

Grano Series – *The American Empire*

This speakers series, held in Toronto at the Grano restaurant, explores the potential and limits of American power in the 21st century through the ideas of four outstanding thinkers.

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Kerry's Best Hope

To beat Bush, says a U.S. pundit, the Democrat must offer an Iraq alternative

WILLIAM KRISTOL

William Kristol, editor of the conservative Weekly Standard, recently visited Toronto, bringing his views on the U.S. election. Kristol, who worked in the White House of George Bush Sr., was the first of four prominent speakers in the privately organized Grano lecture series on the American Empire. Edited excerpts from his remarks:

I WASN'T a big Bush supporter in 2000. I preferred [Sen. John] McCain, primarily because of foreign policy because I thought he would be more interventionist. He had supported [president Bill] Clinton on the Balkans, which I agreed with. Most Republicans hadn't. I preferred McCain, something for which the Bush people have never quite forgiven me. They have long memories, the Bushes. Either you're with them or against them. So I speak not as some kind of Bush loyalist or apologist.

From the American point of view, we have lived through two very big changes in just 15 years. We grew up in the Cold War years. That was the defining fact of American politics and world politics for 40 years until November 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union disintegrated two years later. We then adjusted to the '90s, which was a remarkably different decade in terms of world politics and very much in terms of American politics.

The '90s ended on Sept. 11, 2001, certainly for us and, I believe, forever. One big difference now between the U.S. and Europe -- and Canada is maybe somewhere in between -- is that Europe thinks 9/11 was a sort of very unfortunate and tragic interruption in a historical process that began with the end of the Cold War and is continuing, or

would continue if only Bush weren't so irrational and headstrong and militaristic.

In just 15 years, we've gone through the destruction of one paradigm, to use the sort of fancy political science term that everyone was comfortable with, the Cold War. Then we've gotten used to another one, globalization. And now suddenly we're in a third historical era. I think when that happens in such quick succession, people are confused, people choose sides in different ways than one might have expected. That's certainly been the case in America. I think the political dynamic has been reshuffled by 9/11. Bush ran to be a domestic policy president. He didn't run on any foreign policy platform to speak of. If anything, he said that he hoped to have a more humble America.

Bush has made plenty of mistakes, especially after winning the war in Iraq: the failure to stop the looting, to provide security, to have enough troops, to get the situation stabilized early on once the insurgency began. Now, it's nasty, and people are getting killed -- Americans, but also, unfortunately, lots and lots of Iraqis. Now the terrorists kill a lot more Iraqis than they do Americans. So there have been plenty of mistakes. But I would give Bush somewhat of a pass on the grounds that it's extremely hard to manage these situations you didn't plan for, and you cannot adjust that quickly. We should've built up our military intelligence and diplomatic capabilities much more quickly after 9/11. I still worry that we're trying to run a very aggressive Bush foreign policy on a '90s-size military, '90s-size diplomatic establishment, '90s-size intelligence community. That's not adequate for the post-9/11 world.

Terrorism is going to be front and centre, no matter who's president, and I think that will make it a centrepiece of our future relations with countries ranging from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan to the Palestinian Authority. That's not going to change if John Kerry is president. In the '90s, after all, the problem was not that America was too imperial. The problem with the '90s was that we were too timid and too slow. We were too slow in the Balkans, we were too timid in Rwanda. We were certainly careless about terrorism. We ignored Afghanistan. We ignored weapons of mass destruction proliferation. We were just focusing on our vital national interests and worrying about our trade with major commercial countries.

You couldn't go into the 21st century with a huge chunk of the world being this home of increased extremism, terrorism, of weapons of

mass destruction development, of anti-Americanism. That had to be broken. Now, how you do that and help them construct modern pluralistic liberal democracies is a huge challenge. It's often derided as American simple-mindedness; you know, Jeffersonian democracy. If I could have \$10 for every time I've heard someone earnestly tell me that maybe I don't realize that you can't immediately have Jeffersonian democracy in the Middle East, I'd be a very rich man. And I think most of us *do* realize that, you know. We didn't immediately have Jeffersonian democracy in the United States, after all, and Canada has had ethnic conflicts as recently as living memory that actually came pretty close to threatening the integrity of the nation. Bush is right to think that we can't return to the status quo ante.

I think 9/11's influence is seen in that the election is entirely a foreign policy election. Howard Dean's rise in 2003 was unprecedented. No one's ever come in that way with no money, no name identification, one-half a percentage point in the polls. He was the front-runner by the end of the year. Why was that? Not because of his domestic agenda, not because of what he had to say about health care or anything like that. It was because of the war. He opposed the war, and a lot of Democrats thought Bush was wrong to take us into Iraq and that Democrats in Washington didn't have the guts to oppose Bush. Why did Dean fall? Because he seemed too extreme. He seemed unelectable. Because Kerry and [John] Edwards voted against the US\$87 billion to support the troops in Iraq and for reconstruction in Iraq. It was entirely a political vote -- it allowed them to signal to the Dean supporters that they, too, were now anti-war.

At the Democratic convention, Kerry felt, correctly I think, that he had to, post-9/11, establish himself as a commander-in-chief. He couldn't just be a traditional Democrat, worrying about health care and education. So his way of doing it, slightly odd I think, was to emphasize that he served in Vietnam. They went over his Vietnam service a million times. But Kerry didn't quite think through two things: that a lot of people, as much as they may have admired his service in Vietnam, resented what he did when he came back -- speaking out against the war and, to some degree, against the soldiers who were still fighting there. And, secondly, people don't care what you did 30 years ago; they want to know what you're going to do to lead the country post-9/11. So the Republicans were able to counterattack, and Bush had a very successful convention that moved the swing voters by several percentage points.

Kerry's gambit now is to say, "Look, Bush got us into Iraq. It's a horrible mess. It's Vietnam. We're losing. It's getting worse, and I'll get you out one way or another, or at least I will change course and magically get the Europeans to come in." I find a little fanciful the idea that, after telling the Europeans for the next two months what a horrible horrible mess Iraq is, they are going to cheerfully volunteer to come in. Kerry's not going to say, "We're going to get out." He's not going to say, "We are going to escalate," he's just going to say, "Time for a change." [Dwight] Eisenhower said that in '52 after Korea was a horrible stalemate under President Harry Truman. [Richard] Nixon said it in '68 about Vietnam under the Democrats, and it worked for those two. So it's not a foolish move.