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DAVID BOWEN

Using labels to shape foreign policy doomed



Columnist

If you are like me, you occasionally pull a book from your shelves which you never got around to reading. I did that recently with a small but excellent history book by an old professor of mine, William L. Langer, entitled *Our Vichy Gamble*.

It examines diplomatic relations between the United States and France during the period between the fall of France in June 1940 and the American invasion of North Africa in November 1942.

The thesis is that the United States found it in our national interest to continue relations with a government whose structure and policies we did not admire.

No 'conservative, liberal'

The same situation exists today in dealing with many countries, and our nation and its intellectual leaders are divided about what our current and long-range foreign policy should be.

Many Americans — none more than Mississippians — love to classify every thought and action as either "liberal" or "conservative." While these terms are often useful in analyzing domestic politics, they have little consistency in dealing with foreign policy.

In the recent past, most people who called themselves conservatives supported a degree of isolationism and wanted to hold down government expenditures for overseas adventures, while liberals, in the Wilsonian tradition, were often committed to making the world "safe for democracy" through the application of U.S. military power, leading us into World War I and II, Korea and Vietnam.

Today that formulation is reversed. Many conservatives, now often described as neoconservative, are committed to expanding American power globally to fill the vacuum left by the demise of the Soviet Union. They apply to America the observation of John Maynard Keynes: "All things considered, it was better to have Englishmen running the world than foreigners."

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Most liberals, on the other hand, are concerned with limiting military conflicts, partially in the hope of finding more revenue for domestic purposes.

Neoconservative foreign policy might be described by Langer as of "a sentimental or ideological character," as he put it, while he might see its opponents, as he did earlier, as "realists," committed to foreign policies which "coincide with real national interests."

The basic philosophy of neoconservatives is that calculations of U.S. national interests are not nearly so important as our moral obligation to bestow American political and economic principles upon the rest of the world. They defer to realism by suggesting that America can never really be safe so long as there are bad or "evil" nations out there who do not share our values.

National interests priority

The State Department continues, since Vichy days, its "realist" approach, arguing that we must in matters of war, peace, diplomatic relations and terrorist hunts keep as our compass the national interest rather than an ideological mission to reshape the world.

This is in sharp contrast to civilian officials in the Defense Department but very close to our military leaders, who now strongly argue against a new American war in the Middle East.

In his recent West Point commencement speech, President Bush called for the United States to initiate pre-emptive wars in order "to preserve peace."

Administration realists insist containment and deterrence can safeguard us from "rogue" nations, as they did with the Soviet Union.

We all wish President Bush a swift resolution of these divisive issues and a clear vision for the future.



David Bowen of Jackson, a former member of Congress and current president of the Mississippi Historical Society, is a regular contributing columnist to *The Clarion-Ledger*.