

Reading on the Right

By Jim Lobe | April 05, 2007

Recent efforts to initiate dialogue with Iran and North Korea may give the impression that the Bush administration is gradually easing away from the hardline policies of the past several years, but reports of the president's evolving reading tastes—until now a remarkably good predictor of his policy views—point in the opposite direction. A “literary luncheon” at the White House in late February suggests that President George W. Bush's apparent reading material is moving ever rightward, even apocalyptic.

The luncheon, attended by Vice President Dick Cheney and a dozen hardline neoconservatives, was held in honor of visiting British historian Andrew Roberts, whose latest work, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*, Bush reportedly read late last year and subsequently sent to Prime Minister Tony Blair. Cheney took the book with him on his recent trip to Pakistan.

Roberts, an avowed Thatcherite who proudly declared himself “extremely right-wing” in a recent *Financial Times* interview, repeatedly advised the president, according to Irwin Stelzer, a fellow at the neoconservative-aligned Hudson Institute, to ignore rising anti-U.S. sentiment abroad and opposition at home in pursuing his war on terrorism—or what the historian has called “the Manichean world-historical struggle” against fascism, of which “Totalitarian Islamic Terrorist Fascism” is only the latest.

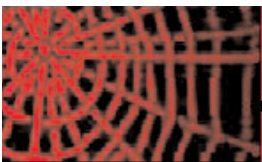
A major lesson of history, Roberts told Bush, is that “will trumps wealth,” according to Stelzer's account of the meeting in the *Weekly Standard*. He warned that “the steady drum-beat of media pessimism and television coverage are sapping the West's will” to fight and defeat the enemy which, in his view includes

Iran, as well as Sunni radicals, such as al-Qaida.

History also warned, Roberts reportedly said, against withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq according to a set deadline, such as that currently being debated in Congress. He compared the risks of doing so to the slaughter of 700,000 to one million people that followed India's independence from British rule in 1947.

In his article, Stelzer, a columnist for the London Sunday Times who is close to the right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch, disclosed that Bush had also recommended that his staff and friends read another, even more apocalyptic, analysis of the current war on terror, *America Alone: The End of the World As We Know It*, by Toronto-born neoconservative columnist Mark Steyn.

Steyn's book, which, unlike Roberts', made the *New York Times* bestseller list, sees Europe's demographic trends and its multicultural, “post-nationalist” secularism as leading inevitably to the “Eupocalypse,” to the “recolonization of Europe by Islam,” to the emergence of a “Eurabia,” and to the onset of a “new Dark Ages” in which the United States



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will find it difficult to survive as the “lonely candle of liberty.”

Steyn, who admits that he would have to drive three hours from his home in “undiverse” New Hampshire to find a Muslim, sees Islam—and not just “Islamist radicals” or “jihadis” such as al-Qaida—as a unique threat that cannot be reconciled with “free societies.”

In the summer of 2002 [...] Bush was seen carrying a just-published copy of *Supreme Command* by neoconservative military historian (and recently appointed State Department counselor) Eliot Cohen.

“[I]t’s not merely that there’s a global jihad lurking within this religion, but that the religion itself is a political project—and, in fact, an imperial project—in a way that modern Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism are not,” he writes. “Furthermore, this particular religion is historically a somewhat bloodthirsty faith in which whatever’s your bag violence-wise can almost certainly be justified.”

To deal with the threat, he calls for a familiar recipe of favorite neoconservative policies, from waging ideological war to ending the Iranian regime and “strik[ing] militarily when the opportunity presents itself.”

The two books, whose worldview and policy prescriptions are remarkably convergent, are the latest in a series read by Bush (not otherwise known as a bibliophile) and lavishly promoted by neoconservatives and their major

media outlets. These include the *Wall Street Journal*’s editorial page and various publications owned by Rupert Murdoch, Conrad Black (before his current legal troubles), and Canada’s Asper family, all of which share a deep affinity for Israel’s right-wing Likud Party, a strong belief in the moral superiority of the so-called “Anglosphere”—Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States (although Steyn thinks Britain and Canada may already be lost to the forces of darkness)—and an undeniable nostalgia for the British Empire, particularly Winston Churchill.

In the summer of 2002, for example, Bush was seen carrying a just-published copy of *Supreme Command* by neoconservative military historian (and recently appointed State Department counselor) Eliot Cohen. The book argued that the greatest civilian wartime leaders, notably Abraham Lincoln and Churchill, had a far better strategic sense than their generals—a particularly timely message in the months that preceded the Iraq war, when a surprising number of recently retired U.S. military brass were voicing strong reservations about the impending invasion.

Two years later, Bush was given an early copy of right-wing Israeli politician Natan Sharansky’s *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror*, which argued that peace in the Middle East could only emerge after the region’s dictatorial regimes were replaced by Western-style democracies. Bush was so taken with it that he summoned Sharansky for a White House tete-a-tete, made the book required reading for his senior foreign policy aides, and incorporated its ideas—in some cases, word for word—into his 2005 inaugural address.

During the Christmas holiday later that year, Bush read Robert Kaplan’s just-released

Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground, an unapologetic paean to U.S. soldiers (who, like Bush’s self-image, “hunted, drove pickups, employed profanities as a matter of dialect, and yet had a literal, demonstrable belief in the Almighty”) deployed across the Muslim world, from the southern Philippines to Mauritania, in what he called a contemporary planetary version of “Injun Country”; that is, those parts of the world that the 19th-century United States subdued and “civilized” thanks to the U.S. Army.

Like the British a century before, it was Washington’s “righteous responsibility to advance the boundaries of free society and good government into zones of sheer chaos,” argued Kaplan, who, like Roberts one year later, also warned at the time that an early U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would result in a “real bloodbath.”

What is remarkable about all of these books is—much like the cherry-picked and manipulated intelligence stovepiped to Bush in the run-up to the Iraq War—both their extraordinary ideological narrowness and their utility in the pursuit of a neoconservative agenda, especially in the Middle East.

In one way or another, each affirms core neo-conservative ideas: the essential beneficence of U.S. (and Anglospheric) power, even if the “natives” are ungrateful; the supreme importance of both “will” and military might in wielding that power, particularly against enemies who can never be “appeased” or “contained.” In Roberts’ words, these enemies are motivated not so much by legitimate grievances against U.S. policies as by “loathing of the English-speaking people’s traditions of democratic pluralism”; the evils of “liberalism,” “secularism,” and “moral relativism” of Western societies that undermine their will to

fight; and the catastrophic consequences of retreat or defeat.

All of these also play to Bush’s own Manicheanism and self-image as a courageous, often lonely, leader in the mold of a Lincoln or Churchill, determined to pursue what he believes is right regardless of what “old Europe,” “intellectuals,” “elites,” or even the electorate think about his course. He is confident only in the conviction that history or God will vindicate him.

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It’s an image that Bush’s neoconservative guests at the literary luncheon—including the *Wall Street Journal*’s editorial page editor Paul Gigot, former Commentary editor Norman Podhoretz, *New York Sun* editor Seth Lipsky, and several like-minded columnists—have also tried hard to propagate, particularly as public confidence in Bush has fallen to the longest sustained lows for any president in more than 50 years.

“It is fair to say that the few people I spoke with as we left shared my impression,” wrote the *Standard*’s Stelzer. “Here is a man comfortable in his own skin; whose religious faith guides him in his search for the good... who worries less about his ‘legacy’ than about his standing with the Almighty, [and] who is quite well read.”

Jim Lobe is the Washington bureau chief of the Inter Press Service and a contributor to Right Web (right-web.irc-online.org).

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