iraq was now at a “tipping point” and nearly a “failed state.” Toward other areas, Rice articulated a mix of aspirations and pragmatic limitations. Iran, for instance, was an ongoing and seemingly intractable problem: along with a long-running animosity toward the US, it now was accused of aiding Iraqi insurgents and developing a covert nuclear weapons program. Yet American allies remained uneasy: Rice noted that Europeans believed the US would initiate military action against Iran.<sup>37</sup> In reality, Bush appeared to harbor no specific military plans and even asked Rice about “how dramatic a shift in policy [they] needed to reassure the Europeans” that the US “wasn’t ready for anything dramatic.”<sup>38</sup> Toward North Korea and its nuclear program, Rice wanted to, and later that year did, restart 6-party talks, which Rice said would prevent the regime from “playing us off against the others

Rice’s “American Realism” was consistent with long-standing US priorities and could not be uniquely tied to the Bush Doctrine or Freedom Agenda. For example, regarding the “War on Terror” and military intervention, Rice embraced but did not expand the Bush Doctrine or

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<sup>35</sup> Kitfield (2005A, 516) quoting former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown. See also King 2005A and B. Even Rumsfeld, in order to protect “next-generation” technologies in Europe, spoke out against a Congressional bill that would limit non-US components in military hardware. Glain 2004, 40

<sup>36</sup> Rice 2011, 325; “The Nomination of Condoleezza Rice,” 2005

<sup>37</sup> Rice 2011, 321

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 336

show how it might be clearly distinct from US strategy in any given administration. When pressed on the 2003 Iraq intervention, Rice hedged. “Circumstances differ,” she explained, and “military force should really be a last resort.” Ironically, rather than Afghanistan or Iraq, Rice highlighted Colombia as a case affirming the Bush administration’s approach to foreign policy: President Uribe got tough on terrorism and pushed for pro-growth economic policies, both of which seemed to have succeeded. Rice did not specify, though, whether and how the Bush Doctrine, the Freedom Agenda or American Realism informed Colombia’s turnaround.

### *Consolidation*

Developments in the next months appeared to confirm this dichotomy between ambitious rhetoric and constrained, or at least contested, action. Bush declared that the recent elections in Palestine as well as Iraq demonstrated his vision of democratic reform, yet casualties in Iraq overall remained high and Bush offered few specifics about what US had or would be doing in order to promote democracy in places like Palestine.<sup>39</sup> Further east, the administration supported Pakistani-Indian rapprochement while opposing a pipeline that would deliver Iranian natural gas across Pakistan to India.<sup>40</sup> Administration officials also advanced military and trade deals with India in order to “cement diplomatic ties and lift India as a democratic counterweight in Asia to China.” Though consistent with the Freedom Agenda, such moves also correlated with realist geopolitics.<sup>41</sup> As Bush’s personnel shifts settled into place, a more constrained but still ambitious strategy emerged. Faced with foreign and domestic backlash along with bloody instability in Iraq, leading neoconservative voices like Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz receded as relatively more moderate actors like Rice and Hadley gained influence. At the Department of

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<sup>39</sup> Cooper 2005

<sup>40</sup> Solomon and King 2005

<sup>41</sup> In fact, Bush later announced in July that the US had agreed to lift the ban on selling civilian nuclear technology to India without India joining the Non-Proliferation Treaty or even ending its nuclear program.

Defense, Rumsfeld attempted to revive his earlier effort to transform the military by building an array of small teams in or near global hotspots.<sup>42</sup> However, Rumsfeld by this point may have become “a lesser force” regarding Iraq and other priorities.<sup>43</sup> Overall, conventional wisdom coalesced around a view that the administration invaded Iraq “with no coherent strategy to run an occupied country—or defeat an insurgency.” Rice, however, remained a “chief instrument” for Bush as she retained influence in the National Security Council and was most often charged with addressing the big issues like building democracy in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, collaborating with France to pressure Syria out of Lebanon and rebuilding talks with Iran, where hawks like Cheney wanted to draw hard lines and accept confrontation.<sup>44</sup> Still, later that summer, “majorities of Americans disapprove[d] of the president's handling of the economy, foreign policy and Iraq.”<sup>45</sup>

In sum, Bush and his closest advisors read the election as an endorsement and saw little reason to shift, and even expanded, their strategic trajectory. Nevertheless, observation of the variables offers a few suggestive results. First, as Legro predicts, the administration did appear to rationally assess the gap between their strategic goals and actual outcomes and implement a minor change toward reconciliation and cooperation with traditional allies. Second, while evidence suggests that the administration took US primacy for granted, it also demonstrated some concern for shifting external conditions by making amends with Europe and beginning to make long term plans for balancing power in Asia. Meanwhile, economic interests played little explicit or implicit part in the administration’s strategic thinking, and, finally, veto players

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<sup>42</sup> Jaffe 2005

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Hirsh and Klaidman 2005, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Hirsh and Klaidman, 2005, 30

<sup>45</sup> Harwood 2005B

proved marginal as Bush remained relatively impervious to dissenting voices and effectively deputized Rice and Hadley to oversee implementation of the Freedom Agenda.

### **Katrina to Samarra**

Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana on August 29, 2005 and, Condoleezza Rice herself concluded, became “the first in a spiral of negative events that would almost engulf the Bush presidency.”<sup>46</sup> Six months later, in February, al Qaeda-affiliated militants infiltrated and blew up the golden dome of Iraq’s al Askari Mosque, a Shia holy site. Bush and other administration officials insisted that, despite the potential for sectarian conflict, Iraqis had “looked into the abyss [of civil war] and did not like what they saw.” Yet in the following weeks, violence in Iraq exploded into a more violent trajectory that would only decline in August 2007 as the administration implemented a radically new war strategy. Bush later, and atypically, admitted, “I was wrong.”<sup>47</sup> These events frame a period in which the Bush administration’s grand strategy, articulated in a November speech about progress in Iraq and then more fully in the March 2006 National Security Strategy, appears to have begun downshifting from its ambitions of early 2005. Here, I focus on a salient period that starts and ends with events that elite administration officials themselves acknowledge as important, and even negative, watersheds.

#### *Katrina and Competence*

Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, for many Americans, came to define the administration’s failings. The storm involved over 1500 dead, major flood destruction in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, and slow relief responses at all levels. For instance, the percentage of Americans who considered Bush a “strong and decisive leader” dropped from 60 percent before Katrina to 49 percent several weeks later, and notably, his approval scores never

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<sup>46</sup> Rice 2011, 398-99

<sup>47</sup> Bush 2010, 361

recovered.<sup>48</sup> Whatever the reasons for this, the point for this project is that observers inside and outside the administration believed that Bush's overall credibility and political capital declined dramatically. Rice later conceded that "there were many missteps, both in perception and reality," and key political operatives considered it "the tipping point" and "the final nail in the coffin."<sup>49</sup> Andrew Kohut of the Pew Center reflected, "This is an event that calcified the criticisms people were having about Bush."<sup>50</sup> In other words, though a domestic disaster, Katrina dovetailed with failure of overt success in Iraq.

### *Ongoing Realities*

Throughout that fall, as the administration attempted to recover politically from Katrina, Iraq and its steadily increasing violence remained the administration's definitive foreign issue. From his communications perspective, Bartlett described constant pressure for strategic change on an administration whose "resolve and determination were coming off as pigheaded."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, by August, 64 percent of Americans disapproved of Bush's handling of Iraq, while in September, Rice received another first-hand account from Zelikow that insurgents enjoyed free movement in many areas, that economic governance had "moved backwards" in some places, and that Iraqis were now suffering "profound disillusionment" with the US and their own future prospects.<sup>52</sup> Despite this negative feedback, Bush personally and politically favored resolve, as exemplified by his open door for Henry Kissinger, who was arguing that the US should not "give an inch" and that "victory over the insurgency is the only meaningful exit strategy."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Weisman and Abramowitz 2006; Stolberg 2006C

<sup>49</sup> Rice 2011, 399. Respectively, Bush's strategist for the 2004 election, Matthew Dowd and White House communications director Dan Bartlett as quoted in Murphy and Purdam 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Weisman and Abramowitz 2006

<sup>51</sup> Woodward 2006, 405

<sup>52</sup> Newsweek Poll 2005; Woodward 2006, 412-414

<sup>53</sup> Woodward 2006, 407-409; Kissinger 2005

In other areas, the administration remained tied to earlier approaches in such a way that the Freedom Agenda looked more like a rhetorical theme than an overarching strategy. The Iranians, for instance, continued to deliver weapons and agents to Iraq's Shia militants, yet the administration essentially followed its containment and pressure strategy, an approach holding little foundation in Bush's explicitly transformational rhetoric but consistent with Rice's more pragmatic positions as Secretary of State.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, toward China, administration policy was largely handled by Robert Zoellick, a "fierce and sometimes combative moderate" who was a trusted Rice advisor and appeared to enjoy Bush's blessing to pursue a classic liberal internationalist agenda of trade expansion and institutional engagement.<sup>55</sup> Still, as earlier in the year, Bush and others in the administration also considered China a possible military and geostrategic threat.<sup>56</sup> In fact, some policy insiders had starting calling the administration's China policy a combination of containment and engagement: "congagement." Though arguably a coherent strategy, this approach made little reference to Bush's more universal calls for active, democratic transformation.

On the domestic political front that fall, Bush's political capital continued to erode. For instance, Cheney's Chief of Staff I. Lewis "Scotter" Libby was indicted for exposing a CIA agent's identity, which renewed a series of questions about the administration's overall national security credibility.<sup>57</sup> That same month, facing Republican objections on grounds of incompetence, Bush withdrew his nomination of Harriet Miers for the Supreme Court.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, Democrats in Congress were expressing an almost complete breakdown of

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<sup>54</sup> Johnson and Hirsh 2005, 30; Murphy and Purdum 2009

<sup>55</sup> Glain 2005, 38

<sup>56</sup> Hutzler 2005; Solomon 2005; Phillips 2005

<sup>57</sup> Stevenson 2005

<sup>58</sup> Fletcher et al. 2005; Stout and Williams 2005

communication and understanding with the White House while Bush's weak approval rating appeared to be affecting Republicans in general.<sup>59</sup>

That November and December, the administration attempted to push back against Iraq War critics and rearticulate its international goals. Over the summer, Hadley reacted to complaints that the US had no war strategy by recruiting two respected policy thinkers, Peter Feaver and Meghan O'Sullivan. They developed what eventually became the "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq."<sup>60</sup> Delayed after Katrina, the document was released on November 30, the same day Bush began a series of speeches outlining a plan for victory in Iraq and even conceding some mistakes. Two weeks earlier, Bush had explicitly portrayed a radical Islamic ideology behind 9/11 that sought to violently impose a "totalitarian empire that denies all political and religious freedom" and linked it to terrorist violence around the globe.<sup>61</sup> Iraq represented a keystone in this global struggle to define and defend the international system. To achieve "complete victory," Bush said the US strategy was to "clear, hold and build": clear areas of terrorist control then protect them while infrastructure and institutions are built to establish a stable political situation. Rather than withdrawing on a timeline, this process involved "large numbers" of Iraqi security forces who would, Bush continued on November 30, "stand up" as coalition forces "stand down."<sup>62</sup>

Despite this effort, political realities through December and January changed little for the administration. Bush's personal reputation for political inflexibility and intellectual isolation remained a common criticism. As one account observed, the White House had alienated respected Democratic Senators like Jack Murtha, while the moderate Republican Richard Lugar

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<sup>59</sup> Woodward 2006, 416-417 and 423; Harwood 2005

<sup>60</sup> Woodward 2006, 427

<sup>61</sup> Bush 2005, "Veterans Day Address"

<sup>62</sup> Bush 2005, "President Outlines Strategy"

believed Bush needed a far greater variety of voices in policy making.<sup>63</sup> Overall, observers seemed to agree that Bush favored constancy and loyalty over innovation and intellectual curiosity, though by late 2005, Bush was interacting more frequently with Republican Congressmen who had been in “open rebellion.”<sup>64</sup> In the Cabinet, Rice and Rumsfeld grew increasingly estranged, particularly when Rumsfeld interpreted Bush’s declaration of “clear, hold and build,” a phrase coined by Zelikow and promulgated by Rice, as a usurpation of his authority.<sup>65</sup> By this time, though, even Card was responding to complaints from prominent Republicans by initiating a quiet campaign to replace Rumsfeld. Regarding Iraq, Bush and the NSC principals agreed that “progress” remained tenuous, and they continually debated plans to achieve an acceptable outcome for Iraq’s political system.<sup>66</sup>

### *Innovation and Challenge*

Amidst these struggles, in mid-January 2006, Rice attempted to introduce an innovation in how the US pursues grand strategy. Calling it “Transformational Diplomacy,” she was working within the Freedom Agenda by pushing a more concerted and coordinated effort at “build[ing] and sustain[ing] democratic, well-governed states.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, the US needed to be an activist power building democracies. However, Rice’s practical changes at the State Department involved building tools of persuasion rather than coercion. These included shifting diplomatic assets away from developed states and toward rising powers like China, India and Brazil; promoting greater regional integration and collaboration on issues like disease; and by

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas and Wolffe 2005, 30

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* In late January, 2006, Bush effectively dropped his ambitious second inaugural domestic agenda and focused more political and rhetorical attention on the war in an effort to replicate electoral wins of the previous two cycles. Wolffe and Bailey 2006A, 35

<sup>65</sup> Woodward 2006 418 and 428; Rice 2011, 458-459. Rumsfeld also argued that the Afghanistan war was “under-resourced” and required either more civilian—i.e., State Department—support in order to outbid the Taliban’s attempt to build a shadow government or less ambitious goals for state building. Rumsfeld 2011, 683-691

<sup>66</sup> Bush 2010, 356-360; Bush 2005, “President Outlines Strategy;” Woodward 2006, 434-442

<sup>67</sup> Rice 2006, “Remarks at Georgetown”

“localiz[ing] our diplomatic posture” by decreasing the individual size but increasing the overall number of US consulates in major cities around the world.

Nevertheless, over the next months, policy makers responded to international developments with ad hoc solutions broadly consonant with long-standing US interests and strategic positions. When Iran broke IAEA seals at several nuclear facilities in order to restart production and research, the administration responded with a call for multilateralism.<sup>68</sup> When Russia cut natural gas delivery to Ukraine and implied a similar threat to other Eastern European states, Rice observed that “we didn’t really have a good response.”<sup>69</sup> When Bolivians elected Evo Morales, a popular figure aligned with socialists in Venezuela and Cuba, US officials found that they could do little to shape Bolivian politics.<sup>70</sup>

This tension grew after the Askariya (or “Golden Dome”) Mosque bombing on 22 February. Initially, administration officials agreed that the situation seemed stable and was even well handled by the Iraqi government.<sup>71</sup> Within weeks, though, those same officials recognized that Sunni/Shia violence had increased, and they now believed that an Iraqi “leadership vacuum” was the main problem because the Iraqi Parliament was failing to choose a viable Prime Minister.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, as Rice and UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw traveled to Baghdad to convince a weak compromise candidate, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, to step down, Bush and Andy Card wondered, “Where’s the leader? Where’s the George Washington? Where’s Thomas

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<sup>68</sup> Kempe 2006; Solomon and King 2006

<sup>69</sup> Rice 2011, 412; White 2005

<sup>70</sup> Davis 2006

<sup>71</sup> Rice 2011, 431; Bush 2010, 361

<sup>72</sup> Rice 2011, 452 and 457

Jefferson?”<sup>73</sup> Still, Bush also insisted, “We have a plan for victory. I’m optimistic about being able to achieve a victory.”<sup>74</sup>

Despite Bush’s confidence, observers increasingly noted gaps between the administration’s strategic ambitions and reality. Most of the prominent Neocons and hawks from the first administration, such as Scooter Libby, Paul Wolfowitz, John Bolton and Douglas Feith had moved to marginal positions or departed altogether.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, more pragmatic policy makers, led by Rice, continued to expand their authority and enjoy Bush’s support in pursuing an increasingly multilateral foreign policy on thorny issues like North Korea, Sudan and even Iran.<sup>76</sup> One analysis suggested that Rice “effectively accepts the president’s goals but not the means of his first term.”<sup>77</sup> In the larger Republican and conservative worlds, “the Republican consensus on foreign policy [had] really fallen apart” and “pragmatic Republicans ... realized that the Bush Doctrine cannot be easily applied to other foreign policy crises, such as Iran.”<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, in March, the administration attempted to fend off another angry groundswell against a foreign firm: Dubai Ports World, which sought to acquire management rights at certain US ports.<sup>79</sup> After earlier Republican party rebellions, like the CNOOC flap and the previous near-failure of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, Bush now began “quietly turning in a new direction.” Rather than emphasizing America’s self-contained capabilities for changing the world, he was “warning at every opportunity of the dangers of turning the nation inward and

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<sup>73</sup> Woodward 2006, 447

<sup>74</sup> Woodward 2006, 453-454. Notably, Bush did admit that the insurgents were at least *attempting* to spark a civil war but “lack[ed] the military strength to challenge Iraqi and coalition forces directly.” Bush 2006, “Foundation for the Defense...”. In hindsight, however, Bush maintained that “for all the lives they stole, our enemies failed to stop us from achieving a single one of our strategic objectives in Iraq.” Bush 2010, 359

<sup>75</sup> Further, as David Rothkopf at *The Washington Post* observed, Rice had replaced Cheney as “more policy architect than presidential aide. Cheney was a role player, not the puppetmaster.” Rothkopf 2006

<sup>76</sup> Solomon and King 2006

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>78</sup> Kurlantzick 2006, 19. Facing reelection challenges, many Republicans had even begun to publicly distance themselves from Bush and figures like Rumsfeld. Wolffe and Bailey 2006B, 32

<sup>79</sup> Weisman and Graham 2006; Sanger 2006G

isolationist, and making the case for international engagement on issues from national security to global economics.”<sup>80</sup> Bush appeared to be “moving into a new phase of his presidency, not by choice or natural inclination, it seems, but by necessity.”

*The National Security Strategy*

The updated National Security Strategy, along with Bush’s statements throughout March, both underscored this change and demonstrated its limits. In particular, Iraq had become “the central front on the war on terror” because al Qaeda and others sought to seize the state and use it as a home base.<sup>81</sup> Echoing the Freedom Agenda, it declared that “the advance of freedom is the story of our time,” and that the U.S. aimed to end tyranny in the world as “the best way to provide enduring security for the American people.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, the U.S. continued to espouse an activist grand strategy. On the other hand, this NSS downshifted expectations by “recognizing the limits to what even a nation as powerful as the United States can achieve by itself” and describing U.S. grand strategy as “idealistic about goals, [but] realistic about means.”<sup>83</sup> Regarding WMD, the 2006 NSS focused upon the technical, cooperative and institutional challenges of proliferation, whereas the 2002 version emphasized justifications for intervention.<sup>84</sup> It insisted that free markets, pro-growth policies and global integration were “integral to our policy” as well as to all humans’ “natural rights.”<sup>85</sup> With Russia and China, Bush

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<sup>80</sup> Sanger 2006A

<sup>81</sup> Sanger 2006F, 4; Baker 2006B; Bush 2006, “Violence in Iraq”; Bush 2006, “City Club of Cleveland”.

<sup>82</sup> Bush 2006, “Democracy and the Future of Iraq.” Bush 2006, 1. As the Introduction to the 2006 NSS elaborated, “The ideals that have inspired our history – freedom, democracy, and human dignity – are increasingly inspiring individuals and nations throughout the world. And because free nations tend toward peace, the advance of liberty will make America more secure.”

<sup>83</sup> Bush 2002, 31; Bush 2006, 48.

<sup>84</sup> Bush 2006, “City Club of Cleveland”; Baker 2006B

<sup>85</sup> Bush 2006, “Terrorism, Iraq, and Intelligence...”; Bush 2006, 26-27

emphasized that within these multifaceted relationships, the U.S. would push the regimes to become “effective democracies” without resorting to blunt confrontation.<sup>86</sup>

Broadly, then, the March 2006 NSS appears to have scaled back the ambitions of January 2005 and focused more closely on specific successes in the war on terror and in Iraq along with advancing America’s old project of expanding and strengthening the “zone of democracy.” What it failed to do was convince skeptics that the administration was flexible or effectively addressing prominent challenges. When Bush held one of his rare press conferences on 21 March, he exerted considerable energy defending his administration’s personnel, particularly Rumsfeld, and attempting to explain his low poll numbers.<sup>87</sup> In fact, Chief of Staff Card was already telling Bush that after months of administration failures, “the drumbeat for change is not going away,” and he offered his own resignation days after this press conference. Both moderate and conservative Republicans, meanwhile, saw an administration that held “the right general policies” but then expanded US strategy beyond its effective limits.<sup>88</sup>

In this vein, the administration’s policies toward several key issues demonstrated pragmatism as much as activism. Bush continued to insist that “the Iranian issue [was] just beginning to play out” and “in this case” “prevention ... means diplomacy.”<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Bush continued to defend his so-called “congaement” approach to Russia and China.<sup>90</sup> One departure from this pattern involved India. Rice notes that she and other administration elites previously

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<sup>86</sup> Sanger 2006F, 6; Bush 2006, “Democracy and the Future of Iraq”; “Democracy and Security” 2006

<sup>87</sup> Bush 2006, “Focus on Iraq: The President’s Press Conference.” Notably, here, Bush’s stated criteria for his staff focused on self-sacrifice and being “good, hardworking people” rather than competent or getting results.

<sup>88</sup> Weisman 2006B, 6

<sup>89</sup> Hoagland 2006. Regarding Iran, the administration had even permitted direct but highly limited talks with Iranian officials regarding Iraqi security and sectarian violence. Bush 2006, “City Club of Cleveland”; Bush 2006, “Focus on Iraq: The President’s Press Conference”; Vick 2006; Slackman and Sanger 2006F. Bush 2006, “Terrorism, Iraq, and Intelligence”; Baker 2006A

<sup>90</sup> Bush 2006, “Democracy and the Future of Iraq.” Bush also applied this logic to the Middle East, but it raises a paradox: the Freedom Agenda rested on democratic access to governance, yet the administration often dealt with leaders as opposed to pushing bottom-up change. Bush defended this approach by arguing that leaders themselves have the power to decide whether they will accept or attempt to destroy grassroots, democratic movements. See Bush 2006, “Terrorism, Iraq, and Intelligence”

had agreed to de-link Washington's India and Pakistan policies and to develop a nuclear agreement as "the centerpiece of our effort to build a fundamentally different relationship with India."<sup>91</sup> In early March 2006, Bush himself traveled to New Delhi to declare that the US and India are "natural partners."<sup>92</sup> Ultimately, a US-India nuclear arrangement and closer relations would conveniently align long-standing commercial, political and power ambitions for South Asia.<sup>93</sup>

In sum, the administration faced growing pressure on multiple fronts. While parochial economic interests registered the least influence, feedback from all five streams registers some influence. Policy makers like Rice did appear to dispassionately assess the gap between goals and reality and attempted to reframe or redirect the general thrust of the Freedom Agenda. Similarly, veto players continued to play a prominent role as the hardliners lost influence, but this effect, despite consternation from both sides of the aisle in Congress, was largely limited to administration insiders. While relative power calculations held little effect, lower-level external pressures—notably the Iraq insurgency—appeared to reveal a general shift toward greater pragmatism and hedging against long-term great power challenges. Finally, negative public opinion does register here as Katrina undermined the administration's credibility for many Americans and Republicans begin to distance themselves from Bush.

### **Midterm Election and Surge Decision**

Events did not improve for the administration: Bush began 2006 asserting that his administration was advancing a "strategy for victory in Iraq," but by December, Bush was "closeted with his war cabinet on his ranch trying to devise a new strategy, because the existing

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<sup>91</sup> Rice 2011, 436

<sup>92</sup> Bush 2006, "The U.S., India, and Nuclear Technology." The previous July, US and Indian officials had ended three years of negotiations with a promise that the US would lift its nuclear technology ban on India.

<sup>93</sup> McKinnon and Wonacott, 2006. Like Pakistan, India had never signed the NPT and suffered some Western sanctions as a consequence.

one had collapsed.”<sup>94</sup> As one observer argued, America’s strategic trajectory had shifted so much from Bush’s first term that “the revolution ... is over.”<sup>95</sup> The Iraq War embodied conventional explanations for this grand strategy failure: protracted insurgency and even civil war, significant casualties, no evidence of WMDs, little allied support, and a decline of American legitimacy. Meanwhile, despite their efforts to staunch a midterm Congressional loss, Bush and his advisors watched Democrats retake the House and Senate and even seize a majority of gubernatorial and state legislative seats. Within two months, Bush had replaced Rumsfeld along with most of the commanders in Iraq and was announcing a major new strategy, commonly called “the surge,” to double-down on the US commitment to Iraq. Bush framed the surge strategy in expansive terms: the war on terror was “the calling of our generation” and Iraq would be “the decisive ideological struggle of our time.”<sup>96</sup> In fact, events highlighted how little beyond Iraq Bush’s grand strategy had progressed. A few native democracy movements had erupted in places like Lebanon and Ukraine, but in those regions, U.S. involvement was constrained even as long-term tensions with, most notably, North Korea and Iran remained unresolved. His subsequent 2007 State of the Union focused on a domestic agenda, while Bush’s priorities for Congress in the new year said nothing about foreign policy or even Iraq.<sup>97</sup>

### *Declining Success*

In early 2006, Iraq’s ongoing instability ultimately consumed most of the administration’s political energy and strategic planning. After the March 2006 Golden Dome Mosque bombing, civilian members of the National Security Council drove a “quiet top-to-bottom strategy review.” By May, trusted Bush advisors like Meagan O’Sullivan were “really

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<sup>94</sup> Sanger et al. 2007, 1

<sup>95</sup> Gordon 2006A, 75-76

<sup>96</sup> Bush 2006, “Status on the Nation”; Bush 2007, “The New Strategy in Iraq”

<sup>97</sup> Bush 2007, “State of the Union”; Bush 2007, “Statement on 2007”

worried about where this is going,” and Bush, acceding to ongoing concerns from the NSC and State Department, agreed to meet key military and other national security officials at Camp David to consider policy options.<sup>98</sup> Bush appeared to seriously consider competing strategic alternatives, but the president left the gathering early for a secret trip to Baghdad and, with renewed optimism, subsequently delayed the review process.<sup>99</sup> Bush’s “stay the course” approach pleased both Rumsfeld and the senior military commanders in Iraq who, whatever their differences, agreed that the US needed to push Iraqis to take up the job of governing and securing themselves while coalition forces exited as soon as possible.<sup>100</sup>

This divide between “stay the course and get out soon” versus “things are going wrong and we need to fix it” characterized the slow-motion strategic shift that persisted until January 2007.<sup>101</sup> Rice, for instance, publicly insisted that Iraqis were “going to have to resolve these issues among themselves” and that “I think you’ll find that most people think we’re on the only reasonable course.” In retrospect, though, Rice admitted that Iraqi politics “were in an absolutely poisonous state,” and to Bush, she advised that the Iraqi government lacked credibility with its people and that “what we are doing is not working ... It’s failing.”<sup>102</sup> Bush later conceded that “the summer of 2006 was the worst period of my presidency” because Iraq appeared to be teetering on the precipice of failure.<sup>103</sup> Meeting Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, Rice joined Hadley to present evidence in early August that “clear, hold, and build” in Iraq’s capital was clearly failing and that “the very fabric of Iraqi society was rending” as Iraqis

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<sup>98</sup> Feaver 2011, 101; Woodward 2008, 61

<sup>99</sup> Bush 2010, 364-365; Sanger 2006D; Sanger et al. 2007

<sup>100</sup> Baker 2006C; Feaver 2011, 101. When asked how the US would reduce sectarianism and violence in the Iraqi police forces and on the streets, Rumsfeld replied, “We don’t. The Iraqis do.” Rumsfeld’s own vision for the war in 2003 was to send in a relatively light force, defeat Saddam Hussein’s forces, make space for a democratic government and leave without a real occupation. Woodward 2006, 463

<sup>101</sup> Gordon 2008

<sup>102</sup> Rice 2011, 511-515; Woodward 2008, 57

<sup>103</sup> Bush 2010, 367; Woodward 2008, 78-79

divided into sectarian camps.<sup>104</sup> Apparently moved by these efforts, Bush declared in a 17 August NSC that “the situation seems to be deteriorating” and that he needed to demonstrate a clear “plan to punch back.” When Casey, Abizaid and Rumsfeld, still aiming to “help [Iraqis] help themselves,” offered minor improvements within the existing strategy, Bush reiterated his support for those three as loyal administrators, but he insisted that “if the bicycle teeters, we’re going to put the hand back on. We have to make damn sure we do not fail.”<sup>105</sup> Bush later said he presumed that Rumsfeld, Casey and Abizaid received his message: “If it’s not working, let’s do something different.”

As Bush moved toward major strategic change in Iraq, Israel launched a major offensive against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and Beirut. As a brief sidebar to the administration’s long-running strategic debates, the conflict revealed both the persistent influence of Bush’s grand strategy as well as its fundamental challenges. Hostilities flared after Hezbollah seized an Israeli soldier and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) sought to cripple the Iranian-backed organization. Before leaving for the region to negotiate a cease-fire, Rice had advised Bush to allow Israel a limited amount of leeway to weaken Hezbollah but also to call for an end to violence before the Israelis were seen as aggressors. By contrast, Cheney insisted that the US should give Israel free reign to finish the operation as it saw fit. Bush sided with Rice by appealing to his grand strategy: “too much was at stake,” he explained, because the US “can’t abandon the democratic forces and their foothold in Lebanon [as well as Palestine and Iraq] and sustain the Freedom Agenda.”<sup>106</sup> Outside observers, though, remained less impressed with Bush’s principles.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 86; Sanger 2007; Rice 2011, 539-541

<sup>105</sup> Woodward 2008, 88-99; Bush 2010, 370

<sup>106</sup> Rice 2011, 491. See also Bush’s characterization of his Middle East policy in Gigot 2006.

Zakaria, for instance, noted that European diplomats tended to interpret Rice's renewed focus on multilateralism as the "product of failure."<sup>107</sup>

### *Strategic Review*

The following months, September to December, saw the administration move decisively to reassess Iraq strategy while seeking to prevent, and then seeking to mitigate, a major midterm electoral defeat. On the first of these tracks, Feaver argues, the civilian leadership ultimately responded to indicators of failure in Iraq and "clearly" overruled top-level military commanders (Gen. George Casey and Gen. John Abizaid).<sup>108</sup> Meanwhile, campaigning for Republicans, Bush's arguments for staying in Iraq shifted from building a democracy to the more humble vision of preventing anarchy.<sup>109</sup> The administration also hoped to have developed an alternative Iraq strategy in case the 10-member bipartisan Iraq Study Group (ISG), commissioned by Congress in March 2006 and due to release its findings in early December, presented Bush with unpalatable recommendations. The strategy review, though, had to remain secret: White House officials concluded that announcing a major review of Iraq strategy two months before the election would undermine any hope of Republican success.<sup>110</sup> In other words, Bush and his closest advisors formally reviewed Iraq strategy in order to prevent civil war, but the process was shaped by domestic electoral constraints.

By the end of September, multiple formal reviews were underway in the White House, Department of Defense, Army and State Department.<sup>111</sup> Amidst this frenetic activity, Bush let

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<sup>107</sup> Zakaria 2006

<sup>108</sup> Feaver 2011, 89

<sup>109</sup> Woodward 2008, 104 and 108

<sup>110</sup> Sanger et al. 2007. As one Bush interviewer (Gigot 2007) observed, the president was publicly "doubling down" on his existing positions because "he has to frame the November contest as a choice over the economy and taxes and especially over his prosecution of the war on terror."

<sup>111</sup> Feaver 2011, 102-104. Specifically, Hadley instructed Deputy National Security Advisor O'Sullivan to assess whether core assumptions of the current Iraq strategy remained viable; General Pace at the Joint Chiefs of Staff initiated a "Council of Colonels" to conduct its own "bottom-up review" of Iraq strategy; General Ray Odierno

others drive the strategic agenda as the policy elites around him settled into a hierarchy of influence. As the president later insisted, “The fix-it was Stephen J. Hadley,” who “knows me well enough that ... he starts a very thorough process and keeps me posted.”<sup>112</sup> In October, Hadley and Rice concluded that Iraq, along with Americans’ goodwill, was reaching a crisis point and the disparate review processes needed to reach some clear options for the president.<sup>113</sup> Heeding Satterfield’s advice, Rice and others at State also encouraged Bush to further constrain his rhetoric and expectations, but by this time, leading media outlets were headlining stories about the administration facing “major change” and “ugly choices” in Iraq.<sup>114</sup> Even leading Republicans like Senator John Warner (R-VA) and former Secretary of State James Baker (then co-chairing the ISG) began to float statements that the administration could and should change course.<sup>115</sup> Remarkably, these criticisms came only weeks before the midterm.

### *The Midterm Election*

When Americans voted on 7 November 2006, the Republicans’ loss surprised few observers. Less predictably, the threat and reality of electoral defeat may not have immediately affected the administration’s fundamental strategic thinking. As Gary Jacobson concludes, the midterm election represents “a classic referendum on the performance of the president and his party.”<sup>116</sup> That Republicans would see some type of defeat comported with most models, which predict that midterm elections are dictated by a) the number of seats held by the president’s party; b) national economic performance; and c) public opinion about the president. Because the

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began his own review of military strategy before assuming command of US ground forces; and at the State Department, two of Rice’s senior advisors—Philip Zelikow and David Satterfield—launched an internal assessment of all aspects of US strategy for Iraq.

<sup>112</sup> Woodward 2008, 102 and 177

<sup>113</sup> Woodward 2008, 173-177

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 178 and 189; Sanger and Cloud 2006C; Abramowitz and Ricks 2006

<sup>115</sup> Cloud 2006B; Sanger 2006D; Stolberg 2006B; Weisman and Tyson 2006A

<sup>116</sup> Jacobson 2007, 1. One report described Iraq as the “paramount issue” the day before the election. VandeHei and Balz, 2006.

economy remained healthy, Jacobson ascribes the dramatic defeat to “the President’s extraordinarily low standing with the public.”<sup>117</sup> Bush himself recognized that his foreign policy, and the Iraq War particularly, had become a major electoral issue for both parties, but he insisted on making a Churchill-like show of “staying the course” and not making strategic decisions based upon election year politics.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, after the election, the administration’s Iraq review process and other core elements of its foreign policy reveal no major or unexpected turns. Though seemingly dramatic and widely interpreted in light of the election loss, Rumsfeld’s resignation the day after the election basically followed a script set in motion as early as September.<sup>119</sup> With an insider’s perspective, Feaver concurs that the election only affected strategy review at the margins: Democratic campaigning against the war led the administration to hide the review process, but then the Republican defeat encouraged “an accelerated shift to the public phase.”<sup>120</sup>

With conventional wisdom holding Bush responsible for the Republicans’ electoral drubbing, interested policy elites—many unaware of the White House’s advanced degree of internal strategic review—began targeting Iraq policy to little effect. The ISG garnered particular attention and partisans of both parties jockeyed to align themselves with the projected recommendations.<sup>121</sup> Even Rumsfeld, one day before the election, sent a classified memo to the White House admitting that “it is time for major adjustment” in Iraq and suggested a list of changes, such as significantly expanding US trainers embedded with Iraqi units, that proved consistent with what the ISG ultimately concluded.<sup>122</sup> Amidst this clamor for action, Bush’s

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid. Specifically, Bush’s approval hovered around 38%, the lowest rating since Harry Truman in 1950.

<sup>118</sup> Bush 2010, 372; Fletcher 2006A; Thomas 2006

<sup>119</sup> Woodward 2008, 196

<sup>120</sup> Feaver 2011, 117 (footnote). Woodward characterizes this timing as “the fear of a ‘hothouse’ news story that would expose the administration’s secret deliberations.” Woodward 2008, 320. See also McCormick 2012, 166.

<sup>121</sup> Kessler and Ricks 2006; Stolberg 2006A

<sup>122</sup> Tyson 2006A; Gordon and Cloud 2006D

choice to replace Rumsfeld, Robert Gates, illustrated both Bush's move toward change and his efforts to withhold national security decisions from domestic political pressures. For instance, many Congressional Republicans believed that Rumsfeld's presence in the administration hurt them at the polls, so they expressed anger when Bush announced the Secretary of Defense's resignation a day *after* the election.<sup>123</sup> At the same time, Gates himself, as part of the ISG, was widely known to be a moderate who disagreed with how the administration had handled the Iraq War.<sup>124</sup> With some strategic change in Iraq increasingly likely, Bush appeared to see Gates as both a pragmatist who would introduce change as well as a loyalist who would largely operate according to Bush's timetables and frameworks.

As earlier in the year, while Iraq absorbed much of the administration's strategic energy, other challenges persisted. On 8 October, for instance, North Korea tested a nuclear weapon. Though a clear provocation, Rice seized the opportunity to push greater cooperation among the members—particularly China—of the ongoing “Six-Party Talks,” while Bush reiterated his insistence that he had to “try all diplomatic measures” before taking military action against North Korea.<sup>125</sup> Meanwhile, with support from both Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Rice had spent the fall pushing for and ultimately achieving—with help from Iranian provocations—agreement among the major powers to sanction Iran until it complied with demands for nuclear transparency.<sup>126</sup> Ideologically, these positions fit somewhat awkwardly with the Freedom

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<sup>123</sup> Woodward 2008, 205-206. Regarding Republicans' election frustration vis a vis Rumsfeld, one retrospective observed that “Rumsfeld will likely go down as an erratic and arrogant manager” and that “it is hard to find any defenders of Rumsfeld.” Barry and Hirsh 2006

<sup>124</sup> Sanger 2006C; Ephron and Hosenball 2006; Cloud 2006C; Ephron et al. 2007

<sup>125</sup> Rice 2011, 517-527 and Shanker 2006; Stolberg 2006A; Fairclough and King Jr. 2006

<sup>126</sup> Rice 2011, 536, 550 and 562; Sullivan 2006; Gigot 2006; Ignatius 2006. Notably, China, France, Germany and Russia eventually assented to this approach despite lucrative economic connections in Tehran. King Jr. 2006B

Agenda; pragmatically, though, they fit well with a state tied down by two wars and willing to manage, rather than definitively solve, thorny political and security threats.<sup>127</sup>

### *The “Surge”*

The multiple Iraq review processes converged in December, and most agreed with a Pentagon report that “we are not winning, so we are losing.”<sup>128</sup> An “emerging consensus” outlined by Bush’s leading advisors solidified into a troop surge coupled with a (still vaguely-defined) counterinsurgency effort focused on protecting the population by moving troops into smaller bases and working with local tribes.<sup>129</sup> Rice transitioned to stronger support for the surge strategy after foreign ministers at a (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council meeting almost uniformly agreed that the US needed to “increase your presence [in Iraq] and finish the job.”<sup>130</sup> As the NSC met through early and mid-December, Casey and Abizaid consistently worried that a surge would only embroil more US troops in fruitless violence while the Iraqis continued to rely on outsiders. Bush and Hadley, however, reasoned that the other leading alternatives—letting violence in Baghdad simply run its course or accelerating the handover—either offered nothing better than current outcomes or threatened to leave Iraq in worse political shape. Meanwhile, though highly anticipated by the media, when the ISG released its report on 10 December, Bush and Gates marginalized it as one voice among many. Bush did single out for praise one minor point: a suggestion about temporarily surging US troops.<sup>131</sup> Ultimately, the administration ignored nearly all of the commission’s central recommendations because—as the White House staff had hoped back in September—its own strategic planning and decision-making were nearly

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<sup>127</sup> Shanker 2006. In one profile, an interviewer observed that as opposed to the administration’s earlier urgency, “implicit in much of what Ms. Rice says is the idea that the U.S. has the luxury of time.” Stephens 2006

<sup>128</sup> Woodward 2008, 201 and 259. Bush himself conceded—and subsequently attempted to equivocate—that “we’re not winning, we’re not losing.” “Status on the Nation at War,” 2006

<sup>129</sup> Gordon 2008; Feaver 2011, 107; Gordon 2006C

<sup>130</sup> Rice 2011, 259; Woodward 2008, 258

<sup>131</sup> Abramowitz 2006; Weisman 2006A

complete.<sup>132</sup> At this point, Bush headed to the Pentagon on 13 December to meet the Joint Chiefs and addressed arguments that a surge would strain ground forces, offer little tactical change and face flagging domestic (US) support. Bush responded that failure in Iraq would undermine the US everywhere, any alternative strategy offers even less chance of success.<sup>133</sup> Whether feeling convinced or cajoled, the military chiefs finally endorsed the option of more US troops as part of a final run toward handing off security to Iraqis.<sup>134</sup>

In effect, the surge was now the new strategy for Iraq. The administration continued its personnel overhaul by rotating General Abizaid, Iraq Ambassador Khalilzad, and UN Ambassador John Bolton out of their positions and bringing in new faces like Lt. General David Petraeus, whose practice and analysis of counterinsurgency helped shape the new Iraq strategy.<sup>135</sup> Meanwhile, Hadley and Bush secured Senator John McCain's tentative support and could now claim endorsements from both a leading, moderate Republican and senior members of the defense establishment.<sup>136</sup> Bush finally announced the surge strategy in a national primetime address on 10 January 2007. As premises, he argued two things: that Baghdad's violence had "overwhelmed the political gains;" and that "failure in Iraq would be a disaster for the United States."<sup>137</sup> The president envisioned a domino situation in which an Iraqi government collapse ended in a "safe haven from which to plan and launch attacks on the American people." In order to protect Iraq—despite its "not perfect" democracy—the new strategy would add five brigades (about 25,000 soldiers) scheduled to peak in summer 2007 and supporting a neighborhood-level

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<sup>132</sup> Namely, three recommendations were "the heart and soul of the report": a troop drawdown in 2007; penalizing the Iraq government if it failed to meet proscribed benchmarks; engaging Syria and Iran to help stabilize Iraq. In other words, the administration effectively chose an opposite trajectory on all three points. Ephron 2007. See also Feaver 2011, 109; Woodward 2008, 262-263; Abramowitz 2006; Sanger 2006["amid hints"]; King Jr. and Jaffe 2006

<sup>133</sup> Feaver 2011, 108; Woodward 2008, 376

<sup>134</sup> Gordon 2006D; "Remarks, Questions, and Answers," 2006; Wright and Tyson 2006B

<sup>135</sup> Gordon and Shanker 2007; Mazzetti 2007; Baker and Ricks 2006

<sup>136</sup> Feaver 2011, 109; Woodward 2008, 300; McKinnon and Dreazen 2006

<sup>137</sup> Bush 2007, "The New Strategy in Iraq"

approach to stabilizing Iraq.<sup>138</sup> The president also expressed interest in free trade and open markets as a means to expand both America's and its allies' wealth.<sup>139</sup> Globally, the US would work with Iraq's neighbors to support Baghdad, the U.N. would pressure Iran through sanctions, a quartet would collaborate on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and multi-party talks with North Korea would continue. At the periphery, these plans also included humanitarian aid, such as US commitments to AIDS relief, the Millennium Challenge Account and trade-based debt relief.<sup>140</sup> Despite ramping up US military power in Iraq, Bush's overall grand strategy trajectory remained relatively stable: a commitment to coercion in Iraq, but a more cooperative, if still US-centered, approach to issues elsewhere.

### *Reactions*

As the White House expected, Congress was not pleased. Already in December, once-supportive Republicans were airing concerns about expanding commitments to Iraq, while leading Democratic Senators like Harry Reid, Evan Bayh and Joe Biden publicly declared opposition to any new strategy short of rapid withdrawal.<sup>141</sup> After Bush's primetime announcement, Democrats united against the surge and, citing a mandate from the November election, even introduced legislation placing timelines on US troop withdrawals.<sup>142</sup> Republicans maintained relative solidarity supporting the president, though a visible minority, including Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NB), called the surge strategy a further "blunder" after a series of foreign policy failures. Sanger and Rutenberg opined in the *New York Times* that Bush's 2007 State of the Union resorted to "plead[ing] with the Democrats ... to 'give it a chance to

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<sup>138</sup> Previously, though Bush had talked about "clear, hold, and build," US troops had "cleared," but they then typically returned to relatively safer positions inside large bases and armored columns.

<sup>139</sup> Bush 2006, "Status on the Nation at War;" Bush 2007, "State of the Union;" Bush 2007, "Remarks at the House Republican Conference;" Stolberg 2007

<sup>140</sup> Bush 2007, "State of the Union"

<sup>141</sup> Risen 2006; Pincus 2006; Zeleny 2007A

<sup>142</sup> Bush ultimately vetoed the bill and later called it "one of the most irresponsible acts I witnessed in my eight years in Washington." Bush 2011, 382

work.”<sup>143</sup> However, without cutting money for troops in Iraq—considered political suicide by most in Washington—Congress did little aside from holding public hearings.<sup>144</sup>

Internationally, the administration continued to address issues on separate tracks. Relations with China still centered on economic issues and cooperative diplomacy, particularly as Rice and Secretary of the Treasury Hank Paulson took the lead.<sup>145</sup> With North Korea, Bush allowed the State Department to lead in working out a major (if later abandoned by Pyongyang) agreement.<sup>146</sup> With Iran, the administration did attempt to turn up the diplomatic and economic pressure, both in the Middle East—where Sunni and secular governments feared Iranian intentions—and with European allies, but as one official admitted, the administration sought to “confront Iran in every way but direct conflict.”<sup>147</sup> Latin American, meanwhile, nearly vanished as a priority. Bush himself had initiated his presidency with a focus on Mexico and America’s Hispanic population, but despite Hugo Chavez’s voluble anti-Americanism in Venezuela and Bush’s six-day tour of friendly regional governments, Rice conceded that “in the atmosphere created by Iraq,” getting attention for Latin America was difficult.<sup>148</sup>

Overall, conventional wisdom and some scholarship suggest that Bush and his administration responded either to a rational (albeit idiosyncratic and slow) analysis of failure or to exogenous pressure surrounding Iraq. What considerations drove Iraq policy? Press accounts tended to portray Bush slowly admitting that events on the ground sharply contrasted with his

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<sup>143</sup> Sanger and Rutenberg 2007

<sup>144</sup> Sanger and Zeleny 2007; Zeleny 2007C; Zeleny 2007B; Shanker and Cloud 2007; Cloud and Zeleny 2007; Zernike 2007. To the fear of cutting funds during a war, McCormick adds that Congress was limited both by its own internal voting rules and by a fear by Democrats of challenging the president on national security. McCormick 2012, 166-167

<sup>145</sup> Rice 2011, 519-520. Even on economic issues, though, the US and China continued to butt heads even over business relations with third parties like Iran. Oster 2007

<sup>146</sup> Rodman 2009, 259

<sup>147</sup> Rozen 2007. See also Abramowitz 2007A; Partlow 2007

<sup>148</sup> Rice 2011, 564; King Jr. 2006A

own goals and what Iraqis might consider acceptable.<sup>149</sup> Retrospectively, Bush himself admitted that America's Iraq strategy was likely to fail unless he interceded with something new, but the fact that conditions reached such an impasse was frequently attributed to Bush's incurious and deferential management style.<sup>150</sup> Feaver similarly argues that once they decided that Iraq was in trouble, Bush and Hadley initiated an "incremental process" of decision-making and then claimed a consensus within the foreign policy and military establishments. In the end, though, they were "only just" able to keep outside veto players in Congress from scuttling the process.<sup>151</sup>

In sum, these findings confirm and extend conventional wisdom. Elite perceptions of failure, external conditions, veto players, and to a much lesser extent, public opinion all affected both the decision for and shape of strategic change during these months surrounding the midterm and surge adoption. Many key actors in the administration recognized that Iraq may have been descending into civil war and actively moved to change US strategy, both in Iraq and around the world, where the gap between transformative goals and stubborn reality appeared to be growing. As veto players, some of those actors and their interests moved the president's thinking, but the slow pace of change highly correlated with growing external pressure. In other words, the administration as a whole appeared to engage in rational analysis only after external pressure became impossible to ignore. Added to this pressure was a fear that "the American people" would grow weary of violence in Iraq and the Freedom Agenda overall. Ironically, when voters did appear to reject Bush's performance, the administration doubled-down on a strategy that would involve even more US troops in Iraq over objections from a newly Democratic Congress.

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<sup>149</sup> Sanger et al. 2007; Woodward 2008, 317

<sup>150</sup> Abramowitz 2007B; Alter 2006, 44; Gordon 2008

<sup>151</sup> Feaver 2011, 112-124. Also from a perch as practitioner and scholar, Rodman concurs that Bush exercised an "indirect" management style: rather than imposing a more aggressive strategy, Bush "wanted it to emerge as the recommendation of his senior advisers, especially the military. The reluctance of the U.S. military to make such a recommendation forced Bush into what was for him an unusual assertiveness that extracted, if not imposed, what he wanted. The complex process took four months." Rodman 2009, 266

## **Findings**

### *Summary*

These salient periods reveal that Legro's expectation is correct: policy makers shifted their grand strategy (explicitly and implicitly) as they observed and analyzed a gap between their strategic expectations and reality. However, these periods also find evidence supporting expectations from other theories: external pressures, veto players, economic interests and public opinion affected both the initiation and the output of strategic change. The following sections summarize these findings.

Recall that this study is seeking to determine whether observed behavior, statements and conditions are congruent with predictions made by several different theoretical approaches. In the first, Legro focuses on ideas and predicts that policy makers will watch a new strategy and revise or drop it if they believe it is failing. This *failure perception* does appear largely as predicted. The administration began its second term with a high sense of success and advanced an ambitious agenda, though Rice's more cooperative approach and White House backtracking on the Freedom Agenda hinted that decision makers were already evaluating the gap between ideal goals and likely outcomes. Within a year, key staffers and decision makers acknowledged that the administration's goals realistically should be pursued over long time periods. The March 2006 National Security Strategy, for instance, remained unapologetic about the Bush Doctrine, but it also excised the most assertive elements of the 2002 document and emphasized less confrontational approaches to global terrorism and rogue states. By the end of 2006, Bush himself admitted that in Iraq, at least, the strategy had effectively failed and a new strategy had to be (and was) adopted. Regarding America's larger grand strategy, by early 2007, the administration had settled into policies and diplomatic relations that were consistent with but not

necessarily derived from the Freedom Agenda. Officials conceded that Iraq may have negatively impacted US capabilities and credibility in other regions, and they talked about long-standing American economic and political interests rather than the Freedom Agenda. In other words, consistent with the Legro approach, the administration articulated and implemented a new strategy, observed that outcomes consistently fell short of expectations, and it ultimately fell back on long-standing strategic approaches. The Bush Doctrine and Freedom Agenda persisted largely as rhetorical shadows.

/Table 1 about here/

Those findings, however, tell only part of the story. Predictions made by the *external conditions* approach also strongly correlate with observed behavior. In early 2005, for instance, both Rice and Bush unambiguously sought to mend relations with major European allies in an effort to reestablish support for third party concerns like negotiations with Iran and commerce with China. While international systemic conditions (i.e., relative power) remained stable throughout all three periods, policy makers throughout the administration acknowledged that rising powers, particularly India and China might dominate the twenty-first century. In turn, the administration sought to integrate new states into America's alliance system. More immediately, and increasingly after the Golden Dome Mosque bombing in early 2006, officials also recognized that conditions in Iraq—Bush's *sine qua non* test case for his grand strategy—continued to worsen. Notably, though, as an *external conditions* observer might predict, the administration did not necessarily respond rationally to this impending failure. Rather, it pushed forward with the original strategy as the insurgency devolved into conditions resembling civil war and ethnic cleansing. In other words, the strategy did not fundamentally change until conditions effectively forced policy makers to act.

The *veto players* thesis also offers some explanatory power. Observers can trace major strategic changes to key bureaucratic players like Hadley and Rice while more hawkish players like Rumsfeld and Cheney gradually lost influence. The Department of Defense, through the Joint Chiefs, also forestalled important changes and finally required a relatively blunt demand for change from Bush before shifting gears in Iraq. Similarly, though less prominently, Treasury was able to carve out a niche with China as it pursued trade negotiations and diplomacy that made little reference to the Freedom Agenda. Superficially, Congressional disapproval of Bush's handling of Iraq and US foreign affairs also correlates with grand strategy change. In reality, Congress created ongoing background pressure to do something new, but the administration was effectively able to bypass and ignore Congress even after a humbling electoral loss in 2006. Overall, *veto players* and their prerogatives shaped the deliberations surrounding grand strategy change, but their ultimate influence appears to have relied upon whether and to what degree Bush, as the executive, acceded them policy making authority.

Like Congressional pressure, *public opinion* correlated with strategic change, but it ultimately proved pliable as the administration interpreted or ignored public opinion to suit its own agenda. In early 2005, Bush claimed a strong mandate after reelection, but when his poll numbers declined after Hurricane Katrina, he insisted (as he had in his first term) that he would not govern based upon polls and that history would judge his decisions. The White House did attempt to present a strong public face as the 2006 midterm elections approached, but observers agree that strategic reassessment, and certainly the larger vision of US grand strategy, remained largely immune to this politicking. Again, broadly speaking, declining public opinion is congruent with and perhaps added more pressure for a slow transition away from the Freedom

Agenda, but there is little specific evidence that the administration felt compelled to act based upon actual or potentially low public opinion.

Finally, *economic interests* proved the least relevant, but neither can they be discounted. Few domestic or international economic events penetrated general strategic or foreign policy discussions, and specific interest groups, such as the oil industry, appeared to contribute to the background conditions but not the central concerns of strategic thinking and decision making. On the other hand, in responding to the Dubai Ports World flap or critiques from his own party as well as in defending given policy decisions, Bush consistently appealed to open trade and economic integration as essential to his vision of a desirable world order. The key for this analysis, though, is that Bush's economic vision—particularly relative to the other axes of analysis—saw few major challenges or changes that correlate with strategic shifts.

### *Conclusions*

Overall, policy makers during these three periods appear to have been immediately motivated by a *perception of failure* as well as *external pressure*, which offer the highest correlations on the congruence test. In the first, perceptions of a gap between goals and reality swung dramatically from a sense of vindication in 2004 to admitting failure and an act of desperation to save Iraq in 2007 as other issue areas devolved to pragmatic, if still principled, engagement. In the second, though stable at a systemic level, external conditions like strained relations in Europe and the steady rise of second-tier powers offered consistent pressure—alongside Iraq's spiraling violence—to recalibrate American engagement with the world in both the short- and long-term. Though seeming to overlap, these explanations rely upon diverging logics for why change happened: in the first, policy makers are active agents who make adjustments based upon their observation and honest assessment; in the second, they are

pressured into change no matter their intentions or analyses. In fact, though, both appear to have occurred. Most prominently, Hadley and Rice recognized that the Freedom Agenda and Bush Doctrine were failing to achieve their goals and even creating more problems, and in an effort to salvage some elements of the original vision, they worked (separately) to shift their grand strategic means and ends. On the other hand, ongoing external pressures left Bush, who approached change reluctantly, with few options outside renewed cooperation with allies, greater pragmatism with adversaries and new approaches with Iraq.

Of the other three, the *veto players* explanation also carried weight, though less decisively. Key players advocated and achieved, or sometimes resisted, changes within the grand strategy that comported with their own bureaucratic or political prerogatives; however, only a few favored insiders wielded this kind of influence while potentially relevant veto players, particularly in Congress, had almost no effect on strategy deliberations. *Public opinion* played a similar role: growing public disapproval for Bush and his foreign policy remained a background concern consistent with but not a direct influence upon changing strategy. *Economic interests* also remained an overarching reference point for the administration's strategic goals, but they comprised the least active external variable throughout these periods and rarely surfaced in strategic deliberations.

These findings reveal that while strategic change is a messy process, it appears to cluster around one or two driving factors. Such findings may suggest that researchers need a more integrative, general theory of grand strategy change. In Bush's second term, sober assessments of strategic failure combined with consistent external pressure, but none of the explanations tested here can be discounted as irrelevant: veto players drove strategic change while public opinion and economic interests lurked as background concerns. While conventional wisdom—

spiraling violence in Iraq, high implementation costs and international rejection of Bush's goals and methods— captures the spirit of why US grand strategy changed in Bush's second term, it remains a loose explanation lacking clear generalizability. More importantly, scholars should not simply take for granted conventional wisdom about such an important case. By contrast, scholarly theories like those analyzed here specify clear lines of feedback and influence, but they oversimplify or overdetermine what influences shaped grand strategy. A theory of grand strategy change that integrates these theories might correct such shortcomings without sacrificing parsimony. Scholars might argue that these streams interact with one another, and the cumulative effect of negative feedback across multiple streams leads an administration to back off from or abandon a major grand strategy change.<sup>152</sup> In other words, a grand strategy “fails” when negative feedback reaches a critical mass or tipping point. By prioritizing one stream or another, most conventional theories of grand strategy change unnecessarily limit their explanatory power. Strategy abandonment, in other words, is the child of many parents.

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<sup>152</sup> This would be a grand strategy or foreign policy equivalent to Kingdon's argument for multiple “streams” affecting domestic public policy. Kingdon 2010

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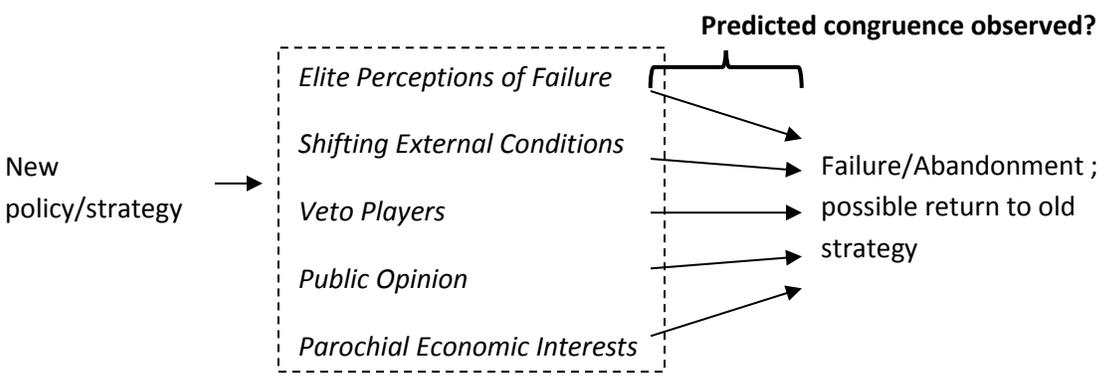
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Figure 1: The congruence method examines the relationship between possible independent or intermediate variables (here, elite perceptions, shifting external conditions, and so on) and a dependent variable (here, “Consolidation of New/Return to Old”). A high level of congruence between values predicted by any given stream of feedback and the dependent variable suggests a likely, or at least possible, causal relationship.



*Table 1:* Assessing congruence across three salient periods during George W. Bush’s second term. As specified in Chapter 3, a “yes” on congruence suggests that predictions made from the given theoretical perspective correlated with actual statements, deliberations or policies. An “inconclusive” result indicates that some of the predictions align with observations in the case, but either the results remain ambiguous or the narrative analysis reveals that the variable was present but appeared not to directly affect strategic change. (See Appendix 1 for detailed table of findings.)

<b>Salient Periods</b>	<b>Congruence? Yes, No, Inconclusive(= I)</b>				
	<i>Failure Perception</i>	<i>External Conditions</i>	<i>Veto Players</i>	<i>Public Opinion</i>	<i>Economic Interests</i>
<i>Second Inaugural</i>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>No</b>
<i>Katrina to Samarra</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>I</b>
<i>Midterm &amp; Surge</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>I</b>

*Appendix 1: Detailed results of assessing congruence across three salient periods during George W. Bush's second term.*

<b>Salient Periods</b>	<b>Congruence? Yes= Y No= N Inconclusive= I</b>				
	<i>Failure Perception</i>	<i>External Conditions</i>	<i>Economic Interests</i>	<i>Veto Players</i>	<i>Public Opinion</i>
<i>Second Inaugural</i>	<b>N:</b> Perception of success, not failure.	<b>Y:</b> Stable external conditions but with pressure to stabilize ME, relations w/China. Also, clear response to Europe by mending relationship.	<b>N:</b> Not prominent either in strategy deliberations or pressure from outside the admin.	<b>I:</b> Influence from Rice and Hadley; relatively less from Rumsfeld and Cheney. No clear influence from Congress, other interest groups.	<b>I:</b> High enough for reelection but then declined. White House claimed mandate but later showed little response to declining polls.
<i>Katrina to Samarra</i>	<b>Y:</b> Steps taken to adjust but not fundamentally change Freedom Agenda. Less strident NSS.	<b>Y:</b> Stable external conditions with decline in Iraq.	<b>I:</b> Not prominent, but growing concern for defending open trade as part of a desirable int'l system.	<b>Y:</b> Growing assertiveness from both parties in Congress. Ascendance of relative moderates in administration.	<b>Y:</b> Decline with little recovery. Republicans worry about midterm election. Marginal focus from Bush's inner circle.
<i>Midterm &amp; Surge</i>	<b>Y:</b> Acknowledgement of failed Iraq strategy but with an extended decision making process. Further steps away from Freedom Agenda but with little reference to Freedom Agenda.	<b>Y:</b> Stable external conditions with marked decline in Iraq. Some discussion of and policy efforts to engage/manage rising powers—especially China—and adversary states.	<b>I:</b> Not prominent, but ongoing concern for defending open trade as part of a desirable int'l system.	<b>I:</b> Prominent influence from Hadley; high-level bureaucratic debate. High opprobrium from Congress but both parties were actively marginalized.	<b>I:</b> Still low, but administration makes no public change until Jan '07. Election shaped some calculations, but evidence suggests marginal effect.

