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Beyond the neoconservative legacy in American counterterrorism policy: from George W. Bush to forever war

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Abstract

More than two decades after the 9/11 attacks, the militarised approach to counterterrorism initiated by the George W. Bush Administration remains firmly in place. Growing frustration with these actions has prompted debates on 'forever war'. This article traces the origins of 'forever war' to the interplay of neoconservatism and conservative nationalism in the George W. Bush Administration, which aimed at preserving American primacy through the cultivation of overwhelming military power. The Administration's support for the revolution in military affairs contributed to the development of a more remote counterterrorism approach, which helps explain the continuities in US counterterrorism policies across the latter Bush administration as well as the Obama and Trump presidencies. By helping embed a 'common sense' understanding that further 9/11-style attacks could only be prevented by enduring and aggressive military action against transnational terrorist organisations, neoconservatism shaped the evolution of American counterterrorism policy. The specific influence of neoconservatism must be qualified and contextualised, however, because the strategic commitment to primacy had wider support within the Bush Administration.

Keywords George W. Bush · Neoconservatism · Counterterrorism · Forever war · Primacy · Revolution in military affairs

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Introduction

In recent years, the notion of 'forever war' has drawn considerable attention in American foreign policy debates (Byman and McCants 2017; Danner 2017; Kapadia 2019). Forever war is an amorphous notion which has been applied to the Vietnam War (Berni 2021), the Iraq War (Filkins 2009) and, more recently, the war in Afghanistan (Biden 2021). Its popularity as a shorthand for criticising American counterterrorism policy builds upon earlier debates on whether victory in what the George W. Bush Administration had coined the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) was possible (Cronin 2014; Gordon 2007). The foregrounding of the adjective 'forever' reflects elite anxieties about the costs of more than two decades of continuous and seemingly unwinnable 'war'[1] at a time when American primacy is being challenged by 'revisionist powers', namely China and Russia. In our understanding, 'forever war' encompasses post-9/11 American combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the (near) continuous smaller counterterrorism operations conducted across many African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian states over the past two decades. In accordance with the overarching aim of this Special Issue (Smith 2023), this paper revisits Bush's presidency to reinvigorate the debates on his Administration's counterterrorism legacy, the origins of forever war, and the wider dynamics of change and continuity in American foreign policy. We examine the following research question: what influence, if any, did post-Cold War neoconservatism have on the formation and subsequent evolution of US counterterrorism policies in the two decades after the 9/11 attacks?

During the 2000s, neoconservatism and its relationship to George W. Bush's foreign policy was subject to considerable debate (Fukuyama 2006a; George 2005; Homolar-Riechmann 2009; Hurst 2005; Mearsheimer 2005; Parmar 2009; Ryan 2010). For some, the impact of neoconservatism on Bush's presidency was overstated (Boot 2004; Hurst 2005; Lynch and Singh 2008: 155). Commentators such as James Joyner (2011) pointed to the ideological overlap between neoconservatism and liberal interventionism, both of which, it was said, undermined realist pragmatism. Others, in contrast, presented neoconservatism as a major influence on the Bush Administration's response to the 9/11 attacks and the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Schmidt and Williams 2008; Peleg 2009). Speaking in July 2003 for example, then Senator Joseph Biden argued that the neoconservatives had 'seem[ed] to have captured the heart and mind of the President, and [were] controlling the foreign policy agenda' (quoted in Daalder and Lindsay 2003: 14). Despite some notable contributions (Pan and Turner 2017; Singh 2014; Solomon 2013), the academic study of neoconservatism's influence on American foreign policy largely subsided after the Bush years.

This matters because, whilst neoconservatism's influence across the Bush and Obama presidencies has been scrutinised (Pan and Turner 2017; Parmar 2009;

[1] In our understanding, the 'forever war' qualifies as a 'war' because it entails the continuous use of American military power to compel transnational terrorist organisations to change their political behaviour and cease plans to conduct large-scale attacks against the continental United States.

Ryan 2010: 188–189; Singh 2014), its relationship to Trump's presidency remains underexplored. Further study is warranted because, although many prominent neoconservatives opposed Trump's election (Heilbrunn 2020; Repinski 2016), earlier studies point to neoconservatism having an adaptive and enduring impact on contemporary American politics (Pan and Turner 2017; Singh 2014). Reconsiderations of George W. Bush's presidency have typically focused on the Iraq War (Butt 2019; Stieb 2021). This is understandable. The invasion was presented as an element of the GWOT,[2] and was the most consequential foreign policy decision taken during Bush's tenure. But Iraq was not the only relevant battlefield, and a narrow focus on Iraq may misrepresent the full scope of 'forever wars'. To fully understand the context in which President Biden has argued that it is 'past time to end the forever wars' (Biden 2020), the wider formulation of US counterterrorism policies deserves critical attention. This paper thus extends the debates on Bush, neoconservatism, and American foreign policy beyond Iraq. In doing so, it aims to connect Bush's foreign policy legacy to Trump, a leader widely seen as antithetical to neoconservatism.

As with the causes of the Iraq War, a conclusive account of the forever war's origins will only become possible after the full declassification of government documents and memoranda (Butt 2019: 251). Whilst acknowledging that an uncritical reading of these sources can understate the role ideology played in shaping the Bush Administration's foreign policy (Stieb 2023), where possible, our analysis is supported by an engagement with the writings and statements of prominent neoconservative figures.[3] This includes individuals such as Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, and Paul Wolfowitz, who held positions within the Pentagon during Bush's presidency, in addition to influential neoconservative commentators such as Charles Krauthammer, Robert Kagan, and William Kristol. Analysts have highlighted the need to be 'empathetic' to the immense pressure Bush Administration officials felt to protect the American public following the horrific 9/11 attacks (Brands and Feaver 2017: 4). Acknowledging the emotional impact of this trauma, our aim is not to defend the actions of either neoconservatives or the wider Bush Administration. Our study is instead intended to serve two important purposes: first, to help pierce the hyperbole that was frequently associated with the neoconservatives in government (Fukuyama 2006a: 13); second, to provide a clearer analytical framework for analysing neoconservatism's specific influence on the forever war's inception, as well as the mechanisms through which its potential impact may have been achieved.

[2] Our analysis of neoconservatism as an ideology requires us to acknowledge that the statements made by officials are not necessarily 'true' in an objective sense. Despite the Bush Administration's push to implicate Saddam Hussein's government in the 9/11 attacks, there was no evidence of an operational relationship between the Iraqi government and al-Qaeda. The 2003 Iraq invasion was nonetheless subsumed into the GWOT, both in the war's public messaging and in the Administration's ideological outlook.

[3] Some scholars have recently pushed to (re)conceptualise neoconservatism through the study of its discursive resonance and formations (Solomon 2013; Pan and Turner 2017). In this article, we are principally concerned with studying the counterterrorism policies proposed by neoconservative figures and the ideological principles which animated them.

We argue that the influence of post-Cold War neoconservatism is insufficient for understanding either the forever war's formation or its continuation across the (latter) Bush, Obama, and Trump presidencies. Neoconservatives promoted a benevolent interpretation of American primacy. This underpinned an expansive temporal vision of American power in which the US's unprecedented prominence in the post-Cold War international order would be extended far into the twenty first century. Yet, whilst neoconservatism may have influenced aspects of the forever war's formation, its significance must be qualified in three important respects. First, it is difficult to determine how neoconservative thinking shaped the Bush Administration's formation of US counterterrorism policies because the ideology itself was, to a degree, likely shaped by the actions taken and proposed by the Administration following the 9/11 attacks. Second, neoconservatives did not propose a unified policy programme on counterterrorism. Just as there was disagreement between neoconservatives regarding military intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s (Ryan 2010), at times they advocated contradictory measures for combatting transnational terrorist organisations. And third, the realisation of neoconservatism's expansive temporal vision for American power cannot be appreciated without situating the neoconservative moment in deeper intellectual currents on the American right—and in US strategic thinking writ large.

Not only did the Bush Administration open certain policy 'pathways' that persisted across successive Administrations, but the expansive temporality of this new war was also sedimented as a 'common sense' response to the 9/11 attacks. Common sense constructions naturalise certain conceptions of the national interest (Weldes 1996). They have ideological effects because they predispose actors to accept or acquiesce to certain kinds of policies (Jackson 2009: 80; Hopf 2013). While subsequent presidents pushed back against elements of neoconservatism, the vision of this 'long' war against transnational terrorist organisations as a multi-generational conflict remained largely intact. Although the concept of 'common sense' has been utilised in scholarship on the War on Terror (Jackson 2009), it has not been applied to the temporal vision that accompanied the onset of this war, nor has it been connected to the forever war of more recent scholarly debate. The common sense understanding of the virtue of American power certainly predated the neoconservative moment, providing something of a 'foundation for neoconservatism' itself (Pan and Turner 2017: 83). The specific vision of a 'long war' with transnational terrorism was an advent of this neoconservative moment, however, and the assumption that such a conflict would naturally serve US interests remained intact even after the neoconservative moment had passed.

As we argue, the Bush Administration relied on a set of counterterrorism tools developed and supported not only by neoconservatives but by their conservative nationalist counterparts. The latter belonged to a distinct intellectual pedigree and were ostensibly more 'realist' in their defence of American primacy. By and large, they were less concerned with the explicit moralism and outward commitment to democratisation found in neoconservatism (Homolar-Riechmann 2009; Hurst 2005). These two 'camps' found common ground in their enthusiasm for the revolution in military affairs (RMA) and the broader military build-up pursued by Donald Rumsfeld. Importantly, as certain features of neoconservatism faded from prominence,

its expansive temporal vision of American power survived. Coupled with the more 'remote' toolset enabled by the RMA, the persistence of this vision as applied to counterterrorism helps explain the forever war's seemingly interminable character. Our analysis thus contributes to debates on change and continuity in US foreign policy by highlighting the role of the RMA in sustaining the forever war across multiple administrations.

Our analysis unfolds in three stages. In the first section, we unpack the key ideas and principles of post-Cold War neoconservatism, highlighting its expansive temporal vision for American primacy. The second section examines neoconservatism's influence on the formation of US counterterrorism policy in the critical year between the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the publication of the National Security Strategy in September of 2002. Our analysis then widens to consider neoconservatism's influence on the evolution of US counterterrorism policies in the (late) Bush, Obama, and Trump presidencies. The third section focuses on the militarisation of US counterterrorism policy in relation to the RMA. This serves to counterbalance the focus on neoconservatism in the first two sections, illustrating the need to look 'beyond' neoconservative ideology to fully grasp the forever war's origins.

The temporality of the neoconservative project

Neoconservatism is a broad intellectual tradition, one open to different interpretations and (mis-)characterisations. As detailed by Pan and Turner (2017), it has typically been studied in three ways, as: a grouping of individuals who share a similar worldview; a collection of foreign policy preferences; and a set of ideological principles. With a nod to the various (geopolitical and security-based) interests that give neoconservatism its coherence as an approach to foreign policy, we emphasise its ideological function throughout our analysis. Conceptual debates notwithstanding, it is widely accepted that the partisans, policies, and principles of neoconservatism shaped Bush's foreign policy, at least during his first term.

Neoconservatism has a long history, evolving across multiple 'generations' from the 1960s onwards (Vaïsse 2010a). Like others (Ryan 2010), our analysis is focused on post-Cold War neoconservatism which developed its own distinct intellectual pedigree due, in part, to its focus on American foreign (not domestic) policy (Homolar-Riechmann 2009: 181). For many on the political right, neoconservatism represented a more 'enthusiastic' foreign policy based on an eagerness 'to seek out and destroy enemies everywhere' (Nau 2004/05: 23). During the 1990s, its proponents called for the USA to openly embrace the mantle of global leadership and reject a possible turn toward (neo)isolationism (Muravchik 1996). As a crusading and outwardly moralistic ideology (Homolar-Riechmann 2009), neoconservatism was deeply Americanist (Guelke 2005: 42; Noon 2007). Despite its liberal 'gloss', neoconservatism can be partially distinguished from liberalism through its militaristic approach to foreign affairs and distrust of international organisations (Rojecki 2008: 71; Peleg 2009: 54–57; Vaïsse 2010b: 5). Neoconservatism also encompasses elements of 'exceptionalism' that, amongst other things, allowed the Bush Administration to justify unilateralism in the service of primacy (Rojecki 2008).

According to Francis Fukuyama, Cold War era neoconservatives shared four major principles: (1) the promotion of democracy and human rights; (2) a belief in the need for, and strategic benefits of, moral uses of American power; (3) a scepticism about the efficacy of international law and institutions to resolve international security challenges; and (4) an opposition to nation-building and social engineering overseas (Fukuyama 2006a: 4–5). After the Cold War, he argued that neoconservatism's distinct blend of moralism and militarism had become misaligned: '[t]he problem with neoconservatism's agenda lies not in its ends, which are as American as apple pie, but rather in the overmilitarised means by which it has sought to accomplish them' (Fukuyama 2006b). Having become inseparably bound up with the Iraq War and the Bush Doctrine's promotion of pre-emption, unilateralism, and regime change as guiding principles of American strategy, Fukuyama (2006a, b: 7) argued that it appeared 'better to abandon the label [neoconservatism] and articulate an altogether distinct foreign policy position'.

The post-Cold War neoconservative project was ideological, in part, because the USA' role in global politics was taken to be naturally benevolent (Kristol and Kagan 1996; Muravchik 1996; Krauthammer 2002/03). Yet, it is important to distinguish the policies proposed by neoconservative thinkers from the discourse used to justify them. The abiding aim of the post-Cold War neoconservative project was extending American unipolarity, not democracy promotion or the spread of American values in service of moral ideals (Ryan 2010). Primacy had been a goal of all Administrations since 1945 (Layne 2006). It was sustained after the Soviet Union's collapse by the interplay of 'power' (i.e. material capability) and 'habit' (i.e. collectively held ideas of appropriate foreign policy conduct) (Porter 2018). What helped distinguish post-Cold War neoconservatism was the push to realign American foreign policy 'habits' with the unprecedented distribution of 'power' which followed the Soviet Union's collapse. These calls were morally justified on the understanding that both the USA and the international community benefited from American primacy (Homolar-Riechmann 2009: 183–184). Thus, the structural position of unipolarity needed to be preserved indefinitely.

The commentary of Charles Krauthammer is instructive here. As one of the project's leading polemicists, Krauthammer emphasised the opportunities created by the momentous changes in global politics presented by the Cold War's end. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* (1990), he coined the term 'unipolar moment' to capture the strategic triumphalism of the time. Revisiting his thesis after 9/11, Krauthammer wrote approvingly that 'the unipolar moment has become the unipolar era' (Krauthammer 2002/03: 17). American power needed to be preserved over the long haul, partly to counteract the 'existential threat' posed by 'Arab/Islamic radicalism' and the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) (Krauthammer 2004: 17) but also because the USA was a uniquely benign hegemon which had 'no great desire to remake human nature, to conquer for the extraction of natural resources, or to rule for the simple pleasure of dominion' (Krauthammer 2002/03: 14). Despite differences amongst neoconservatives regarding the scope of US interests (Fukuyama 2006a: 43), there was convergence with the 'neo-Reaganite' position of Kristol and Kagan. These authors championed the aggressive pursuit of what they termed 'benevolent global hegemony' for 'as far into the future as possible' (Kristol and

Kagan 1996: 20, 23). In a similar vein, Krauthammer wrote that the USA should act strategically to sustain its 'unrivalled dominance for the foreseeable future'. This exceeded the 30-to-40-year timeframe he initially foresaw as the unipolar moment. In the heady days of Bush's first term, even this seemed 'rather modest' (Krauthammer 2002/03: 17).

The temporal vision of American power promoted by post-Cold War neoconservatism was expressed in the name of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), a leading Washington think-tank and lobbying organisation formed in 1997. This group's role in promoting neoconservative ideas is well-documented (George 2005: 189–90; Ryan 2010) and is therefore discussed only briefly here. Co-founded by Kristol and Kagan, PNAC brought together influential intellectuals from across the neoconservative movement. As outlined in its statement of principles, PNAC advocated for a more activist foreign policy aimed at mobilising support for continued American primacy (PNAC 1997). Collaborating with other think-tanks, including the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), PNAC lobbied for the Iraq War (Altheide and Grimes 2005). Central to PNAC was its temporal vision for American power: '[a]t present the USA faces no global rival. America's grand strategy should aim to preserve and extend this advantageous position as far into the future as possible' (PNAC 2000: i).

To claim that neoconservatives exhibited confidence in the durability of American primacy would be an understatement. Concerns about strategic overstretch were often dismissed by neoconservative thinkers (Krauthammer 1990: 26; Krauthammer 2002/03: 5; Kristol and Kagan 1996: 22). It was assumed a clear sense of strategic purpose and increased military spending would steer the USA away from liberal multilateralism and the balance-of-power logic of realism, both of which were associated with 'declinist' perspectives (Noon 2007: 92). For many, such thinking marked a certain hubris (Krebs and Lobasz 2007: 409). This reinforced critiques of Bush's foreign policy, at least in his first term, as being overly ideological (Parmar 2009: 181). Ultimately, this hubris was shattered by the failure of the nation-building campaign in Iraq. 'Neocon' became a term of abuse within American political discourse (Boot 2004: 47). Well-known neoconservative thinkers, including Robert Kagan and William Kristol, subsequently distanced themselves from the label (Turner and Pan 2017: 76).

During Bush's first term, neoconservative ideas shaped policy formation via key officials appointed to 'second tier and consultative positions' (Ryan 2010: 180), including Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense; Douglas Feith, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy; Elliott Abrams, a member of the National Security Council and its lead on the Israel-Palestinian dispute; Lewis 'Scooter' Libby, chief of staff to Vice-President Dick Cheney; and Richard Perle, Chairman of the Defense Policy Board advising Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Outside of the Administration, neoconservative ideas were disseminated through a network of intellectuals and like-minded activists who regularly featured in magazines such as *Commentary*, the *Public Interest*, and the *Weekly Standard;* appeared on network television shows such as *Fox News;* and contributed toward think-tanks such as PNAC, AEI, and the Foreign Policy Initiative (Daalder and Lindsay 2003: 14; Singh 2014: 36–37).

Importantly however, neoconservatives never held a monopoly of influence within the Bush Administration. Neither the president nor most Administration officials can be neatly categorised as neoconservatives even if, at times, they shared ideas about American foreign policy. The most important positions within the Administration were staffed by more traditional conservatives such as Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, and National Security Advisor (and later Secretary of State) Condoleezza Rice. On certain issues, the thinking of these individuals fused with that of the neoconservatives. They shared a preference for primacy as a strategic orientation (Daalder and Lindsay 2003: 15; Ryan 2010), advocated increased defence spending (Stieb 2021: 6), and expressed concerns about the proliferation of WMD to 'rogue states' (Hurst 2005: 80–81). Whereas neoconservatism's (contingent) moralism advocated democracy promotion as an aim of US foreign policy (Hurst 2005: 83–84), nationalist conservatism had a more 'realist' bent. Neoconservatism inculcated a certain 'optimism' surrounding the character and durability of American primacy. Subsuming nationalist conservatism in the aftermath of 9/11, this was interwoven with its expansive temporal vision of American power, strengthening the common sense view that the GWOT would serve US interests no matter its duration.

From a long war to forever war: neoconservatism and the evolution of US counterterrorism policy

For those serving within the Administration, the horrors of the 9/11 attacks triggered a sense of 'moral outrage' (Bush 2011: 137) as well as a 'continuing feeling of dread about what might lie ahead' (Tenet 2007: 170). American foreign policy was thereafter restructured to prevent another mass casualty attack within the continental USA (Brands and O'Hanlon 2021: 35) while protecting American primacy (Leffler 2011: 37). The invasion of Iraq can be seen in this context. In President Bush's retelling, Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld advocated for potential military action against Iraq in the days following 9/11 (Bush 2011: 189–190). Regime change in Iraq had been a long-stated goal of the neoconservative movement. In January 1998, neoconservative figures including Wolfowitz and Perle were amongst the eighteen signatories of a letter published by PNAC calling for Saddam's removal from power (PNAC 1998). After 9/11, neoconservative commentators restated their case for regime change through the guise of counterterrorism (PNAC 2001; Kagan and Kristol 2001). According to Kagan and Kristol, the Administration's response to Iraq was the 'supreme test of whether we as a nation have learned the lesson of September 11' (Kagan and Kristol 2002).

Beyond neoconservative advocacy, the 2003 invasion of Iraq reflected a wider consensus within the US foreign policy establishment (Stieb 2021). The policy of containment implemented after the Gulf War was increasingly contested by the late 1990s. Following the 9/11 attacks, neoconservatives within and outside of the Administration pushed for regime change. It is unclear whether this activism was the determining factor in Bush's decision-making (Stieb 2021); indeed, the removal of Saddam had bipartisan support prior to the 9/11 attacks (Brands and

Feaver 2017: 239–240). Prior to the invasion, some neoconservative commentators had linked regime change to the cause of democracy promotion (Kagan and Kristol 2001). However, according to Douglas Feith (2009: 51), Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz viewed the regime change effort in Iraq as stemming from concerns that, if provided with WMD, terrorist organisations would use them to attack the USA.[4] Even if Feith's claims are to be dismissed on the basis of their authorship, democracy promotion—which has a much longer history in US foreign policy thinking than post-Cold War neoconservatism (Cox et al. 2013)—became a more pronounced feature of Bush's foreign policy discourse only *after* the Iraq invasion in March 2003 (Fukuyama 2006a: 46–47; Leffler 2011: 35).

During his national address delivered on the evening of the 9/11 attacks, President Bush maintained that his Administration would 'make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbour them' (Bush 2001a). As National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice later explained, the inclusion of this line had been agreed by the President, the Vice-President, Donald Rumsfeld, and Secretary of State Colin Powell. It reflected a consensus within the Administration that the state sponsors of terrorism needed to be immediately put 'on notice' (Rice 2011: 54–64). According to Douglas Feith's account, this view was established in the meeting of the National Security Council on September 13, 2001, in which the President, Rice, and Rumsfeld all appeared to conceive of the GWOT as requiring action against al-Qaeda, the Taliban government in Afghanistan, *and* the wider network of state sponsors of terrorism (Feith 2009: 13–17). These actions dovetailed with the policies being advocated by neoconservative figures from positions outside of the Administration. This included support for a 'broad and sustained campaign… against the terrorist organisations and those who harbour and support them' (PNAC 2001; see also Kagan and Kristol 2001). The convergence of this 'Axis of Evil' consisting of both state sponsors of terrorism (Iraq, Iran, North Korea) as well as a wider 'terrorist underworld' (including groups such as al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah) underpinned the president's January 2002 State of the Union Address. In this speech, Bush specified the two primary goals of his Administration's counterterrorism policies: (1) denying transnational terrorist organisations safe havens from which to plan further attacks and (2) 'prevent[ing] the terrorists and regimes who seek chemical, biological or nuclear weapons from threatening the USA and the world' (Bush 2002a). These goals reflected a wider consensus within the Administration that 'as a matter of *common sense* and self-defence, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed' (The White House 2002: ii, emphasis added).

This thinking underlined an expansive temporal vision for US counterterrorism operations. In his memoirs, Cheney recalls a conversation with Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, and Condoleezza Rice at Camp David on September 14, 2001, in which it was understood that 'this would be a long war' with 'no easy, quick victory

[4] In later accounts, both neoconservatives (Frum and Perle 2004: 42) and others in the Administration (Bush 2002b; Cheney 2011: 330) feared that groups including al-Qaeda would, if given the opportunity, use WMD to conduct further mass casualty attacks within the United States.

followed by an enemy surrender' (Cheney 2011: 332–333). In his televised address to both Houses of Congress on September 20, 2001, President Bush stated that the GWOT would 'not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated' (Bush 2001b). As such, 'Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen' (Bush 2001b). The 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS)—a document largely written under the supervision of National Security Advisor Rice (Leffler 2011: 35–36)—reiterated this core message. Unlike previous conflicts, the GWOT would be 'fought on many fronts against a particularly elusive enemy over an extended period of time' (White House 2002: 5). Given the role which discursive presentations of time can play in legitimising the use of military force (Hom and Campbell 2022: 527–528), these statements have more than a symbolic importance. When articulated as a global military response 'of uncertain duration' (White House 2002: i), it becomes difficult to meaningfully determine at what point (if any) these efforts are understood to have succeeded, and are no longer required (Hom and Campbell 2022: 534). From its inception, the GWOT was imbued with a circular logic in which victory was only attainable through perpetual counterterrorism operations (McIntosh 2022).

An expression of the knowledge-power of (certain) policy elites within the Bush Administration (Jackson 2011), the rhetorical framing of a 'long war'[5] on terrorism became more explicit during Bush's second term (Bush 2006)—the point at which the neoconservative 'moment' is commonly thought to have ended (Ikenberry 2004). By September 2005, Feith, Perle, and Wolfowitz had all left their positions within the Pentagon. Donald Rumsfeld, whose thinking on the durability of American primacy and the utility of military power had provided a baseline for cooperation with these figures, was similarly replaced as Secretary of Defense in late 2006. A consistent theme of neoconservative commentary around this time was to admonish the 'defeatism' which was perceived as creeping into elite policymaking circles around Iraq (Frum and Perle 2004: 4; Kristol 2006). Beyond this, however, neoconservative counterterrorism prescriptions began to fracture and, in some cases, deviate from Bush's foreign policy approach, which was moderated in his second term (Brands and Feaver 2017: 28–32). Whilst some neoconservative commentators highlighted how the expansive formulation of the GWOT had undermined aspects of US global leadership (Kagan 2008), others continued to call for a forceful response to Iran's and North Korea's nuclear development programmes (Boot 2004: 49–50; Krauthammer 2007). These calls cut across Bush's scepticism of the utility of preventive military action as a long-term resolution to Iran's nuclear development efforts and the adoption of a more multilateral response to this issue (Bush 2011: 417–420; Brands and Feaver 2017: 262). Highlighting the growing disconnect between the Administration and certain neoconservative commentators, Bush reportedly dismissed Charles Krauthammer and William Kristol as 'the bomber boys' due to their hawkish views on Iran (Goldberg 2010).

[5] It was not until 2006 that the Bush Administration openly embraced the 'long war' terminology. The phrase was used by Bush during his 2006 State of the Union Address, when he declared that 'our own generation is in a *long war* against a determined enemy' (Bush 2006, emphasis added).

Following his inauguration in January 2009, Obama took various steps intended to put some 'bright lines' between the respective Administrations, 'fixing' certain aspects of Bush's approach 'rather than tearing it out root and branch to start over' (Obama 2020: 354–355). Within days of his inauguration, Obama issued executive orders ordering the closure of the Guantánamo Bay detention centre and formally ending the CIA's use of 'enhanced interrogation' methods (White House 2009).[6] As some had anticipated however, the Obama Administration remained wedded to many of the policy prescriptions that had guided Bush's second-term counterterrorism approach (Lynch and Singh 2008: 7). In this way, whilst Obama recalibrated aspects of US counterterrorism discourse (Jackson 2011), his Administration exhibited considerable continuity with the policies of Bush's final two years. This was reflected in the expanded use of drones and other 'lighter footprint' military practices outside of Afghanistan (Brands and Feaver 2017: 248–49). The USA would still use pre-emptive military force to deny transnational terrorist organisations safe havens, but would do so using a more 'remote' approach to military intervention (Watts and Biegon 2021; Biegon and Watts 2022). Under Obama, the USA appeared more sensitive to the various costs associated with direct military action against the state sponsors of terrorism.

The influence of neoconservatism persisted in various ways, including through elite policy networks (Homolar-Riechmann 2009; Parmar 2009; Singh 2014). That said, Obama could hardly be described as a neoconservative, and his Administration was not staffed with major neoconservative figures. Throughout Obama's presidency, many neoconservatives remained highly critical of the Administration's policies toward Iran (Krauthammer 2013) and its unwillingness to directly intervene against Assad's Syria following the Arab Spring (Repinski 2016). Such actions were taken to be consistent with Obama's perceived 'abdication' of US global leadership and reluctance to promote democracy and human rights (Abrams 2013). Importantly however, the Bush Administration's vision of a 'long' war against transnational terrorist organisations remained embedded in policy circles (Jackson 2011). Following his re-election, Obama (2013) professed a desire to end this 'war' and roll-back the expansive legal and military architecture established after 9/11. Nevertheless, as highlighted in the military campaigns launched to dislodge the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) from its self-declared caliphates across the Middle East, his Administration continued to plan for an aggressive and enduring approach to transnational terrorism. Prior to ISIS's rise, there were no attempts to articulate a clear timeline for ending Obama's 'overseas contingency operations', and senior Pentagon officials would report to Congress in 2013 their expectation that combat operations against al-Qaeda would continue for a further '10 or 20 years' (Cronin 2014: 178).

[6] The Rendition, Detention and Interrogation programme, which included the operation of multiple overseas 'black sites' and the waterboarding of detainees, had been largely curtailed by the end of Bush's presidency. The Obama Administration's move to close the Guantanamo Bay dentition centre and transfer its 'high-value' detainees elsewhere failed to overcome strong Republican obstruction (Obama 2020: 580–582).

In both the primaries and general election campaign, Donald Trump vocally criticised what he (incorrectly) presented as the weakness of the Obama Administration's counterterrorism policies. This aligned Trump with the position taken by neoconservative think tanks and policy intellectuals, who argued that more aggressive military action was needed to contain ISIS and that the 2015 Iranian nuclear agreement had been one of the 'worst agreements' in US diplomatic history (Frum 2014; Krauthammer 2015). These shared critiques of Obama's presidency did not, however, provide a basis for an electoral coalition between Trump and neoconservative figures. In May 2016, Trump publicly lampooned the prominent neoconservative contributor William Kristol for being a 'loser' and 'not a smart person' following Kristol's suggestion that an independent candidate was preparing to enter the 2016 presidential election (Engel 2016). Trump similarly contested the long-standing neoconservative narrative regarding the 'virtue' and moral purpose of American power (Pan and Turner 2017), disputing the wisdom of the Iraq War and articulating an admiration for certain authoritarian leaders. These actions fuelled the opposition that certain Bush-era officials (such as Paul Wolfowitz) expressed toward Trump's candidacy (Repinski 2016). By the end of his term, however, Trump had appointed several high-profile neoconservatives—including John Bolton (National Security Advisor, April 2018–September 2019) and Elliot Abrams (US Special Representative for Venezuela and later Iran, January 2019–January 2021)—to positions within his Administration. These actions underlined the many contradictions which underpinned the Trump presidency as well as the capacity of post-Cold War neoconservatism to reassert itself in American foreign policymaking circles (Heilbrunn 2020).

With varying degrees of commitment, Trump feinted a return to some of the more expansive counterterrorism policies which had been championed by neoconservatives during Bush's tenure. For example, the 2018 National Counterterrorism Strategy singled out Iran as 'the most prominent state sponsor of terrorism' (White House 2018: 9) and underscored that '[t]errorism will persist as a tactic of those who view our democracy as a threat to their tyrannical aspirations' (White House 2018: 25). Consistent with this focus, in April 2019, the State Department similarly designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a 'foreign terrorist organisation' (Esper 2022: 69). As demonstrated in its response to the June 2019 destruction of a Global Hawk surveillance drone over the Strait of Hormuz, the President ultimately pulled back from a direct military confrontation with Tehran. With the notable exception of the January 2020 drone strike which killed Iranian General Soleimani (Heilbrunn 2020), the Administration steered away from open hostilities in its attempt to apply 'maximum pressure' on Tehran and curb its support for various Shia militias across the Middle East.

When evaluating the continuity in Trump's counterterrorism policy, it is important to distinguish between his Administration's (largely conventional) planning approach (as outlined in the 2018 National Counterterrorism Strategy) and his idiosyncratic 'bluster' on specific counterterrorism issues, such as the 'Muslim travel ban' (Neumann 2020). In the case of Trump's campaign pledge to 'load up' Guantánamo with some 'bad dudes', Trump's bellicose support for the Bush-era Rendition, Detention and Interrogation programme was largely ignored by Pentagon officials (Neumann 2020: 87–88). During his final year in office, Trump publicly

lamented the 'crazy' costs involved with running the Guantánamo detention centre and called on European states to increase the share of ISIS prisoners they held in custody (Baker 2019). From a certain vantage point therefore, Trump's messaging sought to balance a (hyper-)militarised counterterrorist posture with a scepticism of the kinds of internationalist commitments toward 'democracy promotion' associated with the neoconservatism of the previous Republican administration (Neumann 2020: 17).

It was around the time of the Obama-Trump transition that the term 'forever war' took hold to describe the apparently open-ended series of counterterrorism conflicts fought since 9/11 (Byman and McCants 2017; Danner 2017). The growing unease about the costs of militarised counterterrorism indicated the 'common sense' purchase of the multi-generational conflict against terrorism was waning, at least for segments of the American public (Fig. 1).

Those inside the Administration understood that one of Trump's core campaign pledges was to 'end forever wars' (Bolton 2020: 213; Esper 2022: 208). Throughout his presidency, Trump repeatedly questioned the costs associated with US global counterterrorism operations. Presenting himself as having been 'boxed in' by Pentagon officials, he came to describe Jim Mattis as being a 'terrible' Defence Secretary, partly because he thwarted Trump's attempts to push through a troop withdrawal from Afghanistan (Esper 2022: 211–212). Trump's one-time National Security Advisor John Bolton would later recall his opposition to Trump's call to 'end endless wars' on the basis that these conflicts were not:

> …about making Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, or any other country nicer, safer places to live. I am not a nation builder…[t]his was about keeping America safe from another 9/11, or even worse, a 9/11 where the terrorists had

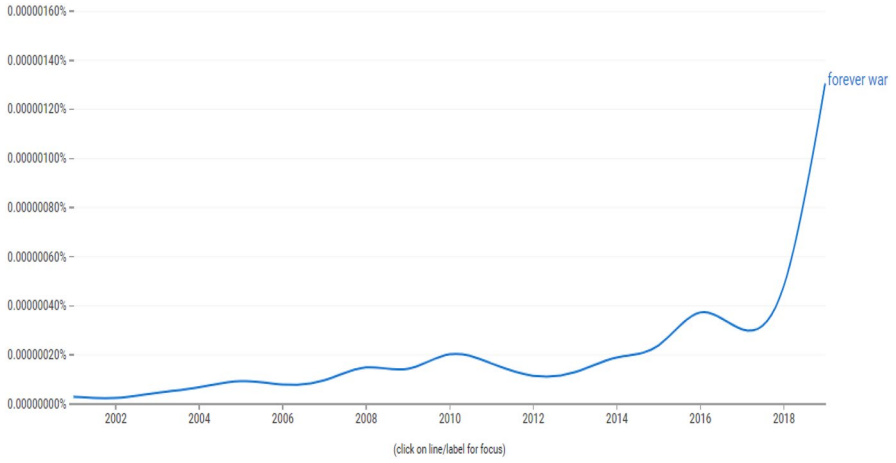

Fig. 1 Use of phrase 'forever war', 2001–2019. Created using Google Ngram Viewer

> nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. As long as the threat existed, no place was too far away to worry about (Bolton 2020: 214).

Whilst Trump ultimately fired Bolton over the National Security Advisor's hawkishness on North Korea (Heilbrunn 2020), he could not overturn the consensus on 'appropriate' counterterrorism conduct. As such, Trump's attempts to deliver on his June 2020 pledge to end 'the era of endless wars' (Baker and Montague 2020) went largely unfulfilled. To be sure: contrary to his earlier reversal of the US pull-out from Syria, the president overrode the objections of Secretary of Defence Mark Esper to push through hurried troop drawdowns in Somalia and Afghanistan in the final year of his term (Esper 2022: 611–619). Given the breadth of existing commitments, however, these actions fell short of signalling an end to forever war—it was left to Trump's successor to oversee the final troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and, under Biden, American combat forces reportedly returned to Somalia (McIntosh 2022: 578). The common-sense view that US interests required an active, interminable approach to combat transnational terrorism through militarised means thus persisted across the Bush, Obama, and Trump presidencies.

The revolution in military affairs and the militarisation of US counterterrorism policy

In analysing the evolution of US counterterrorism policy after 2001, we need to acknowledge a complex amalgamation of structural, discursive, and political factors. The Bush Administration's rhetorical construction of the GWOT created a durable set of policy and bureaucratic pathways that outlasted his presidency (Jackson 2011). Material and political-economic considerations are also significant (Biegon and Watts 2020; Jackson 2011: 400), limiting the capacity of successive administrations to change tack. From a policymaking standpoint, disengagement has generally been dismissed as an implausible option. Leaders have been unwilling to consider alternate approaches to counterterrorism based primarily on legalistic or cosmopolitan methods. Despite the immense human and financial costs of over two decades of war against transnational terrorist organisations, this bipartisan consensus could be interpreted as a reflection of the perceived success of these measures in preventing any further mass casualty attacks within the continental USA (Brands and O'Hanlon 2021).

Without claiming to definitively explain its 'non-ending', we maintain the forever war must be understood in relation to broader the militarisation of American foreign policy (Bacevich 2013). The emphasis on the revolution in military affairs (RMA)—or military 'transformation' as Donald Rumsfeld (2002) conceived it—has been a crucial source of continuity across the (late) Bush, Obama, and Trump presidencies. It enabled a focus on tactics in a way that increasingly displaced strategic thinking about when and where to rollback global counterterrorism operations (Cronin 2014: 183–186). It is in part, we argue, because of the RMA that the GWOT appeared sustainable, if not necessarily 'winnable'. By

helping reduce the political costs of military intervention to below the threshold of sustained public opposition (Biegon and Watts 2022; Watts and Biegon 2021), changes associated with the RMA helped to deter serious reflection about the limits of American military power, even after the setbacks of the nation-building campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. As with the wider evolution of US counterterrorism policy after 9/11, neoconservatism's contribution to the RMA must be qualified. Promoted by key neoconservative figures, the RMA held wider appeal, particularly amongst 'conservative nationalists' (Hurst 2005). Against the backdrop of the established consensus on US primacy, the transformative capabilities of new military technologies appeared self-evident. Neoconservative enthusiasm for the RMA helped solidify the existing common sense that a new era of military power would be strategically advantageous for the USA.

To dissuade would-be rivals from challenging US primacy while simultaneously cultivating a foreign policy that 'boldly and purposefully promotes American principles abroad', neoconservatives had called for a significant increase in defence spending during the 1990s (PNAC 1997). These calls grew more strident after 9/11 (PNAC 2001). The geopolitical logic underpinning increased military spending was referenced by President Bush in his June 2002 West Point address: 'America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge—thereby making the destabilising arms races of other eras pointless and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace' (Bush 2002b). It also permeated the 2002 NSS (White House 2002: 29). Annual military expenditures increased significantly after 2001, reversing the downward trend begun in the early 1990s. Military spending did level-off and begin to fall under Obama following the 2013 budget sequestration (Esper 2022: 88). Nevertheless, the core logic animating the pursuit of military dominance persisted.

According to Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy, overwhelming military power remained a means of deterring adversaries and ensuring American pre-eminence across multiple regions (White House 2017: 4). Not all post-9/11 military spending has been directed toward counterterrorism. By itself, increased defence spending cannot explain the seemingly indeterminate character of many counterterrorism operations. Just as terrorism provides a rationale for expanded military budgets, the military capabilities created by this spending enabled—and arguably create impetus for—perpetual military operations against terrorist groups. Notwithstanding the genuine security challenges presented by transnational terrorism, for many analysts these threats became overinflated (Byman and McCants 2017). The 'militarisation' of US counterterrorism policy can be understood as such because, among other reasons, the scope and costs of the military commitments has outgrown the scale of the strategic challenge posed by these non-state actors.

As Andrew Bacevich (2016) has observed, the post-Cold War period witnessed a seismic shift in Washington's thinking about the strategic utility of military force. Bacevich traces this to (among other developments) Paul Wolfowitz's drafting of the 1992 Defence Planning Guidance during the Administration of George H. W. Bush. Gaining momentum after 9/11, successive Administrations failed to 'distinguish what the US military can do, what it cannot do, what it need not do, and what it should not do' (Bacevich 2016: 37). These failures were particularly acute in the

field of counterterrorism. Successive Administrations failed to differentiate levels of threat posed by terrorist safe havens (Byman and McCants 2017) and largely overlooked the complex social-political challenges presented by terrorist groups (Danner 2017). Encouraging an end to 'endless war', Bacevich thus called for 'abrogating the Bush Doctrine and permanently renouncing preventive war' (2016: 38)—the logic that American security could only be preserved by 'identifying and destroying the threat before it reaches (US) borders', as stated in the 2002 NSS (White House 2002: 6). As a key feature of the militarisation of US counterterrorism policy under Bush, this logic persisted long after his departure; for example, Trump's NSS outlined a commitment to 'deter, disrupt, and defeat potential threats before they reach(ed) the USA' (White House 2017: 7). By the end of Trump's term in January 2021, the US military was supporting counterterrorism operations in 85 states. This included air and drone strikes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen (Savell 2021).

The militarisation of American counterterrorism policy dovetailed with the RMA—a point of alignment between neoconservatives, (elements of) the traditional defence establishment, and President Bush himself (Daalder and Lindsay 2003: 52–53; Frum and Perle 2004: 210–214). When coupled with new organisational doctrine, it was assumed that advances in information and weapons technologies would enable American military power to be more effectively projected over larger geographical distances. This 'transformation agenda', as it was known, became closely associated with Rumsfeld.[7] As President Bush recalls, when interviewed for a position within the Administration, Rumsfeld 'talked about making our forces lighter, more agile, and more rapidly deployable' (Bush 2011: 84). Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Rumsfeld championed the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan as evidence of the RMA's potential and the need to accelerate the procurement of 'low density/high demand' platforms like drones (Rumsfeld 2002: 28). The Taliban regime had been toppled with 'relatively little American manpower on the ground' (Rumsfeld 2011: 406) through a combination of US special forces, precision airpower, and reliance on local fighters. Greater investment in more dexterous, high-tech military capabilities (namely drones and precision-guided munitions but also advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, including space assets) would serve broader strategic purposes beyond counterterrorism. As with the Pentagon's overarching pursuit of 'full spectrum dominance' to prevail against conventional and irregular security threats, these measures were intended to help prolong American primacy (Ryan 2019).

Consistent with the wider aims of the neoconservative project, the RMA would 'influence the decision-making of potential adversaries, to deter them not only from using existing weapons but also from building dangerous new ones' (Rumsfeld 2002: 27). The 2002 NSS made multiple references to the twin goals of defeating non-state adversaries *and* dissuading future competitors from challenging American primacy (White House 2002). For PNAC (2000), the RMA was self-evidently transformative.

[7] Rumsfeld would later distance his understanding of defence transformation from a narrow focus on the development of new weapons technologies, emphasising instead the importance of organisational and cultural change (Rumsfeld 2011: 293–295; see also Ryan 2019: 21–22).

Exploiting this 'revolution' would advance the cause of 'rebuilding' American military power, thus preserving American primacy. Neoconservatives such as Richard Perle called for greater Pentagon investments in information and communication technologies including uncrewed aircraft, precision guided munitions, and long-range bombers such as the B-2 in order to fight a more agile war against illusive transnational terrorist organisations (Frum and Perle 2004: 210–212).

Faith in the RMA underpinned Rumsfeld's planning for the Iraq War. Emboldened by the speed of regime change in Afghanistan, Rumsfeld opposed early plans tabled by General Zinni and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for upwards of a 500,000-strong American invasion force, pushing instead for a figure in the region of 125,000 soldiers (Anderson 2011: 137). Underpinning this decision was Rumsfeld's perception that precision guided munitions—a major focus of the RMA—had greatly increased the lethality of US airpower (Rumsfeld 2011: 427–428). At first, some neoconservative commentators heralded the invasion of Iraq as one of the 'signal achievements in military history' and a template for a 'new American way of war' (Boot 2003: 42–44). Yet, as Rumsfeld himself had somewhat ironically predicted, America's adversaries were unlikely to fight conventionally. Instead, they would operate 'asymmetrically by looking for vulnerabilities and trying to exploit them' (Rumsfeld 2002: 25). This proved true in Iraq, particularly in regards to the use of Improvised Explosive Devices to target American combat patrols. Within months of Saddam's overthrow, insurgency emerged throughout the country and was spread by the insufficient number of US soldiers deployed in the country, the lack of adequate post-invasion planning, and the Coalition Provisional Authority's ill-conceived de-Baathification policies. Although RMA-infused tactics had enabled the quick overthrow of 'rogue' governments in Afghanistan and Iraq, some neoconservatives conceded the paradigm was ill-suited to the complex imperatives of imposing Western-style democracy in the Middle East (Boot 2005; Fukuyama 2006a, b: 36).

The Iraq War ultimately demonstrated the limits of the RMA in the context of what President Bush would label his global 'Freedom Agenda' (Bush 2011: 395–438). Its impact on the direction of US counterterrorism policy was nevertheless profound. As Rasmussen notes (2006: 44), the RMA 'is a description of a process rather than an event'. It entailed considerable investments in robotics, surveillance, remote weapons technologies, and precision-guided munitions, alongside a focus on flexibility and the capability to collaborate with partners in 'joint' operations (Dalby 2009: 235). Its effects were intended to reverberate beyond the Bush years, enabling the longer-term management of the challenges posed by the networked structures of transnational terrorism (Rasmussen 2006: 45). As Dalby argues (2009: 240), the RMA solidified a geopolitical understanding of the centrality of US military power in an era of 'global warfare' and was perceived as a means of 'shaping the future' (Dalby 2009: 246). The intellectual seeds of this shift were planted by Rumsfeld and others after 9/11, but found greater reception as the security situation in Iraq deteriorated in the mid-2000s (Ryan 2019). To prevail in the 'long war' against transnational terrorist organisations, the Pentagon accelerated its 'transformation' in a fashion that mimicked the networked movements of its non-state adversaries (Dalby 2009: 243). The use of Private Military Security Companies both within and beyond the Iraq War was connected to this trend and allowed

the USA to outsource certain military tasks to private actors such as Blackwater (later renamed Xe Services and subsequently Academi) (Avant and Sigelman 2010).

Technological innovations associated with the RMA helped facilitate this 'pragmatic' shift toward flexibility, particularly in regards the use of medium-altitude long-endurance drones such as the MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper. These technologies are most closely associated with the Obama Administration, which institutionalised their use as a key tool for targeting militant leaders and denying terrorist groups safe havens. In both Bush's and Obama's presidencies, drones of various types were widely used to provide tactical battlefield support to American ground forces fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan (Boyle 2020: 107–109). The first drone strikes conducted outside of an active battlefield were launched during Bush's tenure, first in Yemen (November 2002) and later in Pakistan (June 2004) (Boyle 2020: 55–59). In January 2008, the Bush Administration reportedly ended its practice of securing Islamabad's prior consent before conducting drone strikes, leading to a major uptick in such operations (Boyle 2020: 59). Whilst the rate of drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen increased markedly under Obama, this followed the patterns initiated during the Bush Administration. Consistent with the bellicosity of his rhetoric, during his first year in office Trump would similarly loosen certain Obama-era constraints on the use of force to devolve greater control of drone strikes to battlefield commanders in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and Yemen (Neumann 2020: 82–83).

Despite largely predating the institutionalisation of drone strikes as a defining feature of American counterterrorism policy, the use of such technologies is broadly consistent with the post-Cold War neoconservative project, both in terms of the more flexible vision of warfighting promoted by the RMA and the militarisation of counterterrorism policy in general. In his praise for the November 2002 CIA strike in Yemen which killed the senior al-Qaeda member Salim Sinan al-Harithi, then Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz directly connected the use of uncrewed technologies to the Administration's policy that, as Cheney put it (2011: 333–334), the USA was 'going on the offense'. Establishing a logic which persisted through the Obama and Trump presidencies, Wolfowitz told CNN: 'one hopes each time you get a success like that, not only to have gotten rid of somebody dangerous, but to have imposed changes in their tactics and operations and procedures' (CNN 2002).

Although they would occasionally lament the intelligence lost through the killing (rather than interrogation) of terrorist leaders, neoconservative thinkers generally supported Obama's drone campaigns in Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere (Abrams 2013). This extended to support for the controversial September 2011 strike which killed the American citizen Anwar Al-Awlaki (Krauthammer 2013). During a 2013 *Fox News* interview, John Bolton, who served in both the Bush and Trump Administrations, defended the Obama-era drone programme. It was, he claimed, 'consistent with and really derived from the Bush administration approach to the War on Terror' (Krayewski 2013). Additionally, even as Trump remained outwardly hostile to certain neoconservative figures, Bolton praised aspects of Trump's foreign policy, such as the January 2020 drone strike against Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps General Qasem Soleimani in Iraq, which Bolton called 'the first step to regime change in Tehran' (Heilbrunn 2020). Just as Bolton's role in the Trump Administration

symbolises the confluence of the various factions of conservative thinking on security policy, neoconservative praise for Obama's use of drones serves a reminder that there were 'common sense' aspects of the counterterrorism consensus that were bipartisan in nature. This reinforces the need to adequately contextualise the specific influence of neoconservatism on US foreign policy, an imperative that was as true during the early years of the GWOT as it is in contemporary debates on forever war.

Conclusion

What began under the George W. Bush administration as the GWOT has become an enduring feature of contemporary world politics. As reflected in recent debates on forever war, the seemingly unending character of post-9/11 US counterterrorism operations has frustrated growing segments of the American public and national security commentariat. In the context of periodic pushback and heightened anxiety over its immense costs, not to mention the contrasting personalities and politics of recent presidents, this continuity might appear puzzling. To explore this, we returned to the debates on neoconservatism and its influence on the formation and evolution of George W. Bush's counterterrorism policy. Hotly debated in the 2000s, neoconservatism received less attention thereafter. This remained true even under Trump, who was widely interpreted as a rejection of neoconservatism on the American right. In the context of scholarly debate on forever war, the inattention to neoconservatism represents an unfortunate oversight. As we have established, forever war has its origins in an ideological vision that naturalised a long struggle against transnational terrorism. For the Bush Administration, such an approach was consistent with American interests not only because it protected national security (preventing large-scale attacks), but because it would help preserve US unipolarity.

Just as we acknowledge the multiple factors that contribute to continuity in American counterterrorism strategy, we must be careful not to overstate the role of ideas and ideology in policy-formation. At the same time, the long war-cum-forever war was never inevitable, but an outcome of policy choices set in motion through a particular ideological framework. The complex, understudied impact of neoconservatism on counterterrorism policy encompasses the various tensions thrown up by its peculiar blend of militarism and aggressive internationalism. Although neoconservatism did not offer a specific policy programme on counterterrorism, its ideological principles coalesced into a militarised approach to transnational terrorism that extended well beyond the al-Qaeda network and connected the threat of terrorist groups to their state-sponsors and the potential use of WMD. Some Bush-era counterterrorism policies (on detention and interrogation, for example) were abandoned, but the temporal vision of the neoconservative intervention (on counterterrorism specifically) remained largely unquestioned—a common sense that guided strategy across subsequent Administrations. Anxieties around forever war did not lead to a rethinking of the temporal logic initially laid out by Bush, but to the development of more 'remote' tools of military intervention to put counterterrorism policy on a more sustainable footing.

Calling for an end to 'forever wars, which have cost the USA untold blood and treasure', Biden has cautioned against 'staying entrenched in unwinnable conflicts' (Biden 2020). Such sentiment clearly influenced his decision to complete the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, when he reiterated that his Administration was 'refining [US] national strategy to monitor and disrupt significant terrorist threats not only in Afghanistan, but anywhere they may arise' (Biden 2021). As the July 2022 CIA drone strike in Kabul against al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri evidenced, however, the forever war looks set to continue—even if it is framed in a different way (Hom and Campbell 2022: 526–527; McIntosh 2022: 580). Notably, Biden's (2021) vision of an 'over-the-horizon' counterterrorism approach appears contingent on technologies developed as part of the RMA, highlighting further continuities in this area.

What is clear is that the global military campaign against transnational terrorism, initiated in the neoconservative moment, must be analysed in the context of the Bush Administration's broader foreign policy goals. Neoconservatism helped situate the military response to 9/11 alongside a broader push to extend American primacy, but it was not the only factor. Rather than augmenting US pre-eminence, the forever war appears to have undermined it. This argument does not refute the importance of neoconservatism's temporal vision of American pre-eminence, nor does it negate the underlying aims of Bush's strategy. As the costs associated with global counterterrorism operations have come under increased scrutiny, the US has struggled to address the tensions between the country's expansive security commitments and its broader geopolitical interests. These tensions characterised the transition from the long war envisioned by neoconservatives through the forever war that took root after the neoconservative moment. Whether or not they can be reconciled, they show few signs of abating. Whilst the neoconservative moment may have long ended, its influence on American counterterrorism policy continues, and this influence is deserving of further research.

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