

# Reasserting American Exceptionalism – Confronting the World The National Security Strategy of the Bush Administration\*

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The national security policy of the Bush Administration has caused both anxiety and celebration about the role of the United States. When the White House released an official strategy in September 2002, some saw it as a rationale for the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq as well as a statement of a unilateral policy for American hegemony over the world. Was the strategy an argument for »empire«, an emotionally laden word with many meanings?<sup>1</sup> American and European critics alike worry that the strategy represents an abandonment of multilateralism and co-operative diplomacy – trademarks of the post World War II policies pursued by the U.S. to build a stable Europe and defeat the threat posed by the Soviet Union. Furthermore, architects of the strategy believe it was confirmed with the outcome of the recent conflict in Iraq.

Contrasted against the U.S. history, and not just that following World War II, the strategy does not represent such an extreme departure from previous policy and American interaction with the world. There is much more continuity than change in it. Normally, continuity provides assurance to others. It assures characteristics of American behavior that are predictable and even comforting for allies. But from what date does one turn to find continuity?

Much of the criticism of the Bush Administration's policies rests on an understanding of American policies only since the Second World War. Yet present U.S. policy reflects reassertion of perspectives and stances from U.S. history before World War II, which are combined with unsurpassed military power developed during the Cold War years. U.S. policies

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\* The opinions stated within are solely those of the author. They do not represent the official or stated position of the U.S. Government, The Department of Defense, or the National Defense University.

1. See the discussion about defining »empire« in the first chapter of Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 3–26.

during the Cold War increasingly resemble an anomaly, as earlier tendencies in U.S. history reassert themselves. The world is witnessing a problematic combination of legacies from different eras, for it mixes long-running strains in U.S. history of nationalism, special mission, and unilateralism with recent military might. The more that critics of U.S. policy regard the period of 1947–1991 as the desired norm, the stranger the U.S. of the earlier 21st Century will seem to them.

This combination of historical and recent factors could undermine the present strategy. There is disagreement in Washington about the size of government required to implement this national security policy and the costs to support it. For a national security strategy that relies on ideals and concepts from the 18th and 19th centuries, it has to contend with budget and national resource realities of the early 21st century. Put in political terms, the Bush Administration strategy combines an active assertion of national interests and open-ended objectives with a philosophy supporting reductions in taxes, spending, and the overall size of government. Can this disparity between ends and means be reconciled? Will the American people accept it?

## The Strategic Objective

In spite of the apparent victory in Iraq, one misreads the Bush National Security Strategy if one concludes its goal is military dominance. Military pre-eminence is a means not an end. In his introductory letter to the 2002 strategy, President George W. Bush explains the real objective. »In keeping with our heritage and principles, we do not use our strength to press for unilateral advantage. We seek instead to create a balance of power that favors human freedom: conditions in which all nations and all societies can choose for themselves the rewards and challenges of political and economic liberty.«<sup>2</sup> Earlier, the President observes that »in the twenty-first century, only nations that share a commitment to protecting basic human rights and guaranteeing political and economic freedom will be able to unleash the potential of their people and to assure their future prosperity«.<sup>3</sup>

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2. See Bush Strategy, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002 p. iv, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>. Last accessed on April 17, 2003.

3. *Ibid*, p. iv.

These words echo a long-standing conviction that economic and political liberties are interdependent. Americans believe that true political liberty cannot occur without the laws and forces of the free and open market. Their argument goes back at least to the 18th century, when Immanuel Kant and Adam Smith among others argued that interdependence and commerce could reduce the prospects for conflict and war.

Consider how Alexander Hamilton in »The Federalist No. 6«, suggested the same view in 1787. »... [T]he spirit of commerce has a tendency to soften the manners of men, and to extinguish those inflammable humors which have so often kindled into wars. Commercial republics, like ours, will never be disposed to waste themselves in ruinous contentions with each other.«<sup>4</sup>

Just how much the United States of 2003 is a »commercial republic« is debatable, but the strategic end-state the Bush Administration desires is a similar one »where great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war.«<sup>5</sup> The word »compete« does not mean political/military rivalries; instead, the praise of »political and economic liberty« in the strategy indicates that such competition will occur more on the level of friendly commerce. Like the physiocrats of the 18th century Enlightenment who believed that economic policies could solve nearly all political problems, the Bush Administration believes that an international environment can emerge where prosperity and free markets govern instead of military rivalry.<sup>6</sup> The requirement for military dominance ultimately might not be necessary. For a strategy written in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001 and reinforced by concerns about the »axis of evil«, the unbounded confidence expressed about American capabilities in a troubled world is remarkable.

This optimism reflects a conviction that history is a progression towards political liberty and freedom. There is clearly much of Francis Fukuyama in the present strategy inspired by his book »The End of His-

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4. Alexander Hamilton, »The Federalist No. 6« in *The Federalist*, edited by Robert Scigliano (New York; Random House, 2000), p. 30. Hamilton's own view may not have been as optimistic about the harmonizing effects of commerce, but he was writing this to persuade New York to ratify the Constitution. He knew his audience.

5. See The National Security Strategy, p. v.

6. The observation about physiocrats draws upon Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 63.

tory and the Last Man«; yet, this belief about history's progress has been part of U.S. policy since the early 19th century.<sup>7</sup> European liberals also shared this conviction, but the effects of two world wars made it difficult for Europeans to entertain such an optimistic perspective on history. Building the European Union has reawakened such confidence, since the EU is seen as a model for international reconciliation and development.<sup>8</sup>

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This linear, progressive view of history is found in the President's observation that »[w]e are also increasingly united by common values. Russia is in the midst of a hopeful transition, reaching for its democratic future and a partner in the war on terror. Chinese leaders are discovering that economic freedom is the only source of national wealth. In time, they will find that social and political freedom is the only source of national wealth. America will encourage the advancement of democracy and economic openness in both nations, because these are the best foundations for domestic stability and international order.«<sup>9</sup>

The President could have added Iraq and the entire Middle East, based on his promotion of political and democratic reform in Iraq as an example for the whole region. Thus, a President who campaigned to avoid nation-building missions, like the Clinton Administration's policies in the Balkans, has set his administration on the same course of »special mission« taken by historical predecessors.

The Bush Administration's strategy contains a tension in it that the historian Rush Welter found in U.S. policies 150 years ago. The strategy stresses an American obligation to the world, but it also seeks protection

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7. See Rush Welter, *The Mind of America: 1820–1860* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975), especially pp. 3–74.

8. In late 2002 the author heard a speaker from Germany, a former parliamentarian and government official, express the opinion that what the world needed for reconciliation and stability were more »little Brussels« – hopefully not modeled after those offices that discuss agriculture policy.

9. The National Security Strategy, p. v.

of the U.S. »against untoward consequences arising from that obligation«.<sup>10</sup> Whether an obligation to the world or protection of the United States from the dangers of that obligation, the American preference has been to act alone. Unilateralism's origins are very deep in the American psyche.

## The Bush Administration and Special Mission

Commentators have emphasized the Wilsonian vein found in Bush's strategy – its belief in a unique role for the United States, its assumptions about the universal applicability of American democracy and values, and its religious tone of moral responsibility.<sup>11</sup> Yet, Wilson did not create American exceptionalism and notions of special mission. When Ronald Reagan portrayed the United States as a »city upon a hill«, his words were not Wilson's but those of Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay Colony from the early 17th century. Being on a hill suggests not only superiority but also safe distance from threats. Fear of European intervention and corruption of the American experiment made the republic's leaders try to keep the United States independent from Europe, whether through President George Washington's Farewell Address against foreign entanglement or the two hemispheres concept of the Monroe Doctrine.

Until the very late 19th century the United States preferred to stay on the hill as an example rather than to descend and intervene overseas. The war against Spain in 1898 signaled a change. This time the U.S., relying on arguments for human rights as well as for political and economic advantage, waged war against a declining Spain. Whether concerned about Spain's treatment of the Cuban population or totally convinced of Spain's role in the sinking of the USS Maine, there are similarities with the arguments made before the invasion of Iraq. The historian Walter McDougall has suggested that the U.S. had changed by 1898 because no longer was it comfortable just being an example. Others would judge the U.S. increas-

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10. Welter, p. 46.

11. John Lewis Gaddis writes of the strategy's goal of completing »the idealistic task Woodrow Wilson began more than eight decades ago« in »A Grand Strategy of Transformation«, *Foreign Policy*, November/December 2002, p. 56. Also see Edward Rhodes, »The Imperial Logic of Bush's Liberal Agenda«, *Survival*, Vol 45, No. 1, Spring 2003, pp. 131–154.

ingly by actions rather than example. Furthermore, with economic and new naval power, the U.S. believed it had the instruments to act. Choosing to be just an example is a strategy of the weak; helping others to progress is a strategy of the strong.<sup>12</sup>

By the time the U.S. entered World War I certainty about the historical rightness of American power had grown. President Bush's objectives for Iraq sound remarkably similar to Wilson's in 1917, read beyond Wilson's first famous sentence. The world must be safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make.<sup>13</sup>

The claim of disinterest in conquest or possession pervades throughout explanations of U.S. and coalition objectives in Iraq. The elimination of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and the removal of Saddam Hussein are integral steps in a strategy aimed at reducing instability and building an international order dependent on competition and commerce rather than war. Bush's determination to promote democracy in Iraq mirrors Wilson's resolve in 1913 to »teach the South American republics to elect good men«.<sup>14</sup> Yet, are prospects in Iraq any better than those in Latin America ninety years ago?

Each President wanted to protect the United States from the threats that might follow pursuit of its moral obligation. Wilson's answer was a multilateral framework, the League of Nations. The U.S. would yield parts of its independence and unilateral philosophy to it as an international association serving the welfare of all. Wilson realized how U.S. power now enabled it to act in ways unimaginable to Americans a generation before. A restraint had to be placed on a national ego that might use American power arbitrarily and involve the U.S. unnecessarily in certain foreign episodes. Wilson wanted to commit the United States »to a league of nations which shall see to it that nobody disturbs the peace of

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12. Walter A. MacDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), pp. 120–121.

13. Woodrow Wilson quoted in Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1935, 1963), p. 468.

14. Wilson quoted in Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era: 1910–1917* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), p. 119.

the world without first submitting his case first to the opinion of mankind«. <sup>15</sup>

Protection of the United States required a check on its own power. But Wilson's views clashed with others who feared such a restraint would undermine the right of independent, unilateral action for the United States. The sovereignty of the United States could not be compromised. Wilson's defeat was a signal to every subsequent President that he (or she) must walk a very balanced course between unilateralism and multilateralism. No President has tried to move U.S. policy completely into the multilateral arena, and, as will be discussed below, the aftermath of the Cold War has brought about conditions that have enabled them to move policy more towards the unilateral stance favored today.

## **Sovereignty and Unilateralism in National Security Policy**

No greater difference between the United States and many in Europe exists than the former's adherence to the right of unilateral military action and a European preference for multilateralism, consultation, and process. Critics of the United States wonder how to bring it back to a more multilateral route where it can be constrained and held more responsible for its actions. Answers run from traditional solutions of increased negotiation with the Americans, closer proximity to American positions in order to moderate them (the British course), and increased defense spending in order to reduce dependency on the U.S., to stronger reactions, such as sanctions and possible legal measures against the U.S., or even creation of coalitions or alliances to balance or contain American military power.

Yet, while debating how to respond to the United States, all must understand attitudes towards sovereignty. This, too, is one of the foundations for the willingness to resort to unilateral action. The U.S. determination to reserve the right of independent action is not unique; all powers in the past have reserved and used it. What is unique are some of the factors influencing American thinking.

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15. The quotations are from Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition: The Treaty Fight in Perspective* (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987. pp. 11–12. The discussion draws from Ambrosius' interpretation.

American concepts of sovereignty involve more than an ability to maintain control of affairs within national boundaries. Sovereignty is emotionally interwoven with a belief in national exceptionalism and a determination to protect the U.S. from compromise or contamination from the outside world. Independence of action is crucial. The United States cannot afford to entrust its well-being and security to others. Thus, the Bush Administration asserted a right of independent action against Iraq and other threats. »[W]e will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists ....«<sup>16</sup>

These views on sovereignty are reinforced by the Constitution and the separation of powers in the American system of government. The Constitution makes not only the declaration of war but also the concession of sovereignty difficult. No President can implement a treaty with a foreign government without the approval of the U.S. Senate and, in many cases, without the authorization and appropriation of money to support it by both the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Constitution reflects the strong suspicion towards the outside world that authors in a weak, new republic would naturally hold. Today, United States, the world's strongest power, must operate with a Constitution that inherently helps to keep the world at a distance.

The Constitution enables the Congress to act in quite unilateral ways. It assigns control of trade policy to the Congress. During the last 25 years the Congress has used this control to legislate a wide number of sanctions with extraterritorial authority, sometimes against Presidential opposition. Through its control of the budget, the Congress can also remove funding for programs or create new ones, which may or may not have Presidential support. This means that American diplomats may have to come to foreign governments with required actions or positions that the President or Secretary of State opposed. Most parliamentary systems provide their government representatives with more authority to negotiate and then turn to governments to enter the treaty or agreement and make the necessary changes in law. It is not as easy in the American system.

As observed earlier, Wilson's defeat over the League of Nations, showed how careful any President has to be in promoting American membership in major multilateral organizations. This challenge faced

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16. The National Security Strategy, p. 6.



Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman during and after the Second World War and George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton after the end of the Cold War. After the Second World War, many Americans thought isolationism and unilateralism after 1919 had created the environment that automatically led to the next one. Yet, John Ikenberry has identified factors that moved the U.S. towards multilateralism: 1) the recognition that a strong state through multilateral institutions could get other states to accept an international system that serves its short and long-term interests, and 2) an appreciation that accepting restraints on its own power, while frustrating, may provide worthwhile gains in the longer run.<sup>17</sup> Wilson's desire to restrain the ego of American power seemed as prudent as ever.

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The legacy of exceptionalism that is so strong in the American mind ultimately invites not only unilaterally led action but also unilateral justification, because, above all else, the U.S. must answer to its own values and ideals.

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After the Gulf War in 1991, President George H.W. Bush thought there was a unique moment to transform the United Nations into a body that would be part of a New World Order to discourage acts of aggression like Iraq's attack on Kuwait. But Bush was also influenced by additional factors favoring multilateral institutions over unilateral action – the ability to share costs and to acquire international legitimacy. Unlike his son, who has pursued a strategy against Iraq that places most of the cost of the war on the American taxpayer, the father solicited monetary contributions and contributions of troops to lessen its impact on the American economy, then under some strain, and to make the war more acceptable to the Congress and the public.

George H.W. Bush's vision for the UN and Bill Clinton's exploration of a UN rapid deployment force that would contain U.S. forces, ran into a Congressional wall that determined to protect its authority over war-making and the power of the U.S. to act independently required interna-

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17. G. John Ikenberry, »Multilateralism and U.S. Grand Strategy«, in Steward Patrick and Shephard Forman, editors, *Multilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy: Ambivalent Engagement* (Boulder, Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), pp. 124–126.

tional authorization.<sup>18</sup> Besides the tragic outcome of the UN operation in Somalia for U.S. forces in 1993 and subsequent arguments over the value of humanitarian or peacekeeping missions and the criteria for intervention, there were two further developments that reinforced American misgiving about the United Nations. All of these events nourished historic U.S. suspicions of the UN. The second was a shift of the political center in American politics.

The Congress's insistence that only it can declare war or authorize, (except in case of attack) the use of force has been a critical reason for suspicion of the UN. When Congress gave its approval to U.S. membership in the United Nations in the UN Participation Act of 1945, it stated that there was nothing in the UN Charter that would allow a President to use it to deploy American military forces without Congressional consent. (Congress placed a similar provision requiring adherence into the Treaty of Washington in 1949 for NATO members.) Thus, President Truman's use of the UN Charter to deploy U.S. troops to Korea in late June 1950 was unconstitutional in the opinion of many American scholars; although, the Congress had little choice but to accept it.<sup>19</sup> Even when the Congress is passive in protecting its war powers against the President, its refusal to recognize UN authority as a reason to use force has reinforced tendencies towards unilateralism. What the United Nations decides in relation to the use of force is in a peculiar sense irrelevant. It is the Congress's vote and not the UN's that matters on Capitol Hill.<sup>20</sup>

A perceived American dismissal of the United Nations seems to be part of a retreat from multilateral policies that the U.S. generally followed during Cold War. The extent to which this is occurring is debatable, for the number of multilateral institutions and activities the U.S. is involved

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18. Jennifer Sterling-Folker, »Between a Rock and Hard Place: Assertive Multilateralism and Post-Cold War U.S. Foreign Policy Making«, in James M. Scott, editor, *After the End: Making U.S. Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War World* (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 277–304 and Sarah B. Sewall, »Multilateral Peace Operations«, in Patrick and Forman, editors, *Multilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 194–198.

19. Louis Fisher, *Congressional War Power* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995) pp. 82–87.

20. This is not to say a President would not act if the Congress did not authorize force. George H.W. Bush has said he would have done so in 1991, even without Congressional authorization, based on his power as Commander-in-Chief of U.S. forces. After all, most of the forces were already in place – the decisive factor.

in has significantly increased – actually by more than threefold between 1970–1997. So, it is unclear whether the increase in objections, such as those against the Kyoto Protocol or the International Criminal Court, reflects an actual increase in unilateral sentiment or specific objections against individual institutions.<sup>21</sup>

However, two trends seem to be emerging. One is a preference for bilateral or regional frameworks over multilateral ones, and a growing official rationale for solitary or unilateral action. In trade policy, it is probably unfair to criticize the U.S. for bilateral trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, since the U.S. is merely following in the footsteps of the European Union, which has actively sought such agreements worldwide. In security policy, the trend is unsettling because it is caused not only by disenchantment with the United Nations but with another organization the U.S. hoped it could transform into a willing, effective arm on international security issues – NATO.

It was hardly coincidental that the U.S. turned to NATO enlargement after Somalia and the weakening of its commitment to the United Nations. The United States wanted to act through regional bodies where its strategic interests and particular vision were more dominant and accepted.<sup>22</sup> Since NATO was the most important security relationship the United States had beyond its border, it was logical for the U.S. to promote its expansion into the former Warsaw Pact. This would enlarge the U.S.-led transatlantic community and insure that ongoing European efforts to strengthen defense capabilities would unfold in ways that would not undermine the alliance. But the U.S. also wanted the alliance to be willing to act in »out-of-area« missions, which especially meant the Middle East. Given the different assessments of the origins of that region's problems, and the perceived gap in technological and military capabilities between the U.S. and most European militaries, disenchantment with NATO began to appear. The September 2002 strategy of the Bush administration contains a clear warning that the alliance must transform to remain relevant. »If NATO succeeds in enacting these changes, the rewards will be a partnership as central to the security and interests of its members states as was

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21. Stewart Patrick, »Multilateralism and Its Discontents: The Causes and Consequences of U.S. Ambivalence«, in Patrick and Forman, editors, *Multilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 12.

22. Sewall, »Multilateral Peace Operations«, in Patrick and Forman, *Multilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 201–202.

the case during the Cold War.«<sup>23</sup> But what if it does not? Clearly, the U.S. is ready to act with spontaneous »coalitions of the willing« or on its own.

The second trend is a mounting attack on large government and international commitment since the Cold War's end. In fact, that event is a cause of this trend. The undermining of American liberalism began with the Vietnam War and the emergence during the 1970s and 1980s of a new form of conservatism that denounced liberalism's assault on traditional values. However, the Cold War's end also closed an era of New Deal/Fair Deal/Great Society liberalism and acceptance of an active government role in social policy. European advocates of strong social policies who draw inspiration from socialist and Catholic traditions often fail to grasp how dependent American liberalism was on the national security state. It was concern about weakened national security that helped justify many American programs on infrastructure, education, and civil rights. Without the Cold War, a rationale that enabled a political culture suspicious of government to accept »big« government had disappeared.<sup>24</sup>

For some conservatives, criticism of big government carried over quickly and easily into attacks against multilateral bodies and organizations that were part of the Cold War era. Writing before he became the current Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, John R. Bolton described »the United States as the world most libertarian nation«, which means »antipathy towards government control and domination over the lives of citizens«. In terms of foreign policy, Bolton wrote that »the United States is consistently reluctant to saddle itself with associations with other governments, only a few of which even approach its basic contrarianism«. The latter is a reference to the European Union, which Bolton regards as an antithesis to the libertarian ideal that has guided the U.S. through much of its history.<sup>25</sup> This view of multilateralism as part of an assault on U.S. sovereignty and right of independent action is not an automatic justification for unilateral use of military force. In fact, it could be a case for rigid isolationism and as little contact with the world as possible. However, if one possesses unmatched military capability, is suspi-

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23. The National Security Strategy, p. 26.

24. H.W. Brands *The Strange Death of American Liberalism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 173.

25. John R. Bolton, »Unilateralism Is Not Isolationism«, in Gwyn Prins, editor, *Understanding Unilateralism in American Foreign Relations* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000), pp. 53–54, 59.

scious of the philosophies of most governments, and is convinced of the unique mission of the American Republic, this argument provides additional ammunition for pursuing unilateral action.

## **Unilateralism, Pre-Emption, and the Strategic Order**

The right of unilateral pre-emption against terrorists, claimed by the Bush Administration, is at the heart of much of the current dispute between the U.S. and many in the international community.<sup>26</sup> Of course, the U.S. would claim the attack against Iraq was not unilateral, given the political and military support of Great Britain, Spain, Australia, Poland, and others. Even while the U.S. repeatedly asserted Iraq had violated a series of UN Security Council Resolutions going back to 1991, the Bush Administration's public case rested heavily on the claim that Iraq had supported terrorists, including Al-Qaeda, and that Iraq might provide terrorists with weapons of mass destruction to attack the United States. Therefore, the U.S. case depended not only on its interpretation of resolutions passed during the first Gulf War under the authority of Chapter VII, Article 42 of the UN Charter that gives the Security Council the right to determine what military measures are necessary. Claims about a possible Iraqi attack on the U.S. through terrorists invoked Article 51, which concerns the right of self-defense and states that »[n]othing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of an individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations ....«<sup>27</sup>

Where does the right of pre-emptive attack come under Article 51? The international legal community is divided, but one can at least point to a body of legal and scholarly opinion as well as historical precedent on which the U.S. can make its case for pre-emption without UN authorization. Others argue no such action is permissible without the authorization of the UN Security Council.<sup>28</sup>

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26. The National Security Strategy, p. 6.

27. Article 51 as quoted in Anthony Clark Arend and Robert J. Beck, *International Law and the Use of Force, Beyond the UN Charter Paradigm* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 31.

28. An excellent short discussion of this question is David M. Ackerman, *International Law and the Preemptive Use of Force Against Iraq*, CRS Report for Congress, RS21314, March 17, 2003 at [www.house.gov/htbin/crsprodget?rs/RS21314](http://www.house.gov/htbin/crsprodget?rs/RS21314). Last accessed on April 3, 2003.

Given international controversy surrounding the legitimacy of the operation against Iraq, it is ironic that the United States helped define some of the criteria used by critics. In 1837, angered by efforts of U.S. expansionists who were trying to promote insurrection against the British in Canada, British troops seized and burned the ship *Caroline* in the Niagara River from which the Americans were sending supplies. After five years of heated charges from both sides, Secretary of State Daniel Webster conceded the British action had some justification. Webster set forth criteria for pre-emptive attacks that have been part of international law ever since. Such acts are justifiable in cases »in which the necessity of that self-defense is instant, overwhelming, and leaving no choice of means and no moment for deliberation«. In short, there would be no time for diplomatic action or negotiation. The other criteria emphasized proportionality in response – namely that when authorized by a government – in this case Great Britain – that the action »did nothing unreasonable or excessive; since the act, justified by the necessity of self-defense, must be limited by that necessity, and kept clearly within it.«<sup>29</sup>

Was the invasion of Iraq, begun on March 19, 2003, a pre-emptive attack? If the U.S.-led coalition is unable to find clear evidence of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, controversy will no doubt increase, for this was a central part of Washington's argument. The criteria of »instant« or »overwhelming« evidence was not immediately apparent, and whether or not there was more time for diplomacy was a matter of dispute between the U.S. coalition and its opponents. In a recent article on discussions about pre-emption as a measure in policy during the 1990s Robert S. Litwak draws important distinctions. »*Pre-emption* pertains narrowly to military action when actual WMD use by an adversary is imminent.« However, Litwak adds, there is also the concept of preventive measures that can include a number of steps, including the use of force »to forestall the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction«.<sup>30</sup> Although Iraq certainly had chemical and biological capabilities, as its actions and UN inspections showed in the 1990s, many doubt it possessed nuclear weapons. Thus, the Iraq operation seems to have been a combination of pre-emption and prevention, but there is no consensus among experts about the »imminent« nature of Iraq's threat, and the

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29. See Ackerman, *International Law and Preemptive Use of Force*, p. 2.

30. Robert S. Litwak, »The New Calculus of Pre-emption«, *Survival*, Winter 2002–2003, Vol. 44, No. 4, p. 54.

controversy may never be fully resolved, as threats are also matters of perception.

Solely within the context of U.S. history there are a number of precedents that could provide a rationale for the Bush Administration's action against Iraq. A Republican President from a century ago, who is one of President Bush's favorites, Theodore Roosevelt, provided a precedent, at least for action within the Western Hemisphere, when he announced that »[c]hronic wrongdoing or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and ... [in adherence to the Monroe Doctrine] may force the United States, however reluctantly ... to the exercise of an international police power.«<sup>31</sup> Roosevelt was speaking before there was any international body that could sanction the use of force, but he had presented an argument for pre-emption to preserve stability – in this case to stop foreign intervention in the Western Hemisphere – that resembles current arguments for pre-emption to protect stability and peace against threats of WMD.

Closer, though, to the rationale for moving against Iraq was the re-emergence during the 1980s of an argument that justified the use of force to correct »unjust« conditions and to build »just societies«. This was part of the case for intervention in Grenada and in Nicaragua by the administration of President Ronald Reagan and in Panama by George H.W. Bush.<sup>32</sup> All were largely unilateral actions. It is an argument that harkens back to those for intervention in Cuba against Spain in 1898 and, of course, for Wilson's claims concerning Mexico and eventually the entire world. Unlike a century ago, the perspective that seeking a just society is sometimes a more justifiable goal than the preservation of peace has become an argument the U.S. can make to illustrate the limitations of the UN Charter.

When President Reagan ordered air attacks against Libya in 1986, he provided a graphic precedent for Iraq – namely assertion of the right of pre-emptive self-defense. »In light of this reprehensible act of violence [the bombing of a disco in Berlin in which two Americans were killed] and clear evidence that Libya is planning future attacks, the United States has chosen to exercise its right of self-defense. It is our hope that [U.S.]

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31. James Holmes, »Police Power: Theodore Roosevelt, American Diplomacy, and World Order«, *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Winter/Spring 2003, Vol. 27. No. 1, p. 126.

32. Arend and Beck, *International Law and the Use of Force*, pp. 41–42.

action will preempt and discourage Libyan attacks on innocent civilians in the future.«<sup>33</sup>

The air strikes against Libya were both preventive and pre-emptive, and the argument made to dissuade the Libyans from taking similar action in the future was analogous to that for Iraq. The U.S. even tried to »decapitate« the Libyan leadership. Also, President Reagan had ordered this action unilaterally under his authority as commander-in-chief of U.S. forces, consulting neither with the UN nor, for that matter, much with Congress.

From the above examples one could mistakenly believe that unilateral measures during recent years are condoned and encouraged only by Republicans. In Europe, this author has repeatedly heard that if Bill Clinton were still President, or if Al Gore had won in 2000, U.S. policy toward Iraq would be significantly different. The United States would be respectful of multilateral authority and not be so determined to shun the processes and authority of the United Nations.

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The financial costs of the strategy will be immense.

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This is wishful thinking, as is evident by just a brief consideration of the willingness of the Clinton Administration to act without UN authorization in Kosovo and against Serbia in 1999 or a year earlier when the U.S. launched a missile strike against a pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, Sudan thought to be making precursors for chemical weapons. The Clinton Administration regarded the latter as both a counter-proliferation and counter-terrorist measure. In 1994 Clinton was seriously considering using U.S. force as a measure against North Korea to halt its nuclear weapons program. The likely high human costs of a war on the Korean Peninsula dissuaded him from doing so.<sup>34</sup>

Ultimately, the Clinton Administration was nearly as willing to assert the right of unilateral action as the current administration. Struggling to establish a doctrine to justify intervention in humanitarian crises, Clinton's advisers did explore potential changes in interpretations of the UN Charter that would enable such missions under UN auspices. How-

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33. President Reagan quoted in Arend and Beck, *International Law and the Use of Force*, p. 43.

34. For Korea and the Sudan see Litwak, »The New Calculus of Pre-emption«, pp. 64–66.



ever, as his own administration's national security strategy for 1999 stated, this President reserved the right of unilateral action, even beyond the framework of pre-emption: »We act in concert with the international community whenever possible, but do not hesitate to act unilaterally when necessary .... Having decided (in the context of *humanitarian and other interests* [emphasis in the original]) that use of military forces is appropriate, the decision on how they will be employed is based on two guidelines. First, our forces will have a clear mission and the means to achieve their objectives decisively. Second, as much as possible, we will seek the support and participation of our allies, friends, and relevant international institutions. When our vital interests are at stake, we are prepared to act alone.«<sup>35</sup>

Whether portrayed as the »indispensable nation« (Madeline Albright's characterization of the role of the United States) or the nation that can move history along its course of progress, the view of the Bush Administration, many Presidents have persistently reserved the right of independent action to protect not only vital interests but to try to shape a world order that will benefit all. The legacy of exceptionalism that is so strong in the American mind ultimately invites not only unilaterally led action but also unilateral justification, because, above all else, the U.S. must answer to its own values and ideals. This is a disturbing stance for much of the rest of the world, and it is a self-appointed mission that requires the U.S. to weigh the possible negative consequences before pursuing. Very likely, though, the military outcome of the conflict in Iraq will have confirmed for its supporters the wisdom and justice of U.S. policy against the objections of others, even in light of the unrest that followed in Iraq.

Is a national security strategy combining a long, historic sense of special mission and unilateral instincts with modern military power of the early 21st century both obtainable and sustainable? Considered from other views of history, which are not as linear or certain about outcome, the answer is doubtful. Even though the Bush strategy recognizes the power of commerce, culture, and democratic values and institutions in drawing the outside world towards the United States, the final means to assure this movement is the unmatched superiority of American military

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35. A National Security Strategy for a New Century (Washington, D.C., December 1999), pp. 19–20. <http://www.fas.org/man/docs/nssr-1299.pdf>. Last accessed on April 25, 2003.

power. The United States must let no nation or combination of nations develop capabilities to match it. There is an inherent tension, even contradiction, in this strategy. Permeated throughout it is a conviction about the universal appeal and message of American system and values, but the strategy has to acknowledge the fact that there are those who will not accept them. Against those the United States has to decide whether it will direct the power of the sword rather than that of the pen.

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The strategy's emphasis on a balance of power that promotes freedom depends on an assumption that China and Russia are moving towards acceptance of democracy, thereby creating a balance where growing commonality of political values and commercial interdependence will alleviate concerns about U.S. military pre-eminence.

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Going all the way back to Thucydides and his explanation of the cause of the Peloponnesian wars, there is a near certainty that unchecked power, especially if it is military, will eventually lead to endeavors to balance, contain, or defeat it.<sup>36</sup> The strategy's emphasis on a balance of power that promotes freedom depends on an assumption that China and Russia are moving towards acceptance of democracy, thereby creating a balance where growing commonality of political values and commercial interdependence will alleviate concerns about U.S. military pre-eminence. But will the world be willing to accept the role of the United States as a policeman that acts on its own conclusions as to what is acceptable or not? It requires remarkable optimism to believe this.

The disagreement between the United States and some of its traditional allies in Europe, as well as with China and Russia, should suggest the degree of unease about the course being pursued by the U.S. Such a strategy and assertion of American military power will deepen and widen a rift in transatlantic relations that has been growing since the end of the Cold War. More European governments finally are willing to spend more on defense and not because of American prodding but rather because of doubt about U.S. intentions. Could allies become adversaries? It is not

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36. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Rex Warner (London: Penguin Books), p. 49. The famous quote in this translation reads, »What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.«

probable, but it is likely that the U.S.-European relationship will increasingly be characterized by distrust and a desire to limit American power however possible.<sup>37</sup> The character of the transatlantic relationship, which in hindsight sometimes seems more harmonious than it probably was, is forever changed.

## The Weak Domestic Foundations

Even though the Bush Administration strategy is steeped in some of the political and intellectual legacies of U.S. history, those moorings may not be as sound as some believe. Strategies are by nature visionary documents. The vision of the Bush Administration's strategy is a long-aspired goal of the United States that in the early 21st century will require immense national resources to accomplish – especially if the United States tries to pursue this vision of democratic progress and international harmony, reinforced by superior military power, on its own.

The financial costs of the strategy will be immense. The Bush Administration wants to increase defense spending by \$20 billion annually until 2010, raising the annual total to about \$500 billion. However, that does not include other supplemental costs just in military spending that may arise, depending on what course and measures the United States uses in the future. Furthermore, there are going to be questions about the willingness of the Bush Administration to expand the U.S. military if it seeks to increase and then sustain military predominance. Is Iraq a solitary example of the use of military strength, or is it a precursor of a strategy to be used against others? Will such a strategy require more people in uniform, or will the Administration make the case that advances in technology make it unnecessary to increase force size? Regardless of the timing and outcome of the operation in Iraq, it generates questions as to whether or not the United States has enough people in uniform to support its strategy. Finally, one must add the costs of peace. How much will it cost to stabilize Iraq and develop an environment where serious political change and democratic reform could occur and survive? Since the campaign against Saddam Hussein is part of a larger »grand design« for the whole Middle East, is there even a notional sense

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37. See Charles A. Kupchan, *The End of the American Era*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2002) for an extensive development of this type of argument.

of the costs that may be required for aid and other programs through the entire region?

There is a disturbing aura of »guns and butter« in the present strategy – a phrase borrowed from Lyndon Baines Johnson and his policies during the 1960s. The broad sweep of the present national security strategy when placed alongside the revenue policies for tax cuts suggest that the United States will face limits in pursuing such a strategic vision. That is a stance that will not only affect decisions made about the size and structure of the U.S. military; it will greatly influence the scale and duration of any U.S. commitment supporting this strategy.

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European advocates of strong social policies who draw inspiration from socialist and Catholic traditions often fail to grasp how dependent American liberalism was on the national security state. It was concern about weakened national security that helped justify many American programs on infrastructure, education, and civil rights. Without the Cold War, a rationale that enabled a political culture suspicious of government to accept »big« government had disappeared.

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Finally, will the American public be willing to accept a national security policy that increases »big« government in terms of the costs and sustainment of the American military but is accompanied by policies that limit resources for domestic programs? The answer of the Cold War era was to provide both. This was part of the »bipartisan« understanding in American politics that some yearn for when they look back at the earlier years of the Cold War, and that bargain did help win support for both foreign and domestic programs. Of course, another serious terrorist attack in the United States would have a significant effect on national resolve.

The future political landscape of the United States will be shaped greatly by graphic and conflicting views over the allocation of resources between domestic programs and national security. Even with the exhilaration that supporters of the present strategy feel after the military victory in Iraq, it will be difficult to keep public attention away from issues at home. Americans lived »in the shadow of the garrison state« during the Cold War, but, in spite of the serious security threats of that era, it never became one.<sup>38</sup> Faced with threats of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, dangers which are less centrally controlled, it is hard to imagine the American public will allow the United States to go beyond the level

of sacrifice imposed during the Cold War. The pursuit of a national security policy grounded so firmly in the concepts of American exceptionalism, special mission, and the right of independent action may ultimately be limited by equally strong national values about civil rights and liberties and resolute expectations that government is responsible for human dignity of each citizen. Finding the balance, as always, in the U.S. will be turbulent and not easy, but that is what democracy requires.

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38. The quote is taken from a book title and its thesis; see Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: American Anti-Statism and the Conduct of the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).