

Classifying Evil:

Bush Administration Rhetoric and Policy toward Rogue Regimes

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Language matters in international policymaking, and terms such as "rogue," "outlaw," and "hostile" can help mobilize democratic publics against states that actively attempt to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD), proliferate long-range missiles, and sponsor international terrorism. For President George W. Bush, the attacks of September 11, 2001, reinforced the threat emanating from rogue states on all fronts. By using such rhetoric, the president has alerted the American public and the international community to the dangers posed by a class of countries constituting what he calls an "axis of evil." Such language also highlights the manner in which these regimes collude with each other and with terrorists.

Accordingly, the Bush administration has regularly employed provocative language to justify measures such as missile defense and to recruit allies in the war against terrorism and proliferation. This represents a return to the ideologically charged tone that characterized the first terms of Presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. Indeed, Bush administration officials continue to assert Washington's right to launch preemptive strikes against rogue states. By targeting such states, they argue, the United States enhances prospects for regional security, democracy within the Arab world, and an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Simply put, rogue regime change paves the way for democratic peace.

In particular, the administration's joint emphasis on terrorism and proliferation has focused international attention on Baghdad. Iraq has a clear proliferation record, and its history of using WMD has led to concern over the possibility that Saddam Husayn could become more active and effective in working with terrorists. Indeed, the use of American civilian aircraft as weapons on September 11 suggests that terrorists are willing to use any delivery system available to them to attack the United States. Because it is difficult to deter or even defend against assaults by such individuals, the Bush administration has settled on a policy of deterring, coercing, and perhaps toppling terrorist-harboring regimes, with special attention paid to those rogue states that may soon develop (or that already possess) the capability to launch ballistic missiles at the United States.

Anticipating the Bush administration's concern about the conjunction of terrorism and proliferation, Congress expanded the definition of terrorism in 1994 to include efforts by any individual, group, or nonnuclear weapons state to acquire certain nuclear materials or to develop or otherwise acquire a nuclear explosive device. Indeed, treating terrorism and proliferation as related threats makes excellent sense for U.S. policymakers. Consider Iran,

Iraq, Libya, Syria, and North Korea. All possess ballistic missiles and pursue WMD; they also have a history of sponsoring international terrorism and colluding with one another. Given these and other factors, it is reasonable to argue that such regimes constitute a collective threat.

The main advantage of emphasizing the commonality of threats posed by rogue states is the consequent mobilization of public opinion behind tough methods such as coercive diplomacy or brute force. Some argue that grouping dissimilar states together by using "rogue regime" terminology interferes with engagement when the latter is warranted for a particular state. Although such arguments appear at the margin, the Bush administration has demonstrated remarkable consensus regarding the rogue state problem. Because the Bush approach toward outlaw states builds on previous presidential doctrines, it has benefited from continuity of purpose and wider public understanding of the relevant concepts. Reinforced by ideologically charged language, the Bush Doctrine's ambitious goals call for rolling back, rather than simply deterring, nations that engage in proliferation and state-sponsored terrorism, eventually replacing them with peaceful democracies.

Because of the significant benefits and minimal costs of employing terms such as "rogue state," the Bush administration should continue its use of this rhetoric. Moreover, given the collusion between rogue states in the proliferation of missiles and WMD, the United States should work to strengthen international arms control measures such as the Missile Technology Control Regime. Finally, in light of the links among international terrorist groups and their relationship to rogue states, the Bush administration should intensify its strategic approach to the war against terrorism, continuing to avoid a narrow focus on al-Qaeda alone.

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