



IIPS Perspective Series

The Source of President Bush's Conservatism

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Why is the administration of President George W. Bush so conservative? Moreover, why is his foreign policy so rampantly unilateralist? According to one school of thought, the reasons are directly linked to the level of Bush's IQ—that is, the quality of his “gray matter.” Another view is that Bush's foreign policy is a by-product of the end of the Cold War. If one accepts this latter view, then the almost automatic shift towards unilateralism in US foreign policy can be explained by the changeover from the Cold War world order to a unipolar structure. However, this argument overlooks major foreign policy differences between the Clinton administration and the Bush administration.

Undeniably, the Bush foreign policy underwent significant changes due to the events of 11 September 2001—particularly in terms of priorities. The development of strategies to prevent acts of terrorism (especially a repeat of 9/11) was accorded top priority.

However, in the view of this author, the most significant root causes of Bush's conservatism are the long-term and deep-rooted shift towards conservatism in US politics in general, and, in particular, the Republican Party's radical shift to the right. The current Bush administration is comprised almost entirely of conservatives and includes almost no moderate elements. The Bush administration's support base is comprised of such groups as ideological organizations that promote hard-line conservative views, groups opposed to tax increases, associations of small businesses, foreign policy and national security hawks, cultural conservatives, and conservative Christian groups. Politically the administration of former President George Bush differed significantly from that of his son, the current president, in that the administration of Bush senior was essentially moderate.

Until the mid-1970s, the Republican Party was firmly in the hands of moderates. There was a brief deviation from this norm in 1964 when a conservative, Barry Goldwater, was nominated as the Republican candidate for the presidency; however, the party was fundamentally dominated by internationalists and moderates, such as Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, and Rockefeller.

Emerging as a counterweight to the moderates, Ronald Reagan and the elements that supported him achieved significant gains in strength and influence on behalf of the conservatives. With a platform pledging large tax cuts and aggressive deregulation on the domestic front, and a foreign policy based on the principle of “Peace through Strength,” the conservatives succeeded in installing Reagan in the White House in 1980. The moderates briefly came to power in 1989 in the shape of the administration of Bush senior; however, the policies of this moderate administration, such as an increase in taxes, caused Bush to lose his bid for re-election in 1992, an event which dealt a devastating blow to moderate elements in the Party. A further milestone in the rise of the conservatives was the Republican Party's congressional election victory of 1994, when it won sufficient seats in the mid-term elections to take control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years. It was the conservative elements of the Republican Party under the leadership of Newt Gingrich that dominated these mid-term elections, particularly those for the House of Representatives. This was the final nail in the coffin for the moderates in the Republican Party. On the domestic

front, the policy of the conservative elements was centered around small government such as tax cuts and welfare reform, and they pushed the promotion of a missile defense system and a hard line toward China in the foreign policy sphere.

From the moment that George W. Bush announced his candidacy for president, the momentum fueled by the shift towards conservatism provided him with a tide of support that bore him through to victory in the presidential election of 2000. Early in his candidacy, Bush publicly advocated large-scale tax cuts, and pledged to completely overturn the foreign policies of the Clinton administration regarding issues such as the normalization of relations with China, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Since his inauguration, Bush has in fact started to reverse these policies. On domestic issues as well as in foreign affairs, the Bush administration has essentially accepted most of the initiatives advocated by the conservative leadership of the Republicans in Congress.

Furthermore, Bush has succeeded in filling most of the key posts in his administration with conservative elements. A major difference between former President Reagan and the current President Bush is that Reagan still had need of the moderates. Thus, not only has the Bush administration assumed the mantle of legitimate successor to the Reagan administration, it has also succeeded in becoming even more conservative than the Reagan administration ever was.