

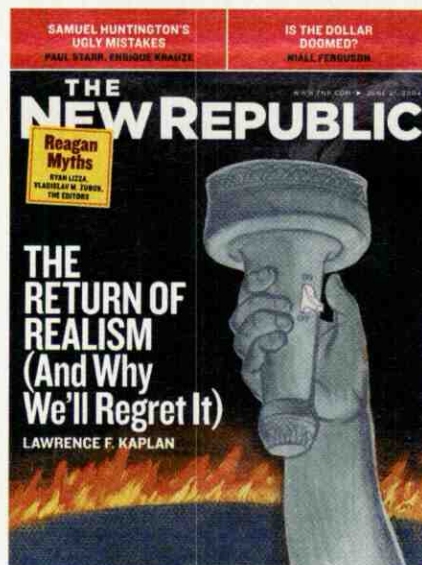
CORRESPONDENCE

REAL WORLD

WE WELCOME LAWRENCE F. Kaplan's admission that realism is ascendant because it shows how the debacle in Iraq has undermined the neoconservative claim that "imposing" democracy on the Middle East is the only way the United States can win the war on terrorism ("Springtime for Realism," June 21). Unfortunately, Kaplan's lament contains errors. First, he assumes that all critics of the Iraq war are realists. In fact, many non-realists opposed the war and a number of non-realists signed the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy's Statement of Principles. Also, certain individuals whom Kaplan describes as realists (G. John Ikenberry, Senator John Kerry, Charles Kupchan) do not fit that label. In short, people of many different persuasions recognize that President Bush's commitment to the neoconservative agenda has seriously damaged America's national interests.

Second, it is not clear if Kaplan realizes just how bankrupt the neoconservative program has become. He still seems to think it is possible to spread democracy in the Middle East by force even though Bush just botched the job in Iraq. But Kaplan is wrong. In their zeal for imposing democracy, the neoconservatives overlooked nationalism, the most powerful political ideology in the world. As the Soviets discovered in Afghanistan, the Israelis discovered in Lebanon, and we are now discovering in Iraq, it does not take long to go from liberator to occupier, and occupiers usually face nationalist insurgencies that are extremely hard to defeat. Kaplan's prescriptions are unrealistic for another reason: Creating democratic governments in countries that have never known democracy is an enormously complicated task. Imposing democracy by force is an even more daunting challenge. We have no good theories that explain how to do it, and our past efforts at this sort of social engineering were mostly failures. We are flying blind, and failure is to be expected.

Finally, trying to create democracies by conquering or coercing states in the Middle East will make our terrorism



problem worse, not better. Increasing the U.S. military presence in the region will stir up nationalism and make people in the countries we occupy eager to throw us out. Terrorism is the best weapon the weak have for resisting the mighty, which is why the Iraqi insurgency is using it. Remember that there were no Iraqi terrorists targeting Americans before we invaded; now there are many. Foreign occupation does not eliminate terrorism; it causes it. It follows that the United States can ameliorate its terrorism problem by reducing its military presence in the Middle East. We should act like an offshore balancer in the region, as we did during the cold war. There is no reason to station large U.S. forces in places like Saudi Arabia and Iraq, especially now that the Soviet threat has disappeared. We can keep our forces over the horizon (as we did with the Rapid Deployment Force) and bring them into the region if our vital interests are threatened. If we continue to maintain a large military

footprint in the Middle East, and use it to impose our vision of society upon others, our terrorism problem will only get worse.

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LAWRENCE F. KAPLAN RESPONDS:

John J. Mearsheimer, Christopher A. Preble, and Stephen M. Walt of the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy make some fine and important points. Alas, they have nothing to do with my article. They object at length to the practice of "imposing democracy by force." As it happens, my article amounts to a brief against imposing democracy by force. It argues that the United States should rely more heavily on tools like public diplomacy, financial aid, and diplomatic pressure—a point the authors, in their haste to conflate war and democracy promotion, don't bother to address. As for the fiction that I "assume all critics of the Iraq war are realists," I have spent enough time writing about and debating liberal critics of the war to know otherwise. I am hardly alone in describing John Kerry as a foreign policy realist. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and numerous other publications have done the same—as has the candidate himself. For those wondering whether the label applies to G. John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan, I recommend Kupchan's aptly titled *The End of the American Era* and Ikenberry's jeremiads against the "Wilsonian" strain in U.S. foreign policy, spelled out best in the summer 2004 issue of *Survival* magazine. ■

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