A Pact with the Devil
Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise
Tony Smith
A PACT WITH THE DEVIL
Also by Tony Smith


*The Pattern of Imperialism: The United States, Great Britain and the Late-Industrializing World Since 1815* (Cambridge University Press)

*Thinking Like A Communist State and Legitimacy in the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba* (W. W. Norton)


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Tony Smith
For David Ovalle and Ron Steel

Constant Companions in the Struggle
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Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman: Yea, hath God not said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?

...And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also to her husband with her; and he did eat.

...And the Lord God said...unto the woman...I will greatly multiply thy sorrow...and unto Adam He said...In the sweat of they face shalt though eat bread...dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return...Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden...

Genesis 3
If we should perish, the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause of the disaster. The primary cause would be that the strength of a great nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle, and the blindness would be induced not by some accident of nature or history, but by hatred and vainglory.


When I arrive at the Pearly Gates, the question from Saint Peter I most fear will be how, given the evidence from the war in Iraq, I myself could have ever been so naïve as to have put so much intellectual stock into supporting Liberal Democratic Internationalism—the belief that fostering human rights and democratic governments abroad should enjoy a prominent role in the making of American foreign policy. I do not think I was ever among the greatest sinners—many of whom this book will mention—liberals with reckless confidence that America’s mission was solely to promote universal salvation through democratic government, not only for the sake of foreign peoples but for the purpose of our national security and world peace as well. I always knew there were casualties in the expansion of American power—in the disregard for the victims of economic globalization, in wars like Vietnam, or through interventions such as in Guatemala and Iran—whatever the justification offered that these outcomes were the regrettable by-products of the struggle for the “free world.”

I had also always feared that in its self-righteousness the United States might lose an awareness of the limits to its power, an important matter as I never expected that the message of progress through embracing the liberal
creed would be greeted elsewhere with the same enthusiasm it met with in
countries like the Czech Republic, Hungary, or Slovenia after the fall of the
Iron Curtain. Elsewhere, nationalist resistance based on fear of American self-
interest, and on pride in ancient ways, would most surely challenge the claim
of liberal democracy to be the only legitimate form of government, especially
when it was evident that the existence of such a state presupposed basic altera-
tions in social and cultural life. Raw chaos would stand in the way as well if the
United States politically decapitated peoples who in their ethno-religious fear
and rage could turn upon one another with a vengeance. Given such obstacles
to “gunboat democracy,” I felt that Washington should be advised to be selec-
tive in the importance it gave to human rights and democracy promotion,
acting prudently in terms of time and place.

Such an attitude was all the more pertinent with respect to the Middle East.
Why should one expect this region to fall under the sway of a doctrine as for-
eign as liberal democracy when its experience for so long had been one of out-
side incursions made for strictly self-interested gain? What possible exposure
had the populations of the Middle East ever had to U.S. power to make them
think the Americans were arriving as liberators rather than as conquerors?
Even with some Arab intellectuals favorably disposed to the idea of liberaliz-
ing politically, socially, and economically, what likelihood was there that these
peoples could easily transform themselves in such a radical fashion? Might it
not happen that in their efforts to replace narrow authoritarian regimes by
broad-based democratic government, a form of populist, militarist, national-
ist neofascism could instead emerge rather than a liberal constitutional order
friendly to American interests and values?

Such considerations inoculated me against taking seriously the pretensions
of the Bush Doctrine, from which the Iraq War was drawn as surely as Eve
from the rib of Adam, and from which other wars could be anticipated to fol-
low. The determination to use, unilaterally and preemptively, what the Bush
administration in 2002 repeatedly described as American military power
“beyond challenge” in order to push the expansion of democratic government
and open market economies as “the single sustainable model” for peace and
progress in world affairs, struck me as an exaggerated claim to make on His-
tory’s patience.

Despite being a liberal myself, I had already become worried by what I
sensed was an intoxicating ideological conviction being formulated by liberal
internationalists well outside the Republican party during the 1990s. Thanks to
conceptual innovations they made during these years in their understanding
of history and politics, these neoliberals, many of whom later metamorphosed into “liberal hawks” and supported the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, developed the heartfelt conviction that with the collapse of Soviet communism the tide of history was with them. Not so much the United States as liberal democratic internationalism had triumphed with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Now was the moment to agitate for Washington to pursue the global spread of human rights and democratic government to create what the late eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant had envisioned as “perpetual peace,” even if the mission required the use of force.

Gathering at home were the storm clouds of what Samuel Huntington had warned us of in the mid-1990s, a “clash of civilizations” based on a deep sense of cultural and creedal divisions. Might democracy promotion be an instance of fostering such a clash? The “civilized” world of Kantian principles would take on the “barbarians” living in the Hobbesian state of nature, both to protect itself from the enemy hordes and to save these peoples themselves from their cruel fate living under despotism. An irony of history was in the making with liberals feeding the very problem of world disorder that they claimed they knew how to cure.

After 9/11, when the Taliban refused to cooperate with Washington to deliver Osama bin Laden, invading Afghanistan was legitimate, indeed imperative. But why take on Iraq? The reasons given—that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction or that he was in league with Al-Qaeda—should not detain us. Virtually no one today believes that such was the root cause for America to go to war, even if some high officials may have suspected these weapons or contacts existed. Here, rather, was a pretext for the affirmation of American supremacy, a primacy in world affairs that Washington maintained was not only military, but also ideological, with the blueprint it possessed for winning the peace that would follow winning the war.

Combining the conviction that America enjoyed unrivalled power with the self-righteous, self-serving, and self-blinding assurance that it had a master plan with which to remake foreign domestic orders, and as a consequence perhaps to reconfigure the entire international system, the Bush Doctrine was a manifest case of imperial hubris. As the United Nations inspection team under Hans Blix found no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq by early 2003, and as the world community asked why the rush to war, the decision nonetheless to invade began to appear to me to be certifiably megalomaniac.

The difference between taking on Serbia in the 1990s—a policy I supported and felt President Bill Clinton should have undertaken earlier than he did—was
thus quite different than taking on Iraq. Not only was Iraq a considerably more difficult task to tackle than the Balkans (which itself was no cakewalk), but it was linked to notions of remaking the “Broader Middle East” and thereby securing a hammerlock on political developments even further afield—a foolhardy ambition that vastly exaggerated both foreign susceptibilities and American capabilities. The decision to depose Saddam was therefore of a very different magnitude altogether than the decision to depose Slobodan Milosevic.

Nevertheless, as the argument spread that “the future of freedom” was what was at stake, the Democratic Party swung into line behind the Iraq War with a vengeance. Hillary Clinton, Joseph Biden, Joseph Lieberman, and Richard Holbrooke (along with many other luminaries) were supported by the spectacularly misnamed Progressive Policy Institute, the self-described think tank of the Democratic Leadership Council. This combination of Democrats joined in criticizing the Bush administration for botching the Iraq invasion—but not for organizing it in the first place, nor for thinking of further conquests thereafter. These Democrats seemingly had no doubts that the battle cry had to be as the Bush administration had defined it—for an American victory defined as the democratization of Iraq and carrying the banner of freedom beyond. Their aim in 2002, and still through 2006, remained affirming American supremacy worldwide under the auspices of this country’s military primacy and its blueprint for order based on the enlargement of the sphere of market democracies.

The intellectual background of these Democratic leaders’ convictions was independent of the neoconservative thinkers surrounding President Bush. Indeed, many of the seemingly most sophisticated arguments backing war for the sake of democracy promotion came not from official Washington, where the phrases offered by the neocons were well-turned, yet scarcely original. They arose instead from neoliberals in their think tanks, universities, and non-governmental organizations. Here during the 1990s, neolib scholars, scholar-activists, and activists had honed to perfection an argument for liberal imperialism just waiting to be used when a team with the will to power took over in Washington. The administration of Bill Clinton had avoided the temptation their arguments offered—or was so stymied by its own internal problems that it simply failed to act—one that the trigger-happy administration of George W. Bush, wanting to leave its mark on history, embraced with alacrity.

My focus in the pages that follow concerns the responsibility of those liberal internationalists of the center and the left—as much as the more publicly known neoconservatives—for providing the intellectual underpinnings for an invasion based on democracy promotion. These neoliberals, or
neo-Wilsonians as we might call them in honor of the Democratic President Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921), who first advanced a global design for democracy promotion, proposed a powerful set of interlocking reasons in the 1990s to think democracy’s moment had finally arrived worldwide. With the end of the Cold War, neoliberals could step forward and spread their wings. No longer relegated to a back seat by containment policy, they could proclaim in the early Clinton years a global mission to promote the “enlargement of market democracies.”

During the 1990s, neoliberals working in international relations theory elaborated reasons in the aftermath of the Cold War as to why American security would be enhanced if democratic governments were to expand worldwide. Democratic peace theory, as their premise was called, was a pseudo-scientific account of world affairs that saw itself as the intellectual harbinger of a new age in human history, one that would usher in an era of enduring peace based on democratic governments, open and integrated economic markets, and participation in multilateral organizations. That this position could claim scientific standing for its pretensions, and that it could don the cloak of Kantian philosophy, was no small element of its appeal—or of its danger.

During the same period, neo-Wilsonians working in the field of comparative political development assured us that the democratization of people under authoritarian governments was an easier undertaking than an earlier generation had believed. Democracy had a universal appeal, they claimed. When great ideas were adopted by great leaders at critical historical junctures, momentous change could be the result.

Finally, neoliberal international jurists told us that the concept of sovereignty as it stood in international law did not provide immunity from attack to states engaging in systematic human rights abuses or amassing weapons of mass destruction. Instead, these were “outlaw” states, pariahs to be attacked by democratic coalitions with a warrant to take them on and liberalize their politics.

Neoliberals in effect divided the world into three spheres. First came the zone of democratic peace inhabited by “post historic” liberal market democracies, peoples freed of living in the state of nature that had hitherto typified human affairs and so capable of enjoying an enduring peace. As the first among equals in this “Community of Democracies,” as the Clinton administration had come to label this grouping, the United States enjoyed a hegemonic status. That is, Washington did not need to impose its views on the members of this “pacific union” for our partners would recognize a collective interest in following American leadership.
A second zone was more problematic. States within it gave signs of moving toward being market democracies, but the transition would take time. Washington should do what it could to help these lands make their historic transition, with the understanding that their conversion was in everyone’s interest.

A third zone consisted of states and organizations actively hostile to the world of market democracies. These enemies were not to be trusted and might be attacked and forcibly converted into democratic regimes under the terms of a new doctrine of “just war” set forth by neoliberal intellectuals. In these instances, America would obviously be acting imperialistically, making foreign peoples subject to forms of political organization spelled out by Washington.3

As we shall see in Chapters 4 through 7, this three-part conceptualization of the world scene is not a mental map I have imposed on neoliberal thought. Thus, John Rawls, probably the most eminent liberal political philosopher the United States has produced, in 1999 divided the world into regimes that were liberal and capable of being law-abiding members of a “Society of Peoples,” “relatively decent hierarchies,” and “outlaws.” While he counseled goodwill toward the “relatively decent hierarchies” and their treatment as equal members of the world community, his assumption was that war might be called for by the liberal democracies against the outlaws, to be followed by their forced conversion to liberal democratic ways.4

Rawls was not just speaking for himself. His tripartite ranking of the world’s states flowed directly from a much greater river of neoliberal discourse in the aftermath of the Cold War that fundamentally conditioned his philosophical conclusions. Rawls died in 2002, and there is no necessary reason to think he might have favored the Iraq War. Surely he would have been scandalized by the actual conquest of that country, from its plundered public offices to its American-run torture chambers. That said, Rawls’s ideas obviously lent themselves to appropriation by the war party.5 Following in these footsteps were neoliberals aplenty who still today condemn the Bush administration’s conduct of the war without at the same time rejecting either the idea of the invasion itself or the notion that Iraq was just the first in a series of progressive imperialist acts the United States might engender.

What the account in the following chapters reveals is that under neoliberal auspices a comprehensive and coherent ideology for liberal imperialism was born in the 1990s. The neoliberal perspective on how to run an imperial order was far more tightly argued than anything the neoconservatives, who ran the foreign policy establishment in Washington after the inauguration of George
W. Bush in 2001, came close to articulating. To be sure, these neolibs lacked the ability to justify unilateral action on the part of a Washington possessed of their beliefs. That was an argument provided by the neoconservatives.

Under the national trauma following the attack of September 11, 2001, a marriage between first cousins was arranged. The opening round in the growing interaction between the neocons and the neolibs had already occurred in disputes about what to do with Milosevic. The neoconservative insistence that nothing would happen without American leadership was persuasive, for it did indeed take determined action by Washington to oust the Serbian dictator. But somewhat less persuasively, the neoliberals could point to multilateral cooperation as key to the success of the mission. The second round, post-9/11, was over the question of Saddam. Here again, the neocons had a game plan ready, one that many liberals endorsed, even if most of them with a certain reluctance. America would effectively act alone.

However, the neocons were not acting alone. In intellectual terms, their wedding had taken place with the neoliberals, a fusion of ideas whose product was the Bush Doctrine, articulated in 2002 in the aftermath of 9/11. There are reasons, we might appreciate anew, that marriage between first cousins is outlawed in the United States today. As the terms of the doctrine suggest, the probability of genetic mutations in the offspring of such unions is too high to warrant the risk.

Did the neoliberals realize just what they had produced intellectually and where they were headed politically? Perhaps not. Certainly many of them were washing their hands of any involvement within two years of the invasion. But others stayed the course. And they did so with good reason, for the result of their labors over the preceding decade had been to fashion an elaborate justification for what might be called a modern version of both just war and wars of national liberation. Now Washington would be a revolutionary force, determined to make use of the window of opportunity it had in military and ideological terms to create a structure of world affairs capable of protecting American security and providing through war what it was confident would be an extended era of peace.

The result was the laying of the intellectual foundation for a bipartisan political consensus based on a common ideological agenda. That leading elements of the Democratic Party could sign on to the mission impossible laid out by the Bush Doctrine only underscores the role of ideology in organizing American foreign policy. As Thomas Friedman, the country’s most widely read foreign correspondent, put it in the New York Times on March 3, 2006, “A
majority of Americans, in a gut way, always understood the value of trying to produce a democratizing government in the heart of the Arab-Muslim world. That is why there has been no big antiwar movement.”

A Pact With the Devil

A pact with the Devil occurs if we exchange control over our immortal soul to a sinister force in the expectation of realizing a powerfully desired goal that except for this agreement could not be obtained. Or in secular terms, we risk the farm thanks to a will to power with its tricks of self-deception that places us on the wrong side of history. But ambition proves its own undoing. History trips up those who would place it under their control; God will not be mocked. In the event, the serpent wins the day.

Whether the Faustian bargain is conducted for personal fame and fortune or for a more selfless common good, in every case, those who make such wagers calculate that once they obtain their heart’s desire, they may outsmart the Devil. Their gamble invariably fails. Satan ultimately wins the soul of those who make such a pact because he knows he can count on God, or on history, to punish the sin of pride.

The reason is familiar. Whatever the motives lying behind such a pact, its signatories inevitably pay a terrible price for wanting what the nature of our condition will never permit. Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden, the humbling of the builders of the Tower of Babel, King David confronted by Nathan for thinking he was above divine law—such are the lessons of our religious tradition for the punishment of arrogant pride, lessons that in secular terms, too, are imminently comprehensible.

This book recounts two such pacts. The first, without parallel in this country’s foreign policy tradition, came in the form of the Bush Doctrine, which looked to exploit America’s military superiority over any conceivable rivals, and the ideological primacy of the appeal of open market capitalism—globalization—and liberal democracy, so as to dominate the international system for generations to come. Here was a pact with the Devil if ever there was one. As the subtitle of this book puts it, in Washington’s bid for world supremacy lay the betrayal of the American promise. America gave in to the temptations of a superpower to overplay its hand, to gamble with fate that it could make a lasting mark on world events. Rushing into the Iraq War to bring global history under control was as perfect an illustration for our day as exists of the adage that pride comes before the fall.
The second pact occurred when neoliberal hawks, who had for the most part not initially supported this Republican president, nonetheless made common cause with him. Many of these hawks were political independents. But the most influential of them brought their ideas from America’s leading universities into the Democratic Party, whose intellectual high ground they effectively controlled. These neoliberals were the functional equivalent for the Democrats of the neoconservatives within the Republican Party, a pro-war faction able to articulate in seemingly persuasive fashion why America’s moment of unrivalled power meant embracing a mission that would echo through the ages for its vision and its courage.

The result? A stunning setback not only for America but as well for liberal internationalism with its call for human rights and democracy promotion as a doctrine of human betterment. A noble idea was tainted. Whatever the outcome of this war, America will remain a superpower. But its doctrine of hegemonic and imperial domination for the sake of pursuing progressive ends has suffered a reversal from which it will likely never recover. To be sure, some liberal individuals and organizations opposed the war and were individually spared from the contamination. But the well has been poisoned. By making liberal internationalism the doctrine of American nationalism in an era of imperialism, too many articulate spokespersons have hopelessly compromised the future of this once progressive doctrine.

How these ideas of empire were formulated on the basis of liberal democratic internationalist thinking, why they were mistaken, and what lessons a more sobered country can draw from the experience, are the subjects of this book.

A WORD OF THANKS

In the course of writing this book, I was enormously aided by several longtime friends. Ronald Steel and David Fromkin, two historians who have never had the slightest truck with liberal internationalism, saw the conceits and misuse of this ideology within months after 9/11. So, too, did my colleague Jeffrey Taliaferro, a political scientist specializing in American foreign policy and a master of the theories guiding the discipline today as it seeks to grasp the logic of world events. Stanley Hoffmann—ever the gadfly, a liberal in the company of realists, a realist in the company of liberals—likewise saw immediately the self-destructive course liberalism had set itself upon when it came to be the standard-bearer of war in the Middle East.
Mario Bettati—a Frenchman and the original author, along with Bernard Kouchner, of the concepts of a “right to intervene” and a “duty to intervene,” and hence a liberal with every bone in his body—was nonetheless from the beginning a critic of the war in ways that afforded me special insights. So, too, was Toni Chayes, a liberal lawyer specializing at the Fletcher School in the international law of humanitarian intervention. Justin Vaisse, another Frenchman, was a precious source of information on the first two decades of the neoconservative movement. I also appreciate the encouragement of David Rieff. Rieff was virtually the only liberal internationalist who, well before the Iraq War, recognized how destructive the exercise of American power would be both to world order and to progressive politics, if it camouflaged its wide range of imperial interests by flying the banner of human rights and democracy promotion worldwide. Michael Kerns acted ably as editor of the book as did Suzanne Lassandro as project manager; thanks to them as well.

Other friends were equally encouraging. I would especially like to thank David Ovalle, Bill Barnes, Sylvan Barnet, Bonnie Cronin, Roger Fauroux, Nadia Georges, Arthur Goldhammer, Hyman and Lillian Goldin, Inge Hoffmann, Marla Joel, Barbara Leaver, Gary Tinterow, Ann Tucker, Hubert Vicente, John Wong, and Henri Zerner. What these friends have in common is an everyday wonder at the foibles of human vanity. All possess the common sense to see folly for what it is, and so labeled the call for the invasion of Iraq as exactly what it was from its first day: an act of hubris—excessive pride based on moral arrogance, a cause for national shame.

I am grateful for a Tufts’ Faculty Research Awards grant for time to complete this manuscript. Vickie Sullivan and Rob Devigne were a tremendous help as were a number of undergraduate students, most especially Jorge Rueda and Philip Moss.

To all of them, I would like to express my appreciation for their support in writing this “biography of an ideology,” an attempt to explain how an idea with such promise—that the world would be a better place if human rights and democratic government were but expanded—could come to contribute to such a tragic turn of events.

Tony Smith, Boston, November 2006
INTRODUCTION: THE WAR OF IDEAS

Winning the war on terror means winning the war of ideas, for it is ideas that can turn the disenchanted into murderers willing to kill innocent victims.

National Security Strategy of the United States, March 2006 (section III, C)

Fighting a War of Ideas is not for sissies. It requires insight into the target audience, their interests and their values. It involves creating messages that resonate, penetrate and are remembered. It entails finding ways to deliver those messages, repeatedly, to the ears and eyeballs of those who need to understand.

Clifford May, Chairman of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, March 17, 2005

The preliminary battles of the war on terrorism were the military invasions of Afghanistan, then Iraq. Once these conquests of arms were achieved, the difficult political part followed: winning the peace. President George W. Bush’s administration planned to consolidate its military victories by democratizing the two countries and, as a consequence of these successful missions, spreading the model of free market democracies to more of the Muslim world, perhaps even further, to China.

To undertake such an historic mission required what official Washington and its supporters tirelessly called “a war of ideas.” How these ideas were structured into a coherent policy for action called the Bush Doctrine, where