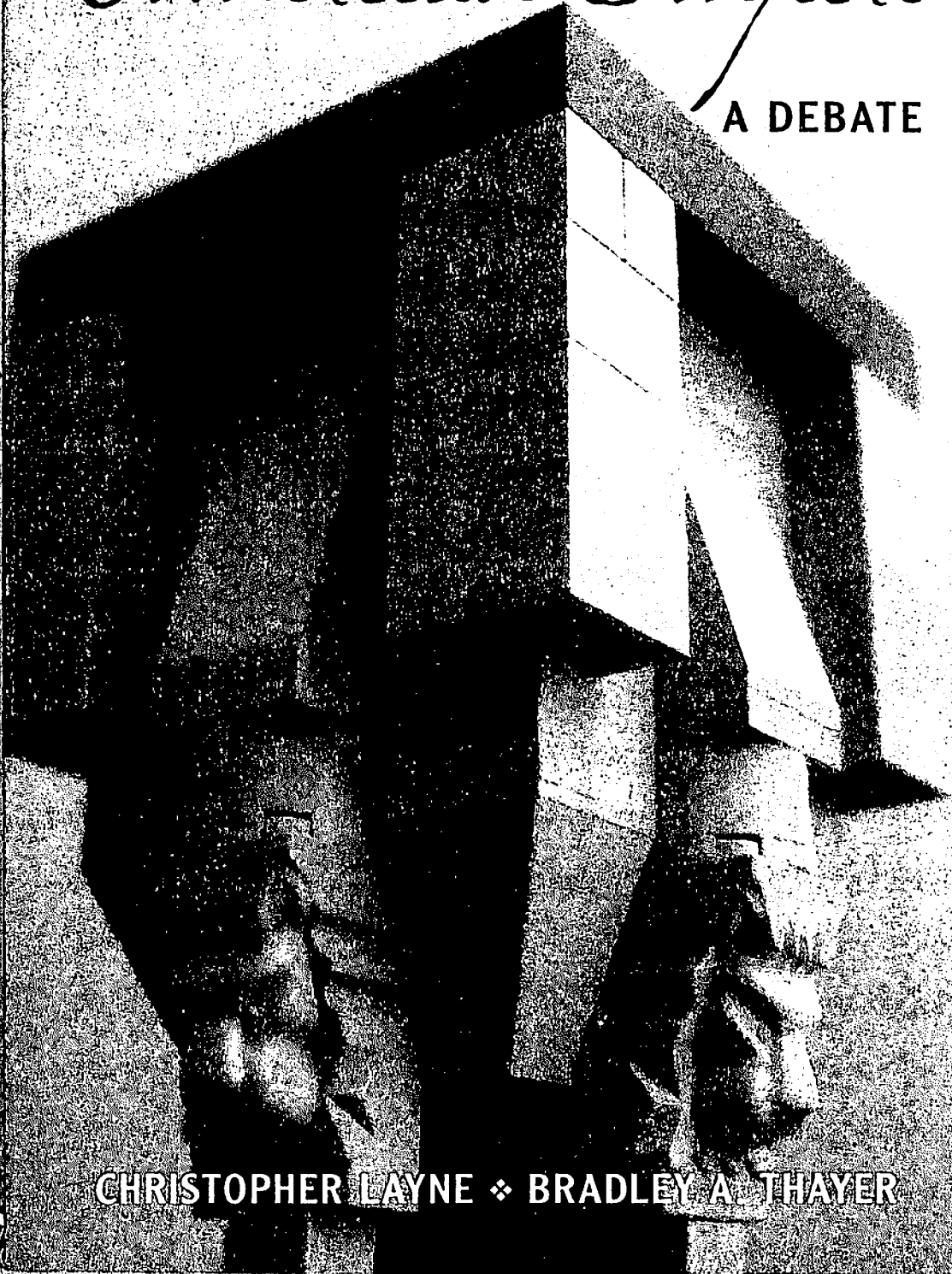


American Empire

A DEBATE



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Reply to Bradley Thayer

The Illusion of the American Empire

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Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the costs of the American Empire. Contrary to its proponents' claims, the strategy of primacy and empire comes with a steep price tag. It is increasingly clear that the United States will be hard-pressed to afford the costs of empire without undermining its economy. Moreover, in addition to its economic impact, the strategy of primacy and empire has a corrosive effect on democracy in the United States and is at odds with America's most cherished political values.

The Costs of Empire

Economics and Empire

At the end of the day, Americans must ask not only if the strategy of primacy and empire makes America more secure, or more *insecure*, but also ask what are that strategy's costs, and can America afford them? It is, of course, a truism that economic strength is the foundation of American primacy. A strong economy generates the wealth that pays for the extensive military apparatus necessary to maintain America's dominant geopolitical position. But here the United States confronts a problem that traditionally has perplexed the statesman of great powers: striking the proper balance between public and private investment in the domestic economy, domestic consumption, and investment in military power. On the one hand, because they are expected to provide welfare as well as national security, modern states constantly face the dilemma of allocating scarce resources among the competing external and domestic policies. At the same time, grand strategists must be cognizant of the danger that overinvesting in security in the short term can weaken the state in the long term by eroding the economic foundations of national power.¹ Finding

the right balance between security and economic stability is a timeless grand strategic conundrum.²

Paul Kennedy's 1987 book, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, ignited an important debate about the sustainability of American primacy. In a nutshell, Kennedy argued that the United States was doomed to repeat a familiar pattern of imperial decline because the excessive costs of military commitments abroad was eroding the economic foundations of American power. An important backdrop to Kennedy's book was the so-called twin deficits: endless federal budget deficits, and a persistent balance of trade deficit. As a result, the United States had quickly gone from being the leading creditor state in the international economic system to being the leading debtor and had become dependent on inflows of foreign—especially Japanese—capital. As Robert Gilpin noted (also in 1987), the inflow of Japanese capital “supported the dollar, helped finance the [Reagan] defense buildup, and contributed to American prosperity. More importantly, it masked the relative economic decline of the United States.”³ The late 1980s debate about possible American decline was terminated abruptly, however; first, by the Soviet Union's collapse, and then by U.S. economic revival during the Clinton administration, which also saw the yearly federal budget deficits give way to annual budget surpluses.

The proponents of American primacy and empire assert both that the United States can afford this grand strategy and that American economy is fundamentally robust. These claims might come as news to most Americans, however. When a company like General Motors—historically one of the flagship corporations of the U.S. economy—teeters on the edge of bankruptcy and sheds some 126,000 jobs—rosy descriptions about the strength of the U.S. economy ring hollow.⁴ Similarly, the notion that the U.S. economy is healthy certainly would not be shared by the hundreds of thousands of U.S. workers who have lost their jobs in America's ever-contracting manufacturing sector—often because their jobs have been outsourced to China or India. Even more worrisome, future outsourcing of American jobs is not likely to be confined just to blue-collar workers. Rather, an increasing number of high-skill/high-education jobs will flow from the United States to other countries.⁵ Another warning sign that all is not well with the U.S. economy is the “middle class squeeze”—the fact that middle class incomes in the United States have been stagnant since the early 1970s. Doubtless, the American economy has made gains in productivity, but those gains are being enjoyed by only a small number of Americans in the highest income brackets. As the *Financial Times* recently noted:

Since 1973, the income of the top 10 per cent of American earners has grown by 111 per cent, while the income of the middle fifth has grown by only 15 per cent. That trend has become more pronounced in the

last few years. Between 1998 and 2004, the median income of American households fell by 3.8 per cent.⁶

To some the American economy may seem buoyant, but the hollowing-out of America's manufacturing industrial base, the outsourcing of American jobs, and stagnant middle-class incomes are flashing red lights warning that all is far from well with the U.S. economy.

Indeed, the economic vulnerabilities that Kennedy pinpointed in the late 1980s may have receded into the background during the 1990s, but they did not disappear. Once again, the United States is running endless federal budget deficits, and the trade deficit has grown worse and worse. The United States still depends on capital inflows from abroad, with China fast replacing Japan as America's most important creditor, to finance its deficit spending, finance private consumption, and maintain the dollar's position as the international economic system's reserve currency. Because of the twin deficits, the underlying fundamentals of the U.S. economy are out of alignment. The United States cannot continue to live beyond its means indefinitely. Sooner or later, the bill will come due in the form of sharply higher taxes and interest rates—and, consequently, economic slowdown. And, as the United States borrows more and more to finance its budget and trade deficits, private investment is likely to be “crowded out” of the marketplace, with predictable effects on the economy's long-term health. In a word (or two), the United States is suffering from “fiscal overstretch.”⁷

Economically, the United States is looking at the same problems in the early twenty-first century that it faced in the 1980s (and which had been building since the early 1960s). Except this time, the long-term prognosis is bleaker, because there are two big differences between now and then.⁸ First, during the Cold War, Japan (and, during the 1970s, West Germany) subsidized U.S. budget and trade deficits as a *quid pro quo* for American security guarantees. It will be interesting to see whether an emerging geopolitical rival like China—or, for that matter, the European Union—will be as willing to underwrite American primacy in coming decades. Second, there have been big changes on the economic side of the ledger that cast a long shadow over America's long-term economic prospects. For one thing, the willingness of other states to cover America's debts no longer can be taken for granted. Already, key central banks are signaling their lack of confidence in the dollar by diversifying their currency holdings.⁹ There are rumblings, too, that OPEC may start pricing oil in euros and that the dollar could be supplanted by the euro as the international economy's reserve currency. Should this happen, the United States no longer could afford to maintain its primacy.¹⁰

The domestic economic picture is not so promising, either. The annual federal budget deficits are just the tip of the iceberg. The real problems are the federal government's huge unfunded liabilities for entitlement programs

that will begin to come due about a decade hence.¹¹ Moreover, defense spending and entitlement expenditures are squeezing out discretionary spending on domestic programs. Just down the road, the United States is facing stark “warfare” or “welfare” choices between, on the one hand, maintaining the overwhelming military capabilities upon which its primacy rests, or, on the other hand, discretionary spending on domestic needs and funding Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security.¹² Here, the proponents of primacy and empire overlook a huge change in the U.S. fiscal picture. They assert that the United States can afford its imperial strategy because defense spending now accounts only for about 4 percent of U.S. gross domestic product (GDP), which is well below Cold War levels. This is true, but very misleading.

Why? Because under the Bush II administration, the norm in the allocation of federal discretionary spending that prevailed throughout most of the Clinton administration has been reversed: the Pentagon’s share of discretionary spending in the federal budget once again exceeds domestic spending. What really matters is not the percentage of GDP absorbed by defense spending, but the Defense Department’s share of discretionary federal spending. Coupled with mandatory spending on entitlements (and debt service), defense spending is squeezing discretionary federal spending on domestic programs. Given the long-term unsustainability of federal budget deficits, coming years will see strong pressures to reduce federal spending. However, because defense, entitlements, and debt service together account for 80 percent of federal spending, it is obvious that—as long as U.S. defense spending continues at the high levels mandated by the strategy of primacy and empire—the burden of federal deficit reduction will fall primarily on the remaining 20 percent of the budget—that is, on discretionary domestic spending. In plain English, that means that the United States will be spending more on guns and less and less on butter—“butter” in this case meaning, among other things, federal government investments in education, infrastructure, and research, which all are crucial to keeping the United States competitive in the international economy. Sooner rather than later, Americans will be compelled to ask whether spending on the American Empire is more important than spending on domestic needs here at home.¹³

In fact, if anything, the costs of the American Empire are likely to increase in coming years. There are two reasons for this. First, there is the spiraling cost of the Iraq quagmire. As some readers may recall, the Bush II administration’s economic advisor, Lawrence Lindsey, was fired because he dared to predict that the cost of the Iraq war, and its aftermath, might reach \$200 billion. The administration predicted that the war itself would cost no more than \$50–\$60 billion and that Iraq would pay for its own postwar recovery from oil sales. Of course, the United States to date has borne most of the cost of Iraq’s postwar recovery. As far as the ultimate economic costs of the war are concerned, it is apparent that the administration’s \$50–\$60 billion estimate

was a projection right out of Fantasyland. Recently, Joseph Stiglitz (a Nobel laureate in economics) and Linda Bilmes have indicated that, at the end of the day, the budgetary cost of the war will be somewhere between \$750 billion and \$1,184 billion (which includes, among other things, the costs of military operations, Veterans Administration costs attributable to the war, increased defense spending, and additional interest on the national debt). Moreover, they estimate that the direct and indirect costs of the war to the U.S. economy will be between \$1,026 billion and \$1,854 billion.¹⁴

The second reason that defense spending is likely to increase is the simple fact that the U.S. military is not large enough to meet all of America’s imperial commitments. Since the Cold War’s end, the United States has shown every sign of succumbing to the “hegemon’s temptation”—the temptation to use its military power promiscuously—and Iraq, along with the simultaneous crises with Iran and North Korea, have highlighted the mismatch between America’s hegemonic ambitions and the military resources available to support them. To maintain its dominance, the American military will have to be expanded in size, because it is too small to meet present—and likely future—commitments.¹⁵ No one can say for certain how long significant U.S. forces will need to remain in Iraq (and Afghanistan), but it’s safe to say that substantial numbers of troops will be there for a long time. At the same time, in addition to the ongoing War on Terrorism (and the concomitant requirements of homeland defense), the United States faces possible future conflicts with North Korea, Iran, and China.

During the past fifteen years or so since the Soviet Union’s collapse, the United States was able to postpone the need to grapple with the painful issues Kennedy raised in 1987. However, the chickens are coming home to roost, and those questions soon will have to be faced. Gilpin’s 1987 description of America’s grand strategic and economic dilemmas is, if anything, even more timely today:

With a decreased rate of economic growth and a low rate of national savings, the United States was living and defending commitments far beyond its means. In order to bring its commitments and power back into balance once again, the United States would one day have to cut back further on its overseas commitments, reduce the American standard of living, or decrease domestic productive investment even more than it already had. In the meantime, American hegemony was threatened by a potentially devastating fiscal crisis.¹⁶

At some point, the relative decline of U.S. economic power that is in the offing will bring American primacy to an end. In the shorter term, however, the United States can prolong its primacy if Americans are willing to pay the price in terms of higher taxes, reduced consumption, and curtailment of domestic programs. But, of course, there is a treadmill-like aspect to preserving the

American Empire, because perpetuating it will hasten the weakening of the economic base upon which it rests.

The Domestic Political Consequences of Empire

In the most memorable—and controversial—passage of his second Inaugural Address, President George W. Bush declared that, “We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. America’s vital interests and deepest beliefs are now one.” In claiming that the survival of democracy in America depends on the successful export of democracy abroad, Bush has reprised Wilsonianism’s most dubious thesis. Like his predecessors—going back to Woodrow Wilson himself—Bush believes that America can avoid becoming a “garrison state” only by following a policy of strategic internationalism and democracy promotion abroad. Contrary to Bush’s assertion in his Inaugural Address, however, an imperial foreign policy is antithetical to the flourishing of democracy and liberty here in the United States.

It may be true that America’s Founding Fathers envisioned that the United States would become an “empire of liberty,” but it is also true that their vision of empire was confined to North America. Moreover, they were crystal clear that their vision of empire was based on important values rooted in America’s own history and political culture, including a republican form of government, protection of individual liberties, and suspicion of state power. They also understood full well that if the United States ever got mixed up in the kind of overseas imperialism practiced by the European great powers, these American values would be imperiled. This argument was reprised during the post-Spanish-American War great debate of 1898–99 about whether the United States should annex the Philippines. In his classic anti-imperialist essay, “The Conquest of the United States by Spain,” William Graham Sumner predicted—accurately—that if the United States went into the empire business, its unique political culture would be transformed and its system of government would come to resemble those of the other great imperial powers of the day: Britain, France, Germany, and Russia. In more recent times, *real* conservatives like Dwight Eisenhower and Robert Taft—a very different breed from the *faux* conservative neocon cheerleaders for American Empire—warned that the Cold War was effectuating a domestic transformation of the United States and that the core values of limited government, shared congressional and executive responsibility for foreign policy, and fiscal prudence were being eroded.

Bush’s words about defending liberty and freedom by promoting it abroad ring hollow. Seldom in American history has an administration displayed less regard for the Constitution, the law—domestic and international—and civil liberties. The truth is that by—purportedly—promoting democracy abroad, the Bush administration is trampling upon it at home. To start with, contrary

to all settled Constitutional principles, the administration has claimed that the president’s war powers are all but unconstrained. In essence, the administration claims that as long as it is in the pursuit of “national security,” the president can do pretty much whatever he deems necessary. The result of this sweeping assertion of power can be seen in the administration’s use of the National Security Agency (NSA) to engage in domestic surveillance of phone calls and emails. As James Risen has written, since 9/11, “The Bush administration has swept aside nearly thirty years of rules and regulations and has secretly brought the NSA back into the business of domestic espionage.”¹⁷ As Risen reports, shortly after 9/11 Bush signed an executive order authorizing the NSA to monitor and eavesdrop on virtually all telephone calls and email traffic inside the United States. The executive order was a deliberate end run around the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which requires the NSA to obtain a court order before eavesdropping on domestic communications. Under Bush’s order, the NSA is completely unaccountable; there is no judicial—or other—oversight of its domestic surveillance. As Risen notes, “the NSA determines, on its own, which telephone numbers and e-mail addresses to monitor. The NSA doesn’t have to get approval from the White House, the Justice Department, or anyone else in the Bush administration before it begins eavesdropping on a specific phone line inside the United States.”¹⁸

The Patriot Act is another instance where the Bush administration has used 9/11 to roll back civil liberties. Under the Patriot Act, the administration is using “national security letters,” which allow secret surveillance and information gathering of “U.S. residents and visitors who are not alleged to be terrorists or spies.”¹⁹ As the *Washington Post* reported, “Issued by FBI field supervisors, national security letters do not need the imprimatur of a prosecutor, grand jury or judge.”²⁰ Moreover, the Patriot Act prohibits the target of a national security letter from disclosing to “any person” that they have been served with such a letter. On its face, the language prohibits a person, or organization, that is served with a national security letter from contacting a lawyer and challenging the letter’s legality.²¹ The FBI uses national security letters to obtain the very kinds of information about citizens’ lives that historically has been protected by the Fourth Amendment’s proscription against unreasonable searches and seizures, including phone records, correspondence, financial information, and even the books a citizen checks out from the library, or the movies a citizen rents from a video store. Real conservatives know that when the government is given such unchecked, wide-ranging powers to intrude into the lives of citizens, civil liberties are at risk. As Bob Barr, a conservative former congressman has said, “The beef with the NSLs is that they don’t have even a pretense of judicial or impartial scrutiny. There’s no checks and balances whatever on them. It is simply some bureaucrat’s decision that they want information, and they can basically just go and get it.” This, apparently, is the Bush administration’s version of democracy in America.

The Bush administration's treatment of "enemy combatants" taken prisoner as part of the so-called Global War on Terror is another example of how the administration has acted contrary to America's deepest values. Asserting a dubious legal claim that it can seize enemy combatants and bring them before military tribunals, the administration has set up internment facilities at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and the Bagram air base in Afghanistan. The detainees in these camps are—so the administration claims—entirely outside the jurisdiction of the U.S. legal system (and outside the purview of the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners of war). According to the administration, the United States can keep enemy combatants—even American citizens suspected of engaging in terrorist acts—in custody indefinitely and is not required to charge them with a crime, afford them legal counsel, or even bring them to trial.

Shielded from judicial oversight, the administration has deliberately promulgated policies that have shaded applicable international law to allow U.S. interrogators to engage in the torture "lite" of enemy combatants at Guantanamo Bay. The administration also has authorized the use of hard-core torture by allowing the CIA to establish secret prisons abroad, and to carry out a policy of so-called renditions (where the United States hands over enemy combatants to countries where interrogation techniques are not limited by legal niceties).²² Although the overwhelming consensus among experts is that torture invariably fails to produce useful information—that is, it is not cost effective—the United States has paid a huge price in terms of its international standing for its treatment of enemy combatants. As Stephen Walt observes, "imagine how America's image might have been improved had it placed the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay under the protections of the Geneva Convention and had Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld apologized and resigned in response to the torture scandal at Abu Ghraib prison."²³ While these policies would not, Walt admits, eliminate all the manifestations of anti-Americanism abroad, they "would have made it much harder to portray the United States as a 'rogue superpower,' and it would have given America's friends around the world far more effective ammunition in the battle for world opinion."²⁴ Not only have the administration's detention and torture policies sullied America's reputation abroad, but in a practical sense those policies are counterproductive.²⁵ Abu Ghraib, for example, injected new life into the Iraqi insurgency and was a veritable recruiting poster for Islamic terrorist groups. Most of all, however, the Bush administration's policies with respect to enemy combatants have inflicted a deep wound to America's own self-image as a decent and humane nation. As the British learned in India and Ireland, and the French in Algeria, imperial policies and democratic values don't mix.

Bush's words about liberty and freedom ring hollow in another sense, too. American officials want to promote democracy abroad, but are loathe to practice it in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. The reason that democracies—

like the United States—are *supposed* to be peaceful is that citizens can hold accountable leaders who squander lives and treasure on unnecessary wars. Moreover, democracy is *supposed* to ensure that policy making is transparent, and policies are subject to open debate. That's the theory, at any rate. But it's based on a romantic notion of how American democracy works that even a sophisticated fourth grader knows is illusory.

What this theory leaves out is what political scientists call "the state"—a nation's central decision-makers and the institutional mechanisms through which they exercise power. Because it is overtly antistatist, liberal political theory downplays the role of the state. But even in liberal countries like the United States, the state is an autonomous actor. That is, rather than by being constrained by civil society, the state mobilizes the levers of power to manipulate civil society and harness it to support state policies. For example, to maintain public support for an imperial policy abroad—and their grip on political power at home—American foreign policy elites have since the early 20th century engaged in a calculated policy of threat exaggeration to overcome the stubborn fact that, because of geography and its overwhelming power, the United States is basically immune from serious threats from abroad. Consequently, for well over a century, official American rhetoric has been based on a finely honed set of images: dangerous ideologies, a "shrinking world," and falling dominoes. To mobilize support for their policies, the American foreign policy elite has created a rhetorical climate of fear in order to convince Americans that only strategic internationalism can preserve the nation's security and way of life.

Another way the state manipulates civil society is by controlling the flow of information and shaping public opinion. In the U.S. government, there even is a name for this: "perception management." Of course, perception management simply is a fancy term for sophisticated lying. It is the kind of manipulation of the truth that the Bush administration engaged in during the run-up to the Iraq war—the claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and—*even more*—the assertion that Saddam Hussein was linked to the 9/11 attacks. As Louis Fisher rightly observes, the decision to go to war with Iraq "cast a dark shadow over the health of U.S. political institutions and the celebrated system of democratic debate and checks and balances."²⁶ It's not just the Bush II administration that has engaged in perception management, however. It is a bipartisan tool. During the Kosovo war, the Clinton administration justified U.S. intervention by implying that Serbia was engaged in, as Defense Secretary William Cohen said, "a horrific slaughter"—a genocide of Holocaust-like proportions against the Kosovars. After the war, these claims were found to be wholly without foundation.

In the long term, the actual facts may come to light. They did with respect to this administration's false claims about Iraq and with the Clinton administration's wild exaggerations about Kosovo. But in the short term, perception

management allows policy-makers to stifle dissent, preempt congressional opposition, and gain a free hand to carry out their interventions. By the time the congress, the public, and the media realize they were misled, it's too late, because the official policy already has been implemented and is irreversible. Indeed, some policy-makers have been quite candid in urging the need for the United States to formulate military strategies that will enable it to intervene and prevail quickly before congressional or public opposition can mobilize. In an interview with the *International Herald Tribune* on the eve of his retirement as NATO Supreme Commander, Wesley K. Clark urged precisely that the United States adopt strategies that could design around the constraining effects of the democratic process.

It's quite evident that the Bush administration has a rather blinkered view of the democratic process. On the eve of his second inauguration, Bush claimed that the November 2004 election had "legitimized" his foreign policy. In a 2005 *New Yorker* article, Seymour Hersh showed that this is exactly what top administration policy-makers believe.²⁷ That is, they believe that in the 2004 presidential election, the American electorate gave the administration a second-term green light to go after "outposts of tyranny" like Iran, Syria, and North Korea. Just how an electoral victory procured through deceit and disinformation—and by equating disagreement with the administration's foreign policy with a lack of patriotism—amounts to a mandate is an interesting question. Still, as Bush himself put it, November 2004 was the administration's "accountability moment." This is a curious view of the American political process. In the United States, the accountability of officials is supposed to be ongoing, not momentary.

If the administration puts its current plans into effect, soon we may be denied even momentary accountability in matters of war and peace. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New Yorker* have all reported that the administration is moving to gut the Central Intelligence Agency and transfer key responsibilities for intelligence gathering and covert operations to the Pentagon—where these activities will be shielded from outside oversight and accountability. That is, the Bush administration is trying to restructure the national security apparatus so that it can wage "low-intensity wars" in secret. So much for the notion that, in a democracy, policy is supposed to be made openly so its merits can be debated fully. And so much for the notion that policy-makers are to be held accountable for their actions.

The American Empire has been bad news for democracy and civil liberties in America. Under the Bush II administration, Americans have seen the very apotheosis of Empire: a government that has built its Iraq policy on a foundation of lies and the doctoring of intelligence, made an unprecedentedly sweeping assertion of presidential war powers, and has rolled back civil liberties. Moreover, the administration has attempted to place its actions beyond the

realm of congressional and public scrutiny. All of this is corrosive of American democracy. As Louis Fisher observes:

Democracy depends on laws but much more on trust. Constitutions and statutes are necessarily general in scope, placing a premium on judgment and discretion. Without confidence in what public officials say and do, laws are easily twisted to satisfy private ends. Leaders who claim to act in the national interest may, instead, pursue personal or partisan agendas....In an age of terrorism, especially after 9/11, the public needs full trust in the integrity of its elected leaders and in the intelligence agencies that guide crucial decisions. For all the sophistication of the U.S. political and economic system, if trust is absent, so is popular control.²⁸

Under the Bush administration, the pursuit of American Empire indeed has weakened trust in government. Americans need to reassert their control in order to preserve a vibrant democracy here in the United States. The Bush administration has disregarded Dwight Eisenhower's sage warning that, "We are defending a way of life and must be respectful of it...not only so as not to violate its principles and precepts, but also not to destroy from within what we are trying to defend from without." This is what *real* conservatism is all about. Americans should not countenance the administration's assault on the Constitution and on America's values and reputation for fairness and decency. They should demand that the Bush administration abandon its imperial policy of "democracy promotion" abroad and, instead, turn its focus to practicing democracy here in the United States.

Beyond Primacy and Empire: Toward a New Grand Strategy

America's greatest foreign policy realist thinkers—Hans Morgenthau, George F. Kennan, Walter Lippmann, Robert W. Tucker, and Kenneth Waltz—have always understood that power has both a seductive and corrupting effect on those who wield it—even the United States: "The possession of great power has often tempted nations to the unnecessary and foolish employment of force, vices from which we are not immune."²⁹ Similarly, they also have been rightly concerned that a *too* powerful America would instill feelings of fear and insecurity among the other states in the international system. Kenneth Waltz has stressed the dangers that ensue whenever power becomes too tightly concentrated (whether internationally or domestically). As he has put it, "I distrust hegemonic power, whoever may wield it, because it is so easily misused."³⁰ Here, Waltz paralleled Edmund Burke's famous—and very timely—injunction about the boomerang effects that follow when overwhelming power is married to overweening ambition:

Among precautions against ambition, it may not be amiss to take one precaution against our *own*. I must fairly say, I dread *our own* power and our *own* ambition; I dread our being too much dreaded....It is ridiculous to say we are not men, and that, as men we shall never wish to aggrandize ourselves in some way or other...we may say that we shall not abuse this astonishing and hitherto unheard of power. But every other nation will think we shall abuse it. It is impossible but that, sooner or later, this state of things must produce a combination against us which may end in our ruin.³¹

Burke's warning resonates today, because as the diplomatic historian Walter LaFeber observes, "In the post-September 11 world, exceptionalism, combined with the immensity of American power, hinted at the dangers of a nation so strong that others could not check it, and so self-righteous that it could not check itself."³²

Realists understand that notions of American exceptionalism can warp U.S. grand strategy. Waltz—echoing Morgenthau's injunction that the task of realism is to prevent statesmen from "moral excess and political folly"—has recognized that an America ensconced in a position of global primacy would be tempted to equate its own preferences with justice and be just as likely as other powerful states to use its power unwisely: "One cannot assume that the leaders of a nation superior in power will always define policies with wisdom, devise tactics with finite calculation, and apply force with forbearance."³³ It is for this reason that realists like Lippmann, Kennan, Morgenthau, and Waltz have highlighted the dangers that await if the United States gives in to the temptations of primacy and have counseled instead that the United States pursue a grand strategy based on prudence and self-restraint.

Realists always have held that grand strategy must be grounded in the concept of national interest. They also have known, however, that the very term "national interest" invariably has a moral—or normative—dimension. This is because there is no single, objectively "true" national interest.³⁴ Rather, the concept of "national interest" describes a starting point, an approach to formulating policy.³⁵ Thinking in terms of national interest improves the quality of statecraft by forcing decision-makers to ask the right questions—about the relation of ends to means, about what is necessary versus what merely is desirable—when they formulate grand strategy. Applied to grand strategy, the concept of national interest reminds policy-makers that they must be guided by what the sociologist Max Weber called the "ethic of responsibility"—which, in layman's terms, restates the familiar injunction that the road to hell is paved with good intentions—and, hence, that decision-makers must "be calculators instead of crusaders."³⁶ Primacy and empire, however, serve to infuse American grand strategy with precisely the crusading mentality and self-righteousness that the United States should want to avoid.

For the last century, U.S. policy-makers have been haunted by the fear that the closure of other regions of the world to the penetration of America's Wilsonian ideology will destroy "the American way of life." As the diplomatic historian Frank Ninkovich has put it, U.S. foreign policymakers have believed (and still do) that closure of these regions would "cut off the oxygen without which American society, and liberal institutions generally, would asphyxiate."³⁷ Wilsonianism always has been based on the fear that unless the United States can remake the world in its own ideological image, it will be transformed at home into a "garrison state." That is, unless American ideology is preeminent globally, the United States might have to accept curtailed political liberties and economic regimentation at home in order to ensure its security in an ideologically hostile world. This is why U.S. foreign policy rests on the assumption that political and economic liberalism cannot flourish at home unless they are safe abroad.

This worldview is the outgrowth of a fundamental pathology in American liberalism. As Louis Hartz pointed out in his classic book, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, in domestic politics, American liberalism has been deeply hostile to alternative ideologies and preemptively has sought to suppress them. American liberalism can be secure at home—or so it is believed—only when it has no rivals. Not to put too fine a point on it, American liberalism—supposedly an ideology of tolerance—aims to extirpate other ideologies and worldviews. Wilsonianism seeks to replicate externally American liberalism's domestic primacy. In other words, American liberal ideology is the fountainhead of the American Empire.

Long before Saddam Hussein came down the pike, "regime change" has been a favored tool of American foreign policy. Here, however, U.S. grand strategy tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, because it causes states that might not otherwise have done so to become threats. That is, Wilsonianism causes the United States to be more, not less, insecure than it would be if its external ambitions were more modest. When, by asserting the universal applicability of its own ideology, the United States challenges the legitimacy of other regimes—by labeling them as outposts of tyranny or members of an axis of evil—the effect is to increase those states' sense of isolation and vulnerability. With good reason, such states fear that their survival could be at risk. Iran is a good example. Given that states—and regimes—are highly motivated to survive, it's no surprise that others respond to American policy by adopting strategies that give them a chance to do so—like acquiring WMD capabilities and supporting terrorism. One thing is for sure: because of its Wilsonian foundations, the American Empire is a recipe for confrontation and antagonism with "others."

Wilsonianism views the world as sharply divided between good states and bad—or even "evil"—states. And the policy implications are obvious: if bad states are the source of war and terrorism, the prescription is for the

United States to use its power and transform them into good states. In this respect, Wilsonianism reveals the dark side of American ideology: permanent (or semipermanent) war, and—ironically—the transformation of the United States into the very garrison state—or, as it came to be known during the Cold War, “national security state”—that the strategy of primacy and empire was supposed to prevent. America’s *real* realists—Kennan, Lippmann, Morgenthau, Tucker, and Waltz—have always feared that the pursuit of primacy would lead to excessive interventionism and cause the United States to adopt both a crusading mentality and a spirit of intolerance. Moreover, the real realists have understood that the United States pays a big price at home for overreaching abroad. For real realists, foreign policy restraint has been the *real* key to defending America’s domestic political system and core values. For all of these reasons, Kennan, Lippmann, Morgenthau, Tucker, and Waltz opposed America’s Vietnam policy, just as the current generation of realists took the lead in opposing the Iraq war. America’s *real* realists have highlighted the dangers that await if the United States gives in to the temptations of primacy and empire and have counseled instead that the United States pursue a grand strategy based on prudence and self-restraint. There are two mechanisms that can constrain the United States. First is a roughly equal distribution of power in the international system, because if confronted by countervailing power the United States would be forced to forego primacy in favor of a more cautious strategy.³⁸ The other possible restraining mechanism is that America’s own domestic political system will prevent “national leaders from dangerous and unnecessary adventures.”³⁹ For the present, at least, there is no counterbalancing power that can compel the United States to forsake its pursuit of primacy and empire. Thus, the United States must follow a policy of self-restraint if it is to avoid primacy’s adverse geopolitical and domestic consequences. Since World War II, such self-restraint seldom has been abundant—and has completely vanished during the Bush II administration. Grand strategic self-restraint can be developed only—if at all—by engaging in a vigorous intellectual debate about the consequences of primacy and empire and about America’s grand strategic options—and only if that debate carries over into the public policy arena.⁴⁰ Here, the torch has been passed to a new generation of realists both to make the case against American Empire and its accompanying perils and to simultaneously make the case for a new U.S. grand strategy.

Notes

1. The classic studies are Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

2. Thus, as Edward Luttwak has observed, for both the Roman Empire and the United States, “the elusive goal of strategic statecraft was to provide security for the civilization without prejudicing the vitality of its economic base and without compromising the stability of an evolving political order.” Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 1.
3. Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 332.
4. In March 2006, GM announced that it would buy out the contracts of all 113,000 unionized employees in its workforce and the contracts of the 13,000 unionized workers at its main parts supplier, Delphi. Micheline Maynard, “GM Will Offer Buyouts to All Its Union Workers,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2006, p. A1.
5. Peter G. Gosselin, “That Good Education Might Not Be Enough,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 March 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/23/business/23auto.html?ex=1300770000&en=57ca081b0a798618&ei=5088&par>.
6. Editorial, “Tackling America’s Growing Inequality,” *Financial Times*, April 6, 2006, <http://news.ft.com/cms/s/d4cf3508-c509-11da-b7c1-000077932430.s01=1.html>.
7. This term is Niall Ferguson’s. Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p. 262.
8. *Ibid.* As Ferguson says, “America’s fiscal overstretch is far worse today than anything [Kennedy] envisaged sixteen years ago.”
9. American budget and trade deficits have not been a serious problem heretofore, because U.S. creditors have believed that the United States could repay its debts. There are signs that this may be changing. If, whether for economic or, conceivably, *geopolitical* reasons, others are no longer willing to finance American indebtedness, Washington’s choices will be stark: significant dollar devaluation to increase U.S. exports (which will cause inflation and lower living standards) or raising interest rates sharply to attract foreign capital inflows (which will shrink domestic investment and worsen America’s long-term economic problems). Given the de-industrialization of the U.S. economy over the past three decades, it is questionable whether, even with a dramatically depreciated dollar, the United States could export enough to make a major dent in its foreign debt. For discussion, see Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations*, p. 332.
10. From the American standpoint, the most frightening soft-balancing scenario is the prospect that—more for geopolitical than economic reasons—the EU, China, and other key players (like OPEC) will collaborate to have the euro supplant the dollar as the international economic system’s reserve currency.
11. See Niall Ferguson and Laurence J. Kotlikoff, “Going Critical: American Power and the Consequences of Fiscal Overstretch,” *National Interest* 73 (Fall 2003): 22–32. Also, see Laurence J. Kotlikoff and Scott Burns, *The Coming Generational Storm: What You Need to Know about America’s Economic Future* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).
12. Alternatively, the United States could raise taxes dramatically. This would have negative long-term consequences for the economy, however. More importantly, perhaps, it is not clear that if confronted with a stark choice between hegemony or domestic welfare whether congress or the public would accept being taxed at very high rates in order to sustain American preponderance.
13. See Edmund L. Andrews, “80% of Budget Effectively Off Limits to Cuts,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2006, p. A22; Jonathan Weisman, “Years of Deep Cuts Needed to Meet Goal on Deficit, Data Show,” *Washington Post*, February 9, 2006, p. A4; Amy Goldstein, “2007 Budget Favors Defense,” *Washington Post*, February 5, 2006, p. A1.
14. See Martin Wolff, “America Failed to Calculate the Enormous Costs of War,” *Financial Times*, January 11, 2006, p. 15.

15. See Mark Mazetti, "Military at Risk, Congress Warned," *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 2005, p. A1. <http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/front/la-na-strategy3may03>; Thom Shanker, "Pentagon Says Iraq Effort Limits Ability to Fight Other Conflicts," *New York Times*, 3 May 2005. www.nytimes.com/2005/05/03/politics/03military.html?ex=1272772800&en=2913a0da89d938a3&ei=5090&...; Ann Scott Tyson, "Two Years Later, Iraq War Drains Military," *Washington Post*, 19 March 2005, p. A1. Facing troop shortages, the Defense Department apparently has concluded that it will need allied military support to undertake future military interventions and subsequent occupations. The Terms of Reference for the Pentagon's 2005 Quadrennial Defense Review states that current security challenges "are such that the United States cannot succeed by addressing them alone." Quoted in Thom Shanker, "Pentagon Invites Allies for First Time to Secret Talks Aimed at Sharing Burdens," *New York Times*, March 18, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/18/politics/18strategy.html>. Also see Mark Mazetti, "Iraq War Compels Pentagon to Rethink Big-Picture Strategy," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 March 2005, <http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/front/la-na-milwarllmar11>. It is doubtful whether allied help will be forthcoming in the future, however. One of the clear lessons of Iraq is that if American allies disagree with U.S. policy, they will withhold military support.
16. Gilpin, *Political Economy of International Relations*, pp. 347-348. For a more recent iteration of this analysis of U.S. economic prospects, see Peter G. Peterson, *Running on Empty: How the Democratic and Republican Parties Are Bankrupting Our Future and What Americans Can Do about It* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004).
17. James Risen, *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration* (New York: Free Press, 2006), pp. 43-44.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
19. Barton Gellman, "The FBI's Secret Scrutiny," *Washington Post*, November 6, 2005, p. A1.
20. *Ibid.*
21. The Patriot Act's admonition that the existence of national security letters cannot be disclosed is being challenged in the federal courts, notably in the case of *Library Connection, Inc. v. Gonzales*.
22. On U.S. torture policy, see Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004); Karen Greenberg, ed., *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On the CIA's secret overseas prison system, see Dana Priest, "CIA Holds Terror Suspects in Secret Prisons," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2005, p. A1.
23. Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 232.
24. *Ibid.*
25. On both torture "lite" and the debate about the effectiveness of torture as a means of extracting reliable intelligence data, see Joseph Lelyveld, "Interrogating Ourselves," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, June 12, 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/12/magazine/12TORTURE.html>.
26. Louis Fisher, *Presidential War Power*, 2d ed. Rev. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), pp. 234-235.
27. Seymour Hersh, "The Coming Wars," *The New Yorker*, January 24, 2005. www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?050124fa_fact.
28. Fisher, *Presidential War Power*, pp. 234-235.
29. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 201.
30. Waltz, "Reply to My Critics," in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 341.
31. Edmund Burke, *The Works of Edmund Burke* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1901), Vol. IV, p. 457.
32. Walter LaFeber, "The Bush Doctrine," *Diplomatic History* 26 (4): 558.
33. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 201.
34. Greg Russell shows that Morgenthau "refused to consider the national interest as a static, self-evident principle of statecraft whose formulation is immune from the complex interaction of domestic and external influences on the decision-making process in foreign policy." Greg Russell, *Hans J. Morgenthau and the Ethics of American Statecraft* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 104.

35. Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), p. 164.
36. W. David Clinton, *The Two Faces of National Interest* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), p. 259.
37. Frank Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power: A History of the Domino Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 53.
38. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 206.
39. *Ibid.*
40. The only viable alternative to the strategy of primacy and empire is an offshore balancing grand strategy. For a detailed discussion of offshore balancing, see Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), chap. 8.