

American Exceptionalism: the new version
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I.

Each nation tends to see itself as unique. Two—France and the United States—consider themselves as exceptional because—or so they claim—of the universality of their values. One only: the United States, has tried to develop foreign policies that reflect such exceptionalism. Whereas France, and most of the European powers, have tended, or been forced, to practice balance of power politics for their protection and for the creation of minimal order in the international jungle, the U.S. has had much leeway to be original. The main component of its exceptionalism has been, for more than a century after its independence, its geographically privileged position: far enough away from Europe and Asia to be able to be safe and uninvolved, yet capable of expanding into contiguous territories easily and without much of a contest. A second component was its institutions: it grew into being the greatest representative democracy, with greater participation of the public and of the legislative branch in foreign affairs than anywhere else. Finally, American principles turned geography and institutions into guidelines for behavior: a distaste for the rule of force that characterized European diplomacy and colonialism, the repudiation of aristocracy and its wiles, enshrined in a sacred text, the Constitution, which served and still serves as the glue that amalgamates all the ingredients of the melting pot (France, with its vast number of Constitutions, could only use its language and culture as the glue of Frenchness).¹

The sense of special mission imparted by these components left ample room for contradictions and complexities. The lofty feeling of democratic superiority and universal relevance was perfectly compatible, in practice, with a pursuit of national interest and advantage that was just as fierce as elsewhere—indeed geographical position and political faith facilitated and licensed quite ordinary crass behavior, as continental expansion was going to show; the usual behavior of states never became the policy-makers’ ideal, with a few exceptions such as Hamilton, but this was not the only domain in which the ideal and the real were allowed to diverge. The complexity was provided by the two very different forms which American exceptionalism took, and which I called elsewhere the Wilsonian

syndrome. One form, of increasing less relevance as U.S. might grew, was isolationism. As Wilson said when World War One began, the U.S. was “too proud to fight,” it was a beacon of light, a model perhaps for others, but it wasn’t going to get involved in others’ fights. Hence the Founding Fathers’ imperative of “no entangling alliances.” The other face was more crusading and militant: making the world safe for democracy, which entailed working with others, yet did not supersede distrust of European-style alliances, marinated in secret diplomacy and cynical deals. Rather it meant a willingness to build global institutions, good both for the promotion of U.S. interests and for the expansion of America’s mission and ideals, yet designed in such a way that the risks of unwelcome entanglements would be minimized (remember that article 10 of the League of Nations covenant, which Wilson’s intransigence refused to water down, left it to each state to protect the political independence and territorial integrity of another state from aggression). One thing that was common to the two versions of exceptionalism: the desire to protect (in both cases) and to project (in the second) what made the U.S., in American eyes, unique: its values and institutions.

Indeed, Wilson had not given up isolationism for power politics: he joined the war as an associate, not an ally. The League, even with imprecise commitments, was too much for the public, and the design, especially in its preference for open diplomacy, anti-colonialism, and self-determination, was unwelcome among Wilson’s traditional foreign associates, and often unrealistic. The result was a return to isolationism, in the age of the totalitarian tyrants.

II.

After Franklin D. Roosevelt’s death, U.S. foreign policy had to be reconstructed. FDR’s vision of the “four policemen” who would rule the world (through the U.N. Security Council), designed to be more effective than the League, was quickly crippled by the Cold War. The shapers of the new strategy of containment were all intensely aware of, and responsive to, the formidable new power of the U.S.—the rest of the West and much of Asia were down and the only challenger: Stalin’s Soviet Union, could only be dealt with in one of two ways: preemption, at a time when the U.S. had a monopoly of nuclear power—but the Soviets had the means of invading Western Europe—or containment, which became the doctrine, and entailed military alliances with the countries that had to be

saved from Soviet domination. This was the Realist moment, whose chief theorist, Hans Morgenthau, excommunicated Wilsonian idealism and moralism. But the policy-makers tried to mitigate the Realists' celebration of power with various kinds of appeals to idealism that Wilson could have applauded. The struggle against Communism was not presented as a power contest but as a crusade of the good (the democracies) against evil. The creation of a vast new network of international and regional organizations, Truman's Four Point program for development, were dimensions of the power struggle but also presentable as idealistic measures for peace and welfare. The realism of the dark side of the struggle (such as subversion) was sugarcoated by a genuine idealism (think of American cultural diplomacy in Western Europe, animated by the CIA). A synthesis of traditional power politics, in the prudent forms advocated by George Kennan, and of American idealistic and multilateralist exceptionalism seemed to be accomplished.

After more than forty years, the outcome was—of course—complex. On the one hand, the synthesis won great victories: the collapse of the Soviet Union (in a way close to “Mr. X”'s prediction in 1947), the rebirth of Western Europe and Japan, as protégés of Washington, the subtle management of the Sino-Soviet split, the acrobatic success of having Israel as well as several Arab states as clients, the waning of colonialism. But on the debit side decolonization produced failed states with often miserable populations and violent ethnic conflicts; a permanent U.S. military presence was needed in Western Europe and Japan, both because of a potential of continuing external threats and because the U.S. was needed to preserve harmony in Western Europe and the Far East. The end of the Soviet Union deprived the U.S. network of often disparate alliances of its glue, and created new headaches. Above all, there was the scar of Vietnam: a bitter lesson in the impotence of force in some situations, a demonstration of the limits of doctrines, as well as of America's appeal, a discovery of the fragility of America's domestic front—points that present-day policy-makers should not forget.

III.

After the Cold War, the U.S. talked about a new world order, but what they faced was a bewildering and disorderly new world. The end of the Soviet empire meant anything but a peaceful scene. The Arab-Israeli conflict continued, the Gulf War was for the military both good (because of the rise in military credits) and perplexing (were the strin-

gent conditions of the Powell doctrine a tough road map for future conflicts, or a warning against most limited uses of force?). Once more, the unexpected struck: ethnic conflicts (some of horrendous scope) that raised each time the question of whether, where and on which side to intervene, and provoked a debate between Realists resistant to foreign policy as “social work” and the idealists of humanitarian interference. In these new circumstances allies began to diverge. American diplomacy found itself pressured, both by a public eager to return to domestic affairs (as Clinton understood, in 1992), and by the military eager to avoid any new Vietnam (hence Powell’s decision to end the Gulf War far indeed from Baghdad, and his reluctance toward humanitarian expeditions).

The first indication of a new attempt by American strategic thinkers to define a doctrine for so complicated and elusive a world was provided by what has been called “Dick Cheney’s masterwork,”² the Defense Planning Guidance draft of 1992, which was toned down before it was published, given the outcry it had produced. It was doubly important. In 1947, the containment rationale was written by a diplomat (one who wanted to deter, not to wage war, and was particularly suspicious of a militarization of America’s alliances, as well as of any resort to nuclear weapons). Forty-five years later, the tract that was the first draft of the Bush doctrine of 2002, was produced by a group of civilian and military officials of the Defense Department. Moreover, it launched a new form of exceptionalism, and carried the American enthusiasm for power way beyond that of the late 1940s. There had been nothing exceptional then about what I called above the U.S. discovery of the need for and utility of power—a rebuke and corrective to the two alternative forms of American exceptionalism until then. But there is something wondrous about its new incarnation, for it is an exceptionalism based almost exclusively on military domination. The 1992 draft went not so much beyond the Powell doctrine (when using force, do it overwhelmingly enough to win and only if the chances of success are good), but in a different direction. The document introduces explicitly the idea of the possible necessity of unilateral action, of the preemptive use of force, and of a U.S. nuclear arsenal strong enough to deter the development of nuclear programs elsewhere. It was clearly aimed at reducing the challenges Russia and China might want to launch some day, as well as the constraints imposed by America’s allies. This still left one with one puzzle and one serious tension. The document proposes a strategy capable of deterring all

challengers and of carrying out interventions anywhere, but it provided little guidance about where the more dangerous challenges and the more necessary interventions might occur (it soon became clear that Powell had no intention to intervene in Yugoslavia, prompting Mrs. Albright, then Clinton's U.N. representative, to ask him what he was keeping his force for). The tension was between this implicit ideal of a liberation of U.S. force from restraints, and the agreements, based on reciprocity, reached with so many governments in the previous forty-plus years. It was not just a turn to a doctrine of the national interest pure and simple, now that the Cold War no longer required alliances and an idealistic stance, but something radically new that led away from the Wilsonian syndrome: it called on the U.S. neither (obviously!) to cultivate its own garden, nor to pursue a world mission by leading others toward directions acceptable to them, through multilateral organizations defining and legitimizing the common goals. Exceptionalism now meant being, remaining and acting as the only superpower, and its substance was capabilities, not ideals and missions.

Let us look more closely at this new exceptionalism. When George W. Bush came to power, the doctrine that seemed to be in favor was a return to Realism: a concentration on those conflicts that could impair the global, or important regional, balances of power, a retreat from involvement in conflicts devoid of such significance (as in Africa), or hopeless (such as the Palestinian issue). However, this is not what prevailed. Already before 9/11/2001, we find a remarkable mix of "sovereignism" (an avatar of the old isolationism's suspiciousness) and distrust of the opinion of others. The rejection of the Kyoto protocol, the withdrawal from the ABM treaty, the scuttling of the land-mines treaty and of the comprehensive test ban treaty, most of these marks of defiance of the U.N. had appeared before George W. Bush came to power, when the Congress was already in Republican hands. The extraordinary vendetta conducted (largely but not exclusively by John Bolton) against the International Criminal Court brought out not only the Bush Administration's paranoia about how a malevolent U.N. and Court could indict innocent American soldiers and officers, but how punitive the U.S. could become against states (allies or not) unwilling to meet U.S. demands. As Michael Ignatieff has quipped, here exceptionalism meant exemptionism.

What are the new exceptionalists' main arguments? One—rather bizarre—insists on the idea that the U.S. Constitution is the law of the land, excluding any kind of superior law—such as international law—and any transfer, pooling or delegation of sovereignty (a British judge commented that even Mrs. Thatcher had subscribed to such transfers to the European Union; so had General de Gaulle). Then, there is the theme of benevolent imperialism, developed in particular by Robert Kagan, who has called the U.S. “a Behemoth with a conscience.” In an article in which valid criticisms of the new “Kantian” Europe (i.e., toothless and preoccupied by “challenges” such as immigration and ethnic conflicts; whereas mighty America focuses on threats) are mixed with a great deal of condescending hubris, he explains that the new sense of “civilian” mission of the Europeans is made possible by the military power and presence of the U.S. and expresses only their own weakness.³ A third argument, presented by Michael Reisman, states that the U.S. being, by its might, responsible for world order, is justified in rejecting those parts of international law that would make order more difficult⁴ (thus he gives to the U.S. the right to decide what parts contribute to world order and what parts do not—a strange position for a professor of law). Finally, there is the argument of brute force. The U.S. has it in abundance, others do not; hence allies, when they do not bend to the will of the U.S., are both nuisances and unnecessary. International law and organizations are constructs that can be discarded whenever they stand in the path of American power. This case has been made by John Bolton and Donald Rumsfeld; in their view U.S. might is at the service of a very narrowly defined national interest (which excludes humanitarian flings). It is clear that those arguments all agree on downgrading restraints and on preserving American preponderance, even though opinions on the nature of America's mission range from a responsibility for world order to pure self-interest.

Who are the proponents of these ideas? They are, on the whole, variants of familiar types, of the stock figures of American exceptionalism. There are the sheriffs, who see the world through the epic of *High Noon* with the eyes of Carl Schmitt—a world in which politics is seen as a struggle for power between foes and friends. In this sense, they are the heirs of the Cold War (for whose ending they credit Reagan). They are suspicious of diplomacy (in the Cold War days, they distrusted arms control and found Kissinger, with his policy of *détente*, too soft). Now that the U.S. is the sole superpower, they deem allies

less necessary and insist on a very selfish notion of the national interest (as Miss Rice has said, the role of the U.S. army is not to conduct children into the kindergarten of troubled countries). A second group is that of the imperialists with a good conscience, because the U.S. offers others the public good of order, and pays the price of preserving it. They share with the previous group a desire for “moral clarity,” for a world in black and white, divided between the good (represented by the U.S.) and the bad (whereas Reinhold Niebuhr, once so influential, saw a world of multiple moral ambiguities).

Both these groups were well represented in the Reagan Administration, and had populated the Committee on the Present Danger of the late 1970s. The sheriffs were disappointed by the turn of Reagan from his evil empire days to his embrace of Gorbachev, which softened the Soviet Empire’s fall. The imperialists—men like Charles Krauthammer or William Kristol—had been frustrated by the (in their eyes truncated) ending of the Gulf war in 1991. These two groups react to the new challenges and troubles as displaced, partly triumphant but also partly scared, ex-cold warriors who behave a bit like Kafka’s beast in the burrow: they see threats everywhere. A third group is less important, except insofar as it shares the Manichaeian vision: those for whom the world is a contest between America’s traditional conservative and religious values, and all those who attack them, be they modern secular and dissolute liberals or Islamic fundamentalists. These are the American fundamentalists.

To these clans, one has to add a group that could be called “friends of Israel,” who believe in the identity of interests between the Jewish state and the United States: both are democracies, both are surrounded by foes, both need to rely on force to survive. Israel is seen as the one sturdy ally in a crucial area in which Israel’s enemies are either also America’s enemies or else very dubious and flawed allies and clients of Washington. These men and women look at foreign policy through the lenses of a dominant concern: is it good or bad for Israel? They are a potent force in American politics. Never in very good odor at the State Department—since 1947—they are now well ensconced in the Pentagon, around such men as Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and Douglas Feith.

IV.

A discerning reader might object that many of my new exceptionalists are no more than Realists drunk with America’s new might as the only superpower. This is true,

but whereas the lesson of past Realists (Niebuhr, Morgenthau, Kennan, even Kissinger) had been the kind of discerning prudence and moderation Thucydides had praised, the new voices are exceptional in their paeon to American might (many of the more traditional Realists, in academia and in government, are worried by the excesses of the present ones, so much closer to Alcibiades than to Pericles).

Moreover, things changed after September 11. Before that traumatic day, the new exceptionalism was a doctrine in search of a cause (or defining its cause as America's own national interest). After September 11, it found its cause, just as the post-World War Two U.S. had found its in the Cold War. It was the war on global terrorism, on the terrorists and on those states that protected them. This was going to be the rationale of the Bush presidency, the great simplifier, the chief new foreign policy doctrine. It had the advantage of providing a lever for domestic mobilization (and diversion from controversial domestic issues), given the shocking discovery of palpable vulnerability. It flattered the exceptionalists of all tendencies by emphasizing the indispensable role of the U.S., and it appealed especially to the more idealistic ones by stressing that the defense against terror, America's cause, was also the world's cause: self-interest and morality, power and values, the sheriff and the missionary, were back together.

But there were signal difficulties. Already during the Cold War, many issues could not be squeezed into the corset of the Soviet-American conflict. Could all important issues now be fitted into the new straitjacket, and could those that could be treated by primarily military means (two questions raised by Hubert Védrine)? The phenomenon of terrorism is extraordinarily heterogeneous. If terrorism means deliberate attacks on the innocent, one would have to amalgamate the gangs of "private" terrorists, and state terrorism (carpet bombings, totalitarian terror, etc.), as well as the multiplicity of reasons for the resort to terror: the will to self-determination (as in the case of the Palestinians or the Chechens), a fight over territory (as in Kashmir), a form of domestic action against a repressive regime (in the Sudan, in the Algeria of the 1990s), a religious holy war (Al Qaeda), etc. Obviously one size doesn't fit all, and concentrating on the acts of terror at the expenses of the causes could well contribute to the global destabilization sought by the terrorists.

Another difficulty is the choice of a method to combat them. Should it be through a coalition of states or—given their own diversity of regimes and situations—should it be primarily America’s war? Both alternatives seemed unpromising. Should the U.S. focus on the threats to American lives and installations? This would have clashed with the new verbal universalism of the doctrine. Being the sole superpower does not help resolve such issues.

Moreover, there is the danger of a slippery slope, of a constant extension of the new “war.” From September 11 on, the Bush Administration widened the war against transnational terrorists into a war against the regimes that gave them shelter (but hasn’t Al Qaeda found hiding places in a very large number of states, the U.S. included?). A much more controversial extension has been that from terrorism to states with weapons of mass destruction (and hostility to the U.S., unlike, say, Israel, Pakistan or India). This makes world order even more shaky; it incites others to use the new American doctrine for their own very special ends: the Indians against Pakistan, the Russians against Chechen rebels and occasionally Georgia, the Sharon government against not only Palestinian terrorists but the Palestinian Authority and Arafat. This blurs the distinctions a more discerning U.S. should be able to observe. The war on terrorism becomes a vast tent under which all kinds of settlements of accounts can fit—including our own quarrel with the bizarre “axis of evil.” Within a year of Bush’s characterization of three very different states, he has been obliged to diversify American responses in order to limit the dangers to peace and the risk of American “imperial overstretch.” At present, Iran isn’t mentioned, North Korea is being treated with diplomacy; only Iraq is under the American gun.

Bush, during the campaign of 2000, had spoken about the need for modesty in foreign affairs. How far from this we are now is shown both by the doctrinaires of the new exceptionalism and by the final avatar of the 1992 defense draft: the new “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” dated September 2002. It is something of a hodgepodge, speaking about primacy *and* balance of power, using also traditional Wilsonian language (“we will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world”). It talks about organizing coalitions, but also about not hesitating to act alone for self-defense. Still, in the main, it codifies all the new aspects of exceptionalism: the doctrine of preemption, so as

to destroy threats before they reach U.S. borders (while warning others not to use preemption as a pretext for aggression); the emphasis on the deadly threat of rogue states that try to acquire threatening weapons of mass destruction, and “reject basic human values and hate the U.S. and everything for which it stands”; the promise to maintain the capability needed to defeat any attempt by any state to impose its will on the U.S. and its allies and to dissuade potential adversaries from building up their forces to equal or surpass the power of the U.S.; last, but clearly not least, the determination to protect U.S. nationals from the International Criminal Court.

The promise of preemption, which the U.N. Charter rules out (as a form of aggression) except when an aggression is obviously imminent, is a formula for chaos, if it becomes a frequent claim by others, and if disputes break out about how urgent the need for anticipatory self-defense really is. The document never refers to the U.N. as a body whose endorsement would be needed—clearly, it would be the U.S. that would judge on both the legitimacy of its own preventive acts of force, and on that of others: the exceptionalists are protected by their good conscience (which does antedate Bush: it was Mrs. Albright who described the U.S. as the indispensable nation who sees farther than the lesser breeds). The whole new doctrine is pervaded by the view that we see not only farther, but better what is good and bad, and others are not to be allowed to act like us.

This imperial conception risks plunging the U.S. in a morass of double standards. For this Administration, Palestinian terror is bad, but Sharon’s attacks on Palestinian civilians are, at worst, imprudent; proliferators are bad if they are anti-American tyrants, and thus candidates for American preemption, but not otherwise (it is fortunate we did not practice this doctrine on the U.S.S.R. in the 1940s or China in the 1960s). As Pierre Hassner has noted, the U.S. pressured Serbia into sending Milosevic to the Hague Tribunal, but refuses to accept the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court for itself.⁵ The reduction of international politics to the fight against enemies of the U.S. raises in acute form the problem of unsavory allies: after all, many terrorists hate us not because of our democratic values and system, because of what we are, but because of what we *do* (or what they think we do), because of our policies that support antidemocratic regimes. To be sure, we vaguely promise democracy for all, but short of universal intervention we cannot reach that goal—and even with universal intervention we would have trouble main-

taining democracy in countries that have no experience of it. Indeed, if our goal is really not just rhetorical but genuine, reaching for it would destroy many of our alliances and, by revolutionizing and de-pacifying world affairs, actually risk wounding the process of economic globalization for which the U.S. also stands.

In sum, the Bush doctrine means more than the emancipation of a colossus from constraints that are based on an ideal, and on the practical benefits, of reciprocity (constraints that the U.S., for all its superiority had restored and enshrined in networks of international and regional organizations after 1945). It amounts to a doctrine of global domination, inspired by the fact of U.S. might, founded on the assumption that America's values are universally cherished except by nasty tyrants and evil terrorists.

The design may be grandiose, but there is something breathtakingly unrealistic about this unilateralist power and grand exceptionalism coated in all too familiar moralism—what Hassner has called “Wilsonianism in boots.”⁶ There are two main obstacles. One is the world itself, and the other one the U.S. public. The world is not reducible to two cleavages—between terrorists and antiterrorists, between democratic and non-democratic regimes (as U.S. alliances, and occasional unilateral interventions, for instance in Central American, have shown). We have helped terrorists abroad, when we deemed them useful (such as even the Taliban against the Soviets); some of our allies (from Guatemala to Pakistan) have practiced state terrorism on a grand scale. Charles Maier reminds us that empires have always had troubles with those excluded from their benefits (inside and outside their borders).⁷ Just as Cold War “globalists” never paid enough attention to the regional and local causes of conflicts, our exceptionalists, today, pay far too little attention to such problems as development or the environment, whose relative neglect (in the latter case) or dogmatic treatment (in the former) feed hostility to the U.S. Going way beyond the banalities of the National Security Strategy document, they have, under the rubric of “regime change,” promised an energetic effort at replacing tyrannical regimes with democracies; this, if attempted, would not only topple friendly tyrants but manifest a blind hubris: we don't have the skill or knowledge to manipulate the domestic politics of a large number of other countries, to tell others who their leaders should or should not be, and to “improve” the world by projecting on them a model of democracy that has worked—not without upheavals—in the rich and multicultural U.S., but

has little immediate relevance in much of the present world. “Regime change” in Germany and Japan required a prolonged occupation and came out of a total war. These are not the circumstances of today. What we would see as a selfless or benevolent policy of democratization would be received as a policy of satellitization and clientelism. Even Palestinian reformers have not responded kindly to George W. Bush’s call for a displacement or replacement of Arafat, whose waning power has been bolstered by Bush’s excommunication.

Here is where the other flaw lies: the misfit between this democratic imperialism (a fine contradiction in terms, from the start) and the American polity. A strategy of frequent preemptive use of force and of domestic restrictions on public liberties necessitated by the global wars against evil is unlikely to get public support for very long, especially if the claims for prosperity and well-being are pushed behind the necessity of winning these wars (and today’s would-be imperialists cannot simply rely on exploiting the resources of others). Sooner rather than later, the public would suffer from battle fatigue, especially if its officials continue to explain simultaneously that the U.S. is the most powerful nation in history, and that it is the most threatened. A world order based on American might, but whose imperial master has little enthusiasm for peace-keeping operations, and little patience with nation-building, would be doomed. A world order, to have a chance of stability, and especially if it is threatened by pervasive terrorism, would require among its states a code of cooperation, rules of behavior and engagement (as during the Cold War), and restraints in order not to appear even more threatening than the enemies they hope to defeat by a mix of violence and incantations. But, alas, all the new exceptionalism offers is a mix of force and faith—a huge force that is often not usable or counterproductive, and a grandiose faith in the appeal of an American model that is a cause of resentment as well as of admiration (and envy, closer to the former than to the latter). Taming a tempestuous world, overcoming its uncertainties, by military power and a variety of bribes would be insufficiently effective abroad, and increasingly unacceptable at home.

V.

Iraq is seen by the new exceptionalists as the best place to test the new doctrine: it has a horrid regime, a record aggressions and of violations of U.N. demands, a patient and relentless quest for weapons of mass destruction. What better case could be found? If

the U.S. should succeed, even alone (or with only Mr. Blair), in destroying Saddam and his arsenal, what a wonderful lever for transforming the whole Middle East, for furthering modernization in the Muslim world, for assuring the victory in that world of the moderates over the rabid, and for a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issue on terms more favorable to Israel than those that Barak had appeared to offer Arafat, or those that Clinton had offered at Taba? What Mark Danner has called “a vision of great sweep and imagination: comprehensive, prophetic, evangelical— . . . wholly foreign to the modesty of ‘containment’ (which was the “ideology of a status quo power”) signals a determination “to remake the world” and to deal with the “evil of terror” by “making new the entire region from which it springs.”⁸ It may be this vision which inspires the new exceptionalists to focus on Iraq, whereas an attack on North Korea does not have the same potential for transforming a whole unstable and dangerous area. Nor does it have oil, certainly a potent factor in the drive to oust Saddam at a time when the Saudi alliance is in trouble. But what if the risks exceed the expected gains?

That Saddam Hussein is an evil man and a threat to his neighbors and to U.S. interests is undeniable. But is it a threat that calls for and justifies preventive action? What are the risks of acting now? Are there alternatives worth trying?

Iraq’s arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and quest for nuclear arms are worrisome, but not unique. Saddam is not suicidal, and is much more likely to resort to these if attacked, by us, against either U.S. forces or Israel. We hesitate to “preempt” against North Korea because it could incinerate Seoul. Indeed, we hesitate to impose on it sanctions comparable to those we apply to Iraq, because North Korea could respond by accelerating its nuclear program. Iraq, “as far as nuclear weapons are concerned, is much less of a threat now than it was in 1991.”⁹ Our attempt to eliminate Saddam and his weapons may well provoke the disaster we’re saying we want to prevent. We contained the Soviet Union, its huge army and its enormous weapons for almost fifty years.

Indeed the risks of such an attempt are very high. The case against it is both political and moral. The burden of proof lies on those who tell us that we’ll win easily, that his regime will crumble and that democracy will then prevail in a liberated nation. Even if such optimism is based on more than wishful thinking (remember Vietnam!), the aftermath of victory is likely to be awesome. The opposition to Saddam remains divided—

not only the Kurdish one. It is untested and devoid of experience in democratic rule and traditions. A U.S. Administration with deep doubts about nation-building and very little help from other nations would be stuck with running a vast Muslim country, racked by internal ethnic and religious divisions and aspirations for revenge. This would foster more anti-Americanism and terrorism in the Muslim world. Indeed, the unilateralism of the Administration risks, if the U.S. acts alone, shaking many of our carefully built alliances—in Europe and in the Middle East. If we want them to last and to help, our interest requires that we concentrate on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and on the “war” on terrorism *before* we turn on Iraq (indeed, for some of the hawks in the Administration one of the attractions of an early war on Iraq is that it would postpone and render even more difficult an even-handed solution of the Palestinian problem).

Our unilateralists tell us that a superpower does not need to have its hands tied by international agreements and the United Nations. What they forget is that, as in the war on terrorism, we cannot achieve any of our goals alone, and that it was the U.S.—the dominant power after 1945—which had the wisdom of understanding this. An order founded on force and American beliefs alone does not create legitimacy or guarantee effectiveness, and it instigates anti-Americanism.

It is said that critics of a U.S. attack on Iraq fail to understand “the moral clarity” the President wants to impose on world politics. It is argued that Hussein’s regime gives us a moral foundation for action. In Bryan Hehir’s words, which have inspired the paragraphs that follow, “The invocation of moral reasoning for any contemplated policy decisions is to be welcomed as long as the complexity of moral issues is given adequate attention. Moral reasoning can indeed support military action, at times obligate such action. It also, equally importantly, can restrain or deny legitimacy to the use of force. To invoke the moral factor is to submit to the full range of its discipline.”

The proposed strategy has three characteristics pertinent to its moral character. It is proposed as a preemptive strike, an intervention and a unilateral action. Each characteristic raises serious moral questions. Preemption is morally conceivable but only within the most stringent limits. The case against it lies in the need to legitimate the use of force only in the most extreme conditions. Self-defense is the most obvious case, but the arguments proposed thus far that a presumptive attack on Iraq meets the self-defense standard

are thin. Eroding the restraints against preemption – especially in the policy of the world’s most powerful state – is a dubious moral move. Deterrence is more complex today, as the President has argued. But maintaining deterrence rather than preemption as an international standard is of the highest moral and legal importance.

There is a solid case for expanding moral legitimation of military action in cases of humanitarian intervention (Somalia, Rwanda, Kosovo), but the abiding value of the principle of non-intervention must be recognized and protected. Its basic role is to preserve order among sovereign states which acknowledge no higher political authority. Action against Iraq is clearly not a case—after many years of Hussein’s tyranny—of humanitarian intervention. It would not be comparable to the overthrow of the Taliban: Saddam’s links with Al Qaeda are unconvincing. It would be classic Great Power intervention, the principal case which non-intervention was meant to restrain. Like deterrence, non-intervention is designed to produce a conservative pattern of world politics, giving primacy to order and restraint. Preemptive military intervention, save in the most extreme cases, will erode basic principles of international order.

Finally, a unilateral intervention, undertaken without authorization and with little or no allied support, would intensify the moral and legal problem. Authorization for the use of force, embodied in the U.N. Charter, is an extension of the moral principle that force should not be invoked quickly or easily. Unilateralism, however much lauded as the prerogative of a Great Power by supporters of a preemptive strike, in fact omits other meanings of Great Power responsibility. Great Powers set precedents in world politics; hence each choice they make must be measured by the consequences of the precedent they set. Eroding deterrence, nonintervention and authorization in one stroke is at least morally reckless.

There is an alternative to America’s acting as the self-appointed policeman and promoter of “regime change” (a daunting task in areas unfamiliar with democracy, and something of a potential boomerang for a country like the U.S., many of whose allies are highly dubious regimes whose support Washington needs). It is a collective, U.N.-supported policy of containment, entailing a strong border-monitoring system, and the return of weapons inspectors to Iraq. Indeed, instead of acting alone and justifying military action by the risk of future Iraqi aggression, the U.S. ought to plead for collective en-

forcement of past U.N. resolutions and the fulfillment by Iraq of obligations it accepted after the Gulf War, i.e., the dismantling of weapons of mass destruction, to be followed by a lifting of sanctions. The U.S., in other words, should present itself not as the lone sheriff but as the trustee of the society of states. The greatest chance of success in the task of eliminating Iraq's arsenal lies not in attacking Saddam now, and thereby activating Iraq's capacity of destroying quasi-hostages (its Kurds) or neighbors, but in creating a coalition on behalf of the objectives most states have subscribed to—*not* in acting alone, entangled in difficulties with allies and encumbered by the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The Administration, obviously divided, seems to have begun to understand this, but it still insists on preserving the possibility of unilateral action either if the U.N. doesn't meet American demands or if the Iraqis make the inspections impossible.

The zealots who celebrate America's might and its benevolent imperialism forget that world order requires more than force, that a modern "empire" needs a consensus of states, and that it undermines its leadership by acting as a bully or a spoiler. As for eliminating evil regimes and leaders, especially when their successors might turn out to be no better, it is a form of arrogance the wiser conservatives and liberals in our past (and today) have always warned us against.¹⁰

VI.

Empire, or the dream of empire, has invariably gone to the heads of the imperialists. The dream of Wilsonian missionaries, deeply suspicious of any force other than that of world public opinion, still inspires many international agencies and non-governmental organizations. The dream of a benevolent empire sustained by an illusion of the world's gratitude, but resting in fact only on the opinion of its own Establishment and on a determination to avoid clear obligations shows how wide the gap has become between America's ever more flattering self-image and the image of the U.S. abroad, even in countries so pro-American for so long as Germany and Britain. Given the fact of America's preponderance in all forms of power, hard and soft (to use Joseph Nye's useful distinction¹¹), the U.S. is bound to remain the most important state actor in the world. But there is a major difference between a leader and an empire: "The choice is between authoritarian, if not tyrannical rule tempered by anarchic resistance, and hegemony tempered by law, by concert and by consent."¹² The Bush Administration remains a puzzle,

with grandiose ideas floating over many improvisations. It has a State Department that still believes that imperial power “can only be maintained if accompanied by a measure of reciprocity, even if it is partially illusory or contrived, in its obligations and dealings with others. It has, in the Pentagon and the White House, the new exceptionalists whose vision is one of an American world-wide “mission civilisatrice” with Roman Empire, or Prussian, methods. And it has a President who talks mainly like the latter but often acts more cautiously. Maybe, as Andrew J. Baleyich has written, “no one is really in charge” ours is an Empire without an Emperor,”¹³ given the domestic restraints on the Presidency. Such an Empire functioning not by direct rule over others but in a world of states of all kinds faces a Sisyphean task. It is not reassuring, either for Americans with little desire to be the twenty-first-century Romans or Britons, or for the foreign tribes. It is time to remember Vietnam, and reread Thucydides.

¹ See S. Hoffmann, *Gulliver's Troubles*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1968, part 2.

² See David Armstrong, “Dick Cheney’s Song of America,” *Harper’s Magazine*, October 2002, pp. 78-83.

³ See Robert Kagan, “Power and Weakness,” *Policy Review* 113, pp. __. Kagan also mocks France’s “punching far above his weight class” (Washington Post, Nov. 3, 2002, p. B 07). What would, in 1940-1945, de Gaulle have obtained for France, if he hadn’t “punched above its weight class”? Can the U.S. today, with all its power, really dominate the world?

⁴ See W. Michael Reisman, “The United States and International Institutions,” *Survival*, Winter 1999-2000, pp. 62-80, at pp. 63, 66-71 and 75 especially.

⁵ See Pierre Hassner, *The United States: The Empire of Force or the Force of Empire*, Chaillot Papers No. 54 (September 2002): 41ff.

⁶ Op. cit., p. 43.

⁷ Charles Maier, “An American Empire?” *Harvard Magazine*, Nov.-December 2002, pp. 20-31.

⁸ Mark Danner, “The struggles of democracy and empire,” *New York Times* op-ed, October 9, 2002, p. A-31.

⁹ Norman Dombey, “What has he got?”, *London Review of Books* 24, 20 (October 17, 2002).

¹⁰ For another critical evaluation of the Iraq policy of the Administration, see John Lewis Gaddis, “A Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Policy*, November-December 2002, pp. 50-57.

¹¹ See Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹² Pierre Hassner, “Definitions, Doctrines, Divergences,” *The National Interest* 69 (Fall 2002), p. 34.

¹³ In “New Rome, New Jerusalem,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Summer 2002, p. 56.