



George H.W. Bush: Conservative Realist as President

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Abstract: This article explores George H.W. Bush's foreign policy in order to examine what it can tell us about the successes and weaknesses of conservative internationalism as a world view and as an analytic construct for scholars of international relations. First, to what extent, if any, did the Bush administration's foreign policy reflect the course and logic of conservative internationalism? Second, what can the Bush administration's foreign policy tell us about the utility of conservative internationalism as a foreign policy approach relative to alternative approaches?

In office for only one term, George H.W. Bush held sway over U.S. foreign relations during a critical transitional phase of the postwar era. On one level, the U.S.-Soviet rivalry was slowly waning, taking with it the central organizing principle that had guided U.S. strategy since 1945.¹ At the same time, America's "unipolar era" was still forming, and the post-Cold War euphoria that characterized the subsequent Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations was still to arrive.² The resulting flux in international conditions set the stage for a series of issues—how to manage the decline of the USSR while shaping relations with Europe, Asia, and other centers of geopolitical significance without the glue of anti-Soviet antagonism—that were arguably the most complex any U.S. leader had faced since the immediate postwar period.³

¹ On general developments in this period, see Derek H. Chollet and James M. Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror* (New York: BBS Public Affairs, 2008, 1st ed.).

² In fact, the idea of a "unipolar moment" was first popularized by columnist Charles Krauthammer in 1990. Others argue that true unipolarity only took shape with the collapse of the Soviet Union. See Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 1990-1991, pp. 23–33; Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security*, April 1993, pp. 5–51.

³ Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017), p. 4.

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Amid these changing conditions, to what extent did the H.W. Bush administration's foreign policy reflect the course and logic of Conservative Internationalism? If, as proponents of Conservative Internationalism suggest, the approach often anchors U.S. foreign policy, then we ought to see evidence that it helped shape U.S. foreign policy at this core inflection point. As importantly, what can H.W. Bush's foreign policy tell us about the utility of Conservative Internationalism as a foreign policy approach relative to alternative approaches? Put differently, based on the relationship between H.W. Bush and Conservative Internationalism, what judgments can we make on the value of conservative internationalism as an organizing principle for U.S. foreign policy?

This article advances two inter-related arguments. First, at a basic level, George H.W. Bush was not a conservative internationalist.⁴ Rather, he was a realist, and his administration followed this basic line of reasoning. Certainly, the Bush administration espoused free-markets and individual liberty in the foreign arena. Nevertheless, power, strategic advantage, and an overarching desire for stability took center stage in the Bush administration's agenda. This focus provided the vehicle through which liberal values were pursued; when power and values clashed, the latter were often subjugated to the former.⁵ Second, the Bush administration's *realpolitik* achieved a range of notable foreign policy successes, including the peaceful denouement of the Cold War and collapse of the USSR itself, reunification of Germany within a Europe still dominated by the United States, stable relations with China, and an enormously successful military campaign in the Middle East. These

⁴ For Bush's broader engagement with American conservatism, see Hugh Hecl, "George Bush and American Conservatism," in Michael Nelson and Perry, eds., *41: Inside the Presidency of George H. W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

⁵ See a similar thesis in Strobe Talbott, "Post-Victory Blues," *Foreign Affairs* 71, no 1(1991), pp. 53–69.

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accomplishments were understandably praised by policymakers at the time and have been lauded by analysts after the fact.⁶ Given these successes, one must, therefore, consider not only whether conservative internationalism is all that it is cracked up to be, but also whether realism—as a prominent alternative foreign policy tradition itself—has something more to commend it.⁷

This article first considers the logic of conservative internationalism and contrasts it with realist precepts. Next, it reviews Bush's foreign agenda, focusing on three key developments in U.S. foreign policy from 1989 to 1993. These developments include: U.S. policy towards the East European Revolutions of 1989 and German reunification; managing the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf crisis; and shaping U.S.-Soviet relations during the Soviet Union's breakup and eventual collapse in 1991.⁸ Each of these developments involved potential tradeoffs surrounding whether the United States would seek power and security, or promote its values. Thus, they provide a prism for evaluating H.W. Bush as a conservative internationalist. Finally, the article concludes by using this record to discuss the merits of conservative internationalism and realism as focal points and organizing principles in U.S. foreign relations more generally.

Conservative Internationalism and Realism: A Study in Contrasts

As Henry Nau's work illustrates, conservative internationalism is defined by one's commitment to three core organizing principles in foreign policy.⁹ The first is the spread of freedom as the foremost objective of U.S. foreign policy.¹⁰ In this view, U.S. policy should anchor on ensuring that individuals have the capacity to reach their fullest economic, political, social, and spiritual potential as individuals, free of the shackles of external or internal coercion.¹¹ Thus, highly centralized regimes calling for the subservience of the individual to the state should be opposed, while

⁶ Bartholomew H. Sparrow, "Organizing Security: How the Bush Presidency Made Decisions on War and Peace," in *41*, p. 82.

⁷ For theories of realism and their application to foreign policy, see Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998), pp. 144–72.

⁸ Portions of this analysis are drawn from Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: Rising States and the Fate of Declining Great Powers* (Cornell University Press, 2018), ch. 5. Thanks go to Cornell University Press for allowing use of the material.

⁹ Henry R. Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), Kindle ed. ch. 2. Other scholars offer different accounts of the role of conservative precepts in U.S. foreign relations. For a good, recent distillation, see Colin Dueck, *Hard Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy since World War II* (Princeton University Press, 2010), ch. 1.

¹⁰ Making a similar point—and underscoring the liberal impulse in U.S. foreign relations—Paul D. Miller, *American Power and Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy* (Georgetown University Press, 2016), ch. 1–2.

¹¹ Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*, p. 1,469.

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foreign occupation that denies conquered peoples a say in their fates should be undone.

Second, conservative internationalism calls for the United States to embrace the use of force and other tools of statecraft to abet freedom's march.¹² At times, this may require the United States to sacrifice a stable relationship with a foreign country—presumably, even one that is economically or strategically valuable—when doing so generates an appreciable gain for freedom and liberty in world politics. That said, the third principle—applying U.S. power and capabilities in pursuit of a freedom agenda—is not an absolute. Rather, the pursuit of freedom abroad cannot occur at the expense of freedom at home, nor be imposed on foreign peoples or states when the targets in question look ready to oppose the outcome. Thus, conservative internationalism requires a healthy deference to domestic conditions at home and abroad. If spurring freedom abroad looks likely to take liberty away at home, as, for example, might occur through large-scale taxation to support a large, expeditionary military (a core Jeffersonian concern) the effort should be walked back.¹³ Likewise, if foreign action looks likely to be met with significant local opposition, for example, spurring a civil war in which many individuals will perish—the march of liberty should be (temporarily) restrained.¹⁴

Consider what conservative internationalism is not. It is not focused primarily on military or strategic calculations. In fact, military and strategic concerns are often second to value judgments. It also places a premium on fostering change in international affairs: sacrificing stability for the sake of U.S. values. Nor, notably, does conservative internationalism focus on spreading values and promoting change through international organizations. Although proponents of *liberal* internationalism – Woodrow Wilson's support for the League of Nations is a prime example – see institutions as a viable vehicle for values promotion, conservative internationalism is skeptical of international constructs. Instead, conservative internationalism prefers change through state-level actions and capabilities that give national decision makers the greatest possible leeway over the course of events.¹⁵

In contrast, realism (alternatively called *realpolitik*) breaks with conservative internationalism on several grounds.¹⁶ First, values promotion is relegated to the

¹² Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*, p. 1,434. On this definition, Nau's conception of Conservative Internationalism falls close to Dueck's definition of Conservative Hawks.

¹³ On the important role played by different definitions of domestic "liberty" to this evaluation, see Brendan Rittenhouse Green, "Two Concepts of Liberty: U.S. Cold War Grand Strategies and the Liberal Tradition," *International Security*, Oct. 2012, pp. 9–43.

¹⁴ Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*, pp. 1,620-1,644.

¹⁵ A good discussion of liberal internationalism can also be found in G. John Ikenberry, "Woodrow Wilson, The Bush Administration, and the Future of Liberal Internationalism," in *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-First Century*, G. John Ikenberry et al., eds (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 1–24. Also, Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*, ch. 1, also pp. 1,389-1,430.

¹⁶ Realism and *realpolitik* have a long international tradition but lack a consistent definition or conception of what state objectives entail and thus what foreign policy is expected to look like. For the purposes of this paper, Realism is taken to be a vision of international relations in which states are guided by calculations of material power and the influence and security this

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backbench, below calculations over power and security vis-à-vis other states. By this logic, because the United States has important business to do with other states on issues such as trade and arms competitions, U.S. foreign policy should focus on ensuring that the outcomes of such interactions primarily meet U.S. economic and military interests. This does not, however, mean that realism is devoid of morals and values.¹⁷ Rather, realism sees an increase in power as a means for promoting values (as one of many concerns a state might have) to be promoted. After all, values are hard to promote when a state is comparatively weak or insecure vis-à-vis its peers. In other words, where conservative internationalism suggests values promotion and power go hand-in-hand, realism contends that power and the search for relative economic and military gains are the foremost priority, with value promotion following once the United States has improved its relative position. When power seeking and values promotion clash, therefore, realists are inclined to favor the former.¹⁸

Second, realism places more emphasis on sustaining relationships among the great powers, that is, states with significant hard power and influence in world affairs.¹⁹ Because international politics is a struggle for advantage and security, great powers need to nurture their relationships with one another to compete while avoiding the risk of competition devolving into conflict. Stability, defined as avoiding war with other major powers, is often at least an implicit objective. Conservative internationalism is similarly interested in promoting values in areas of geopolitical significance that are often home to other great powers. Realism, however, counters that values promotion can be harmful by antagonizing other major players in world affairs, suggesting a Manichean struggle that can undercut their ability to negotiate while avoiding conflict. If one's values are promoted in the

affords them; this, in turn, directs attention to relations among the great or major powers in world affairs. Foundation works in the realist wheelhouse include Niccolò Machiavelli, in Allan H Gilbert, trans., *The Prince, and Other Works, Including Reform in Florence, Castruccio Castracani, On Fortune, Letters, Ten Discourses on Livy* (Chicago: Packard, 1941); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations; the Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1954, 2nd ed.); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

¹⁷ On suggestions of realist amorality in light of other foreign policy traditions, see Brian C. Rathbun, "Does One Right Make a Realist? Conservatism, Neoconservatism, and Isolationism in the Foreign Policy Ideology of American Elites," *Political Science Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2008), pp. 271-299; Samuel P. Huntington, "American Ideals versus American Institutions," *Political Science Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (1982): pp. 1-37; Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Henry R. Nau, "Conservative Internationalism," *Policy Review*, Sept. 2008, pp. 3-44. For one of the original Liberal Internationalist critiques, see Woodrow Wilson, "Peace Without Victory," Speech delivered Jan. 22, 1917, Washington, D.C., http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=3898.

¹⁸ Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*, pp. 1346-1352, 1386-1392; also Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*, pp. 117-119.

¹⁹ Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*, pp. 844-849.

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course of competition with other states, then so be it; still, stable competition among the great powers is the name of the game.

Finally, realism places primary emphasis on the external rather than internal composition of other states. Conservative internationalism underscores that domestic politics can abet freedom and liberty in some places while constraining them in other situations. In contrast, realism is concerned primarily with the tools and resources states can bring to bear against one another—their hard power. To the extent domestic politics matters, it primarily affects states' ability to generate hard power.²⁰ Again, though, this is a matter of degree, proponents of realism are often happy to see other states' domestic transformation to look more like one's home country—they simply do not place primary emphasis on the issue.

H.W. Bush and Foreign Policy: The Evidence

Given this basic framework, even a cursory reading of history shows that the George H.W. Bush administration stands as one of the foremost proponents of realism in postwar U.S. foreign policy. The evidence is overwhelming: on matters ranging from Eastern Europe's revolutions to countering Iraqi aggression in the Persian Gulf and to U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, Bush and his key advisors sought to maximize U.S. power, promote security, and often sustain relations with even domestically noxious regimes in these areas. This does not mean that Bush was ambivalent about the march of freedom. However, as realism realist, Bush saw freedom and liberty as promoted by virtue of U.S. international successes. In the struggle for power and security, values promotion was not the primary focus of U.S. policy, but rather followed from successful U.S. engagement and competition in the world.

Bush and Eastern Europe

Shortly after arriving in office in January 1989, Bush and his advisors faced the unraveling of Soviet power and Communist influence throughout Eastern Europe.²¹ That winter and spring, Poland and Hungary moved to liberalize their political and economic systems. By the fall, Poland was led by the non-Communist Solidarity movement while Hungary was well on its way to democratizing.²² The rest of Eastern Europe soon followed. By October 1989, unrest mounted in East

²⁰ On domestic mobilization capacity and realism, see Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "State Building for Future Wars: Neoclassical Realism and the Resource-Extractive State," *Security Studies*, Sept. 2006, pp.464–95.

²¹ Jacques Lévesque, "The East European Revolutions of 1989," in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 311–32.

²² Rudolf L. Tökés, *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution: Economic Reform, Social Change and Political Succession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 305–329; Gregory F. Domber, *Empowering Revolution: America, Poland, and the End of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014); also, Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

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Germany—the Soviet Union’s premier European ally—as citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) took to the streets to denounce the economic hardships and socio-political repression of Ernst Honecker’s Communist government. When neither Honecker nor Egon Krenz (his short-ruling successor) proved able to contain the ferment, protests spread, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989.²³

Events accelerated. By the close of 1989, not only had Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria followed other members of the Communist bloc onto the path of liberalization, but calls for German reunification grew. Within a few months, discussions for German reunification were well underway.²⁴ Remarkably, the Warsaw Pact itself unraveled in early 1990 as the newly non-Communist members of the Soviet alliance system demanded autonomy from Soviet structures and the withdrawal of Soviet troops.²⁵ When representatives from East and West Germany, the United States, the USSR, France, and Britain formally met in October 1990 to codify Germany’s unity, the transformation of Eastern Europe effectively was complete.

Had Bush embraced conservative internationalism, one would be hard-pressed to imagine a better opportunity to advance the cause of freedom and liberty in a key region of the world. By mid-1989, after all, freedom appeared on the march in the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence. Promoting freedom in the region would thus simultaneously give a boost to liberal values and highlight Communism’s failings and the drawbacks of statism, in an area where domestic conditions seemed ripe for a liberal victory. Moreover, one might assume that the United States could promote freedom without risking its own security given Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev’s reluctance to intervene in the region amid signs that he sought a positive U.S.-Soviet relationship.²⁶ In short, conditions in 1989-1990 seemed propitious for a leader

²³ The best overview of these events can be found in Mary E. Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

²⁴ Mary Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Postwar Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion,” *International Security*, Spring 2016, pp. 7–44.

²⁵ Svetlana Savranskaya, “The Logic of 1989: The Soviet Peaceful Withdrawal from Eastern Europe,” in Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas S Blanton, and V. M Zubok, eds., *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 1–47. See, too, National Intelligence Council, *The Direction of Change in the Warsaw Pact*, April 1990, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/at-cold-wars-end-us-intelligence-on-the-soviet-union-and-eastern-europe-1989-1991/16526pdf/NIC90-10002.pdf>.

²⁶ For bullish takes on this issue at the time, see Jack Matlock, “The Soviet Union over the Next Four Years,” Feb. 13, 1989 in *Masterpieces of History*, doc. 45; Jack Matlock, “U.S.-Soviet Relations: Policy Opportunities,” Feb. 22, 1989, released via State Department FOIA. Though less ebullient on Gorbachev’s passivity, see, too, George Bush, “Comprehensive Review of U.S.-Soviet Relations,” Feb. 15, 1989, <http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/pdfs/nsr/nsr3.pdf>.

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focused on promoting liberty and freedom to drive through the breach created by the march of East European feet.

Bush moved more cautiously than conservative internationalism would predict. Watching events unfold in Poland and Hungary, for instance, Bush was reluctant to involve the United States for fear of triggering a Communist crackdown.²⁷ Indeed, upon first taking office, President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker embraced a plan floated by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to explore a quid pro quo with the USSR. In return for the Soviet Union tolerating limited reforms in Poland and Hungary, the United States would agree not to exploit change in the region for U.S. strategic advantages.²⁸ The so-called Kissinger Plan faltered soon after it was delivered, the victim of rapid change on the ground and mounting ambivalence in Washington. Still, the preference for managed, gradual change remained. Once, for example, Poland's Communist government agreed to recognize and negotiate formally with Solidarity in the spring of 1989, Bush and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft ignored calls to use the break in Communist rule to call for reforms throughout the region. Instead, they more narrowly noted that "If Poland's experiment succeeds, other countries *may* follow [emphasis added]."²⁹

Visiting Poland and Hungary in July 1989, Bush elaborated further on this approach. Although the U.S. leader met with Solidarity head Lech Walesa, he also assured Poland's Communist President Wojtech Jaruzelski that he was not in the region to create problems for either Jaruzelski or, significantly, for Gorbachev.³⁰ The implication was clear: the United States would not seek the rapid overthrow of the status quo. As Bush said at a related news conference, the U.S. would "deal with what's there, with who is there [in office], and do it with respect."³¹ This was not just rhetoric. When, for instance, Polish and Hungarian reformers sought billions of dollars' worth of foreign aid to help the non-Communist cause—Walesa put the figure at \$10 billion—the United States responded with a package Scowcroft later

²⁷ See, e.g., Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 39; and Miller Center Interview with Brent Scowcroft, University of Virginia Miller Center, Nov. 12, 1999, p. 51, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/brent-scowcroft-oral-history-national-security-advisor>.

²⁸ Transcripts of Kissinger's conversations are in *Masterpieces of History*, docs. 36 & 37.

²⁹ Bush and his advisors weighed different versions of a statement to greet the Roundtable Accords; "Presidential Statement Supporting Democracy in Poland Option 1: Forward Looking" and "Presidential Statement Supporting Democracy in Poland Option 1I: Moderate," undated, CF00716, Rice Files, George Bush Presidential Library [hereafter GBPL]. For the conditional "other countries may follow" result, see Bernard Weintraub, "Bush Unveils Aid Plan for Poland Linked to Recent Liberalization," *New York Times*, April 16, 1989.

³⁰ Memcon, Bilateral Meeting with Wojciech Jaruzelski, Chairman of Poland, July 10, 1989, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1989-07-10--Jaruzelski.pdf>.

³¹ "The President's News Conference with Journalists from the Economic Summit Countries," July 6, 1989, Public Papers of George Bush, online via Bush Presidential Library.

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called “embarrassingly meagre”: approximately \$425 million in aid to Poland and \$25 million for Hungary.³²

Nor was this policy limited to Poland and Hungary. As Communist rule in East Germany tottered and fell in late 1989, Bush and his senior advisors were reluctant to push change. Indeed, into mid-October 1989, senior State Department officials narrowly recommended that the U.S. begin, “a carefully controlled expansion of our contacts within East German society, a search for modest new areas for cooperation, and continued efforts to resolve the outstanding claims issues.” In fact, even more forward-leaning officials such as State Department Director of Policy Planning Dennis Ross only wanted the United States to “consider steps that we might take to confront the current [East German] leadership with its own failure.”³³ This trend continued after the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. As the first high-level planning document on U.S.-German relations after November 9 underscored, “The United States has an interest in promoting economic reform and democratization within the GDR,” but the “highest priority” U.S. interest “is to assure that the political, economic and security ties” linking the U.S. and *West* Germany remain(?) intact and insulated from “whatever new relationship develops between the two German states.”³⁴ Reflecting this advice, Bush pointedly refused to endorse West German leader Helmut Kohl’s late November 1989 call for German reunification until after Gorbachev seemed to bless the idea at the December 1989 Malta Summit. Instead, Bush called more generally for East German “self-determination” without specifying what this process entailed. Ultimately, it took until February 1990 for the United States to embrace the cause of German unification and, with it, the extension of West Germany’s liberal economic and political systems into East Germany.³⁵

So, Bush was reluctant to fully embrace the rapid overthrow of illiberal systems in Eastern Europe. This reluctance sets Bush’s behavior apart from what one might expect of a conservative internationalist. As striking, however, was Bush’s reasoning. As one might expect of a foreign policy realist, Bush was concerned with the Soviet reaction to U.S. involvement in the USSR’s sphere of influence and the dangers this held for the United States. This concern was not unreasonable. The USSR, after all, had hundreds of thousands of troops stationed in Eastern Europe backed by a robust nuclear arsenal aimed at the United States and American allies. It also possessed a record of using these forces to suppress change in the region. In such circumstances, one could imagine how U.S. activism might have prompted a

³² Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, p. 114.

³³ R.G.H. Seitz, “The Future of Germany in a Fast-Changing Europe,” Oct. 10, 1989, National Security Archive, George Washington University, Soviet Flashpoints Collection, Box 38.

³⁴ Robert Hutchings, “The German Question,” November 20, 1989 and enclosure, “Handling the German Question at Malta and Beyond,” CF00717, Rice Files, GBPL.

³⁵ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “The Malta Summit and US-Soviet Relations: Testing the Waters Amidst Stormy Seas New Insights from American Archives,” *Cold War International History Project E-Dossier*, July 2013.

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hostile Soviet response and primed U.S.-Soviet relations for a crisis. Activism and freedom-promotion may also have undermined the prospects for change in Eastern Europe and undercut potential negotiations between the U.S. and USSR.³⁶ Thus, Bush in early 1989 was worried that events in Poland and Hungary could “turn violent and get out of hand” by generating “an internal crackdown” or “a Soviet backlash.”³⁷ Scowcroft shared this concern, particularly as calls for greater U.S. involvement escalated in the spring and summer of 1989. Later, he noted:

Let’s take a particular case, like Poland . . . I remember when Nixon went there and there were almost riots. That’s the last thing we wanted, because what we didn’t want was either Gorbachev to have to turn hard, or the . . . hardliners in the Kremlin kicking out Gorbachev. So we wanted the pace of events to be underneath their radar screen. And don’t accelerate. Keep them at a pace that will not force a reaction by the Soviets. Of course, we didn’t know what that pace was. But that was our goal.³⁸

East German developments reinforced the trend. Shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, for example, an interagency study of *GDR Crisis Contingencies* bluntly warned Bush and the senior leadership that “in the event of severe internal unrest in the GDR, our overriding objective should be to prevent a Soviet military intervention, which . . . would raise the risk of U.S.-Soviet military confrontation.” In fact, Soviet intervention in East Germany was “among the World War III scenarios for which U.S. and NATO planners have been preparing for decades.”³⁹ Accordingly, Bush was reluctant to accelerate events on the ground after November 9, reasoning that “this was not the time to gloat.” He continued, “my mind kept racing over a possible Soviet crackdown.”⁴⁰ This caution continued both before and after the Malta Summit. Just as Bush went to Malta fretting that German reunification was a near-impossibility given Gorbachev’s “unequivocal” stance endorsing “the existence of two German states,”⁴¹ so did the U.S. reassure the USSR that America had no designs on Soviet clients (especially East Germany) when Soviet military forces unexpectedly went on alert in early December.⁴² Instead, it took until early 1990—after the Soviet military and strategic threat to and from Eastern Europe

³⁶ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans*, ch. 5.

³⁷ Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 39.

³⁸ Author interview with Scowcroft, Aug. 3, 2011. See also Scowcroft, Miller Center Interview, p. 51.

³⁹ “GDR Crisis Contingencies,” Nov. 6-7, 1989, CF00182, Blackwill Files, GBPL. Conversations with Seitz, Dobbins, Hutchings, and Scowcroft reinforced this perspective.

⁴⁰ Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, pp. 148–149.

⁴¹ Brent Scowcroft, “The Soviets and the German Question,” Nov. 29, 1989, 91116, Scowcroft Files, GBPL.

⁴² Robert Hutchings, *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), p. 101; Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 140; Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, p. 202; and Sarotte, *1989*, pp. 80–81.

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was in tatters, the Warsaw Pact collapsed, and Soviet influence unraveled—for the United States to begin deeper engagement in the region.⁴³

In sum, Bush took a page from Realism 101 as the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe imploded. Rather than use the collapse of East European Communism to push liberal values, Bush more cautiously engaged the region, worrying about Soviet and local military opposition that could imperil the security and advantages already enjoyed by the United States. To be clear, this was not a values-free assessment or strategy. In Bush's view, cautious U.S. engagement with the region was the surest path to creating conditions that would allow the march of freedom. This march was already underway with Solidarity's triumph, Hungary's reforms, and the push for German reunification. A stable security environment provided the necessary backdrop to promote freedom and liberty. Insofar as U.S. security interests and U.S. values suggested different courses of action, however, Bush erred on the side of the former rather than the latter.⁴⁴

The Gulf War

By the middle of 1990, East European states were effectively liberated from Communism and beginning to consolidate liberal domestic orders. Then, Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, touching off events that would lead to the First Persian Gulf War. The timing was propitious. Iraq's invasion occurred on the very day that Bush intended to roll-out the United States' new defense strategy for an era of lowered East-West tensions. The strategy put substantially greater emphasis on prospective operations in Southwest Asia. Iraq's invasion could scarcely have provided a better proof-of-concept, let alone a backdrop with which to seek continued investment in a robust U.S. military.⁴⁵

The precise course of events in the 1990-1991 contest is covered in other venues.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, a brief overview bears description. Following Iraq's

⁴³ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans*, ch. 5.

⁴⁴ A similar trend occurred in the United States' relations with China, which was seized in mid-1989 with the Tiananmen Square protests. After China crushed protesters seeking liberalization of the Chinese state, the Bush administration came under intense pressure to cut relations with Beijing. As in Eastern Europe, however, Bush relegated a values-based foreign policy to the back burner. Instead, his administration sustained American diplomatic and military engagement with China, reasoning that it was important to retain influence over and insight into a major regional power. For details on sustaining the relationship, see Engel, *World Seemed*, pp. 192-198. Note, too, that China's willingness to forcibly suppress calls for internal reform spurred U.S. policymakers to consider whether similar developments could occur in the Soviet Union; see Robert Blackwell, "Can It Happen in the Soviet Union?" June 20, 1989, CF00716, Rice Files, GBPL.

⁴⁵ Lorna S. Jaffe, *The Development of the Base Force, 1989-1992* (Washington: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1993), pp. 36-38.

⁴⁶ See, in particular, Jeffrey Engel, ed., *Into the Desert: Reflections on the Gulf War*, 1st edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E.

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invasion, Bush quickly moved to condemn the annexation of Kuwait. Along the way, he worked with both traditional U.S. allies (e.g., France, Canada, and Britain) and former adversaries (most notably the Soviet Union) to impose sanctions on Iraq and to de-legitimize Iraqi moves. Still, it became clear in the fall of 1990 that sanctions and international opprobrium would not force an Iraqi withdrawal. In response, Bush and his team began plans for the military rollback of Iraq from Kuwait, deploying substantial military forces to the Gulf and structuring a UN-endorsed coalition to provide additional troops, finances, and diplomatic resources. The U.S. and its allies began operations against Iraq on January 17, 1991 with a 42-day aerial campaign against Iraqi targets, followed on February 24 with a ground assault that quickly routed Iraqi forces in and around Kuwait. By the time a ceasefire was declared on February 28, 1991, the Iraqi military had been defeated, with some U.S. planners even contemplating a further march towards Baghdad to overturn an Iraqi regime that was already facing internal uprisings.

That the United States went to war against Iraq in 1990-1991 is not surprising from any number of foreign policy traditions.⁴⁷ At base, conservative internationalism would expect the United States to oppose Iraq's conquest of Kuwait which, although taking place against an illiberal regime, nevertheless violated norms of self-determination. Similarly, liberal internationalism would expect action to buttress a liberal international order that puts a premium on forgoing the use of force and on respecting existing territorial arrangements. Realism, meanwhile, predicts a move to limit Iraq's potential as a regional powerhouse following its conquest of Kuwaiti oil. Prosecuting the war itself thus tells us little about Bush's foreign policy inclinations.

That said, several core developments during the period underscore Bush's realist inclinations. First, Bush and his team prioritized cooperation among the major powers in order to confront Iraq and proved willing to use international organizations to abet this objective. While conservative institutionalism is skeptical of international institutions and advocates a degree of U.S. unilateralism when U.S. interests are on the line, Bush worked to maintain a united front among the United States, Britain, France, China, a range of Middle Eastern states, Japan, and—above all—the Soviet Union.⁴⁸ This desire for multilateralism held from the opening diplomatic moves against Iraq to the January-February war itself. To this end, Bush, Baker, and other American officials engaged in sustained personal diplomacy with

Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf*, 1st ed (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995).

⁴⁷ For review and critique of several of these arguments, see Christopher Layne, "Why the Gulf War Was Not In the National Interest," *The Atlantic*, July 1991, <https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/91jul/layne.htm>; for discussion and expansion on the realist case in particular, see Robert J. Art, "Geopolitics Updated: The Strategy of Selective Engagement," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1998-1999), pp. 92-95.

⁴⁸ For U.S.-Soviet cooperation, see the discussion among American and Soviet former officials in William Wohlforth, ed., *Cold War Endgame: Oral History, Analysis, Debates* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), pp. 77-114.

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foreign leaders to ensure their support for the anti-Iraqi campaign.⁴⁹ Moreover, and in accordance with this mission, Bush and his advisors accepted the need to seek approval from the United Nations and other international institutions and organizations (e.g., the Arab League) for the diplomatic and military moves against Iraq.⁵⁰

These moves were not made because the United States sought international legitimacy per se or felt bound by the liberal order. Rather, negotiations and institutional sanction were believed to provide other states with political cover—especially for those faced with fraught domestic politics—that would make the costs of cooperation with the U.S. more palatable.⁵¹ Likewise, major power negotiations helped foreclose Iraq's own opportunities to short-circuit American efforts at confronting Iraqi aggression while buttressing U.S. domestic support for the conflict.⁵² Working through institutions was also believed to mitigate the blowback the United States might receive for operating against Iraq, discrediting charges that the United States was waging war unilaterally and reducing incentives to oppose U.S. actions.⁵³

Of course, the United States was prepared to defect from these institutions and risk major power discord when American interests dictated. As Scowcroft underscored when discussing the January-February military campaign, the United States was ready to tell its partners “that the ideal approach was to get a new Security Council resolution authorizing all necessary means to achieve these objectives, but that we would be prepared to assemble an informal multinational effort (outside the UN) for the same purpose.”⁵⁴ Still, the general inclination to (1) foster a united great power front, and (2) strategically use institutions for this purpose is fully in keeping with what one would expect from a realist president. At the end of the day, opposing aggression by an illiberal regional adversary was valuable, but so too was generating the greatest possible gains for the United States in its relations with other powerful actors with whom it would need to do business in the future.

Second, the United States willingly worked with illiberal states to oppose Iraqi aggression against Kuwait. Although not conclusive of Bush's strategic orientation, it is suggestive that conservative internationalism did not drive the foreign policy agenda in the George H.W. Bush years. By contrast, Ronald Reagan

⁴⁹ Engel, *World Seemed*, pp. 407-409; see, too, the memoranda of telephone conversations and meetings between U.S. leaders and foreign officials, posted online at <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/memcons-telcons>.

⁵⁰ E.g., Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 414.

⁵¹ Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, pp. 342-344. For illustration, see Bush's negotiations with Turkish President Ozal, detailed in Engel, *World Seemed*, p. 406.

⁵² Engel, *World Seemed*, pp. 397, 409-414, 434-436.

⁵³ Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, pp. 277-283; Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, pp. 344-346, 390-396.

⁵⁴ Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 392. The United States' willingness to sidestep Soviet efforts to avert conflict in January-February 1991 is illustrative of the same; see Engel, *World Seemed*, pp. 436-437; Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, ch. 22.

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nominally made diplomatic opposition to illiberal regimes a centerpiece of his foreign policy agenda. Yet, Bush, the realist, largely ignored the domestic makeup of governments with which the United States worked in the Gulf, accepting cooperation with overtly illiberal states such as Egypt and Syria, and ambiguously liberal regimes like the reforming USSR and Turkey. This approach made sense in context, as it helped secure a large coalition against Iraq, ensure diplomatic backing for the conflict, and brought overwhelming combat power to bear.⁵⁵ Ultimately, though far from dispositive, the net result hews closely to what a policy guided realism—with its focus on the external capacity rather than the internal makeup of other states—would expect.⁵⁶

Finally, Bush showed himself willing to forego efforts at overthrowing the Hussein regime itself and attempting to replace it with a more liberal alternative. To be clear, forcible regime change is not a hallmark of conservative internationalism. Still, regime change when it has the support of the local population certainly fits within the conservative internationalism penumbra. Yet, although Bush and others in the administration concluded that the Hussein regime lacked popular support and might be toppled internally (a fact reinforced immediately after the Gulf War ceasefire by uprisings among Iraq's Kurds and Shiites), no regime change occurred. In fact, despite an open road to Baghdad in late February 1991 and occasional debate over the merits of displacing the Hussein regime, Bush opted to settle for the military defeat of the Iraqi army and the liberation of Kuwait.⁵⁷ Here, the prospective costs of regime change and risks to U.S. relations with other major powers dictated the American response.⁵⁸ As Bush noted retrospectively, "Trying to eliminate Saddam, extending the ground war into an occupation of Iraq, would have violated our guideline about not changing objectives in midstream, engaging in "mission creep," and would have incurred "incalculable human and political costs," just as "the coalition [against Iraq] would instantly have collapsed, the Arabs deserting it in anger and other allies pulling out as well."⁵⁹

In short, Bush sided against an overt focus on democracy and values promotion for the sake of minimizing the security costs and maximizing the diplomatic gains of U.S. foreign relations. When the dust settled in the Gulf, Hussein

⁵⁵ Some of these moves were controversial at the time; Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, ch. 16.

⁵⁶ Along similar lines, see Steve Yetiv, "The Travails of Balance of Power Theory: The United States in the Middle East," *Security Studies* 15, no. 1 (January-March 2006), pp. 91-94; David Garnham, "Explaining Middle Eastern Alignments during the Gulf War," *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 13 (September 1991), pp. 63-83.

⁵⁷ Most internal discussions of overthrowing Hussein appear to have occurred in November-December 1990, although hardliners such as Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz continued raising the issue into 1991; see Miller Center Interview with Robert M. Gates, University of Virginia Miller Center, Jul. 23-24, 2000 pp. 19, 58-60,

<https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/robert-m-gates-deputy-director-central>; Miller Center Interview with Richard B. Cheney, University of Virginia Miller Center, Mar. 16-17, 2000 pp. 62-64, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/richard-b-cheney-oral-history-secretary-defense#download-popup>.

⁵⁸ Yetiv, "Travails," pp. 93-94; Engel, *World Seemed*, pp. 437-438; Baker, *Politics*, pp. 436-438.

⁵⁹ Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 489.

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remained in power, albeit much weakened, but the United States emerged with its military prowess demonstrated without what would likely have been a costly and open-ended state-building effort.

Managing the Soviet Collapse

Following the crisis in the Gulf, American attention turned back to Europe. Events were again in rapid flux as the Soviet Union, having sustained the loss of Eastern Europe over the prior two years, was itself beginning to unravel. The Soviet leadership primarily was responsible for this trend. Gorbachev and his allies came to office seeking to reform and revitalize the Soviet state. By 1990-1991, however, the Soviet government's increasingly radical economic and political programs unleashed a host of centrifugal forces that undermined the very fabric of the Soviet state. As individual Soviet republics sought increasing autonomy or independence—often accompanied by mounting ethno-nationalist grievances—Gorbachev was caught in a vise. Communist hardliners sought a crackdown to suppress dissent and reassert control over Soviet territory; liberals embraced a devolution of power to the republics. Gorbachev tried to maneuver between these groups, but could not. Hardliners staged a poorly-conceived coup in August 1991, the defeat of which empowered republican leaders, such as Russian Soviet Republic President Boris Yeltsin, and discredited what remained of Moscow's authority. Although Gorbachev tried to salvage a partial union in the fall of 1991, his efforts came to naught once leaders from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, representing three of the four largest economies inside the USSR, declared independence in December 1991.⁶⁰ On Christmas Day 1991, the Hammer and Sickle flag was lowered over the Kremlin's walls for the last time. The Soviet collapse was complete.

Watching events unfold, President Bush was again forced to decide whether the United States should embrace an agenda that explicitly promoted democracy, freedom, and the spread of liberal values, or work with the powers that be irrespective of their domestic attributes. Conservative internationalism would argue for the former, particularly as many of the people of the Soviet Union seemed to be clamoring for change and liberalization. Realism, in contrast, would favor the latter, especially as the USSR retained significant economic and military reach.

As in Eastern Europe, realism won out. In fact, throughout the winter, spring, and fall, Bush worked to sustain relations with Soviet central authorities under Gorbachev. Often, this came in the face of noxious Soviet actions and calls from within the administration to ratchet down U.S.-Soviet ties to punish the Gorbachev regime for its behavior. When, for example, the Soviet Union bloodily suppressed secessionist movements in the Baltic states in early 1991, National Security Council member Condoleezza Rice called for blocking economic aid for the USSR and

⁶⁰ For details on the Soviet collapse, see Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); for economic details, see CIA, *Handbook of International Economic Statistics, 1992* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1992), p. 59, table 31.

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reducing diplomatic ties. Bush, however, ignored such advice and maintained the U.S. relationship with Moscow's central authorities.⁶¹ His response was indicative of the United States' general approach. By the spring, policymakers decided that the United States would have "minimal involvement" in the USSR's fragmenting domestic scene.⁶² As Rice subsequently explained, doing otherwise – for example, encouraging ostensible liberals and republic-level leaders to challenge Moscow's authority – would harm "our ability to work with the central government on key foreign policy issues."⁶³

This hands-off approach remained in place even after the August 1991 coup attempt. Tellingly, an interagency group intended to shape U.S. policy towards the disintegrating USSR emphasized into the fall of 1991 that the United States would "continue to deal with central government institutions on some issues—nuclear/military issues and some portions of foreign policy—at the same time building new and more vigorous relationships with the republics."⁶⁴ Similarly, and rather than embrace the Soviet Union's fragmentation when it became clear that the state was to collapse, Bush, Baker, and U.S. diplomats set preconditions Soviet republics would need to meet to obtain American recognition of their independence.⁶⁵ As Baker elaborated when countering Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney's call for a speedy Soviet dissolution, the United States "should not establish

⁶¹ Condoleezza Rice, "Dealing with the 'Lull' in the Baltic Crisis," Jan. 15, 1991; and Condoleezza Rice, "Responding to Moscow," Jan. 21, 1991, both in Bush Presidential Library, Rice Files, CF00718, folder "Baltics." On the actual U.S. response, see: Engel, *World Seemed*, p. 432. As Engel rightly notes, Bush did issue a private warning that the U.S. would freeze U.S. economic support for the USSR unless the USSR reversed course in the Baltics, and Gorbachev seemed to cave to U.S. demands. Given, however, that Bush's quiet threat was still less assertive than his advisors advocated, and in light of the desire to sustain momentum in the broader U.S.-Soviet relationship, it remains unclear whether Bush would have followed through on his threat.

⁶² Memcon, "Meeting with Francois Mitterrand, President of France," March 14, 1991, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1991-03-14--Mitterrand.pdf>; and Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 502.

⁶³ Condoleezza Rice, "Coping with the Soviet Union's Internal Turmoil," and enclosure to The President, March 7, 1991, 91119, Scowcroft Files, GBPL; see, also, Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*.

⁶⁴ No author [likely Ed Hewett], "Contingency Group Workplan," undated, Burns and Hewett Files, CF01599, "Policy Group Meetings 1991 [1]," GBPL. Content indicates the report originated circa Oct.-Nov. 1991.

⁶⁵ For an overview of U.S. efforts to communicate conditions, see SecState WashDC to All Diplomatic Posts, "Background Points – U.S Position on Republic Independence," September 8, 1991, CF01433, Burns and Hewett Files, GBPL; "JAB Notes from 10/2/91 mtg w/Gen. Scowcroft, Sec. Cheney, The White House," Oct. 2, 1991, box 110, Personal Papers of James A. Baker III, Seeley Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University [hereafter BP]; SecState WashDC, "Letter from Secretary Baker to NATO Foreign Ministers – NATO Summit Statement on Soviet Union," November 4, 1991, CF01307, Gompert Files, GBPL; James A. Baker III, "America and the Collapse of the Soviet Empire: What Has to Be Done," *U.S. Department of State Dispatch* 2, no. 50 (December 16, 1991).

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a policy of supporting the breakup of the Soviet Union.” Rather, it would allow centrifugal tendencies to continue “subject to our principles.”⁶⁶ In short, and as Bush himself noted in March 1991, the United States would “dance with who is on the floor,” cooperating with the legitimate Soviet government independent of the USSR’s internal composition.

Driving this behavior was a logic heavily influenced by realist calculations. On one level, American leaders sought, in Scowcroft’s terms, “to consolidate our gains” with the USSR on issues such as arms control and Soviet involvement in third world contests. This meant, as Baker explained, “trying to get as much as we could out of the Soviets before there was an even greater turn to the right or shift into disintegration.”⁶⁷ Still, U.S. strategy also was influenced strongly by the dangers inherent in antagonizing a Soviet Union that retained a large nuclear arsenal and strong security apparatus. Particularly worrisome was that accelerating the Soviet breakup could precipitate Gorbachev’s displacement by Communist hardliners seeking to salvage what they could of Soviet fortunes, a military coup, or a Faustian bargain between Gorbachev and Soviet hardliners. These were issues of Soviet domestic politics, but U.S. leaders understood that the outcomes carried real strategic implications. As Deputy National Security Advisor Robert Gates recalled in his memoirs, a hardline turn could “erase many, if not most, of the internal and external changes” witnessed in the USSR.⁶⁸

Equally problematic was the risk of overt competition between hardliners and reformers. Not only could this precipitate what Gates later termed “civil war and dangerous instability in a country with tens of thousands of nuclear warheads,” but since hardliners were likely to triumph in an internal conflict, it might result in what Baker called “fascism with nuclear weapons.”⁶⁹ The August 1991 Soviet coup attempt brought these concerns into sharp relief, as American leaders initially refrained from condemning the coup on the grounds that “there was no point in needlessly antagonizing a new and potentially unstable government with tens of thousands of nuclear warheads.”⁷⁰ Neither did the coup’s failure eliminate the danger. Indeed, into the fall of 1991, members of Bush’s senior leadership and the broader bureaucracy were unenthusiastic about the Soviet Union’s collapse, driven by worries over “who would control the nuclear arsenal.”⁷¹

⁶⁶ Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 530.

⁶⁷ Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, p. 499; and James A. Baker and Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: Putnam, 1995), p. 475.

⁶⁸ Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 528.

⁶⁹ Gates, *From The Shadows*, p. 528; “JAB Notes from 9/4/91 Cabinet Meeting w/GB, The White House, Washington, DC,” Sept. 4, 1991, box 110, BP. On hardliner prospects in a conflict, see Rice, “Coping.”

⁷⁰ Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 521.

⁷¹ Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 529; Brent Scowcroft, “Developments in the USSR,” September 5, 1991, online via <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2016-12-25/end-soviet-union-1991>. For further details, see Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans*, ch. 5.

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Of course, the United States welcomed the flowering of pro-democracy and liberalization movements across the Soviet space.⁷² As Scowcroft wrote Bush in late July 1991, the United States wanted to “present our unequivocal support for democracy, peaceful change, and free markets in the context of a rapidly changing USSR.”⁷³ Still, even this track had a competitive logic: as Acting Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger observed in an accompanying memorandum, “It is in our interest to see the peaceful end of the Soviet Union as we have known it since 1917—a strong, totalitarian central government able to mobilize the vast human and material resources at its control. . . . *The sine qua non for eliminating this threat is substantial devolution of economic and political power* [emphasis added].”⁷⁴ Even more direct was Secretary of the Treasury Nicholas Brady, who argued in a June 1991 meeting of senior policymakers that “A real reform program would turn [the Soviet Union] into a third-rate [military] power, which is what we want;” judging from their comments at this meeting, Baker, Scowcroft, and others seemed to accept this point of view.⁷⁵ Put simply, the spread of freedom, liberty, and U.S. values into the Soviet space was normatively attractive, but it also carried starkly advantageous geopolitical consequences for the United States.

In short, the Bush administration’s response to the Soviet Union again shows that realism more than conservative internationalism colored Bush’s foreign agenda. Yes, the United States welcomed the growth of Soviet domestic liberties and the prospective end of the Soviet Union as an autocratic and Communist state. Faced, however, with the choice between abetting this trend by facilitating the breakup of the Soviet state into its constituent parts or trying to slow the process to consolidate American gains and minimize the security risks to the United States, the Bush administration chose the second route. In the eyes of Bush, Scowcroft, and other administration officials, the dangers of antagonizing a still-powerful state—to say nothing of imperiling the stability of the Soviet nuclear enterprise—required the United States to subsume its liberal impetus for the sake of U.S. security. This decision was not an absolute, as Bush also saw slowing the Soviet march to dissolution as a way of ensuring reformers and liberals truly dominated the post-Soviet space. Still, the general trend fits far closer with a Bush administration motivated by *realpolitik* concerns, and less a conservative internationalist mindset.

⁷² Reuters, “After the Summit: Excerpts from Bush’s Ukraine Speech: Working ‘for the Good of Both of Us,’” *New York Times*, August 2, 1991; Brent Scowcroft, “Meeting with Secretaries Baker, Brady, Cheney re: U.S.-Sov. Relations” June 13, 1991 and enclosure “The U.S. Response to the New Soviet Pluralism,” undated, CF01407, Burns and Hewett Files, GBPL.

⁷³ Brent Scowcroft to The President, “Your Summit Meeting with Gorbachev,” July 25, 1991, supplied to the author via George Bush Presidential Library.

⁷⁴ Lawrence S. Eagleburger to The President, “Your Visit to the USSR,” July 25, 1991, folder “POTUS Trip to Moscow and Kiev, July 29–Aug. 1, 1991 [1],” CF01308, Burns Files, GBPL.

⁷⁵ Memorandum for the Files, “Meeting on U.S.-Soviet Economic Relations, 1:30-2:30 PM, June 3, 1991, White House Situation Room,” CF01407, Burns and Hewett Files, GBPL.

Realism, Conservative Internationalism, and the American Future

To summarize, the George H.W. Bush administration's foreign policy was colored far more by realist impulses than conservative internationalist instincts. As a review of U.S. policy towards the 1989 Revolutions, the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis, and the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union illustrates, Bush and his advisors were heavily attuned to the risks that a more activist U.S. agenda centered on values promotion might pose for U.S. security. Of course, this did not mean abandoning U.S. values for an amoral focus on power and security. Rather, Bush and his advisors simply prioritized the relative weight of the two interests, putting power and security first and the spread of liberty second.

These outcomes beg the question: what can the Bush administration's foreign policy tell analysts about the merits of realism as an organizing principle for U.S. foreign relations? Compared to conservative internationalism, realism is often critiqued for nominally espousing a value- and morality-neutral approach to foreign policy, one that allows dictators to remain in office, foreign peoples to remain subjugated, and which sullies the principles upon which the United States seeks to propound at home. On balance, however, Bush's foreign policy suggests that such criticisms need to be taken with a grain of salt. Although realism is far from perfect, it has more virtues than critiques of the approach allow.

Over the last quarter century, Bush's foreign policy has been held in increasingly high regard by scholars, analysts, and practitioners alike. This is a reversal from many contemporary assessments where, in the columnist George Will's quip, "Bushism is Reaganism minus the passion for freedom."⁷⁶ Today, however, the evaluation has changed.⁷⁷ A presidential historian, for instance, praises Bush's "true conservative" instincts in recognizing that "radical foreign adventures have unforeseen consequences,"⁷⁸ Mark Updegrove lauds Bush's "steady hand as commander in chief" during a tumultuous time,⁷⁹ just as Jeff Sheshol of the *New Yorker* fetes the forty-first president's "steady hand at a time of geopolitical instability."⁸⁰ Even former political opponents acknowledge Bush's "strong presidential leadership" and voice their "high opinion" of his abilities, in part because

⁷⁶ Quoted in Timothy Naftali, *George H.W. Bush* (New York: Holt, 2007), p. 92.

⁷⁷ Allen Reed, "Historians: Legacy of George H.W. Bush will stand the test of time," *The Eagle*, April 6, 2014, http://www.theeagle.com/news/local/historians-legacy-of-george-h-w-bush-will-stand-the/article_2d7b32b4-a14e-5e29-95cc-876fdaf166ca.html.

⁷⁸ Council On Foreign Relations, "The Legacy of the George H.W. Bush Administration," February 17, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/event/legacy-george-hw-bush-administration>.

⁷⁹ Mark K. Updegrove, "The Twilight Vindication of George H.W. Bush," *Daily Beast*, October 20, 2013, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-twilight-vindication-of-george-hw-bush>.

⁸⁰ Jeff Sheshol, "What George H. W. Bush Got Wrong," *The New Yorker*, November 13, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-george-h-w-bush-got-wrong>.

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he was reluctant to overreach in foreign affairs.⁸¹ Bush's foreign policy, in short, is now widely regarded as both effective and having generated significant benefits for the United States. Some of this surging appreciation for Bush's foreign policy legacy is likely due to the passage of time and blowback from nearly twenty years of American involvement in foreign wars. Nevertheless, appreciation for Bush's prudence and pragmatic realism is warranted.

A simple thought experiment comparing the results of Bush's realism with a plausible alternative had conservative internationalism held greater sway in 1989-1991 illustrates the benefits of Bush's approach. Overtly advocating and incentivizing liberalization throughout the Eastern Bloc, for instance, might have exacerbated domestic tensions within the USSR's sphere of influence, creating conditions ripe for local violence and external intervention. Similarly, had Bush and his team toppled Saddam and directly supported the Shiite/Kurdish rebellions, a costly U.S. occupation of Iraq without a clear U.S. exit strategy might well have erupted in 1991 rather than after 2003. Meanwhile, actively backing Soviet secessionist and independence movements during the Soviet dissolution might well have given Communist hardliners incentive to move all the more decisively against Gorbachev. And, critically, such activism may have garnered them more support for their efforts by raising the spectre of a United States meddling in Soviet domestic affairs. At minimum, conditions in 1991 suggest the result would have been significantly greater contestation over the Soviet Union's future than turned out to be the case. At maximum, it is conceivable that hardliners might have been able to supplant reformers and keep the USSR together longer than was realized.

None of these alternatives may have come to pass. Nevertheless, compared to Bush's realism, a conservative internationalism-inspired agenda would have entailed greater risks and potentially fewer benefits for the United States *including setbacks for liberalism and freedom*. Yet, if this is true, then realism itself looks significantly less amoral and value-free than critics allege. It is true that Bush's realism often sacrificed an overt emphasis on the spread of freedom. Doing so, however, (1) created conditions in which freedom could flourish and expand in areas (e.g., Eastern Europe, the USSR) with propitious conditions, and (2) avoided costly windmill-tilting exercises in areas where freedom and liberal values were unlikely to soon take root (e.g., Iraq). Paradoxically, Bush's restraint and prudence thus abetted an agenda conducive to the spread of American values despite its realist precepts. Far from amorality, realism allowed U.S. policymakers to assess whether international conditions were propitious for a values-driven agenda and, in doing so, sustained American security and power so that the United States *could* promote freedom when the situation warranted. Ultimately, given the foreign policy legacy of H.W. Bush, realism stands out as a valuable foreign policy tradition not only for sustaining secure relations with key international players, but for helping leaders decide when to move beyond power and security concerns towards a values-driven agenda.



⁸¹ See Peter Baker, "Bush 41 Reunion Looks to Burnish His Legacy," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2014.