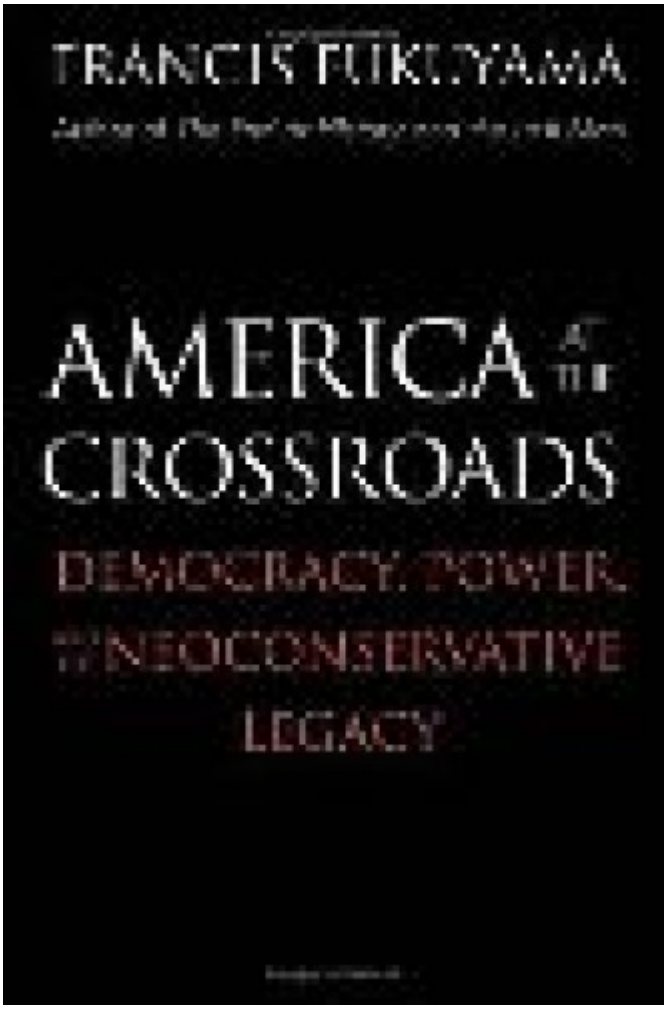
Second thoughts

By Robert Westbrook in the June 13, 2006 issue

In Review



America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power and the Neoconservative Legacy

Francis Fukuyama
Yale University Press

The rats are deserting a sinking ship. The war in Iraq has long divided the American left between antiwar refuseniks and Humvee liberals and split the American right between paleoconservative isolationists, realpolitik realists and neoconservative imperialists. Now the war has begun to shatter the ranks of the neoconservatives themselves—the faction that, above all, gave us this disaster.

The most prominent neoconservative turncoat is Francis Fukuyama, he of the prophecy of an “end to history” and the eventual triumph of liberal democracy—a forecast that played no small part in the neoconservative project of a war to make the Middle East safe for Halliburton and Republican political consultants. *America at the Crossroads* is his apologia for apostasy.

He has much to regret. Fukuyama, along with such luminaries as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Scooter Libby, was a founder in 1997 of the Project for the New American Century, whose statement of principles provided the Bush Doctrine of preventive war and coercive regime change with its first draft. Shortly thereafter, he was among those calling upon the Clinton administration to consider military action to topple Saddam Hussein, and then complaining months later when their plea was unavailing.

A little more than a week after the terrorism of 9/11, Fukuyama signed a letter arguing that “even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack, any strategy aiming at the eradication of terrorism and its sponsors must include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq.”

Fukuyama now says that his doubts about war in Iraq began to mount at this point, though he failed to advance them publicly as the war clouds gathered in the 18 months that followed. In his book he offers no explanation for his silence. This demurral has led some of those he now criticizes to wonder openly whether he would have written this book had the war gone as he had once hoped it would.

Be that as it may, the first signs of Fukuyama’s discomfort in the ranks of the militant neoconservatives came in a response (“The Neoconservative Moment”) he offered in the summer 2004 issue of one of their house organs, *National Interest*, to an earlier speech of neocon pundit Charles Krauthammer. In this speech—the Irving Kristol Lecture to the American Enterprise Institute—Krauthammer had called upon neoconservatives to temper the idealistic “democratic globalism” of the likes of William Kristol and Robert Kagan with a stiff measure of “realism.”

Neoconservatives, he argued, should sustain their commitment to promote democracy throughout the world, but should do so militarily only when doing so coincides with American strategic interests. In other words, yes to war in Iraq, which Krauthammer defined as a necessary struggle to the death with “Arab/Islamic radicalism,” but no to humanitarian interventions such as that in Kosovo.

In the audience for Krauthammer’s speech, Fukuyama tells us, he “could not understand why everyone around me was applauding the speech enthusiastically, given that the United States had found no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, was bogged down in a vicious insurgency, and had almost totally isolated itself from the rest of the world by following the kind of unipolar strategy advocated by Krauthammer.” *America at the Crossroads* recapitulates, extends and, to some extent, modifies Fukuyama’s initial response to Krauthammer.

He begins with a relatively nuanced account of the history of neoconservatism, one that rightly stresses the internal disagreements that have marked its development and complicates the caricatures that decorate the polemical response it has elicited. Neoconservative thinking on foreign policy, Fukuyama says, has been grounded in four shared principles. First, a conviction that concern with the behavior of other states cannot stop at the borders, but must include an effort to transform the internal regimes of others in a liberal democratic direction. Second, a willingness to deploy American power “to achieve moral purposes.” Third, “a distrust of ambitious social engineering projects,” a distrust carried over from the neoconservative disenchantment with the domestic welfare state. And finally, “skepticism about the legitimacy and effectiveness of international law and institutions to achieve either security or justice.”

Fukuyama now believes that these principles need to be tweaked if not abandoned, and that the U.S. should move in the direction of what he calls “realistic Wilsonianism.” He thinks his position remains consistent with neoconservatism rightly understood, but he despairs of convincing other neoconservatives and so is willing to bid the fraternity farewell.

The sort of “Wilsonianism lite” that Fukuyama recommends would retain the neoconservatives’ concern for the internal regimes of other states and their commitment to promoting democracy and nation-building, but would do so with a heightened sense of the difficulties entailed. Here he nicely points up the tension, verging on a contradiction, between the neoconservatives’ enthusiasm for regime

change and their wariness of social engineering. This combination when embodied in practice—call it “Rumsfeldism”—is a recipe for regime-destruction and ensuing anarchy, as in present-day Iraq.

The only resolution to this contradiction can be in opting either for immediate (revolutionary—“Leninist” is Fukuyana’s apt term) regime change with extensive postwar engineering or, as Fukuyama prefers, evolutionary (largely nonmilitary) regime change without much social engineering. Fukuyama would, that is, continue in good Wilsonian fashion to mobilize American power for the good of all, but with a decided preference for “soft power” that does not come dressed in a flak jacket.

As Fukuyama sees it, the most significant departure from neoconservatism of his realistic Wilsonianism lies in its greater appreciation of the virtues of international institutions. Which is not to say Fukuyama has much of a brief for the United Nations. Rather, he urges that policymakers take fuller account of the possibilities of the “horizontal mechanisms of accountability between the vertical stovepipes we label states.”

By such mechanisms, he means not only other formal international organizations such as the World Bank and formal agreements such as treaties but also, and more significantly, less state-dominated organizations such as the International Organization for Standards and less formal agreements such as intergovernmental memoranda of understanding and “soft” law embodied in corporate codes of conduct and other settlements negotiated between private parties. He also offers a brief for organizations of states such as NATO and the Community of Democracy (a moribund Clinton administration invention) that include only democracies.

Critics of neoconservatism less wedded than Fukuyama to its family values will no doubt find that the greatest virtues of his book lie elsewhere than in the soporific litany of neo-Wilsonian proposals for building “multi-multilateralism,” with which he concludes. Krauthammer has cruelly but accurately described many of Fukuyama’s prescriptions as so much Washington think-tank chit-chat, “a mush of bureaucratic make-work.” Of much greater interest is Fukuyama’s sharp indictment of the “threat assessment” of “Islamo-fascism” that has gripped much of our society and culture and turned what should have been a low-level counterinsurgency campaign into an apocalyptic war on terror.

Many neoconservatives and others would have us believe that Osama bin Laden stands poised to lead an all-out, “existential” assault that would, Krauthammer says, “decapitate the American polity, cripple its economy, and create general devastation.” Fukuyama is skeptical of such fears and troubled by the response they have generated. He numbers himself among the critics of the Bush administration who contend that most of the many in the Islamic world who hate us, hate us for what we have done, not for who we are. As a consequence, he reserves some of his sharpest barbs for those who have taken advantage of 9/11 to erase the distinction between preemptive and preventive war on the grounds that only the latter can protect us from a fate worse than Hitler—though Fukuyama’s own position seems to be that preventive war should remain a policy option for the U.S., but not one that the nation’s leaders publicly advertise.

Even more incisively, Fukuyama attacks the presumption of American exceptionalism that underlies the neoconservative vision of a world dominated by the U.S.’s “benevolent hegemony.” He suggests that in the wake of the Iraq war, American policymakers might want to reconsider the claim of Kristol and Kagan that the U.S. need not fear an adverse international response to the exercise of hegemonic power “because American foreign policy is infused with an unusually high degree of morality” that sets the minds of other peoples at ease.

“It is not sufficient that Americans believe in their own good intentions,” Fukuyama wryly concludes; “non-Americans must be convinced of them as well.”

In sum, this is a sane and sober book, marked throughout by wise admonitions to caution and temperance. Nothing Fukuyama says here will cost him a seat at the head table when, after the Bush ship has slipped fully beneath the waves, people of Fukuyama’s sort of conventional wisdom have resumed command of the American empire.

In their earlier face-off Fukuyama more boldly suggested that Krauthammer was too disposed to view American foreign policy as if it were Israeli foreign policy, hinting at the need to put more space between the U.S. and Israel. He backs off from that argument in this book. Apparently he now realizes, in the face of Krauthammer’s unwarranted but predictable and effective riposte of anti-Semitism, that that is the sort of thing that really will get him in trouble and markedly cut down on the dinner invitations.

The least interrogated term in this internecine neoconservative debate, and indeed in the entire controversy stirred up by the war in Iraq and the Bush Doctrine for American foreign policy, is *democracy*. Almost everyone is for it, but few are willing to specify precisely what they mean by the term. Widespread fetishism of majoritarian, free elections prevails among its proponents—until voters in Venezuela turn to Hugo Chavez or Palestinians back Hamas, which induces much hemming and hawing. Then we are assured by wise men such as Fareed Zakaria that it is not democracy as such but liberal democracy or rather democratic liberalism that we seek, and so we must insist that liberalism—a culture of individual rights and (most would add) capitalism—trump democracy in those regimes we would press on others. “Democratic globalism,” it seems, comes bearing an asterisk.

In fact, few who put democracy first are participating in these debates since democracy is not something that one people can impose on or sell, lend or give to another people. There is nothing democratic (“realist” or otherwise) about Krauthammer’s sentiment that “we could use a Colonial Office in the State Department,” but I suspect that he is only more honest than most in advancing it.

Democracy is self-government that, in the end, can be won and sustained only by a people itself; it is not a colonial project. True democrats resist the missionary desire so prevalent on the right and left alike today because democracy is, as Woodrow Wilson (at his best) understood, an act of self-determination. Friendly to the impulse to “do *with*” others, democrats are profoundly mistrustful of the impulse to “do *for*” them.

Moreover, “democratic globalists,” since Wilson at least, have been notoriously blind to the mote in their own eye. Perhaps the reason democracy is the least interrogated term in American foreign policy is that, if it were interrogated, American democracy might not pass inspection at the border. But these days that sort of notion will also ensure that one’s tuxedo remains in mothballs.