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Podhoretz's Complaint

Neoconservatism has failed. How liberal internationalism can triumph in its place.

**WORLD WAR IV: THE LONG STRUGGLE AGAINST ISLAMOFASCISM BY
NORMAN PODHORETZ • DOUBLEDAY • 2007 • 240 PAGES • \$24.95**

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aligned by all, deserted even by many of his closest associates, George W. Bush is actually a visionary. He is one of the few Americans and global leaders who “possessed the wit to see the future” after September 11 and “summoned up the courage to begin crossing over into it.” That is the world according to Norman Podhoretz in his new book, *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism*.

Podhoretz is nothing if not tendentious; he is supremely sure of himself and speaks in absolutes—much like George W. Bush. The result is a lively but often infuriating book that will tempt many readers to counterpunch at every turn against its intemperate excess. Journalists may take offense at his insistence that coverage of the Iraq war demonstrates how “the Vietnam syndrome—the ‘loss of self-confidence and the concomitant spread of neo-isolationist and pacifist

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sentiment” across America—is “still alive and well.” Historians may wonder at his certainty that the Vietnam War was popularly supported and all but won, had defeatist elites not lost their nerve. Academics may bridle, as did this reviewer, at his characterization of professors as “guerrillas-with-tenure” who forced students displaying American flags after 9/11 to take them down.

Resist this temptation. It is better to read the book as the purest possible statement of the Bush Doctrine, untainted by any compromise with practical politics. Podhoretz is a neo-con’s neo-con—one of the very few, by his own account, left standing amid the wreckage of Iraq. Read this way, *World War IV* offers a valuable synopsis of the basic assumptions behind the Bush foreign policy revolution at a time when liberal internationalists, realists, and various hybrids (ethical realists, pragmatic idealists) are all jockeying to be its successor.

In the wake of the Iraq debacle, foreign policy thinkers on the left like Tony Smith and David Rieff have already charged many of their fellow liberals with enabling the Bush doctrine. In this view, the Clintonite embrace of democracy, combined with the development, after Rwanda and Kosovo, of the “responsibility to protect,” paved the way for the neocon policy of imposing democracy through the unilateral use of force. After Bush, if the neocons are dead and liberal internationalists, now increasingly referred to as liberal interventionists, are tainted by association, then realists could again rule the day, embracing order and stability over ideology and values. That is why today it is vital for liberal internationalists—self-styled neo-Wilsonians—to take up the challenge of defining the precise line between their creed and that of neo-conservatives like Podhoretz. *World War IV* crystallizes those differences.

The cornerstone of Podhoretz’s manifesto, as its title suggests, is that America is at war. Readers may be surprised to learn, however, that the U.S. government is actually involved in two wars: an international war against global Islamofascism and a domestic war against the “antiwar movement”—“a war so ferocious that some of us have not hesitated to describe it as nothing less than a kind of civil war.” A *civil war*? Podhoretz’s apocalyptic views of our domestic debates suggest that his diagnoses of international conflicts should be taken with more than a pinch of salt.

But let us begin with the international war: World War IV. Podhoretz insists on the numbering because he believes it is impossible to understand the current war against Islamofascism unless we understand how and why the Cold War was really World War III. It was not, in his reading, a long stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union, but, as Eliot Cohen put it, “a mixture of violent and nonviolent efforts” over a long period, all with “ideological roots.”

The Korean War, the Vietnam War, and countless interventions in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Central and South America were thus not discrete foreign policy events but all battles in a global conflict.

This analytical framework allows Podhoretz to link together 40 years of attacks by a wildly disparate group of actors as skirmishes and battles in World War IV. He includes Black September attacks on American and Israeli diplomats in the 1970s, the Iranian hostage crisis, the 1983 Hezbollah bombing of the Beirut Marine barracks, the PLO's hijacking of the *Achille Lauro*, the Lockerbie bombing by Libya, and unspecified Islamic terrorist operations in various countries that were not aimed at the United States but nevertheless killed Americans.

By doing so, Podhoretz buttresses his two central arguments. First, that all of these groups (and states, in the case of Libya and Iran) are different manifestations of the hydra-headed enemy Islamofascism, the successor to Nazism and communism. And second, that Islamofascists were emboldened by the failures of the Carter Administration, the Reagan Administration (at least after the Beirut barracks bombing), and above all the Clinton Administration to respond forcefully to their

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attacks. It is these “twin understandings” of the past that give rise to the twin pillars of the Bush Doctrine. The first pillar is “the new military strategy of preemption”; the second is the “new political strategy of democratization.” Taken together, they provide an offense-based alternative to the Truman Doctrine’s strategy of containment. During World War III, it was possible to hold off the Soviet Union both directly and indirectly by supporting their adversaries around the world. But in World War IV, it is necessary to take the war directly to the enemy. Containment and deterrence can’t work, Podhoretz argues, because we are fighting nonstate actors, on the one hand, and “unbalanced dictators” who can’t be trusted not to use their nuclear weapons on the other. Preemption is the answer—hitting our enemies before they can hit us and settling in to liberate “another group of countries from another species of totalitarian tyranny.” The more accurate historical analogy, which Podhoretz resists, is not the Truman Doctrine, but rather “rollback”—the far more aggressive doctrine of liberating communist countries espoused by John Foster Dulles and Douglas MacArthur.

An attractive corollary to the Islamofascist worldview, from Podhoretz’s perspective, is that America is not fighting Israel’s war. On the contrary, Israel

is fighting America's war. In a world war between Islamofascists and America, 60 years of repeated Arab attacks on Israel are only the opening volleys. According to Podhoretz, Clinton's attempts to make peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians were "obsessive" and "futile"—futile because the Palestinians cannot be dealt with as discrete actors, but only as part of a larger pan-Arab movement. Bush, on the other hand, has finally understood the nature of the corrupt and brutal governments surrounding Israel, meaning that Israel need not make peace until those governments become the kinds of democracies that it can trust.

Notwithstanding the sweep and ambition of this worldview, it is actually the domestic war that takes up the bulk of *World War IV*. A major advantage of characterizing the fight against global terrorist networks as a world war is that it enables Podhoretz to characterize any opposition to the Administration's foreign policy as an "antiwar movement." For him, the antiwar movement today comprises, in large part, the twenty-first-century successors to the "jackal bins" of the 1960s and 1970s. (Podhoretz uses the term "jackal bins" repeatedly, taking it from a mangling of the term "Jacobins" by columnist Jimmy Breslin. Its simultaneous connotations of feral scavengers and garbage containers apparently appeal to him.) This time around, as Podhoretz documents in chapter after chapter, the antiwar movement includes the mainstream media, isolationists right and left (including a group of right-wingers he calls "paleoconservatives"), liberal internationalists, realists, radical democrats, and right-wing defeatists (neocons who have lost their nerve). This litany does not leave many standing—really only Podhoretz himself, and George W. Bush.

Podhoretz's obsession with domestic political battles is revealing. The vehemence of his denunciations of his political opponents suggests a man beset with enemies at every turn. I am reminded of Alastair Moody in the Harry Potter books, with his eye swiveling about in every direction and his continual injunctions of "constant vigilance!" Like Moody, Podhoretz is right to point to dark forces in the world and even at home, but his own life experience has rather warped his perspective. More generally, Podhoretz's repeated denunciations of the members of "our domestic insurgency" remind us that the neocons still reserve their greatest wrath for their former bedfellows on the left.

Suppose that early 2009 brings a Clinton Doctrine, an Obama Doctrine, or an Edwards Doctrine, one that could very well be implemented by a Secretary of State Biden, Holbrooke, or Richardson. Suppose further that such a doctrine seeks to recover the Democrats' traditional liberal internationalist roots, reuniting support for democracy *and* multilateral institutions. That was the hallmark of Wilson, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Carter, and Bill Clinton.

What might such a doctrine look like? Where, if at all, would it intersect with Podhoretz's description of the Bush Doctrine, and where would it differ?

A doctrine is a response to a threat, or threats; thus the first step is to diagnose the ills besetting the United States. For a Democratic president, the threat would not be "terror" *per se*, as in the war against terror. As General Anthony Zinni, among others, has pointed out, that is a war on a tactic, not an enemy. Neither would it be the constructed ideology of Islamofascism. (The fascists, Nazis, and communists of the twentieth century declared their ideologies themselves. They did not need us to fill in the blanks.) Instead of a hydra of different Islamic terrorist groups determined to bring America down, the great danger of the twenty-first century is a cluster of threats that would fundamentally alter life not only in the United States, but across the planet. These would include a terrorist strike with a nuclear or biological weapon; a nuclear arms race among multiple countries resulting in a nuclear war; the catastrophic rise of sea levels, wiping out cities and creating massive conflict; a global pandemic killing millions of people; or a war over dwindling supplies of energy.

Note that this list does not have nearly the alluring simplicity and fairy-tale, good-versus-evil quality of Podhoretz's narrative. But search the pages of *World War IV* in vain for a discussion of any of these threats. Podhoretz is so focused on the Islamic nature of the danger that he draws no distinction between the kidnapping of an American official and the possibility, which should be any president's nightmare, of the intersection between a terrorist group and a nuclear weapon. Yet if any of these horrific possibilities came to pass, the world as we know it would change terribly—even if we "win" World War IV.

The true liberal internationalist response, perhaps the true Trumanesque response, would be to develop a positive strategy, adding a vision of a better world to a policy of protecting against terrorist attacks and hunting down actual terrorists wherever we can find them. That vision would build not on the narrow Bush definition of freedom as elections and free speech, but rather on Roosevelt's four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Where Podhoretz advocates preemption, a realistic and effective long-term strategy would call for patience and persistence to build the social, economic, and political foundations necessary for these freedoms to flourish. That was the wisdom of the Marshall Plan, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade—all designed in the wake of World War II to provide the economic assistance and the guarantee of financial and political stability necessary to allow shattered societies to rebuild from the ground up.

That strategy would also call for using all the dimensions of American power, rejecting the Bush Administration's love affair with force. It would revive the

value of statecraft, the kind of vigorous and forceful diplomacy that Richard Holbrooke practiced in the Balkans and James Baker and Brent Scowcroft deployed in bringing about the peaceful reunification of Germany. And it would practice what former National Security Council staffers Nina Hachigian and Mona Sutphen, in their new book *The Next American Century*, call “strategic collaboration” with both allies and occasionally adversaries, spreading burdens, building institutions to lock in cooperation and tackle collective problems, strengthening relations, and ensuring that all countries have good reason to at least hedge their bets and not ally against us. This strategy would recognize that America is not the only protagonist in a war of ideas; it would also recognize that the war of ideas between violent fundamentalist jihadists and moderate Muslims must be ultimately be waged within Islam as much as within the West.

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Finally, the core of this liberal internationalist strategy would not be democratization, but rather supporting democrats. Rarely has so much depended on a suffix. Democratization, or even democracy promotion, is something imposed or achieved from outside. Indeed, Podhoretz falls into the now-standard misquotation of Wilson’s

great address to Congress on our entry into World War I, where he supposedly, in Podhoretz’s words, “promised to ‘make the world safe for democracy.’” But as historian and Wilson expert John Milton Cooper points out, Wilson actually said, “The world must be made safe for democracy.” Cooper argues that Wilson was a strict grammarian who would never have used the passive voice unintentionally. Instead, in Cooper’s view, Wilson “meant that democracy must be defended where it existed, and if America could aid others in advancing democracy, so much the better.”

Supporting and standing for democracy means doing whatever would actually help the various forces in a given society striving for government by the people consistent with the rule of law and universal human rights. It means, for instance, denouncing the crackdown against the monk-led demonstrations by the Burmese junta this past October, as the Bush Administration did; working through the UN and ASEAN, as the Administration tried to do; and, as Bush did not, getting China and India to pressure Burma’s generals into engaging seriously with the opposition. It does not mean calling for regime change, refusing to negotiate with the Burmese directly should they provide an opening, or sanctioning the country in any way that would make life harder for ordinary

Burmese. It is impossible to “democratize” Burma, no matter how much we might want to. Force—which Podhoretz’s fellow neocon William Kristol has called for in Burma—will not help unless some group of countries were inclined to take over and rule the country.

In the longer term, supporting Burmese democrats could include working with other ASEAN countries to create more levers of economic and political influence with the junta. We must develop carrots in the form of economic or political benefits and devise sticks that would hurt the generals—their ability to procure luxury goods, health care, and trips for themselves or their families—in ways that could create incentives for change. Such a strategy would certainly involve working with religious leaders to strengthen the hand of the monks. And it would mean encouraging regional institutions like the Asian Development Bank to develop the Burmese economy in ways that would drastically increase the costs to the government of cutting off the Internet, which would in turn restrict its ability to brutalize its citizens outside the global media purview.

Burma’s problems cannot be linked to Islamofascism even by the most fevered imagination. So Burma wouldn’t even make it to the sidelines of World War IV, unless the junta collapsed and a wing of Jemaah Islamiyah, the Indonesian radical Islamist group, sought to move north to seek sanctuary. In that case, Podhoretz would presumably recommend that the U.S. rally its badly overstretched forces and invade yet another country. In the meantime, China and India, Burma’s neighbors and hugely important powers in the region and increasingly in the world, would either be free to take no action against the junta or would find U.S. troops trying to run yet another sharply ethnically divided society on their borders.

If you doubt that even Podhoretz would be this crazy, just substitute Iran for Burma and remember that Bush has actually said publicly that Iran’s nuclear ambitions could trigger World War III. Bush got the number wrong, but—according to Podhoretz—he’s moving in the right direction.

Podhoretz’s story has the airbrushed quality of grand history. He notes several times that Bush’s mistakes in Iraq pale beside the mistakes made by the United States in World War II. The long lens cannot pick out petty details, such as the destruction of a society’s infrastructure or the inability of a president to heed the advice of his generals. Nor can it differentiate between a terrorist group seeking power in a civil war and a global terrorist network seeking an enemy powerful enough to mobilize millions against it. It is the lens of myth and legend, suitable for rousing speeches and calls to battle. It is emphatically

not the lens of policymaking, where, as every academic quickly discovers upon arriving in Washington, tiny details typically matter more than big ideas.

If a president gets the policy right, historians will fill in the sweeping narrative. But if his ideology blocks his ability to see and understand the policy choices to be made, Hollywood labels—“*World War IV!* Coming to a theater near you!”—and devoted courtiers will not save his legacy. It is far more likely, as we stare down the decades of the twenty-first century, that the era of world wars is over. But the specters of war—death, destruction, disease, impoverishment—remain with us in many new and challenging forms, for which the Bush Doctrine offers no answers. ■