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Take Home Exam 2

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Analysis of the Shift in U.S. Foreign Policy after 9/11

 After 9/11 there was a major shift in U.S. foreign policy caused by many different changes in international politics, world political culture, and intercultural beliefs. The shift that occurred was towards more aggressive and defensive policies. U.S. foreign policy has shifted because in a rapidly changing world the U.S. is trying to assert its power, protect its foreign investments, and defend its national security. The Bush Administration acted in accordance with these motives, and they correlate with a realist approach to foreign policy. In this essay I will attempt to explain how and why the U.S. developed these motives post-9/11, and how they caused their foreign policy to change. Alternatively, I will explain that even though the realist rationale can be used to explicate why the Bush Administration acted the way they did, it does not apply to the international *results* of their actions.

Firstly, we must define what changes in U.S. foreign policy actually occurred. 9/11 caused a tidal wave of fear to spread across the U.S. Most Americans had a very inaccurate view of war because none of the 20th century wars took place on American soil. The terrorist attack of 9/11 showed their vulnerability and proved that their home-front was not as safe as they believed. The Bush Administration capitalized on this terrorist attack to push their offensive policies. The apparent trend in foreign policy after 9/11 was marked by aggression across borders (i.e. The War in Afghanistan, The Iraq War), while domestic policy was marked by an increase in defensive security inside the U.S. (i.e. The Patriot Act). The focus of this essay is on U.S.’s aggression and the war in Iraq. The aspects of the Iraq War can be explained by the realist approach. Realists believe that because of the global anarchy states act unitarily and that they are the primary actors in international politics. Furthermore, they believe that states act in their best self-interest and take any means to protect their national security. In the case of the Iraq War realists would argue that the government exploited the fear of the people and propagated the idea of retribution to gain domestic support for offensive measures. Some theorists even claim that the threat of a terrorist attack was no greater after 9/11 than before the infamous attacks.

“Although it remains heretical to say so, the evidence so far suggests that fears of the omnipotent terrorist... ...may have been overblown, the threat presented within the United States by al Qaeda greatly exaggerated. The massive and expensive homeland security apparatus erected since 9/11 may be persecuting some, spying on many, inconveniencing most, and taxing all to defend the United States against an enemy that scarcely exists.” (Mueller, 2006)

Mueller’s argument is that the threat of terrorism was exaggerated, which leads to the conclusion that the fear was generated and proliferated so that the U.S. government could have justification for their aggressive actions. This correlates with the rationalist view that the ends (securing power) justify the means (propagating fear). He explained that terrorism was a threat, but it always had been and 9/11 just increased the international awareness of it.

The Bush Administration told the world that they went to war with Iraq on the basis that Saddam Hussein was sheltering terrorists, producing weapons of mass destruction, and violating international humanitarian laws. Of course, underneath these reasons the Bush Administration had ulterior motives. Firstly, they were attempting to prove that it was still the most powerful nation in the world, and that terrorism could not deter them; 9/11 could not bring them down. They believed that the world was in a unipolar system. In a unipolar system there is one prominent power whose decisions and opinions influence the policies of most other nations worldwide. This sole nation often takes initiative to maintain its power by acting as the “global sheriff”, keeping a watch on other nations. After the Cold War the U.S. emerged as the prominent power and their policies reflected unipolarity. For this reason the Bush Administration believed it had the authority to go to war in Iraq despite opposition from the UN, other international organizations, and many allies. Secondly, the Middle East, including Iraq, provides the U.S. with a resource vital to Americans: oil. Their positioning in Iraq would secure a source of oil that would economically benefit the U.S. A military stationing in Iraq, a geographically central country in the turbulent Middle East, would also allow the U.S. to keep a close watch on the other nations in the region maintaining their “global sheriff” image. Thirdly and lastly, the Bush Administration was trying to curb terrorism, the largest threat to U.S. national security and power. Terrorism has become a major non-state actor in international politics and in some nations terrorists are even part of the government, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. 9/11 made it obvious to the rest of the world that terrorism was a problem that affected even the greatest superpower.

The problem with the realist approach in this situation is that it assumes that the world system is unipolar. The United States is acting for the reasons that a realist would claim are true to their beliefs, but the results are not actually benefitting the United States. In fact, U.S.’s international influence has decreased greatly since the war in Iraq. Many political scientists believe this is because a world system of multipolarity is emerging and the United States (still trapped in the mindset of a unipolar world) has not acknowledged, let alone accepted multipolarity. Because of this their popularity across the globe has been decreasing.

“Most of the world does not want the United States to be its policeman. As a multipolar system emerges, the appropriate replacement for a global sheriff is community policing, with the major regional powers assuming primary responsibility for order in their own regions.” (Huntington, 2004)

This explains why the Iraq War backfired on the Bush Administration. They continually acted in their own self-interest while failing to see that other nations were cooperating and forming their own community made up of nations that were willing to share power. In addition, a security dilemma was created in which other rival nations of the United States began to bolster their military in reaction to the increase of U.S. military aggression. Realists would argue that this multipolar world cannot exist and that those nations are cooperating only to gain power; if the U.S. is no longer a superpower conflict will increase until another superpower emerges.

By exploiting the fear of another terrorist attack the Bush Administration employed an aggressive foreign policy after 9/11, leading to the war in Iraq. They did so because they wanted to reaffirm their position as the sole superpower in international politics, station themselves strategically in the oil and turbulent rich Middle East, and ensure national security from terrorist threats abroad. However, they misunderstood the world political system at the time of their aggression, and to the international and domestic community the Iraq War became a great blunder of the Bush Administration and the United States; a mess that they themselves created. As the world continually moves towards a multipolar world, the United States must find its place and accept its position of less power; though according to realists the United States will never enact foreign policy that decreases their power and has more benefit to the international community than their own.