The Bush administration has coined a foreign-policy doctrine. President George W. Bush, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and Secretary of State Colin Powell herald “the new realism.” Think you know what they are up to? OK, then fill in the blank: The “new realism” is _______. If you find the blank hard to fill, don’t worry; so would most of today’s international-relations scholars. Indeed, one fundamental problem with the Bush administration’s new doctrine is that “realism” no longer has any real intellectual coherence.

Until recently, realism was a venerable school of thought with a distinct thrust. Realpolitikers such as E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz visualized world politics as an anarchic realm in which the struggle for survival required prudent management of material (generally military) resources, and where the balance of power ultimately determined outcomes. Realists chastised “liberals,” “legalists,” and “idealists,” who believe that material and military power are secondary to factors such as the form of domestic government (democratic or authoritarian), the mutual advantages of economic interdependence, the functional benefits of international institutions, and the sway of national and transnational beliefs.

Yet a funny thing happened on the way past the Cold War. While still attached to the realist label, many realists have abandoned their distinctive realpolitik precepts. International-relations scholars today are far more inclined to accept that major trends—European integration, global trade liberalization, the surprising power of small countries in limited wars such as Vietnam, the impact of human rights and environmental norms, and the spread of a “democratic peace”—are not shaped simply, or even primarily, by power. Balance-of-power calculations are often trumped by imperatives rising from economic globalization, political democratization, particular belief systems, and the role of international law and institutions.

Realists have broadened their definition of “realism” in an attempt to embrace this smorgasbord of factors. But the consequence has been conceptual incoherence. Why does the Bush administration associate itself with an academic theory that no longer seems to mean anything in particular? Aside from the chance that George W. Bush has not been keeping up with International Security, two broad possibilities stand out:

One is that “realism” gives good spin. The administration employs the term as if its opposite

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were “idealism,” “self-delusion,” or, as Rice would have it, “romanticism” (as practiced, of course, by the previous administration). The implication is that realism is primarily about seeing and telling the hard truth—a conceit common among realists of the 1930s and 1940s. Peripatetic pessimist Robert Kaplan updates this view of a realist theory that can “grapple with how the world actually works” and confront the “unrelenting record of uncomfortable truths.” This tough talk dovetails with Dubya’s huddle around publications like *The Weekly Standard* and the *National Review* fearing that the United States will find itself militarily unprepared for a coming battle for global hegemony with great powers such as China and a united Europe.

A second and more thoughtful reason the Bush administration may be attracted to the realist label is that the administration does indeed place a greater emphasis on accumulating and wielding military power. While the threat percep-
reliance on military deterrence nor its justification for NMD. The administration may indeed have adhered to a minimalist notion of realism, but at a significant potential cost.

If the academic debates between “smorgasbord” realists and their critics have one thing to teach us, it is that realism’s simple solutions to policy dilemmas are misguided. The empirical research that has undermined academic “realism” demonstrates that complex, multicausal processes underlie most important events. Power still matters. But countries do not consistently bend to great-power desires, even when backed by a credible deterrent; an indirect approach of persuasion, negotiation, and, above all, the encouragement of positive domestic change, are also potent tools of statecraft. Any policymaker who relies only on the “realist” management of military power reveals a greater faith in simplistic theories than do academics themselves.

So don’t be surprised if the “new realism” starts to look a bit different this autumn. Newborn administrations tend to exhibit steep learning curves as their staffs fill out, they reach bureaucratic compromises, and practical solutions to complex global realities displace simple campaign promises. The Clinton administration moved in the opposite direction, pulling back from some bold international rhetoric. By the end, it pursued (and this is one of the leading criticisms Rice and others make of their predecessors) a highly pragmatic policy. If the Bush administration remains attuned to global reality, it is likely to become more pragmatic as well, expanding tactical options beyond decisive and unilateral military action. Bush and company may continue, of course, to label their hybrid doctrine as the “new realism.” But outside the academy, at least, a misleading label is a small price to pay for a sensible foreign policy.