

## **Securing the Nation: The National Security Strategy According to the Bush and Obama Administrations<sup>1</sup>**

**Polly Sylvia, Baruch College**

### **Abstract**

This paper will explore the social construction of national security. It will attempt to understand how concepts like security and nationalism are a political and cultural practice that is negotiated, but one that is also largely shaped by the policies of presidential administrations. Through a content analysis of the Bush and Obama administrations' National Security Strategies, this paper will examine the similarities and differences between these two documents to explain the position of the United States in terms of its approach to security. In further considering C. Wright Mill's concept of the power elite, the goal of this paper is to understand how these documents shape political discussions of social issues such as terrorism, violence, war, and security within an era of globalization.

### **Introduction**

Although strategies in regards to national security have varied over the years the underlining approach has remained the same. The President as chief executive and commander-in-chief has the primary responsibility of maintaining national security. The policies that both the Bush administration and the Obama administration engage in are approaches that have been solidified in the United States following the completion of World War II. On October 26, 1945, President Harry Truman asked and succeeded in obtaining the consolidation of a number of departments from Congress. The National Security Act of 1947, and amendments in 1949 and 1958, consolidated various entities including both the war and navy departments into a single department headed by a civilian secretary - the Department of Defense. But this act also created the Central Intelligence Agency, to coordinate all foreign intelligence information and the National Security Council as well (Congressional Digest 2002).

Carl Figliola suggests that since 1947 succeeding presidencies of Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon adopted a number of policies that follow the methods used by both Truman and Eisenhower (1974). The assumption here is that the National Security Act Congress gave the President a host of powers to assure the security of the nation but the extent and the limit of that power is what is often left to debate. In considering this discussion on power, Abraham Sofaer suggests that the Framers of the Constitution meant to assure the president's authority but that this authority was subject to "the exercise of Congress's powers and to the Supreme Court's decisions on conflicting interpretations." (2007) So we can assume that the President has an authority to ensure national security but this authority exists in and through the other two branches of government.

National security can be considered as "that part of government policy having as its objective the creation of national and international political considerations favorable to the protection or extension of vital national values against existing and potential adversaries." (Trager and Kronenberg 1973) Considering both the Bush and Obama administrations National Security Strategy (what I will refer to as NSS), the understanding that I came to is that although both administrations have a different ideological approach to the question of democracy, the underlining assumption of each document emphasizes the importance of democracy and the spread of democratic governance throughout the world as a mechanism of providing security. What follows is thus an exploratory content analysis of the ways in which security is depicted within the 2006 and 2010 National Security Strategies of the Bush and Obama Administration. National security is not only about the defense of borders and protecting the people who live within these borders, it is a host of other values and economic and political goals as the definition above suggests. The Bush administration assumed war as a profitable and, at the time, a necessary means for its security and for the spread of democracy. The Obama administration recognizes similar threats but understands these threats differently. However, promoting democracy is still the name of the game. Inevitably this sense of security is thus tied to effectively convincing others (whether by force or by peaceful means) to accept democratic governance.

## **Performing Security**

C. Wright Mills demonstrated that “within American society, major national power resides in the economic, the political, and the military domains.” (2000) This is his well-established assertion that to understand mass society we must consider the growth toward the centralization of power within these three domains. But within these definitions of the power elite he assumed the notion of national power and focused his study on understanding this elite in terms of the personal awareness actors have, the historical scale of events, and the major institutions within society that to some degree link the previous two (2000). He envisioned the power elite as a sort of imagined community that not only has power within a national society but also has a vested interest in maintaining this power or perhaps the security of this particular “community” as well. In this paper, I am interested in exploring the national security strategies of these administrations as representations inherently tied to the power elite that Mills spoke of. I am interested in exploring the ways in which these documents represent the position and point of view of the power elite as a particular imagined community and how this position shapes discussions of security within society as a whole.

Luisa Bialasiewicz et al. examine a number of developments in US strategy to understand how a political (and perhaps social) imagination of place creates or alters political reality (2007). They situate their study of this phenomenon within a greater political geography literature that is attempting to understand the negotiation that takes place between “imaginative geographies” and foreign policy (2007). They suggest thinking through the concept of national security as a performance rather than a social construction; an approach which allows thinking through a discourse on security that is ever changing and on-going. In sociology, social construction assumes that meaning is created through a process of socialization where individuals learn the norms of society and often assume identities such as gender, race/ethnic and national identities based on this socialization. But these authors focus on the concept of performance rather than social construction to preserve a politics of agency in the production of identities and in socialization in general.

In reviewing US national security strategy documents including the 2002 National Security Strategy they attempt to tease out this performance of security within the government. They argue that the distinction within recent National Security Strategies is their “deployment of integration as the principal foreign policy and security strategy.” They cite Richard Haass, the former Director of Policy at the US State Department who articulated that:

The goal of US foreign policy should be to persuade the other major powers to sign on to certain key ideas as to how the world should operate: opposition to terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, support for free trade, democracy, markets. Integration is about locking them into these policies and then building institutions that lock them in even more (Bialasiewicz et al. 2007)

The “us versus them” rhetoric as an example of this attempt at integration and exclusion as well. The idea is that you are either with the United States and in agreement with its values and practices or you are against it. They go on to give a thorough overview of how this “integrative” approach has worked its way into various government strategies including the National Security Strategies of the Bush administration. But they also suggest that there is another dimension to this idea of integration: the dissolution of an inside/outside approach to security policy (2007). In an age of globalization, they reflect on the government’s own understanding of one globalized world and perhaps the place of the United States within it. This furthers their conceptualizations regarding imaginative geographies and how governments like the US are continually negotiating their own understandings of their place in an ever-growing integrative geopolitical world. Though they recognize the complexity of how this articulation plays out they focus on the themes of integration and inclusion/exclusion perhaps as guiding forces.

This performance of security sees integration with democratic principles or the interests of the United States as a mechanism to provide security and as a way to calculate who is “with us and who is against us.” In thinking through this assessment of security, Ulrich Beck argues that in advanced modernity the promise of security in an industrial society exists through the distribution and growth of risk (1992). In an industrial society, the economy works through the distribution of commodities or goods. But in a risk society, he argues that there is a distribution of dangers or “bads”. Even

when individuals attempt to gain more wealth, this accumulation of wealth takes place through the risks that are taken or as he goes on to argue it is the risks themselves that can be productive as well. It is as if producing risk or playing a game of risk in economic production is the most profitable commodity. As a result, we have become risk societies where security is only possible through these risks and perhaps the ones that are profitable or the ones that once achieved offer a greater sense of security, economic or otherwise. Therefore, even when we talk about the concept of security we are often speaking as if it is already connected to this concept of risk: what we are willing to risk in terms of security is perhaps the way he would pose the question.

In thinking of foreign policy within this risk society, he suggests that the “the principal lines of conflict during the Cold War were clearly political & derived their explosiveness from questions of national and international security. The geopolitical lines of conflict in the world risk society run between different risk perception cultures.” This is a nice reflection on discourse and how the discursive practices within a culture can actually feed or influence political conflicts like the Cold War. It is interesting to consider a Cold War culture of fear or insecurity that helped to perpetuate the politics of the Cold War itself. But this is also a reflection on how issues of international and national security act as a mechanism that can foster conflict in terms of creating and implementing boundaries, territory and asserting political power. Anthony Giddens would suggest that the emergence of manufactured risk assumes a new understanding of politics and a host of different values and strategies (1999). According to this point of view, both the national security strategies of the Bush and Obama administrations, and perhaps all administrations since World War II, are not only about this assertion of political strategy but essentially about a game of risk: what risks a form of government is willing to take in terms of asserting or defending its own national and international security. Security is seen as something that is at risk or something to risk and therefore the response to providing security is also inevitably tied to this game as well. The content analysis that follows will consider the implications of combining the promotion of democratic values with risk assessment.

It could very well be that national security is about the promotion of democratic values throughout the world but it poses some very important questions if this promotion is inevitably tied to the manufactured risk that Giddens refers to here.

### **The Role of Effective Democracies**

Both the National Security Strategies of the Bush and Obama administrations are examples of the discursive practice of security, nationalism and democracy but each administration is responding to a different set of conditions and therefore these practices vary to some degree. Both of these strategies incorporate what Bialasiewicz et al. refer to as a politics of integration or perhaps a politics of obedience; one that asks for other states to comply with the understandings of security and the democratic values of the United States. In this strategy, the Bush administration is attempting to justify its response to the events surrounding September 11<sup>th</sup> and what it sees as a necessary response to current global geopolitical affairs. It declares that “America is at war” and that this war or these wars are necessary not only for our own security but also in making the world safe. This administration sees security in physical terms but also speaks of American values such as freedom and liberty and the political interests attached to these values as well. The goal is to “protect our nation and honor our values, the US seeks to extend Freedom across the globe by leading an international effort to end tyranny and promote democracy.” (NSS 2006)

This security strategy often equates security with democratic governance and tyranny with despotic regimes but it also includes terrorism in these definitions of tyranny as well. The Bush administration was responding to a watershed act<sup>1</sup> that has redefined not only how the United States government understands its own sense of security but also how it responds to others in global affairs as well. The Obama administration is responding to what it indirectly suggests is an overreaction to the events of the “war on terrorism” but yet it often defines national security issues similarly.

The Bush Administration considers the goal of statecraft:  
to help create a world of democratic, well-governed states that can  
meet the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in  
the international system. This is the best way to provide enduring

security for the American people. To protect our Nation and honor our values, the United States seeks to extend freedom across the globe by leading an international effort to end tyranny and to promote effective democracy.

The NSS of the Bush Administration argues that since 2002 the world has seen a progression of freedom, democracy and dignity (2006). It argues that the people in Afghanistan and Iraq have replaced tyrannies with democracies. It also argues that democracy has advanced throughout the world with “peaceful transfers of power; growth in independent judiciaries and the rule of law; improved election practices; and expanding political and economic rights.” But it goes on to suggest that many of these governments are at fragile stages and that they must uphold the principles of democracy. It understands security as the protection of the American people but it also sees security as the protection of the values of the United States. Even though it calls for an international effort in ending tyranny and spreading freedom and democracy throughout the world, it is continuously defining and redefining its own role in that effort.

Although it never clearly defines what it sees as democratic this document does give a list of what it sees as effective democracies, which includes the upholding of rights of citizens; the right to vote; effective sovereignty and the maintaining of social order; and finally the limit of the reach of government and the protection of the institutions of civil society. It goes on to suggest that within effective democracies freedom is indivisible. But interestingly enough as this statement is a reflection of ideological policy it never defines what terms like democracy and freedom mean. It gives suggestions as to what democracy looks like but then it doesn't necessarily provide consistent examples.

Tyranny is defined as the “combination of brutality, poverty, instability, corruption, and suffering, forged under the rule of despots and despotic systems.” (NSS 2006) The NSS then goes on to name regimes it sees as despotic suggesting that these tyrannies threaten the world's interest in expanding freedom and in some tyrannies also help to sponsor terrorism, which threaten our security as well. Throughout this document you see the equating of democracy with freedom and justice and the linking of tyranny to all things, which threaten the growth of democracies. But this is a very narrow

understanding of governance and it is also a narrow understanding of the state of democracy as we know it in the west and in the east or in the global north or the global south, but it is also an incomplete and narrow understanding of what threatens the well-being of people in these nations as well. And here I am specifically thinking of the use of tyranny as a catchall phrase for what threatens security.

I am always struck by the tone of the letter that introduces the Bush Administration's security strategy:

America is at war. This is a wartime national security strategy required by the grave challenge we face – the rise of terrorism fueled by an aggressive ideology of hatred and murder, fully revealed to the American people on September 11, 2001. This strategy reflects our most solemn obligation to protect the security of the American people.

This letter does mention laying the foundations for peace but it sees peace in terms of fighting and winning the war on terror and by promoting freedom as an alternative to various forms of tyranny. The letter ends by mentioning two main strategies of the NSS document. One is the promotion of freedom, justice and human dignity by working to end tyranny and promoting effective democracies. The other is confronting the “challenges of our time” by leading a growing community of democracies.

The Obama administration suggests that in the era of globalization, the nation is at war with other nations and non-state actors, which means the United States must have a renewed interest in national issues but that it must also have renewed interest in being a global leader as well. This security strategy is still equated with promoting democracy but here the understanding is that the US is in a time of transition. In the opening remarks of his strategy Obama focuses less on the prevalence of war and more on defining and understanding the United States in this time of transition:

Time and again in our Nation's history, Americans have risen to meet – and to shape – moments of transition. This must be one of those moments. We live in a time of sweeping change. The success of free nations, open markets, and social progress in recent decades has accelerated globalization on an unprecedented scale. This has opened the doors of opportunity around the globe, extended democracy to hundreds of millions of people, and made peace possible among the major powers. Yet globalization has also intensified the dangers we



face – from international terrorism and the spread of deadly technologies, to economic upheaval and a changing climate.

This statement recognizes challenges that may exist but it is also weaving a narrative that suggests successes in spreading democracy or what it refers to here as spreading opportunities. The strategy recognizes the need to focus on issues at home while at the same time building and strengthening old alliances and fostering new partnerships. This statement ends by suggesting, “we will maintain the military superiority that has served our country and underpinned global security.” (NSS 2010) Although the most striking difference between these two documents is their overall tone, interestingly enough both opening statements end by stating that the United States is ready to lead in international or multinational affairs.

The Obama administration continues to articulate that:

Our country possesses the attributes that have supported our leadership for decades—sturdy alliances, an unmatched military, the world’s largest economy, a strong and evolving democracy, and a dynamic citizenry. Going forward, there should be no doubt: the United States of America will continue to underwrite global security— Our national security strategy is, therefore, focused on renewing American leadership so that we can more effectively advance our interests in the 21st century.

Just as our national security strategy is focused on renewing our leadership for the long term, it is also facilitating immediate action on top priorities. This Administration has no greater responsibility than the safety and security of the American people. And there is no greater threat to the American people than weapons of mass destruction, particularly the danger posed by the pursuit of nuclear weapons by violent extremists and their proliferation to additional states.

This statement is not altogether different from the Bush Administration’s approach to national security. It speaks of the United States as a “superpower” that policed and protected global security and it announces a renewed effort in providing American leadership. It suggests that the threat of security comes directly from weapons of mass destruction but this strategy also makes reference to violent extremists, not specifically naming terrorists or terrorism but perhaps the implication exists just the same. Like the Bush Administrations’ NSS, the Obama administration states that it will always seek to

delegitimize the use of terrorism. The Obama administration emphasizes what it sees as a shift in the security threats that exist against the United States. It sees these threats not coming from what it calls a “single nuclear adversary”. It suggests that instead “of a hostile expansionist empire, we now face a diverse array of challenges, from a loose network of violent extremists to states that flout international norms or face internal collapse.” (2010) The NSS of the Obama administration focuses heavily on supporting the strengthening of the economy and on fostering engagement with other states, suggesting that the United States has not succeeded through isolationism. It does not reference tyranny as much as the Bush Administration does, but it does state that this strategy will also stand up to tyranny. The NSS of the Obama administration also does not officially support the right of preemption, which the Bush administration continuously upheld in its 2002 and 2006 security strategies.

In thinking of its reflections on democracy, the Obama administration argues that democracies that uphold the rights of citizens will remain the strongest allies of the United States. It goes on to describe the United States’ strengths as a democracy and in championing human rights. Interestingly enough it also admits “some methods employed in pursuit of our security have compromised our fidelity to the values we promote.” Unlike the Bush administration it admits that there have been imperfections, but it suggests that these compromises have occurred because of a threat to security. This state of exception type of argument is actually not that different from the arguments of the Bush administration. However, the Bush administration did not often articulate an excuse for its right of preemption or for other actions during the “war on terrorism.” It merely assumed that it had these rights. It may only be a position of technicality but it is one worth noting.

These documents merely reflect the ideological position of the United States government regarding its security strategy. They are representations of the discursive practice of the power elite and in particular these two presidential administrations. I would argue that there are differences between these two documents but in actuality it is how these documents are implemented through governmental and foreign policy that determines the differences or perhaps the similarities between the Bush and Obama administration’s policies regarding national security.

## Conclusion

Democracy is often used as a catchall phrase that not only explains the position of the United States in terms of its security strategy but it also implies that this strategy includes upholding what it sees as the democratic values and policies of the United States. In 1968, Martin and Joan Kyre argued “if aggressive democratization becomes a national security position of the U.S., then a successful administration will depend on a military elite which would assist in establishing western-style governments during occupation.” What is interesting about this reflection is this very much seems to be the position of the United States in its hegemonic role of spreading democracy throughout the world (Martin and Martin 1968). Although I think the Bush administration and Obama administration see democratization differently, it is interesting to note that both documents define security in terms of democracy not necessarily in terms of security in and of itself.

The assumption is that by spreading democracy whether by peaceful or violent means and in continuing to remain a global hegemon, the security of the United States and the security of other nations will remain intact. If Beck is right by suggesting in advanced modernity the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risk, it seems that governance is also caught up in this game of the accumulation of wealth and risk as well. I am not altogether sure what that means in terms of issues of security. But if issues of security are defined in this way, even in documents that are meant to be polemic and/or ideological, it makes for a security that may in fact be quite insecure.

In this case, the performance of security might very well be more concerned with the security of the power elite and/or the maintenance of its economic, political and social interests.

Bialasiewicz et al considered “that the US is no longer prepared to tolerate regimes that do not mirror its own democratic values and practices, and that it will seek to persuade such major powers to change their policies and behaviors to fit the American *modus operandi*, is not without historical precedent.” (2007) This means that the focus is more

on the position of power rather than the practice of democracy in and of itself and it is still a position that is imposed or directed by the United States government. While I would argue that there are differences between the Bush administration and the Obama administration in their understanding of what democracy is, it may very well be that it is a difference of degree rather than of kind.

## References

- Beck, Ulrich. 2009. "Critical Theory of World Risk Society: A Cosmopolitan View." *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 16: 3-22.
- Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. New York: Sage.
- Congressional Digest*. 2002. "A Page From History: The 1945 Debate Over a Proposed Department of Defense."
- Figliola, Carl. 1974. "Considerations of National Security Administration: The Presidency, Policy Making and the Military." *Public Administration Review*. 82-87.
- Fisher, Louis. 2009. "Presidential Power in National Security: A Guide to the President-Elect." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39: 347-362.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1999. "Risk and Responsibility" *The Modern Law Review* 62: 1-10.
- Kyre, Martin and Joan Kyre. 1968. *Military Occupation and National Security*. Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs.
- Lupton, Deborah. 1999. *Risk and Sociocultural Theory: New Directions and Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- National Security Strategy of the United States. 2010. [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf)
- National Security Strategy of the United States. 2006. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006/>
- O'Malley, Pat. 1999. "Governmentality and the Risk Society" *Economy and Society* 28: 138-148.
- Sofaer, Abraham. 2007. "Presidential Power and National Security." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37: 101-123.
- Trager, Frank N. and Philip S. Kronenberg. 1973. *National Security and American Society*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- Williams, M.J. 2008. "(In)Security Studies, Reflexive Modernization and the Risk Society" *Cooperation and Conflict*. 43:57-79

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the 2011 meeting of the New York State Sociological Association.

<sup>2</sup>Here I am referring to September 11, 2001, but I would also argue that the “war on terrorism” as a response could be defined in and through this act as well.