

Bush and his cohorts should come down from the clouds and learn from FDR

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The weekend in Normandy saw speeches from the leaders of the "coalition of the willing" that were heavy with implicit references to the Iraq crisis.

President George Bush said: "We defend freedom against people who can't stand freedom." The Prime Minister, John Howard, declared that Australians "have never been reluctant to play our part and to fight alongside others in pursuit of a just cause".

These are just the latest examples of attempts to play up the parallels between the two conflicts and thereby revive the esprit de corps of the grand alliance that won World War II.

In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush labelled Saddam Hussein and his alleged cohorts in Tehran and Pyongyang an "axis of evil", borrowing the terminology which described the Axis alliance of Germany, Italy and Japan.

In the countdown to war a year later, Bush and the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, convened an Atlantic summit in the Azores Islands, evoking the other occasion on which a president of the United States and a prime minister of Britain had a lonely Atlantic rendezvous to confer on an international crisis the August 1941 conversation at sea between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill.

White House supporters also persisted in comparing Saddam with Hitler and making spurious allegations of appeasement, despite the massive disparity in threat posed by the two men. Saddam was an evil dictator who brought suffering down on the heads of his own and other people. However, at the time that US forces commenced operations against his regime, he had been contained for a decade and posed little threat to international peace and security. In mid-1941, by contrast, Hitler had annexed much of Western Europe and was a clear and present danger to the world.

In truth, the differences between the two eras are more apparent than any similarities, in no area more so than the nature of US leadership. To put it delicately, George Walker Bush is no Franklin Delano Roosevelt. One historian said of FDR that "details stuck in his mind like sand in honey" not quite the description one would apply to today's incumbent.

Nevertheless, Bush could do worse than read up on his predecessor, and in particular three aspects of Rooseveltian foreign policy.

First, FDR took a realist, not an ideological, approach to international relations. In establishing the United Nations, for example, he eschewed Woodrow Wilson's idealism in favour of a system that recognised great power supremacy.

Second, Roosevelt invested time and prestige in building a reliable domestic foreign policy consensus in favour of involvement in a foreign war. He appointed Republicans to the most senior cabinet posts in order to foster bipartisanship. Crucially, he deferred American entry until the moment was right, when opinion had swung away from isolationism and the surprise attack at Pearl Harbour demonstrated the moral and security imperative of intervention.

This foreshadows the third lesson: FDR knew the value of working with and through other countries to project American power. For two long years, Roosevelt fought the European war by proxy, arming, supplying, but not fighting alongside Allied forces. For the postwar settlement, he designed institutions

of global order that gave other nations a voice but ensured American predominance. As the historian John Lewis Gaddis argues, Roosevelt established American hegemony by consent.

FDR intuitively understood the value of so-called "soft power" the ability to get others to want the outcomes you want and he deployed it alongside the tanks and aircraft carriers that constituted American hard power. In the prelude to Operation Iraqi Freedom, by contrast, Bush appeared little interested in persuading the world of the righteousness of his cause, a stance he now plainly regrets.

Recent weeks have seen several overdue but welcome shifts in US policy, including the involvement of the UN in the selection of the Iraqi interim government and the application of a lighter touch in trouble spots such as Falluja. This trend must accelerate: the times require skilful and subtle statesmanship.

The current imbroglio is saddening to those of us who are instinctively sympathetic towards the United States: the great democracy's mistakes are corroding the massive international goodwill built up towards her between D-Day and September 11.