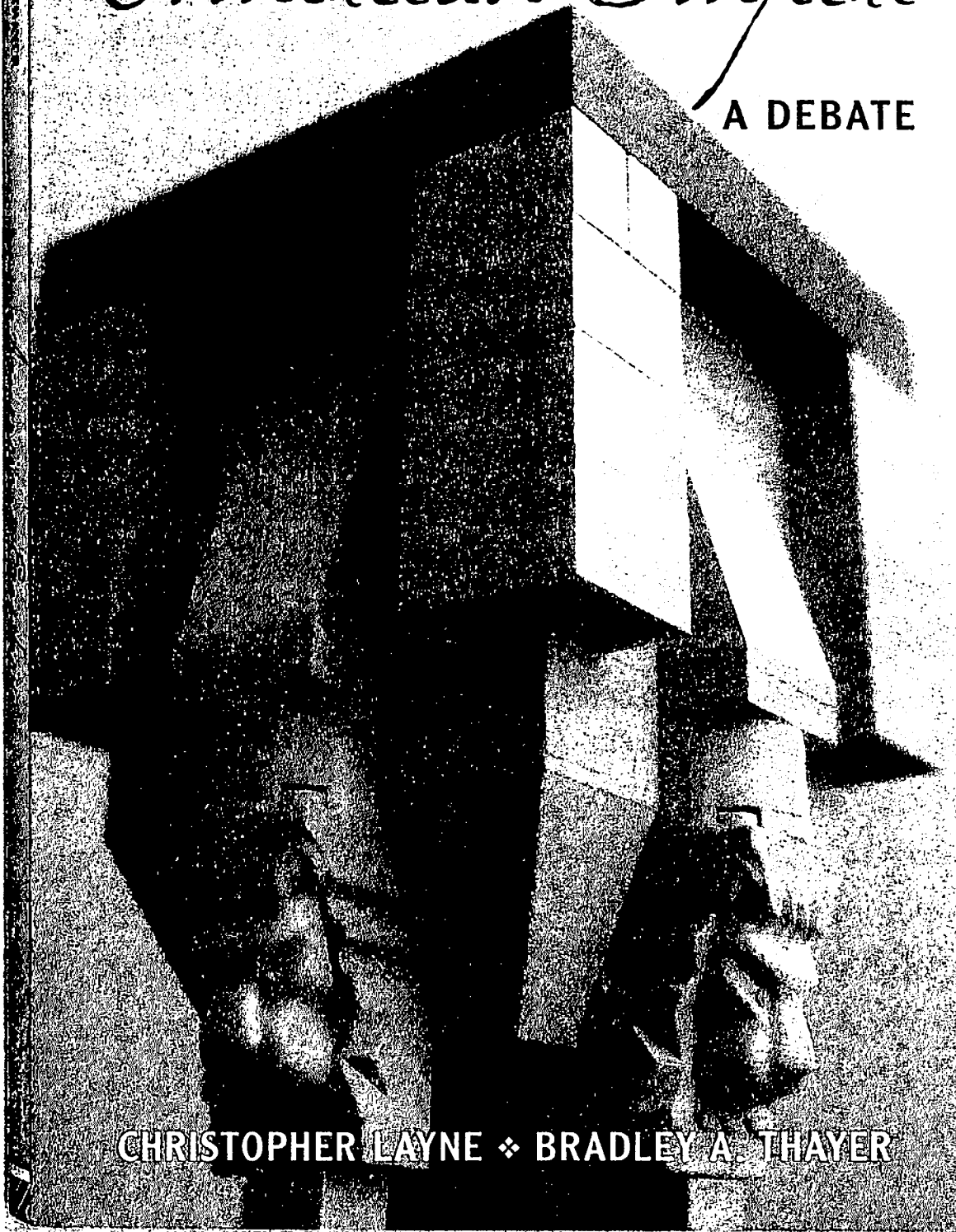


American Empire

A DEBATE



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50. Phillip Longman, *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What to Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), pp. 62–63
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 67.
52. Menno Steketee, "Dutch Authorities Report Increase in Islamist Radicalisation," *Jane's Intelligence Review* 17 (2): 20–21.
53. Tamara Makarenko, "Takfiri Presence Grows in Europe," *Jane's Intelligence Review* 17 (2): 16–19. Other Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups operating in Europe include the Armed Islamic Group, the Libyan Fighting Islamic Group, the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, the Tunisian Combatant Group, and the Tunisian Islamic Front.
54. National Intelligence Council, *Mapping the Global Future*, p. 83.
55. Donald R. Rumsfeld, "Take the Fight to the Terrorists," *Washington Post*, 26 October 2003, p. B7.
56. The GIA specialized in mass killings. For example, in Bin Talha, a suburb of Algiers, they cut the throats of some eight hundred people, mostly women and children, in a single night. But they were also expert at conducting assassinations, including those of the president and its most important trade union leader.
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The Case Against the American Empire

CHRISTOPHER LAYNE

Introduction

The Issues

Since the Cold War's end, the United States has dominated international politics. It is—as international relations scholars put it—a “global hegemon.” Indeed, in recent years in books and articles about U.S. foreign policy it has become commonplace to see the United States described as the most powerful actor on the international stage since the Roman Empire was at its zenith. This doubtless is true. The central question I address is whether the United States should seek to maintain its current primacy in world politics and use this preeminence to construct a new American Empire. At first blush, this may seem an odd question to ask. After all, since the ancient Greek historian Thucydides wrote his classic *History of the Peloponnesian War*, realists have understood that international politics is fundamentally about power. If this is true—and it is—how can it be argued that the United States might possess *too much* power for its own good?

The events of the last five years suggest the answer. In the aftermath of 9/11, Americans—citizens and policy-makers alike—asked repeatedly, “Why do they hate us?” President George W. Bush answered by claiming that the United States was the target of *al Qaeda*'s terrorist strikes because radical Islamicists hate America's freedom. More thoughtful analysts have pointed out that it is U.S. policies in the Middle East and Persian Gulf that caused the terrorists to attack the United States. In March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq. In this endeavor it was opposed not only by Russia and China, but also by long-time allies like Germany and France. Around the world, public opinion—which largely had been sympathetic to the United States in 9/11's wake—turned sharply against the United States. Increasingly, the United States has come to be perceived globally as an 800-pound gorilla on steroids—out of control, and dangerous to others. Far from being regarded as a “benevolent hegemon,” America has come to be seen as a kind of global Lone Ranger, indifferent to its allies, ignoring international institutions like the United Nations, and acting in defiance of international law and norms. In

the last five years there have been many indications that, far from welcoming American primacy, others worry about it—and sometimes find it downright threatening to their own interests and security. In other words, a too-powerful America risks a global geopolitical backlash against its preeminent position in international politics.

The issue of whether a strategy of primacy is good for the United States has been a subject of debate in the foreign policy community for the last fifteen years. After 9/11, however, the debate about primacy merged with another debate. Cognizant of America's overwhelming "hard" (military and economic) power, and believing in the attractiveness of its democratic values and institutions ("soft power"), some in the foreign policy community—mostly neoconservatives—urged that the United States should use its primacy to construct a new American Empire. The United States, it was urged, should use its hard and soft power to intervene in failed states like Afghanistan, and rogue states like Iraq, and engage in a policy of "nation-building" to ensure that such states no longer could serve as either terrorist havens or sources of instability and aggression. Writing in *The Weekly Standard* shortly after 9/11, the neo-conservative pundit Max Boot argued that the United States should follow in Britain's imperial footsteps and administer Afghanistan—ruled by the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban, and home base to Osama Bin Laden and *al Qaeda*—until "a responsible, humane, preferably democratic government takes over."¹ Once the United States dealt with Afghanistan, the United States, Boot said, should invade Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein from power. As Boot freely admitted, the United States should do this even if Saddam Hussein was not implicated in the 9/11 attacks: "Who cares if Saddam was involved in this particular barbarity?"² By overthrowing Saddam Hussein the United States could "establish the first Arab democracy...[and] turn Iraq into a beacon of hope for the oppressed peoples of the Middle East."³ The Bush II administration—the key national security positions of which were staffed by neoconservatives and neocon fellow-travelers—took up Boot's challenge. The March 2003 invasion of Iraq was the first step in the administration's "generational commitment" to bring about a "democratic transformation" in the Middle East.

The heart of the current debate about the direction of American foreign policy—about the costs and benefits of primacy and empire—is about security. Do primacy and empire make the United States more secure, or—as I argue—less secure? This debate is important not just for policy-makers, and foreign policy scholars, but also for *citizens*. The events of 9/11 underscored that the debate over America's grand strategy is not an abstract one. The policies the United States follows in the international arena have real-life consequences for Americans. To understand the debate about American primacy and empire, one must engage with the key theories of international politics that underlie both current U.S. strategy and its alternative, offshore balancing; and with competing narratives—that is, contrasting ideas about, and interpretations

of—concerning America's proper role in world affairs. These narratives are rooted deeply in this nation's history and its political culture.

This may seem like a daunting challenge. After all, most Americans do not make their living studying international politics and U.S. foreign policy. But the challenge is not insuperable. The major debates about American foreign policy during the last six decades have reflected parallel debates in academe about "how the world works." These scholarly debates invariably seep into the real world of policy making and influence decision-makers' actions. After all, as leading scholars of strategic studies like Stephen Walt and Barry Posen have pointed out, far from being esoteric, grand strategy actually is policy-makers' theory of how to "cause" security for the United States. Put another way, decision-makers have a set of a cause and effect—or "if...then"—hypotheses about what policies will make the United States more—or less—secure. For example, American primacy and empire are based on—among others—two key propositions derived from international relations theory: that attaining, and keeping, overwhelming hard power—that is, primacy—is the strategy best calculated to ensure U.S. security; and that the United States should promote regime change abroad, because a world composed of democracies will be more stable and peaceful than a world in which "rogue states" are allowed to exist (a proposition derived from so-called democratic peace theory).

American grand strategy is shaped not only by theories of international politics and by the "balance of power," but also by *ideas*. Since the very founding of the Republic, the question of what America's "purpose" in international politics should be has been contested. There have been recurring controversies about how deeply the United States needs to be engaged in international politics in order to gain security and about whether engagement abroad strengthens or weakens America domestically. Indeed, the very term "security" has been a subject of contention. For the United States, is security determined by power relationships and geography (the traditional criteria that great powers have employed in determining their strategies), or can the United States be secure only in a world that shares its liberal democratic ideology? In the wake of 9/11, Americans once again have occasion to confront these enduring questions.

Michael Hunt has observed that American history has been marked by the clash of two contending visions of America's proper role in the world. One of these holds "that the American pursuit of lofty ambitions abroad, far from imperiling liberty, would serve to invigorate it at home, while creating conditions favorable to its spread in foreign lands."⁴ This belief that America's mission is to remake the world in its image underlies the Bush II administration's pursuit of an American Empire. However, this expansive vision of America's world role has always existed side by side with a very different viewpoint, which has argued that America's political institutions, prosperity, and social cohesion are best safeguarded by a policy of restraint in foreign affairs. Proponents of this vision have "argued that the pursuit of greatness diverted

attention and resources from real problems at home and might under some circumstances even aggravate or compound those problems. Foreign crusades unavoidably diminished national ideals and well being.”⁵

Michael Hogan has elaborated on the way in which the two competing worldviews depicted by Hunt have influenced debates about American grand strategy since the end of World War II. One school of thought has believed in limited government at home and a limited role abroad. Those who cleaved to this view of America’s world role harbored “a strong antipathy toward entangling alliances, a large peacetime military establishment, and the centralization of authority in the national government” and they argued that the “rise of the national security state necessarily entailed economic and political adaptations that could undermine the very traditions and institutions that had made America great.” This view was opposed by a new cultural discourse—extolling the virtues of the “national security state”—that blossomed as the Cold War intensified. As Hogan notes, the advocates of the national security state “borrowed from a cultural narrative that celebrated American exceptionalism and American destiny” and argued that “leadership of the free world was a sacred mission thrust upon the American people by divine Providence, and the laws of both history and nature.” The Bush II administration has used 9/11 to breathe new life into this outlook, which forms the bedrock of the case for American primacy and empire. At the same time, the morass of Iraq, the economic costs of empire, and the Bush II administration’s assault on civil liberties—exemplified by the Patriot Act and revelations of National Security Agency eavesdropping—have given a new resonance to the deepest fear held by those who have favored a foreign policy of restraint: that in the course of attempting to transform the world, the United States would succeed only in transforming itself.

Overview of the Chapter

In this chapter, I argue that primacy and empire is a strategy that will lead to bad consequences for the United States. Rather than bringing the United States peace and security, the pursuit of primacy and empire will result in a geopolitical backlash against the United States. It already has. The 9/11 attacks were a violent reaction against America’s primacy—and specifically against its imperial ambitions in the Middle East. Similarly, the quagmire in Iraq also is a direct consequence of U.S. imperial aspirations. And it will not end there. Because it is premised on the belief that the United States must embark on assertive policies to bring about regime change by imposing democracy abroad, the pursuit of primacy and empire will drag the United States into otherwise avoidable wars—what one proponent of the strategy has termed “savage wars for peace.” Looking ahead, if the United States continues to follow its current strategy of primacy and empire, it almost certainly will find

itself on a collision course with Iran (and possibly North Korea and Syria) and—more importantly—China.

In this chapter, I argue that primacy and empire are the cause of American *insecurity*. The balance of this chapter unfolds as follows. First, I place the debate about primacy and empire in historical context and examine the intellectual foundations of current American strategy. Second, I show why the pursuit of primacy is a counterproductive—even dangerous—strategy for the United States. Third, I examine the imperial dimension of American strategy, especially the push for regime change and democratic transformation abroad. Here, I focus on the Iraq war, because this reckless adventure was all but mandated by the logic of the strategy of primacy and empire.

Before and after 9/11: The Historical Backdrop to the Strategy of Primacy and Empire

9/11: What Did Not Change

It is often said that 9/11 “changed everything” with respect to U.S. foreign policy. In the most fundamental sense, however, this is not true. From 1991 to 9/11, the key debate about the United States’ role in the world was about American primacy. This remained true after 9/11. The United States, of course, was catapulted into a position of primacy when its superpower rival, the Soviet Union, collapsed between 1989 and 1991. That is, when the Cold War ended the United States was left standing (as U.S. policy-makers liked to put it) as the “sole remaining superpower” in the international system. With no actual or potential geopolitical—or ideological—rivals in sight, America enjoyed an historically unprecedented dominance in international politics. At the same time, the fact that the United States attained primacy as result of the Soviet Union’s downfall should not obscure the fact that from the early 1940s onwards, gaining geopolitical primacy was the overriding objective of U.S. grand strategy.⁶

American primacy has two distinct meanings. On the one hand, primacy describes an objective *fact* of international politics. The United States today is—as it has been for some fifteen years—far and away the most powerful state in the international system. On the other hand, primacy is also a *policy*, because since the Cold War’s end America’s paramount grand strategic goal has been to maintain a firm grip on its preeminent international role. Although there has been widespread agreement among foreign policy analysts favoring the strategy of primacy, neoconservative foreign policy intellectuals have been its most articulate proponents. The writings of William Kristol and Robert Kagan are illustrative. They argued that, having prevailed in the Cold War, “The United States enjoys strategic and ideological predominance. The first objective of U.S. foreign policy should be to preserve and enhance that predominance by strengthening America’s security, supporting its friends,

advancing its interests, and standing up for its principles around the world.”⁷ For them, in the Cold War’s aftermath, “the appropriate goal of American foreign policy is to preserve [U.S.] hegemony as far into the future as possible.”⁸ The proponents of primacy and empire like a “unipolar” world—as long as the United States is on top—and want to keep it that way. As one neoconservative intellectual puts it: “A unipolar world is fine, if America is the uni.”⁹

The flip side of this belief that a unipolar world dominated by the United States is the best of all possible worlds is the corresponding belief that a multipolar world—that is, an international system composed of three or more great powers—is the worst of all possible worlds. According to neoconservative pundit Charles Krauthammer, multipolarity is not only “inherently fluid and unpredictable,” but also “unstable and bloody.”¹⁰ The way to prevent multipolar instability, it has been claimed, is to maintain U.S. primacy. As Kristol and Kagan put it, “American hegemony is the only reliable defense of peace and international order.”¹¹ Similarly, Zalmay Khalilzad—a senior Pentagon official in the Bush I administration, who has served as ambassador both to Afghanistan and Iraq during the Bush II administration—argued that “U.S. leadership [i.e., continued American primacy] would be more conducive to global stability than a bipolar or a multipolar balance of power system.”¹² Consequently, it was said, to preserve its primacy and avoid a reversion to multipolarity, the United States should use its hard power to prevent the emergence of new great powers (“peer competitors”). As Kagan and Kristol put it, “In Europe, in Asia, and the Middle East, the message we should be sending to potential foes is: ‘Don’t even think about it.’”¹³ The primacist vision of American grand strategy has been adopted by all three post-Cold War administrations.

The official U.S. position on the prospect of a post-Cold War multipolar system was set forth clearly in the *Regional Defense Strategy*, which was prepared by the Pentagon during the Bush I administration: “It is not in our interest...to return to earlier periods in which multiple military powers balanced one against another in what passed for security structures, while regional, or even global peace hung in the balance.”¹⁴ This stance was reiterated during the Bush II administration by Condoleezza Rice, who found it “troubling” that “some have spoken admiringly—even nostalgically—of ‘multipolarity,’ as if it were a good thing, to be desired for its own sake.” She made it clear that from Washington’s standpoint, multipolarity is not a good thing at all.¹⁵ U.S. hostility to multipolarity was underscored in the Bush II administration’s 2002 *National Security Strategy*, which declared that the United States is “attentive to the possible renewal of old patterns of great power competition.”¹⁶ For the Bush I, Clinton, and Bush II administrations, the antidote to multipolar “instability” has been U.S. primacy.

This first was made clear during the Bush I administration. The administration’s draft *Defense Planning Guidance (DPG)* for fiscal years 1994–1999—which was written under the supervision of the neoconservative Paul Wolfowitz, then

serving as a senior Pentagon official—was leaked to the *New York Times*.¹⁷ The DPG made clear that the objective of U.S. grand strategy henceforth would be to maintain America’s preponderance by preventing the emergence of new great power rivals, stating that “we must maintain the mechanisms for *detering potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role*.”¹⁸ The Clinton administration embraced the strategy of primacy, as has the Bush II administration, which, in its 2002 *National Security Strategy* declared that the aim of U.S. strategy is to prevent a would-be peer competitor from “surpassing, or *even equaling* the power of the United States.”¹⁹

9/11: What Did Change

The strategy of primacy was in place well before 9/11, and it remains so. In this respect, U.S. policy was not changed by 9/11. But 9/11 did change American grand strategy in one important respect: it gave rise to voices calling for the muscular assertion of U.S. power to create a new American Empire. Yet, in saying this, care must be exercised. Although the question of whether the United States *should* be an empire has been contested at least since the Spanish–American War (1898), it is undeniable that America *has* been an empire for a long time. Similarly, although the proponents of a new American Empire have called for regime change and the promotion of democracy abroad, this too is hardly a new departure in U.S. foreign policy. These have been key features of American policy since Woodrow Wilson’s time. More recently, the “enlargement” of democracy was the centerpiece of the Clinton administration’s grand strategy. Moreover, President Bill Clinton himself, as well as other key administration officials, made it clear that the United States had the right to intervene in the domestic affairs of nondemocratic states. As President Clinton declared in April 1993:

During the Cold War our foreign policies largely focused on relations among nations. Our strategies sought a balance of power to keep the peace. *Today, our policies must also focus on relations within nations, on a nation’s form of governance, on its economic structure, on its ethnic tolerance.* These are of concern to us, *for they shape how these nations treat their neighbors as well as their own people and whether they are reliable when they give their word.*²⁰

And, well before President George W. Bush proclaimed that America’s democratic values are “universal,” President Clinton said the same thing—specifically, that those values are a “universal aspiration.”²¹

Notwithstanding these continuities in U.S. policy, 9/11 *did* change some things. First, it brought about a dramatic change in the tone of the Bush II administration’s foreign policy. It is easy to forget that during the 2000 presidential campaign, candidate George W. Bush intimated that he understood that the strategy of primacy could boomerang against the United States. He

said that, if elected, under his administration the United States would be guided by “realism,” act on the world stage with “humility,” renounce the Wilsonian idealism of the Clinton administration (and, although he, of course, did not say so, also of the Bush I administration), and forego “nation-building” abroad. After 9/11, of course, the Bush II administration embraced both the substance and the rhetoric of primacy and empire—indeed, compared to the Bush I and Clinton administrations, the Bush II administration approach was primacy and empire on stimulants.

The jarring contrast between George W. Bush’s foreign policy stance during the 2000 election and its post-9/11 rhetoric and policies raises an interesting question: Did Bush’s statements as a candidate sincerely reflect his foreign policy preferences? Put another way, but for 9/11 would the Bush II administration have renounced the strategy of primacy? Almost certainly not. The Bush II administration brought to power a number of policy-makers who either were “neoconservatives” or were strongly influenced in their foreign policy views by the arguments that have been advanced beginning in the 1990s by neoconservative intellectuals, including *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol, Robert Kagan, Max Boot, Charles Krauthammer, Ben Wattenberg, and the British historian (and now Harvard professor) Niall Ferguson. Foremost among these administration officials were Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, senior Defense Department officials Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, presidential speechwriter David Frum, and Cheney’s former national security adviser, I. Lewis (“Scooter”) Libby.

These officials came to office with an expansive view of America’s interests in the world. As James Mann has observed, their “vision was that of an unchallengeable America, a United States whose military power was so awesome that it no longer needed to make compromises or accommodations (unless it chose to do so) with any other nation or groups of countries.”²² Indeed, even before 9/11 there were signs—its hard-line stance with respect to China and North Korea, its decision to build a national missile defense system despite the qualms of the NATO allies, and its skepticism toward international treaties—that the administration would prefer primacy to “humility.” For the administration’s primacists, 9/11 was an almost providential event that gave them a green light to follow the policy course—a highly militarized and confrontational strategy of primacy—that they would have wished to pursue in any event, but for which they might otherwise have lacked public and congressional support—especially applying the strategy of empire to gain dominance in the Middle East.

It is here, perhaps, that the events of 9/11 most obviously changed American grand strategy. 9/11 accelerated the morphing of the post-Cold War debate about American *primacy* into a debate about American *empire*. Of course, although the notion of an American Empire is nothing new, most Americans

undoubtedly believe that the United States is not—and never has been—an empire. After all, one of the first history lessons Americans learn is that the United States gained independence by rebelling against Britain’s imperial rule. And, at least since Woodrow Wilson’s time, the United States has presented itself to the world as an opponent of (European) imperialism and a champion of anticolonialism. And, of course, U.S. policy-makers routinely deny that America harbors imperial ambitions. As President George W. Bush declared in his January 2004 State of the Union address, “We have no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire.”²³ These denials resonate with Americans, who tend to think that empire involves land-grabbing and flag-planting in overseas territories.

The truth, however, is different. From its inception, the United States has been a nation driven by imperial ambitions and a corresponding sense of national mission. As Richard Van Alstyne has noted, the Founding Fathers believed that the United States was a “rising empire”; that is, a nation “that would expand in population and territory, and increase in strength and territory.”²⁴ Until the War Between the States, America’s territorial expansion was confined to the North American continent and did not take place overseas, which may explain why Americans tend not to think of this period of U.S. history as an age of American imperialism. This expansion was both ruthless and aggressive and came at the expense of the European great powers that had North American interests (Britain, France, Spain), of Mexico (in the war of conquest initiated by the United States in 1846), and, of course, the native American Indians who had the misfortune to find themselves in the way as the United States fulfilled its “Manifest Destiny” by expanding all the way to the Pacific Ocean from its original enclave on the Atlantic seaboard.

For sure, it is commonplace to believe that empires are based on the conquest and direct rule of overseas lands—literally planting the flag on foreign soil. Following the Spanish-American War, of course, the United States did flirt briefly with this traditional form of imperialism, when it acquired the Philippines and Puerto Rico, and (at about the same time) annexed Hawaii. However, for the modern American Empire, the acquisition of colonies has been the exception, not the rule. This kind of formal imperialism is not the only way a powerful state can establish an empire abroad. A great power also can establish an *informal* empire by using its military and economic muscle—and its culture and ideology (what foreign policy analysts frequently call “soft power”)—to install and maintain compliant, friendly regimes in foreign territories. By ruling indirectly through local elites, an imperial power can forego the burdens of direct colonial rule. The American Empire since 1900 has followed this path. Specifically, American imperialism has taken the form of what Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher described as the “imperialism of free trade” and what William Appleman Williams called the “imperialism of idealism”—that is, by democracy promotion and regime change.

The new—post-Cold War and post-9/11—American Empire traces its lineage directly to the old American Empire of the twentieth century, the geographic core of which was western Europe and East Asia. But 9/11 did mark a change in the way policy-makers conceive of the American Empire. The new American Empire is distinguished from the old American Empire by its geographical focal point—the Middle East—and by its breathtaking ambition of transforming the Islamic world. As the invasion of Iraq demonstrated, it is an empire constructed on the marriage of raw military power and a militant ideology. In the early 1990s, neoconservative foreign policy thinkers began developing the concepts that would provide the intellectual framework for the new American Empire. First, the United States would have to deal with dangerous “rogue states” and ensure they did not acquire nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons (the so-called weapons of mass destruction; WMD). These rogue states invariably did not share America’s democratic values, which, as the neoconservative architects of the American Empire viewed it, is precisely what made them rogue states. Thus, second, the United States had both the right, and the obligation, to use its power “to shape the international environment to its own advantage” by “actively promoting American principles and governance abroad—democracy, free markets, respect for liberty.”²⁵ The architects of the current American Empire made clear that U.S. strategy would seek to promote America’s interests *and* its values. Indeed, for them the two were identical, because as the neoconservative foreign policy intellectuals saw it, to be secure the United States would have to export liberal democratic principles. Well before the Bush II administration spoke of the “axis of evil,” or “outposts of tyranny,” neoconservative foreign policy thinkers had pinpointed exactly which states were in their geopolitical crosshairs *and* what the United States should do about them: “in the post-Cold War era a principal aim of American foreign policy should be to bring about a change of regime in hostile nations—in Baghdad and Belgrade, in Pyongyang and Beijing, and wherever tyrannical governments acquire the military power to threaten their neighbors, their allies, or the United States itself.”²⁶

The foundations of America’s post-9/11 imperial Middle Eastern policy were in place well before the events of 9/11. In January 1998, for example, many of the neoconservative architects of the current American Empire wrote an open letter to President Bill Clinton arguing that “removing Saddam Hussein and his regime from power...now needs to become the aim of American foreign policy.”²⁷ Neoconservatives had a long track record of virulent, ideologically tinged hostility to Islamic fundamentalism. After 9/11, their views came to the forefront of the U.S. foreign policy debate. Foreshadowing the Bush II administration’s crusade against “Islamofascism,” in November 2001 Charles Krauthammer depicted the threat posed by *al Qaeda* as similar to that posed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union: “We have an enemy, radical Islam; it is a global opponent of worldwide reach, armed with an idea, and

with the tactics, weapons, and ruthlessness necessary to take on the world’s hegemon; and its defeat is our supreme national objective, as overriding a necessity as were the defeats of fascism and Soviet communism.”²⁸ 9/11, it was said, demonstrated that the United States was involved in “a new existential struggle, this time with an enemy even more fanatical, fatalistic and indeed undeterrable than in the past.”²⁹

9/11 enabled the neoconservatives to translate their transformational, imperial aspirations for the Middle East into actual U.S. policy. As James Mann has pointed out, even before 9/11, the architects of the new American Empire had concluded that with the Cold War’s end, the United States no longer needed to tie its regional policies to authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia and those of the Gulf emirates.³⁰ The region was, they believed, ripe for a democratic transformation. That, or so they say, is the only way to “get to the root of the problem, which is the cauldron of political oppression, religious intolerance and social ruin in the Arab-Islamic world—oppression transmuted and deflected by regimes with no legitimacy into the virulent, murderous anti-Americanism that exploded upon us on 9/11.”³¹ 9/11 was both the catalyst, and the pretext, for the United States to put this policy into effect. Whether the United States could have pursued these ambitions of causing a democratic transformation in the Middle East prior to 9/11 is doubtful, but 9/11 opened the door for the Bush II administration to attempt to incorporate the Middle East into the American Empire.

The Case against the American Empire

Preserving American Hegemony

American hegemony today is an objective fact, reflecting the absence of other great powers (what U.S. strategists call “peer competitors”) and U.S. hard power. The Soviet Union’s collapse, of course, removed from the geopolitical equation the one state capable of acting as a counterweight to American power. No other state has stepped up to fill this geopolitical vacuum created by its downfall. Indeed, the sheer magnitude of U.S. power makes it difficult—and possibly dangerous—for other states to emerge as countervailing power centers. Militarily, American power is awesome. The United States spends more on defense than the rest of the world combined. And U.S. superiority is qualitative, not just quantitative. Presently, no state can compare with the U.S. military skills in high-tech conventional warfare. The United States enjoys a commanding advantage in the use of stealth aircraft, precision-guided munitions, the integrated use of computer systems and reconnaissance and communications satellites, and long-range power projection capabilities. Moreover, the United States enjoys a commanding advantage in nuclear weapons. Indeed, the United States has a first-strike capability against China and may have a similar advantage over Russia. Economically, the story is the same.

The U.S. economy remains far and away the largest economy in the world (far ahead of number two Japan, and even farther ahead of fast-rising China).

Given this formidable—indeed, overwhelming—hard power, the obvious question is what is wrong with a strategy that seeks to preserve American primacy; that is, U.S. dominance of a unipolar world? After all, the strategy does have both an intuitive, and a logical, plausibility. Power is important in international politics, and the United States today has a lot of it. What could be better than being the only great power in a unipolar world? The obvious answer (the answer given by advocates of primacy) is “nothing could be better,” and, hence, the United States should do everything it can to perpetuate its current geopolitical preeminence. Indeed, if the Duchess of Windsor had been an American strategist she doubtless would have said that the United States can never be too rich, too powerful, or too well armed. In the abstract, it is difficult to quarrel with this line of thinking. In the real world, however, the attempt to preserve American primacy is likely to backfire against the United States.

The Fate of Hegemons: Why Other States Will “Balance” against American Primacy

The intellectual foundation for American primacy is what is known as “offensive realist” theory.³² This is one of several versions of the realist approach to international politics. Offensive realism holds that the best strategy for a great power is to gain primacy because, if it can do so, it will not face any serious challenges to its security. There are two reasons why offensive realists believe this to be true. First, if a great power successfully gains primacy, its overwhelming power will dissuade others from challenging it. Second, primacy alleviates uncertainty about other states’ intentions and about the present and future distribution of power in the international system. As John Mearshimer puts it, in the dog-eat-dog world of great power politics, “states quickly understand that the best way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful state in the system.”³³ Simply put, the grand strategy prescribed by offensive realism is that a great power should grab all the power it can get. This certainly is what the United States has sought to do since the Cold War’s end.

At first glance, the logic of offensive realism appears to be compelling. However, when looked at closely, it leaves out some factors that have—or should have—a crucial role in grand strategic calculations. The most important of these is geography. Offensive realist theory is based on the history of multipolar European great power politics that ended only in 1945. On the Continent, multiple great powers contended for supremacy in a geographically compact area. Geopolitically speaking, Europe was a tough neighborhood where each of the major powers was always at risk of being attacked, and conquered, by its nearby rivals. Under these conditions, gaining primacy—what historian A.J.P. Taylor called “the mastery of Europe”—was the only way to break out

of the permanent state of insecurity and fear that characterized Continental power politics.

However, while offensive realism explains the behavior of Continental powers, it does a poor job of accounting for the grand strategies of offshore—or insular—great powers like Great Britain (during its imperial heyday) or—even more so—the United States since 1900. Britain and the United States have been shielded both by geography and their own considerable military capabilities from invasion. Indeed, the United States has been—and is—the most secure great power in history. The reasons are well known. The United States has been blessed with weak neighbors on the North American continent and has been protected from hostile rivals by the vast expanse of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The defensive impact of geography has been reinforced by U.S. naval and air power, and, after, 1945, by its nuclear deterrent capabilities. Even after 9/11, the United States is all but invulnerable to *existential* threats emanating from abroad. To put it another way, the logic of offensive realism does not apply to the United States: the United States does *not* need to seek global primacy to gain security because it *already* is secure. Moreover, there is a compelling reason for the United States to forego the goal of maintaining its global primacy.

Counterpoised against offensive realism is another variant of realist theory: balance of power realism. Balance of power theorists argue that in one way, at least, international politics is like physics: every action triggers a reaction. Specifically, when one great power becomes too powerful—that is, verges on, or gains, primacy—other great powers respond by “balancing” against it. That is, they build up their military capabilities (internal balancing) and/or enter into alliances with other great powers (external balancing) to stop it. The reason is simple: when one state becomes too powerful, it threatens other states’ security.

States are ever-vigilant when it comes to maintaining their security because they want to survive as independent players in international politics. Up to a point, therefore, it is a good thing for a state to be powerful. But when a state becomes *too* powerful, it frightens others; in self-defense, they seek to offset and contain those great powers that aspire to primacy. And the ironclad lesson of history is clear: states that bid for hegemony (primacy) invariably fail. As Henry A. Kissinger has said, “hegemonic empires almost automatically elicit universal resistance, which is why all such claimants have sooner or later exhausted themselves.”³⁴ Indeed, the history of modern international politics is strewn with the geopolitical wreckage of states that bid unsuccessfully for primacy: The Hapsburg Empire under Charles V, France under Louis XIV and Napoleon, Victorian Britain, Germany under Hitler. By pursuing a strategy of primacy, the United States today risks the same fate that has befallen other great powers that have striven to dominate the international political system.

Is American Primacy Different?

Despite the impressive historical evidence that the quest for primacy ends in ruin, the proponents of American primacy claim that the United States is an exception to the rule. Here, two arguments are commonly invoked. One is the assertion that the United States' lead in hard power is so massive that no other state(s) can even aspire to catch up with the United States.³⁵ The second claim is somewhat different: even if other states could emerge as peer competitors to the United States, they have no incentive actually to do so because they do not perceive *American* primacy as threatening. On the contrary, U.S. primacy is unique—or so it is said—because the United States is a “benevolent” hegemon. Both of these assertions contain just enough truth to be superficially plausible. However, when examined a bit more closely, neither of them provides an accurate gauge of the future of American primacy.

Can the United States Be Caught? Up to a point, the primacists are correct. In terms of hard power, there is a yawning gap between the United States and the next-ranking powers. It will take some time before any other state emerges as a true “peer competitor” of the United States. Nevertheless, at some point within the next decade or two, new great power rivals to the United States will emerge. To put it slightly differently, American primacy cannot be sustained indefinitely. The relative power position of great powers is dynamic, not static, which means that at any point in time some states are gaining in relative power while others are losing it. Thus, as Paul Kennedy has observed, no great power ever has been able “to remain *permanently* ahead of all others, because that would imply a freezing of the differentiated pattern of growth rates, technological advance, and military developments which has existed since time immemorial.”³⁶ Even the most ardent primacists know this to be true, which is why they concede that American primacy won't last forever. Indeed, the leading primacists acknowledge, that—at *best*—the United States will not be able to hold onto its primacy much beyond 2030. There are indications, however, that American primacy could end much sooner than that. Already there is evidence suggesting that new great powers are in the process of emerging. This is what the current debate in the United States about the implications of China's rise is all about. But China isn't the only factor in play, and transition from U.S. primacy to multipolarity may be much closer than primacists want to admit. For example, in its survey of likely international developments up until 2020, the CIA's National Intelligence Council's report *Mapping the Global Future* notes:

The likely emergence of China and India as new major global players—similar to the rise of Germany in the 19th century and the United States in the early 20th century—will transform the geopolitical landscape, with impacts potentially as dramatic as those of the previous two

centuries. In the same way that commentators refer to the 1900s as the American Century, the early 21st century may be seen as the time when some in the developing world led by China and India came into their own.³⁷

In a similar vein, a recent study by the CIA's Strategic Assessment Group projects that by 2020 both China (which *Mapping the Global Future* pegs as “by any measure a first-rate military power” around 2020) and the European Union will come close to matching the United States in terms of their respective shares of world power.³⁸ For sure, there are always potential pitfalls in projecting current trends several decades into the future (not least is that it is not easy to convert economic power into effective military power). But if the ongoing shift in the distribution of relative power continues, new poles of power in the international system are likely to emerge during the next decade or two. The real issue is not *if* American primacy will end, but *how soon* it will end.

Is America a Benevolent Hegemon? The second leg of the argument that U.S. primacy is an exception to the rule rests on three closely related claims. First, other states—at least those that are not rogue states, “outposts of tyranny,” or part of the “axis of evil”—will not resist American primacy because U.S. power does not threaten them. Second, many other states do not fear American power because they share liberal democratic values with the United States. Third, others' fears of U.S. power are assuaged because the United States acts altruistically and does good things for the international system. Indeed, because other states benefit in many ways from American primacy, they supposedly regard the United States not as a threat, but as a positive factor in international politics. As Michael Mandelbaum puts it, the United States may be Goliath in international politics, “but it is a benign one.”³⁹ He goes on to argue:

The United States does not endanger other countries, nor does it invariably act without regard to the interests and wishes of others. Second, far from menacing the world, the United States plays a uniquely positive global role. The governments of most other countries understand that, although they have powerful reasons not to say so explicitly.⁴⁰

This argument cannot simply be dismissed out of hand.

American primacy *does* benefit the world in some ways. Scholars of international political economy have devised an explanation—“hegemonic stability theory”—to show just why this is so. Like Britain during the period from 1814 to 1914, American military and economic power provides the framework for an open, economically interdependent—in today's catchword, “globalized”—international economy. The U.S. dollar is the international economy's “reserve currency,” which serves as the medium of exchange and thus lubricates international trade and investment. Through the huge outflow of dollars—a

combined effect of the U.S. merchandise trade deficit, overseas investments by American firms, and foreign aid and military expenditures overseas—the United States provides the international economy with liquidity. The United States—generally acting through institutions that it controls like the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—also is the international economy’s “lender of last resort.” American largess—typically in the form of low-interest loans by the IMF—is what keeps tottering economies in East Asia, Mexico, and Latin America from going belly-up. Finally, the United States is the world’s market, or consumer, of last resort. Americans’ seemingly insatiable demand for overseas products—cars, electronics, computers, apparel—drives the growth of overseas economies like those of China, India, South Korea, and Latin America. The boundless appetite of U.S. consumers for foreign goods is the locomotive force for global economic growth.

Other countries also benefit from American military power. Wars are bad for business, and the U.S. military presence abroad supposedly “reassures” East Asia and Europe that these regions will remain stable and peaceful, thereby contributing to economic confidence. As Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld put it, other states “think of the value [U.S.-provided] security provides the world, and the fact that all of the economic activity that takes place is stunted and frightened by instability and fear....”⁴¹ Moreover, the U.S. military protects the “global commons” of air, sea, and space—the avenues through which information is transmitted, and through which goods and people flow from nation to nation. Most important, because many states abroad live in dangerous neighborhoods, the forward deployment of U.S. military forces protects them from troublemakers that live nearby. Moreover, because American military power supposedly is “off-shore,” the United States does not threaten the security of other states. As Stephen Walt puts it, “The United States is by far the world’s most *powerful* state, but it does not pose a significant *threat* to the vital interests of the major powers.”⁴²

According to primacists, far from being apprehensive about American hard power and balancing against the United States, other states eagerly seek to shelter under the protective umbrella that American primacy provides. Consequently, in Europe, the United States ensures Russia and east central Europe that they will not be menaced by resurgent Germany while simultaneously protecting east central Europe from a revived Russian threat. In East Asia, the situation is similar. There, American military power shields Japan and Taiwan from China, and South Korea from North Korea. In the Middle East, the U.S. military commitment protects Saudi Arabia and the oil-producing Gulf emirates—and Israel—from Iran (just as it protected them before March 2003 from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq). According to the proponents of the American primacy, by maintaining order in these regions, the United States keeps a lid on long-simmering historical animosities, precludes national rivalries from resurfacing and forestalls destabilizing arms races—and possibly major war.

A final reason that others supposedly regard American primacy as “benevolent” is because the United States is a *liberal* hegemon. As such, it is said, America’s “soft power”—its ideals, political institutions, and culture—draws other states into Washington’s orbit. As Harvard professor Joseph S. Nye Jr., asserts, because of America’s soft power “others do not see us as a threat, but rather as an attraction.”⁴³ In a similar vein, G. John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan have argued that the liberal democratic nature of America’s domestic political system legitimates U.S. primacy and simultaneously reassures others that the United States will exercise its power with restraint.⁴⁴ As one neoconservative commentator has put it, the rest of the world accepts American primacy because they “know that they have little to fear or distrust from a righteous state.”⁴⁵ This belief routinely is echoed in official pronouncements, such as a Pentagon policy statement that declared: “Our fundamental belief in democracy and human rights gives other nations confidence that our significant military power threatens no one’s aspirations for peaceful democratic progress.”⁴⁶ All in all, the liberal nature of American primacy supposedly reinforces the confidence of other states that—its vast power notwithstanding—the United States is not a threat because, as G. John Ikenberry puts it, it “is a mature, *status quo* power that pursues a restrained and accommodating grand strategy.”⁴⁷

The truth, however, is that the United States is not at all a *status quo* power. Now, for sure, the American primacists are content with the prevailing unipolar *status quo*. That is, they want to make sure that the United States retains its role as the sole superpower. But in a more fundamental sense, the United States is the antithesis of a *status quo* power. Rather, it is an expansionist power that constantly is attempting to add to its lead in relative power vis-à-vis potential rivals; extend the territorial reach of its military power (for example, by acquiring new bases in Central Asia); and enlarge its influence ideologically by spreading “democracy” worldwide. Indeed, the whole debate about the new American Empire underscores the expansionist impulses driving U.S. grand strategy today. If any doubt existed on this point, the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003 dispelled it. Around the world, Iraq removed the veil of American “benevolence” and revealed to the rest of the world the aggrandizing and self-interested nature of U.S. grand strategy.

The claim that others regard American primacy as benevolent because of U.S. *soft* power and shared values is similarly dubious. And again, Iraq played an important role in exploding this myth. Beginning with the run-up to the invasion of Iraq to the present, one public opinion survey after another has revealed that a vast “values gap” exists between the United States and the rest of the world. Tellingly, this gap exists not just between the United States and East Asia and the Middle East, but between the United States and Europe. One would think that if there is any part of the world where shared values really do cause others to view American primacy as benevolent, Europe would be

the place. Yet, a September 2004 poll of eight thousand respondents on both sides of the Atlantic found that 83 percent of Americans, and 79 percent of Europeans, agreed that Europe and the United States have different social and cultural values.⁴⁸ On a host of issues—including the death penalty, the role of religion in everyday life, and attitudes toward the role of international law and institutions—Europeans and Americans hold divergent views, not common ones. The Iraq war has exposed the huge gulf in values that gradually is causing the United States and Europe to drift apart—in large measure because Europe regards the United States as being a geopolitical rogue elephant, rather than as a “benevolent hegemon.” The problem with rogue elephants, of course, is that when they are on the loose anyone nearby is at risk of being trampled. This is why other states are uneasy about American primacy.

For sure, many states do benefit both economically and in terms of security from American primacy. And it also is true that not *all* other states will feel threatened by U.S. hard power. Eventually, however, some of the other states in the international political system *are* going to believe that they are menaced by American primacy. For example, far from being “off-shore” as the primacists claim, U.S. power is very much on shore—or lurking just beyond the coastline—and very much in the faces of China, Russia, and the Islamic world. And, in this sense, international politics is not a lot different than basketball: players who push others around and get in their faces are likely to be the targets of a self-defensive punch in the nose.

Doubtless, American primacy has its dimension of benevolence, but a state as powerful as the United States can never be benevolent *enough* to offset the fear that other states have of its unchecked power. In international politics, benevolent hegemony are like unicorns—there is no such animal. Hegemony love themselves, but others mistrust and fear them—and for good reason. In today’s world, others dread both the overconcentration of geopolitical weight in America’s favor and the purposes for which it may be used. After all, “No great power has a monopoly on virtue and, although some may have a great deal more virtue than others, virtue imposed on others is not seen as such by them. All great powers are capable of exercising a measure of self-restraint, but they are tempted not to and the choice to practice restraint is made easier by the existence of countervailing power and the possibility of it being exercised.”⁴⁹ While Washington’s self-proclaimed benevolence is inherently ephemeral, the hard fist of American power is tangible. Others must worry constantly that if U.S. intentions change, bad things may happen to them. In a one-superpower world, the overconcentration of power in America’s hands is an omnipresent challenge to other states’ security, and Washington’s ability to reassure others of its benevolence is limited by the very enormity of its power.

American Hegemony: 9/11 and Beyond

Contrary to what its proponents claim, in at least three respects, primacy causes *insecurity* for the United States. First, even before 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, the heavy hand of U.S. primacy pressed down on the Middle East, as the United States sought to establish political, military, and cultural ascendancy in the region. Terrorist groups like *al Qaeda* are a form of blowback against long-standing U.S. policies in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf—including American support for authoritarian regimes in the region, and uncritical support for Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians. America’s current strategy of primacy and empire also means that the United States is on a collision course with China and Iran. In both cases, the logic of U.S. strategy suggests that preventive and preemptive options are on the table to thwart the rise of a prospective peer competitor (China) and a regional rival (Iran). Tensions with China and Iran also are being fueled by the liberal—Wilsonian—thrust of American strategy that challenges the legitimacy of nondemocratic regimes while aggressively aiming at the promotion of democracy abroad.

Terrorism: When Over There Becomes Over Here 9/11 was not a random act of violence visited upon the United States. The United States was the target of *al Qaeda*’s terrorist strikes because that group harbored specific political grievances against the United States. If we step back for a moment from our horror and revulsion at the events of September 11, we can see that the attack was in keeping with the Clausewitzian paradigm of war: force was used against the United States by its adversaries to advance their political objectives. As Michael Scheurer, who headed the CIA analytical team monitoring Osama bin Laden and *al Qaeda*, put it, “In the context of ideas bin Laden shares with his brethren, the military actions of *al Qaeda* and its allies are acts of war, not terrorism...meant to advance bin Laden’s clear, focused, limited, and widely popular foreign policy goals...”⁵⁰ Terrorism, Bruce Hoffman says, is “about power: the pursuit of power, the acquisition of power, and use of power to achieve political change.”⁵¹ As Clausewitz himself observed, “war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object.”⁵² Terrorism really is a form of asymmetric warfare waged against the United States by groups that lack the military wherewithal to slug it out with the United States toe-to-toe. 9/11 was a violent counterreaction to America’s geopolitical—and cultural—primacy. As Richard K. Betts presciently observed in a 1998 *Foreign Affairs* article, “It is hardly likely that Middle Eastern radicals would be hatching schemes like the destruction of the World Trade Center if the United States had not been identified so long as the mainstay of Israel, the shah of Iran, and conservative Arab regimes and the source of a cultural assault on Islam.”⁵³ U.S. primacy fuels terrorist groups like *al Qaeda* and fans Islamic fundamentalism, which is a form of “blowback” against America’s preponderance and its world role.⁵⁴ As long as the United States uses its global primacy

to impose its imperial sway on regions like the Persian Gulf, it will be the target of politically motivated terrorist groups like *al Qaeda*.

After 9/11, many foreign policy analysts and pundits asked the question, "Why do they hate us?" This question missed the key point, however. No doubt, there are Islamic fundamentalists who do "hate" the United States for cultural, religious, and ideological reasons. And, for sure, notwithstanding American neoconservatives' obvious relish for making it so, to some extent the War on Terrorism inescapably has overtones of a "clash of civilizations." Still, this isn't—and should not be allowed to become—a replay of the Crusades. As Scheuer says, "one of the greatest dangers for Americans in deciding how to confront the Islamist threat lies in continuing to believe—at the urging of senior U.S. leaders—that Muslims hate and attack us for what we are and think, rather than for what we do."⁵⁵ The United States may be greatly reviled in some quarters of the Islamic world, but were the United States not so intimately involved in the affairs of the Middle East, it's hardly likely that this detestation would have manifested itself as violently as it did on 9/11.

Experts on terrorism understand the political motives that drive the actions of groups like *al Qaeda*. In his important recent study of suicide terrorists, Robert A. Pape found that what "nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland."⁵⁶ Pape found that "even *al Qaeda* fits this pattern: although Saudi Arabia is not under American military occupation *per se*, a principal objective of Osama bin Laden is the expulsion of American troops from the Persian Gulf and the reduction of Washington's power in the region."⁵⁷ This finding is seconded by Scheuer, who describes bin Laden's objectives as: "the end of U.S. aid to Israel and the ultimate elimination of that state; the removal of U.S. and Western forces from the Arabian Peninsula; the removal of U.S. and Western military forces from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Muslim lands; the end of U.S. support for oppression of Muslims by Russia, China, and India; the end of U.S. protection for repressive, apostate Muslim regimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, et cetera; and the conservation of the Muslim world's energy resources and their sale at higher prices."⁵⁸ Simply put, it is American primacy, and the *policies* that flow from it, that have made the United States a lightning rod for Islamic anger.

The Coming Clash with China Almost from the moment the Soviet Union collapsed, American officials have worried about the strategic implications of China's rise. U.S. policy toward China during the last three administrations has been complex. All three post-Cold War administrations have made clear that they are not prepared to countenance China's emergence as a peer competitor. The United States, however, is willing to give China the opportunity to integrate itself into the American-led international order—on Washington's

terms. Thus, the United States encourages China to become a "responsible member of the international community."⁵⁹ "Responsibility," however, is defined as Beijing's willingness to accept Washington's vision of a stable international order.⁶⁰ Specifically, "responsibility" means that Beijing "adjusts to the international rules developed over the last century"; in particular, to the international security and economic frameworks that were created following World War II by a dominant United States.⁶¹ "Responsibility," as President Bush reiterated in his November 2005 speech in Kyoto, also means China's domestic political liberalization and its development as a free market economy firmly anchored to the international economy.⁶² As the Bush II administration's 2002 *National Security Strategy* declares, "America will encourage the advancement of democracy and economic openness" in China "because these are the best foundations for domestic stability and international order." As Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick underscored, "closed politics cannot be a permanent feature of Chinese society."⁶³ If anything, the Bush II administration's 2006 *National Security Strategy* suggests that the United States' insistence on China's democratization has hardened. As that document states:

The United States encourages China to continue down the road of reform and openness, because in this way China's leaders can meet the legitimate needs and aspirations of the Chinese people for liberty, stability, and prosperity. As economic growth continues, China will face a growing demand from its own people to follow the political path of East Asia's modern democracy, adding political freedom to economic freedom. Continuing along this path will contribute to regional and international security... Only by allowing the Chinese people to enjoy these basic freedoms and universal rights can China honor its own constitution and international commitments and reach its full potential. Our strategy seeks to encourage China to make the right strategic choices for its people, while we hedge against other possibilities.⁶⁴

In essence, then, American grand strategy requires China to accept U.S. primacy, and the ideology that underpins it—which means trouble ahead in Sino-American relations.

Although "the United States welcomes a confident, peaceful, and prosperous China that appreciates that its growth and development depends on constructive connections with the rest of the world," the United States is not willing to countenance a China that emerges as a great power rival and challenges American primacy.⁶⁵ Unsurprisingly, U.S. grand strategy under both the Bush II and Clinton administrations has aimed at holding down China. While acknowledging that China is a *regional* power, both the Clinton and Bush II administrations have been unwilling to concede that China either is, or legitimately can aspire to be, a world-class great power.⁶⁶ Enjoining China

against challenging the United States militarily, the Bush II administration's 2002 *National Security Strategy* warns Beijing that "In pursuing advanced military capabilities that can threaten its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region, China is following an outdated path that, in the end, will hamper its own pursuit of national greatness. In time, China will find that social and political freedom is the only source of that greatness."⁶⁷ Washington rejects the notion that China has any justifiable basis for regarding the American military presence in East Asia as threatening to its interests.⁶⁸ Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld recently reiterated this point when he suggested that any moves by China to enhance its military capabilities are, ipso facto, a signal of aggressive Chinese intent. According to Rumsfeld, China's military modernization cannot possibly be defensive because "no nation threatens China"—a view restated in the Bush II administration's report, *The Military Power of the People's Republic of China*.⁶⁹ In the Pentagon's view, "China's military modernization remains ambitious" and in coming years "China's leaders may be tempted to resort to force or coercion more quickly to press diplomatic advantage, advance security interests, or resolve disputes."⁷⁰

The Bush II administration has not entirely abandoned engagement with Beijing, but—more openly than the Bush I and Clinton administrations—it has embraced containment of China as an alternative to engagement. Given the influence of neoconservative foreign policy intellectuals on the administration's grand strategy, this is unsurprising. After all, during the 1990s, leading neoconservatives were part of the so-called Blue Team of anti-China hardliners in the foreign policy community.⁷¹ Containment is a strategy that emphasizes using the traditional hard power tools of statecraft to prevent China's great power emergence and maintain American primacy.⁷² The heart of containment, however, lies in military power and alliance diplomacy.

What, specifically, do primacists mean when they call for China's containment? First, they want the United States to pledge explicitly to defend Taiwan from Chinese attack and also to help Taiwan build up its own military capabilities. Primacists believe that the United States should not back away from confronting China over Taiwan and, indeed, they would like the United States to *provoke* such a showdown. They also want the United States to emulate its anti-Soviet Cold War strategy by assembling a powerful alliance of states that share a common interest in curbing rising Chinese power. As part of such a strategy, the United States should tighten its security relationship with Japan and invest it with an overtly anti-Chinese mission. Needless to say, primacists are determined that the United States maintain its conventional and nuclear military superiority over China. Indeed, with respect to nuclear weapons, as Keir Lieber and Daryl Press have pointed out in an important *Foreign Affairs* article, the United States currently has an overwhelming nuclear first-strike capability against China, which will be augmented by the national ballistic missile defense system that the United States currently is deploying. Even if

Beijing switches its military modernization priorities from its current conventional defense buildup to the enhancement of its strategic nuclear deterrent, it will take some time before China could offset the first-strike capability that the United States possesses.

Advocates of containment hope that the various measures encompassed by this strategy will halt China's rise and preserve American primacy.⁷³ However, as one leading proponent of containment argues, if these steps fail to stop China's great power emergence, "the United States should consider harsher measures."⁷⁴ That is, before its current military advantage over China is narrowed, the United States should launch a preventive war to forestall China's emergence as a peer competitor. Of course, in the abstract, preventive war always has been an option in great powers' strategic playbooks—typically as a strategy that declining great powers employ against rising challengers. However, it also is a strategy that also can appeal to a dominant power that still is on top of its game and is determined to squelch potential challengers before they become actual threats.

In fact, preventive war (along with preemptive military strikes) is the grand strategic approach of the Bush II administration, as set out in its 2002 *National Security Strategy* (and reaffirmed by the administration in its 2006 *National Security Strategy*), and in policy statements by senior administration officials (including President George W. Bush himself). There is nothing in the *logic* of the administration's grand strategy doctrines of preventive war and preemptive action that suggests that it is applicable only to terrorist groups like *al Qaeda* and so-called rouge states (like Iran and North Korea). If anything, preventive strategies should be most appealing with respect to potential rivals like China—those who could become peer competitors of the United States. Here, the primacists' fixation on defending Taiwan suggests that an American commitment to that island's defense is valued most because it could afford Washington a possible pretext to take on China in a preventive war.

To be sure, the United States should not ignore the potential strategic ramifications of China's arrival on the world stage as a great power. After all, the lesson of history is that the emergence of new great powers in the international system leads to conflict, not peace. On this score, the notion—propagated by Beijing—that China's will be a "peaceful rise" is just as fanciful as claims by American policy-makers that China has no need to build up its military capabilities because it is unthreatened by any other state. Still, this does not mean that the United States and China inevitably are on a collision course that will culminate in the next decade or two in a war. Whether Washington and Beijing actually come to blows, however, depends largely on what strategy the United States chooses to adopt toward China, because the United States has the "last clear chance" to adopt a grand strategy that will serve its interests in balancing Chinese power without running the risk of an armed clash with

Beijing. If the United States continues to aim at upholding its current primacy, however, Sino-American conflict is virtually certain.

There are three elements of current U.S. grand strategy toward China that needed to be reconsidered. The first two are the linked issues of trade and domestic liberalization. Trade is an issue where just about everyone involved in the current debate about America's China policy has gotten it wrong. Engagement—based on economic interdependence and free trade—neither will constrain China to behave “responsibly” nor lead to an evolutionary transformation of China's domestic system (certainly not in any policy-relevant time span). Unfettered free trade simply will accelerate the pace of China's great power emergence: the more China becomes linked to the global economy, the more rapidly it is able to grow in both absolute and relative economic power. To be sure, short of preventive war, there is nothing the United States can do to prevent China from eventually emerging as a great power. Thus, there would be no point in simply ceasing economic relations with China. But the United States must be careful about how—and why—it trades with Beijing.

American trade with China should be driven by strategic, not market, considerations. If Washington cannot prevent China's rise to great power status, it nonetheless does have some control over the pace of China's great power emergence. A U.S. trade policy that helps accelerate this process is shortsighted and contrary to America's strategic interests. The United States must reduce China's export surplus to deprive it of hard-currency reserves that Beijing uses to import high technology and to invest in building up its economic and technological infrastructure (which, in turn, contributes to the modernization of China's military). Washington also should tightly regulate the direct outflow of critical advanced technology from the United States to China in the form of licensing, offset, or joint venture agreements. Individual American corporations may have an interest in penetrating the Chinese market, but there is no *national* interest, for example, in permitting U.S. firms to facilitate China's development of an advanced aerospace industry.

On the other hand, those U.S. hard-liners who want to use Sino-American trade as a bludgeon to compel Beijing to accept America's demands with respect to human rights and democratization also have gotten it wrong: while American leverage is too limited to have any significant positive effects, Washington's attempts to transform China domestically inflame Sino-American relations. America's values are not universally accepted as a model to emulate, least of all by China. Washington's attempts to “export” democracy to China are especially shortsighted and dangerous and have sharpened Sino-American tensions—and strengthened Beijing's resolve to resist U.S. primacy.

Finally, Taiwan is a powder-keg issue in Sino-American relations. China remains committed to national reunification, yet Taiwan is moving perceptibly toward independence. Almost certainly, Beijing would regard a Taiwanese declaration of independence as a *casus belli*. It is unclear how the United

States would respond to a China-Taiwan conflict, although President George W. Bush created a stir in 2001 when he declared that the United States would intervene militarily in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan. For sure, however, it is safe to predict that there would be strong domestic political pressure in favor of American intervention. Beyond the arguments that Chinese military action against Taiwan would undermine U.S. interests in a stable world order and constitute “aggression,” ideological antipathy toward China and support for a democratizing Taiwan would be powerful incentives for American intervention. On Taiwan, in other words, the arguments of U.S. primacists have come close to locking-in Washington to a potentially dangerous policy.

The primacists' claim that the United States must be prepared to defend Taiwan from Chinese invasion overlooks three points. First, for nearly a quarter century, the United States has recognized that Taiwan is a Chinese province, not an independent state. Second, America's European and Asian allies have no interest in picking a quarrel with China over Taiwan's fate. If Washington goes to the mat with Beijing over Taiwan, it almost certainly will do so alone. (Given their unilateralist bent, however, the prospect of fighting China without allies might not be much concern to American primacists.) Third, by defending Taiwan, the United States runs the risk of armed confrontation with China—probably not in the immediate future, but almost certainly within the next decade or so.

It would be an act of folly for the United States to risk conflict for the purpose of defending democracy in Taiwan. The issue at stake simply would not justify the risks and costs of doing so. Indeed, regardless of the rationale invoked, the contention that the United States should risk war to prevent Beijing from using force to achieve reunification with Taiwan amounts to nothing more than a veiled argument for fighting a “preventive” war against a rising China. If U.S. primacists believe that preventive war is a viable option for coping with a rising China, instead of using Taiwan as a fig leaf they should say so openly so that the merits of this strategy can be debated.

So what should the United States do about China? If the United States persists with its strategy of primacy, the odds of a Sino-American conflict are high. Current American strategy commits the United States to maintaining the geopolitical status quo in East Asia, a status quo that reflects American primacy. The United States' desire to preserve the status quo, however, clashes with the ambitions of a rising China. As a rising great power, China has its own ideas about how East Asia's political and security order should be organized. Unless U.S. and Chinese interests can be accommodated, the potential for future tension—or worse—exists. Moreover, as I already have demonstrated, the very fact of American primacy is bound to produce a geopolitical backlash—with China in the vanguard—in the form of counter-hegemonic balancing. Nevertheless, the United States cannot be completely indifferent to China's rise.

The key component of a new geopolitical approach by the United States would be the adoption of an offshore balancing strategy. Under this approach, a regional East Asian power balance would become America's first line of defense against a rising China and would prevent Beijing from dominating East Asia. The other major powers in Asia—Japan, Russia, India—have a much more immediate interest in stopping a rising China in their midst than does the United States, and it is money in the bank that they will step up to the plate and balance against a powerful, expansionist state in their own neighborhood. It is hardly surprising (indeed, it parallels in many ways America's own emergence as a great power) that China—the largest and potentially most powerful state in Asia—is seeking a more assertive political, military, and economic role in the region, and even challenging America's present dominance in East Asia. This poses no direct threat to U.S. security, however. Doubtless, Japan, India, and Russia (and, perhaps, Korea) may be worried about the implications of China's rapid ascendance, because a powerful China potentially would be a direct threat to *their* security. This is precisely the point of offshore balancing: because China threatens its neighbors far more than it threatens the United States, these neighbors—not the United States—should bear the responsibility of balancing against Chinese power.

Iran Because of the strategy of primacy and empire, the United States and Iran are on course for a showdown. The main source of conflict—or at least the one that has grabbed the lion's share of the headlines—is Tehran's evident determination to develop a nuclear weapons program. Washington's policy, as President George W. Bush has stated on several occasions—in language that recalls his prewar stance on Iraq—is that a nuclear-armed Iran is “intolerable.” Beyond nuclear weapons, however, there are other important issues that are driving the United States and Iran toward an armed confrontation. Chief among these is Iraq. Recently, Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, has accused Tehran of meddling in Iraqi affairs by providing arms and training to Shiite militias and by currying favor with the Shiite politicians who dominate Iraq's recently elected government. With Iraq teetering on the brink of a sectarian civil war between Shiites and Sunnis, concerns about Iranian interference have been magnified. In a real sense, however, Iran's nuclear program and its role in Iraq are merely the tip of the iceberg. The fundamental cause of tensions between the United States and Iran is the nature of America's ambitions in the Middle East and Persian Gulf. These are reflected in current U.S. grand strategy—which has come to be known as the Bush Doctrine. The Bush Doctrine's three key components are rejection of deterrence in favor of preventive/preemptive military action; determination to effectuate a radical shake-up in the politics of the Persian Gulf and Middle East; and gaining U.S. dominance over that region. In this respect, it is hardly coincidental that the administration's policy toward Tehran bears a striking similarity to its policy

during the run-up to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, not only on the nuclear weapons issue but—ominously—with respect to regime change and democratization. This is because the same strategic assumptions that underlay the administration's pre-invasion Iraq policy now are driving its Iran policy. The key question today is whether these assumptions are correct.

In his 2002 State of the Union speech, President George W. Bush famously labeled Iraq and Iran (along with North Korea) as part of the “axis of evil.” Just what this meant in strategic terms became apparent in an important address that Bush gave in June 2002 at West Point, in which he announced a new U.S. strategic posture.⁷⁵ In that speech, Bush said that the post-9/11 threat to the United States “lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology”; that is, the ability of rogue states and terrorist groups to obtain weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Throwing nearly a half-century of American strategic doctrine out the window, Bush declared that “Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies.” Henceforth, instead of relying on deterrence and containment, he said, the United States would deal with such threats preemptively. “If we wait for threats to fully materialize,” Bush said, “we will have waited too long.”

The administration's stance with respect to so-called rogue state threats was amplified in its September 2002 *National Security Strategy*.⁷⁶ Here, the offending characteristics of such regimes were defined with specificity. These states “brutalize their own people”; flaunt international law and violate the treaties they have signed; are engaged in the acquisition of WMD, which are “to be used as threats or offensively to achieve the aggressive designs of these regimes”; support terrorism; and “hate the United States and everything it stands for.”⁷⁷ Given the nature of the threat, the *National Security Strategy* concluded that the Cold War doctrine of deterrence through the threat of retaliation is inadequate to deal with rogue states because the rulers of these regimes are “more willing to take risks, gambling with the lives of their people and the wealth of their nations.” Moreover, in contrast to the strategic doctrines of the two superpowers during the Cold War, rogue states purportedly consider WMD to be the “weapons of choice” rather than weapons of last resort.⁷⁸ Consequently, the administration argued, rogue states represent a qualitatively different kind of strategic threat, and the United States “cannot remain idle while threats gather.” The United States, the administration announced, would adopt a new strategy: “To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively.”⁷⁹ The preemptive stance of the United States against rogue state threats provided the impetus for the invasion of Iraq and is also driving American policy toward Iran.

If its premises are accepted, the administration's strategy is logical on its own terms. The problem, however, is that the assumptions on which this

strategy is based are dubious. First, the administration conflates two *different* threats: the threat from terrorist groups and the threat from so-called rogue states. Terrorist groups like *al Qaeda* do present a novel set of challenges strategically. Precisely because these groups are shadowy, “non-state” actors, it is hard to deter them. As is often said, unlike states—rogue or otherwise—terrorist groups have no “return address” to which retaliation can be directed. On the other hand, the threat of retaliation effectively deters states—even rogue states—for several reasons. For one thing, in contrast to terrorist organizations, if a state attacks the United States, Washington knows where to find it—that is, the “return address” is ascertainable—and where to aim a retaliatory strike. Moreover, states can be deterred because, unlike terrorists, they have a lot to lose: if their actions prompt the United States to hit back, a state will suffer devastating damage to its economy, huge loss of life among its citizens, and regime survival will be jeopardized. Jeffrey Record has cut to the heart of the strategic error that confounds the Bush Doctrine:

Terrorist organizations are secretive, elusive, nonstate entities that characteristically possess little in the way of assets that can be held hostage.... In contrast, rogue states are sovereign entities defined by specific territories, populations, governmental infrastructures and other assets; as such they are more exposed to decisive military attack than terrorist organizations. Or to put it another way, unlike terrorist organizations, rogue states, notwithstanding administration declamations to the contrary, are subject to effective deterrence and therefore do not warrant status as potential objects of preventive war and its associated costs and risks.⁸⁰

To put it simply, although there is considerable justification strategically for preempting terrorist threats, there is very little justification for attacking states preemptively or preventively.

The very notion that undeterrable “rogue states” exist is the second questionable assumption on which the administration’s strategy is based. In an important article in the Winter 2004/2005 issue of *International Security*, Francis Gavin points out that the post-9/11 era is not the first time that American policy-makers have believed that the United States faced a lethal threat from rogue states.⁸¹ During the 1950s and early 1960s, for example, the People’s Republic of China was perceived by Washington in very much the same way as it perceived Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, or, currently, Iran. Under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong, the Chinese Communist Party imposed harsh repression on China and killed millions of Chinese citizens. Moreover, Beijing—which had entered the Korean War in 1950, menaced Taiwan, gone to war with India in 1962, and seemingly was poised to intervene in Vietnam—was viewed (wrongly) as an aggressive state. For Washington, Mao’s China was the poster child of a rogue state, and during the Johnson

administration the United States seriously considered launching a preventive war to destroy China’s embryonic nuclear program.

In many ways, Mao was seen by U.S. policy-makers as the Saddam Hussein of his time. Moreover, like Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad—who has made outrageous comments denying the Holocaust and threatening Israel’s destruction—Mao also suffered from diarrhea of the mouth. Indeed, Mao arguably was even more afflicted because he trivialized the consequences of nuclear war. Thus—*before* China became a nuclear power (1964)—Mao’s rhetoric cavalierly embraced the possibility of nuclear war. “If the worse came to worst and half of mankind died,” Mao said, “the other half would remain while imperialism would be razed to the ground and the whole world would become socialist.”⁸² Once China actually became a nuclear power, however, where nuclear weapons were concerned both its rhetoric and its policy quickly became circumspect and responsible. In fact, a mere five years after the Johnson administration pondered the possibility of striking China preventively, the United States and China were engaged in secret negotiations that, in 1972, culminated in President Richard Nixon’s trip to Beijing and Sino-American cooperation to contain the Soviet Union.

The United States’ experience with China illustrates an important point: the reasons *states* acquire nuclear weapons are primarily to gain security and, secondarily, to enhance their prestige. This certainly was true of China, which believed its security was threatened by the United States *and* by the Soviet Union. It is also true of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and today’s Iran. As Gavin writes, “In some ways, the Kennedy and Johnson administration’s early analysis of China mirrors the Bush administration’s public portrayal of Iraq in the lead-up to the war. Insofar as Iraq was surrounded by potential nuclear adversaries (Iran and Israel) and threatened by regime change by the most powerful country in the world, Saddam Hussein’s desire to develop nuclear weapons may be seen as understandable.”⁸³ The same can be said for Iran, which is ringed by U.S. conventional forces in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq and in the Persian Gulf, and which also is the target of the Bush II administration’s policy of regime change and democratization. Tehran may be paranoid, but in the United States—and Israel—it has real enemies. It is Iran’s fear for its security that drives its quest to obtain nuclear weapons.

The same architects of illusion who fulminated for war with Iraq now are agitating for war with Iran. If Iran gets nuclear weapons they say, three bad things could happen: it could trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East; it might supply nuclear weapons to terrorists; and Tehran could use its nuclear weapons to blackmail other states in the region or to engage in aggression. Each of these scenarios, however, is improbable in the extreme. During the early 1960s, American policy-makers had similar fears that China’s acquisition of nuclear weapons would trigger a proliferation stampede, but these fears did not materialize—and a nuclear Iran will not touch off a proliferation

snowball in the Middle East. Israel, of course, already is a nuclear power (as is Pakistan, another regional power). The other three states that might be tempted to go for a nuclear weapons capability are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. As MIT professor Barry Posen points out, however, each of these three states would be under strong pressure *not* to do so.⁸⁴ Egypt is particularly vulnerable to outside pressure to refrain from going nuclear because its shaky economy depends on foreign—especially U.S.—economic assistance. Saudi Arabia would find it hard to purchase nuclear weapons or material on the black market—which is closely watched by the United States—and, Posen notes, it would take the Saudis years to develop the industrial and engineering capabilities to develop nuclear weapons indigenously. Turkey is constrained by its membership in NATO and its quest to be admitted to membership of the European Union.

Notwithstanding the near-hysterical rhetoric of the Bush administration and the neoconservatives, Iran is not going to give nuclear weapons to terrorists. This is not to say that Tehran has not abetted groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, or Hamas in the Palestinian Authority. Clearly, it has. However, there are good reasons that states—even those that have ties to terrorists—draw the line at giving them nuclear weapons (or other WMD): if the terrorists were to use these weapons against the United States or its allies, the weapons could be traced back to the donor state—which would be at risk of annihilation by an American retaliatory strike. Iran's leaders have too much at stake to run this risk. Even if one believed the administration's overheated rhetoric about the indifference of rogue state leaders about the fate of their populations, they do care very much about the survival of their regimes—which means that they can be deterred.

For the same reason, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons will not invest Tehran with options to attack or intimidate its neighbors. Just as it did during the Cold War, the United States can extend its own deterrence umbrella to protect its clients in the region—like Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Turkey. American security guarantees not only will dissuade Iran from acting recklessly but will also restrain proliferation by negating the incentives for states like Saudi Arabia and Turkey to build their own nuclear weapons. Given the overwhelming U.S. advantage in both nuclear and conventional military capabilities, Iran is not going to risk national suicide by challenging America's security commitments in the region. In short, while a nuclear-armed Iran hardly is desirable, neither is it "intolerable," because it could be contained and deterred successfully by the United States.

No serious expert doubts that Tehran is inching closer to developing a nuclear weapons capability. Yet, at least some observers feel that at the end of the day, this crisis—unlike Iraq—will not culminate in war. In part, this is because the United States—perhaps having learned from the Iraq war that there are high diplomatic costs of acting like the Lone Ranger—is working in

concert with Britain, France, Germany, and Russia to bring Iran before the bar of world opinion at the United Nations and is asking the international community to impose sanctions on Tehran. Yet, if sanctions are imposed, they are unlikely to be effective. They seldom are. So at the end of the day, the United States will be left with the options of either using military power or acquiescing in a nuclear-armed Iran.

Some observers believe that the Bush II administration has been chastened by its experience in Iraq, and hence will avoid using military force against Iran. It is also commonly argued that the United States has been "overstretched" by its military commitment in Iraq and lacks the ground forces to go to war with Iran. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the administration has abandoned the military option. In January 2005, it was reported that since summer 2004 the United States had been mounting reconnaissance missions—using both aerial surveillance and on-the-ground special forces teams—to pinpoint nuclear installations and missile-launching sites inside Iran.⁸⁵ There have been recent press reports—including a detailed story by Seymour Hersh in *The New Yorker*—that the Bush administration feverishly is preparing plans for a sustained military campaign against Iran.⁸⁶

Although these efforts could be written off as either routine contingency planning or as a way of supplementing diplomacy with the threat of military action, we should not dismiss the possibility that the administration *really* is contemplating war against Iran. After all, this is a notoriously cloistered administration in which power remains tightly concentrated among a small circle of policy-makers. This is, moreover, an administration whose key policy-makers remain committed to their preexisting worldview. President George W. Bush remains at the apex of this decision-making process, imprisoned in his intellectual bubble and impervious to facts that create cognitive dissonance with his fixed view of the world. We have had ample time to observe Bush's decision-making style, and it seems clear that once his mind is made up, he closes his mind to discrepant facts and stays resolutely—or more accurately, lemming-like—on course. Given his oft-stated view that a nuclear-armed Iran is intolerable, and that Iran is a rogue state, it would be foolish to think the military option is off the table.

But it should be. Attacking Iran would be a strategic blunder of the first magnitude—far worse than going to war with Iraq. To be sure, while the United States may be short of ground troops, it still possesses more than enough air power to mount a sustained bombing campaign against Iran's nuclear facilities. The problem, of course, is that the United States does not know the location of all of Iran's nuclear sites. Consequently, although a bombing campaign probably would inflict enough damage to impose some delay on the Iranian nuclear program, the fact that the United States cannot pinpoint all of Tehran's nuclear facilities means that the United States cannot destroy the Iranian nuclear program or inflict long-term disruption. Simply stated, the United

States ultimately cannot prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the risks to the United States in bombing Iran's nuclear infrastructure are high—higher than any benefit that might be gained by slowing down Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. Because of its links to the Iraqi Shiites, Iran has the capability to intervene in Iraq and put U.S. forces—and the entire American project there—in even greater jeopardy. Tehran can also use its ties to Hezbollah and Hamas to create instability throughout the region. Indeed, the events of summer 2006 in Gaza and Lebanon suggest that it may be doing so—perhaps to remind the United States that Iran has the capability of responding to any military action that Washington might take in regard to Iran's nuclear programs.

War is always a risky proposition—even for states that have impressive military capabilities. As German Chancellor Theobald Bethamann-Hollweg said during the July 1914 crisis, war is “a leap into the dark”—and a “cosmic roll of the iron dice”—because there are so many imponderables and so many things that can go wrong. This is a lesson that the current administration would do well to take to heart with respect to its Iran policy (and one it should have learned from its experience in Iraq). U.S. military and civilian strategists are so enamored with the idea of using shock and awe to impose America's will on its enemies that they forget what strategy is all about: strategy is a *two*-player game, not a single-player game, in which U.S. adversaries have options of their own. Iran, in fact, has many options because of its links to terrorists, its own military capabilities (which are sufficient to impose high costs should American forces ever launch a ground war against Iran), and the importance of its oil to the global economy.

Iran is in no position to slug it out toe-to-toe against the United States in a conventional military conflict, but it has political, economic, and even diplomatic cards that it can use to make it very costly to the United States to employ military force in an attempt to halt or delay Iran's nuclear weapons program. If the United States does use force against Iran, it will be opposed diplomatically by Europe, China, and Russia. More important, a military strike against Iran would unleash forces that could trigger a true “clash of civilizations” and would make the Persian Gulf and Middle East even more unstable—and more anti-American—than it is now. Simply put—unpalatable though it may be—the military option is not viable with respect to Iran. Still, although a nuclear-armed Iran is not a pleasant prospect, neither is it an intolerable one. Tehran won't be the first distasteful regime to acquire nuclear weapons (nor will it be the last). The United States has adjusted to similar situations in the past and can do so this time. Rather than preventive war and regime change, the best policies for the United States with respect to Iran are the tried and true ones of containment, deterrence, and diplomatic engagement.

The strategy of primacy and empire also calls for the United States to attain dominance in the Middle East by pursuing a policy of regime change with

respect to Iran. In February 2006, the administration requested that Congress appropriate \$75 million to “support the aspirations of the Iranian people for freedom in their own country.”⁸⁷ In language eerily reminiscent of that used by the administration during the run-up to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush has declared that, “By supporting democratic change in Iran, we will hasten the day when the people of Iran can determine their future and be free to choose their own leaders. Freedom in the Middle East requires freedom for the Iranian people, and America looks forward to the day when our nation can be the closest of friends with a free and democratic Iran.” As the administration sees it, the government in Tehran is illegitimate because it is unrepresentative of the Iranian people. As Bush put it, “Iran is a nation held hostage by a small clerical elite that is isolating and repressing its people, and denying them basic liberties and human rights.” This is a simplistic view, however—and a dangerous one if it fosters in American policy-makers the expectation that Iranians will welcome U.S.-initiated regime change. All Iranians have long memories of foreign—and especially American—interference in their nation's internal affairs, which is why Washington is not positioned to exploit successfully any political divisions that, in fact, may exist in Iran. Indeed, nothing could be better calculated to trigger a strong Iranian nationalist backlash against the United States than a serious attempt by the administration to orchestrate regime change in Tehran.

The administration's 2006 *National Security Strategy* takes dead aim at Iran, declaring that the United States “may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran.”⁸⁸ The 2006 *National Security Strategy* makes clear that Washington's concerns about Iran go well beyond the nuclear issue: “The Iranian regime sponsors terrorism; threatens Israel; seeks to thwart Middle Eastern peace; disrupts democracy in Iraq; and denies the aspirations of its people for freedom.”⁸⁹ Finally, the 2006 *National Security Strategy* clearly outlines the administration's view of how U.S.–Iranian tensions can be resolved: “The nuclear issue and our other concerns can ultimately be resolved only if the Iranian regime makes the strategic decision to change those policies, open up its political system, and afford freedom to its people. This is the ultimate goal of U.S. policy.”⁹⁰ The policy of seeking regime change and democratization in Iran is based on the same faulty premises that have led the United States into the morass in Iraq. To understand the dangers that could lie ahead in Iran, it is necessary to revisit the road to war and occupation in Iraq.

The Wages of the American Empire: The Iraqi Quagmire

The March 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent—still ongoing—occupation is the most damning indictment of American Empire. The decision to invade Iraq was the inevitable consequence of the triumph within the Bush II administration's policy-making councils of the ideas—and ideology—that the neoconservative architects of empire had been purveying since the early 1990s.

As such, Iraq demonstrates powerfully the illusions upon which the American Empire is based. As a consequence of these imperial fantasies, the United States blundered into an avoidable war—a war with disastrous consequences, the full dimensions of which will become clear only with the passage of time.

Wilsonianism and American Security Hard power is the backbone of American primacy. But liberal ideology is the foundation upon which the new American Empire is built. “Wilsonianism” is the shorthand term for the projection abroad of America’s domestic liberal ideology. Realism and liberalism often are viewed by foreign policy analysts as polar opposite approaches to U.S. foreign policy. However, the American Empire joins realism and liberalism together like Siamese twins. For sure, U.S. policy-makers *are*—and always have been—concerned about power and security. But Wilsonian ideology has a lot to say both about the purposes for which America’s power is used and about how its security requirements are conceptualized. The American Empire rests on the belief that to be secure, the United States must spread democracy abroad—if necessary, by force. For the United States, a world comprised of democracies will be peaceful, stable, and safe ideologically—or so it is claimed.⁹¹ By spreading democracy abroad, the American Empire is supposed to bolster America’s security from external threat, *and*—at least as important—to ensure the integrity of America’s liberal domestic institutions, which is considered to be tied inextricably to their replication abroad. As the diplomatic historian Walter LaFeber has observed, “America’s mission” of extending democracy worldwide is not altruistic. Rather, “it grew out of the belief that American liberties could not long exist at home unless the world was made safe for democracy,” and thereby for America’s own economic system, which was held to be the very foundation of its domestic political system.⁹² Of course, the dark side of this view of America’s security requirements is the belief that the United States can be secure *only* in a world composed of democratic states. As diplomatic historian Lloyd C. Gardner notes, the key assumption underlying U.S. strategic and foreign policy is that “America must have a favorable climate for its institutions to thrive, and perhaps even for them to survive.”⁹³

The belief that the export of democracy is crucial to American security was a key component of U.S. grand strategy during the Bush I and Clinton administrations. Indeed, the democratic enlargement—the active promotion by the United States of democracy abroad—was the centerpiece of Clinton administration’s foreign policy. If anything, the Wilsonian notion of spreading democracy has played an even more salient role in the Bush II administration’s grand strategy than it did during the two preceding administrations. In its 2002 *National Security Strategy*, the Bush II administration committed the United States to promoting a “balance of power that favors freedom” and declared that it would extend democracy “to every corner of the world.”⁹⁴ It stated that U.S. grand strategy would be “based on a distinctly American

internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests.”⁹⁵ As the administration explained, this means that U.S. grand strategy “must start” from America’s “core beliefs and look outward for possibilities to expand liberty.”⁹⁶ In his January 2004 State of the Union speech, President George W. Bush proclaimed that “America is a nation with a mission” and that its aim is “a democratic peace.”⁹⁷

The 2006 version of its *National Security Strategy of the United States* reaffirms the primacy of democracy promotion in the administration’s grand strategy. Echoing the views of the Clinton administration, the 2006 strategy document states that the United States: “cannot pretend that our interests are unaffected by states’ treatment of their own citizens. America’s interest in promoting effective democracies rests on an historical fact: states that are governed well are most inclined to behave well.”⁹⁸ The administration believes that America’s strategic interests are congruent with its Wilsonian ideology. As the 2006 *National Security Strategy* states:

Championing freedom advances our interests because the survival of liberty at home increasingly depends on the success of liberty abroad. Governments that honor their citizens’ dignity and desire for freedom tend to uphold responsible conduct toward other nations, while governments that brutalize their people also threaten the peace and stability of other nations. Because democracies are the most responsible members of the international system, promoting democracy is the most effective long-term measure for strengthening international stability; reducing regional conflicts; countering terrorism and terror-supporting extremism; and extending peace and prosperity.⁹⁹

Reflecting the influence of the neoconservative apostles of Empire, the Bush II administration regards the Middle East’s democratic transformation as the antidote to Islamic extremism and terrorism.

Attributing the terrorist threat to the United States to the failure of democracy to take root in the Middle East, President George W. Bush has committed the United States to “a forward strategy of freedom in that region.”¹⁰⁰ Both President Bush and Condoleezza Rice have made clear their belief that, while it is a formidable and prolonged challenge—a “generational commitment”—the Middle East’s successful democratization is crucial to American security.¹⁰¹ As Bush has put it:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic

harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.¹⁰²

Rice has argued that the Middle East suffers from a “freedom deficit.” Because of this, she says, “it is a region where hopelessness provides a fertile ground for ideologies that convince promising youths to aspire not to a university education, career, or family, but to blowing themselves up—taking as many innocent lives with them as possible. These ingredients are a recipe for great instability, and pose a direct threat to American security.”¹⁰³ The administration is committed to its own version of the domino theory in the Middle East. It believes that a democratic Iraq will trigger a wave of democratization throughout the Middle East. As Bush has put it: “The failure of Iraqi democracy would embolden terrorists around the world, increase dangers to the American people, and extinguish the hopes of millions in the region. Iraqi democracy will succeed—and that success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Tehran—that freedom can be the future of every nation. The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution.”¹⁰⁴ This is why the administration believes the stakes in Iraq are so high.

Regime Change and Democratization: The Bush II Administration's Real Reasons for Invading Iraq Doubtless, the apostles of Empire will seek to exculpate themselves with a “revisionist” view of the war and the decisions that led up to it. They will claim that the decision to invade was correct; the United States could have defeated the insurgency and attained its larger aims in the region had not American strategy been hamstrung by poor planning and execution. The truth, however, is different: the American decision to use military force to overthrow Saddam Hussein and achieve regime change in Iraq was irredeemably flawed in its conception. The imperial project of democratizing Iraq, and using it as a springboard to transform the entire Middle East politically, was doomed from the outset. There are many things that we know now about the Iraq war—things that were known—or should have been known—during the run-up to the invasion. First, as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt pointed out in an important prewar article in *Foreign Policy* magazine, the U.S. policy of containing and deterring Saddam Hussein was working—which also was the pre-invasion view of the U.S. intelligence community.¹⁰⁵ There was no chance that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was going to attack either the oil-producing states of the Persian Gulf or Israel (the security of which often seemed to weigh more heavily in the calculations of the American Empire's neoconservative architects than did the national interests of the United States). Second, although in an attempt to rally public support for Iraq policy the administration repeatedly suggested there was a link between Saddam Hussein and 9/11, this patently was not true. Amazingly, however, the administration continues to rely on

this false canard to justify its decision to invade Iraq. As the administration's 2006 *National Security Strategy* says, in its view it “inherited an Iraq threat that was unresolved,” and “for America, the September 11 attacks underscored the danger of allowing threats to linger unresolved.”¹⁰⁶ Third, there were no weapons of mass destruction. The administration's intimations—notably by Bush, Cheney, and Rice—that the United States needed to strike Iraq preventively to ensure that the American homeland itself did not fall victim to an Iraqi nuclear strike was conjured out of whole cloth. History will judge harshly as prevarications the administration's tales of mushroom clouds, aluminum tubes, and Nigerian yellow cake—tales it told to mislead the American people into supporting a disastrous and unnecessary war in pursuit of the administration's imperial delusions in the Middle East.

Of course, the administration still likes to say that “everyone”—not just the U.S. intelligence community, but also the intelligence services of America's allies—believed that Saddam Hussein had chemical and biological weapons and was attempting to acquire nuclear weapons. However, here, the administration overlooks two inconvenient facts. One is that if the administration had allowed the UN weapons inspectors more time to complete their task, it would have become evident that Iraq had no WMD capabilities. The other is that the Bush administration did not *want* the inspections to continue precisely because it was concerned that the inspectors would discover the truth about the nonexistence of Iraqi WMD, and thereby undercut the rationale for embarking on a war it already had decided to fight regardless of whether Iraq possessed WMD. For the same reason, the administration twisted the U.S. intelligence community's findings on Iraqi WMD to suit its own political purposes.

Paul R. Pillar, who served as National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia from 2000 to 2005 has written that the intelligence community's evidence—admittedly flawed—about Iraqi WMD played no part in the administration's decision to go to war. The administration, he says, already had decided to go to war and was interested only in intelligence analysis that supported its decision. Indeed, we now know from several sources that from its first days in office, Iraq was high on the administration's strategic agenda, and that within hours of the 9/11 attacks, leading administration officials wanted to use the terrorist strikes on New York and Washington, D.C., as a pretext to attack Iraq.¹⁰⁷ For this reason, the administration also simply ignored the consensus of the intelligence community that the United States would face grave postwar difficulties if it occupied Iraq.¹⁰⁸ There is ample evidence now that, in terms of explaining the administration's decision to go to war, the issue of Iraqi WMD was a red herring. For example, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz has stated that regardless of whether Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, the invasion was justified, because “We have an important job to do in Iraq, an absolutely critical job to do, and that is to help the Iraqi people to build a free and democratic country.”¹⁰⁹

Thanks to the “Downing Street Memoranda”—which chronicle the prewar discussions between British and Bush administration officials—we know that as early as March 2002 regime change, indeed, was the real aim of the administration’s policy. However, in both Washington and London, officials doubted that the case for war with Iraq could be sold politically on that basis. Elimination of Iraqi WMD was the most politically saleable argument for invading Iraq, and this is the argument—along with the alleged link between Saddam Hussein and 9/11—the Bush administration invoked to win support for the war, the real objective of which was to overthrow Saddam Hussein and to democratize Iraq as the catalyst to a broader democratic transformation throughout the Middle East region.¹¹⁰ Indeed, in July 2002, British intelligence warned that “Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD.” The British also noted that the administration’s “case was thin. Saddam was not threatening his neighbors and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea, or Iran.”¹¹¹ President George W. Bush himself has made it clear that WMD was not the factor that drove U.S. policy toward Iraq. In a December 2005 speech—after conceding that prewar intelligence estimates about Iraqi WMD were “wrong”—Bush said that “it wasn’t a mistake to go into Iraq. It was the right decision to make”:

Given Saddam’s history and the lessons of September the 11th, my decision to remove Saddam Hussein was the right decision. Saddam was a threat—and the American people and the world is [sic] better off because he is no longer in power. We are in Iraq today because our goal has always been more than the removal of a brutal dictator; it is to leave a free and democratic Iraq in its place. As I stated in a speech in the lead-up to the war, a liberated Iraq could show the power of freedom to transform the Middle East by bringing hope and progress to the lives of millions. So we’re helping the Iraqi—Iraqi people build a lasting democracy that is peaceful and prosperous and an example for the broader Middle East.¹¹²

During a press conference several days later, Bush reiterated that, although the intelligence information about Iraqi WMD was incorrect, his decision to remove Saddam Hussein was “right” because the administration’s “broader strategic objective” was the “establishment of democracy.”¹¹³

In seeking to democratize Iraq—and the Middle East—the administration embarked upon “Mission Impossible” (not “Mission Accomplished,” as the administration prematurely crowed in May 2003). The administration ought to have known this, because there were plenty of authoritative prewar warnings of the difficulties the United States would encounter if it invaded—and occupied—Iraq. In November 2002, James Fallows wrote an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* about the post-conflict challenges the United States most likely would face after defeating Iraq. His article was based on numerous

interviews with policy experts. The broad conclusion of those with whom he spoke was that “the day after a war ended, Iraq would become America’s problem, for practical and political reasons. Because we would have destroyed the political order and done physical damage in the process, the claims on American resources and attention would be comparable to those of any U.S. state.”¹¹⁴ In the short term, Fallows noted, the United States would face the difficult task of imposing order in what probably would be a chaotic environment. In the longer term, the United States would confront enormous obstacles in setting up an Iraqi government and in keeping Iraq from fracturing along sectarian lines. As Fallows noted, some senior administration officials and their neo-conservative acolytes in the foreign policy community expected that Saddam Hussein’s overthrow would be the catalyst to spread of democracy throughout the Arab world. However, among the experts that he interviewed, “the transforming vision is not, to put it mildly, the consensus among those with long experience in the Middle East.”¹¹⁵

Fallows’s conclusions were supported by other studies. For example, before the war, an independent working group cosponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and Rice University’s James A. Baker Institute for Public Policy warned that “There should be no illusions that the reconstruction of Iraq will be anything but difficult, confusing, and dangerous for everyone involved.”¹¹⁶ In contrast to the Panglossian hopes of administration officials—notably Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz—that revenues from the sale of Iraqi oil would cover the costs of postwar reconstruction, the working group presciently warned that because of prewar deterioration and war-inflicted damage, there would be no oil “bonanza” in postwar Iraq. Moreover, the costs of postwar reconstruction of Iraq’s economy would be steep. Finally, the working group warned that “The removal of Saddam...will not be the silver bullet that stabilizes” the Middle East.¹¹⁷

Perhaps the most prescient study of the travails the United States would face was a paper written by two analysts at the U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute. Although the apostles of Empire famously predicted that American troops would be greeted as liberators by the Iraqis, the authors of the Army War College report knew this was a pipe dream:

Most Iraqis and most other Arabs will probably assume that the United States intervened in Iraq for its own reasons and not to liberate the population. Long-term gratitude is unlikely and suspicion of U.S. motives will increase as the occupation continues. A force initially viewed as liberators can rapidly be relegated to the status of invaders should an unwelcome occupation continue for a prolonged period of time.¹¹⁸

The authors highlighted the probability that U.S. occupation forces would find themselves facing guerilla and terrorist attacks—or even a large-scale insurrection.¹¹⁹ The report also stressed that “the establishment of democracy

or even some sort of rough pluralism in Iraq, where it has never really existed previously, will be a staggering challenge for any occupation force seeking to govern in a post-Saddam era.¹²⁰ Ethnic and sectarian tensions, the authors noted, not only would constitute a formidable obstacle to Iraq's democratization, but also could lead to the breakup of a post-Saddam Iraq. The report also warned that the costs of rebuilding Iraq would be substantial, and that these could not be covered by Iraqi oil revenues. The authors' bottom line was that, "The possibility of the United States winning the war and losing the peace in Iraq is real and serious."¹²¹

The Army War College report was hardly the lone voice within the government predicting that the United States would confront a monumental post-war task if it invaded Iraq. The U.S. intelligence community counseled the administration to refrain from going to war and forecast that if it did invade, the United States would face a "messy aftermath in Iraq."¹²² The intelligence community also believed that a postwar Iraq: "would not provide fertile ground for democracy; would witness a struggle for power between Sunnis and Shiites; and would require 'a Marshall Plan-type effort' to rebuild the nation's economy."¹²³ Events have underscored the prescience of the Army War College's, and the intelligence community's, estimates of the probable course of events in postwar Iraq.

The argument has been made—notably in George Packer's recent book, *The Assassins' Gate*—that the United States' failure in Iraq is not attributable to the nature of the administration's goals, but rather the result of the Pentagon's top civilian leadership's cavalier indifference to planning for the post-conflict occupation of Iraq.¹²⁴ There is a kernel of truth to this argument, because the willful failure of the Defense Department's civilian leaders to prepare adequately for the occupation bordered on criminal negligence. As a July 2002 memorandum prepared by British officials for Prime Minister Tony Blair noted, the United States was giving "little thought" to dealing with a post-conflict Iraq notwithstanding that "a postwar occupation of Iraq could lead to costly and protracted nation-building."¹²⁵ Still, even with the best planning in the world, it is unlikely that the United States could have succeeded in democratizing Iraq. The administration had no understanding of the issues and challenges involved in democratic transformations. If it had, it surely would have realized both that Iraq was singularly unsuitable candidate for democratization and that America's power to effectuate a region-wide democratic transformation was limited, while the risks of embarking on such a policy were sobering. To put it slightly differently, promoting—or imposing—democracy on other states is a daunting task, and American interests are *not* served by a policy of democracy promotion.

Democratizing Iraq: The Test Case of the American Empire Before the invasion, administration officials pretty much believed that the processes of democra-

tization and nation-building in Iraq would be a piece of cake. They frequently invoked the examples of post-1945 Germany and Japan as "proof" that the United States could export democracy to Iraq without undue difficulty. For at least three reasons, they should have known better: the use of military force by outside powers to impose democracy rarely works; military occupations seldom are successful; and the preconditions for a successful democratic transformation did not exist in Iraq. Democracy and nation-building are hard tasks, and Washington's track record is not encouraging.¹²⁶ Since the Cold War's end, the United States—without any notable success—has engaged in democracy promotion and nation-building in Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. U.S. efforts to assist post-Soviet Russia's democratization—a key American aim since the Cold War's end—also have been disappointing. The lesson to be learned from these efforts is that, even under the best conditions, the barriers to transplanting democracy successfully on foreign soil are formidable. This is no surprise to those scholars who study democratic transitions. They know that successful democratic transitions invariably are the product of domestic factors.¹²⁷ That is, the push for democracy must come from within the state making the transition rather than being imposed by an outside power.¹²⁸ In this respect, the post-World War II American occupations of Germany and Japan stand out as notable exceptions to the rule, and thus have little relevance in predicting the outcome of the U.S. democratization effort in Iraq.

Those who have studied military occupations know that the odds of success are stacked against occupying powers. As David Edelstein observes:

Military occupations usually succeed only if they are lengthy, but lengthy occupations elicit nationalist reactions that impede success. Further, lengthy occupation produces anxiety in imperialist occupation powers that would rather withdraw than stay. To succeed, therefore, occupiers must both maintain their own interest in a long occupation, and convince an occupied population to accept extended control by a foreign power. More often than not, occupiers either fail to achieve those goals, or they achieve them only at a high cost.¹²⁹

The successful U.S. occupations of Germany and Japan—which helped both nations emerge from the ashes of World War II as prosperous and stable democracies—succeeded because of unique circumstances that enabled the United States to attain its goal of transforming Germany and Japan politically. Similar circumstances do not exist in Iraq, however. In contrast to Iraq, the United States was able to impose order and stability swiftly upon the defeated Germans and Japanese. Both of the Axis powers were utterly defeated and shattered societies; surrendered unconditionally; and were occupied by an overwhelming number of American (and, in Germany's case, Allied) troops. In Japan, moreover, Emperor Hirohito commanded the Japanese people to

surrender and to cooperate with the occupation authorities. Furthermore, as Edelstein points out, "Whereas war-weary Germans and Japanese recognized the need for an occupation to help them rebuild, a significant portion of the Iraqi people have never welcomed the U.S.-led occupation as necessary."¹³⁰ Finally, as Edelstein also notes, the Cold War was a hugely important factor contributing to the success of two post-World War II occupations. Both the Germans and the Japanese felt threatened by the Soviet Union, and they recognized their need to align with the United States in order to be safeguarded against the Soviet menace. In postwar Iraq, no such external threat exists to bind the United States and the Iraqis together. On the contrary, the leaders of Iraq's dominant Shiite population gravitate toward Iran.

Among those who study democratic transitions there is widespread agreement about the factors that conduce successful democratic transitions. These include a modern market-based economy; absence of hostility between ethnic or religious groups; a political culture that is hospitable to democracy; and a vibrant civil society.¹³¹ Another important factor is the capacity of state institutions to perform their tasks effectively. Iraq met none of these criteria. As Andrew Rathmell has observed: "Iraq was not a promising environment for achieving the goal of building a peaceful, democratic, free-market nation. Iraq had failed to develop into a cohesive nation-state; its state structures had the form but not the substance of a modern state; its economy was in poor shape; and its society had endured almost half a century of debilitating violence."¹³²

From this perspective it's no wonder that the American Empire has foundered in its democratization and nation-building effort in Iraq. Iraq was nothing like post-World War II Japan and Germany. In the wake of World War II, the United States could aspire to transform Germany and Japan into democracies because there was a strong foundation upon which to build.¹³³ Both the defeated Axis powers had the internal prerequisites in place for a successful democratic transformation and consolidation. First, Germany and Japan both had political cultures that were hospitable to democracy. Before 1933, after all, Germany actually had been a practicing democracy. And while Japan was not, it had both substantial experience with parliamentary government and exposure to liberal ideas. Second, wartime devastation notwithstanding, Germany and Japan both had advanced economies and a substantial middle class. Third, both Germany and Japan were essentially homogenous societies. Neither was afflicted with any serious power struggles between rival ethnic, national, or religious groups. Fourth, in both Germany and Japan, there were effective state institutions that the United States was able to reform and reconstitute, and to which power then could be transferred.

With respect to each of these factors, Iraq is an altogether different kettle of fish. Since it was created out of the post-World War I ruins of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq has had no experience with democracy, and there is nothing to suggest that its political culture is conducive to democracy. Second, Iraq's

economy was a shambles even before March 2003 (the result of Iraq's long war with Iran, the 1991 Gulf War, and the UN-mandated economic sanctions imposed after the 1991 war). Third, Iraq is a seething cauldron of ethnic and sectarian conflict in which Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shiite Arabs are battling for power. Indeed, as many of the administration's critics predicted before the war, the U.S. invasion and occupation have opened a Pandora's box of ethnic and sectarian strife in Iraq and brought it to the brink of civil war, and—perhaps—disintegration as a unitary national state. Moreover, as Robert Dahl points out, the building of democratic institutions can be side-tracked by the intervention of outside powers that are pursuing their own political agendas.¹³⁴ Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Syria, and Iran all have important interests at stake in postwar Iraq and are likely to meddle there by exploiting Iraq's ethnic and sectarian fault lines. Fourth, in Iraq there are no effective state institutions that the United States can reconstitute. These will have to be built from scratch, and there are no signs that the United States has been successful in doing so. Iraqi politics and government are characterized by corruption and the ongoing struggle for power among the Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. The "sovereign" Iraqi state remains unable to fulfill the most basic definition of a state: it has failed to attain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and has been unable to impose order and stability in Iraq. In part, this is because key state institutions—like the military and police—are dominated by private (Shiite) militias. In short, no one should hold his breath waiting for the emergence of a democratic Iraq. In truth, there never was a snowball's chance that the architects of Empire could achieve their goal of successfully democratizing Iraq, and if they had based U.S. policy on a careful study of both democratic transitions generally, and Iraqi history specifically, instead of reflexive ideology, they would have realized this. Instead, they led the United States into the geopolitical quicksand of Iraq.

Conclusion: Imperial Illusions

The American Empire rests on two foundations. One is the *faux* realism of primacy. The other is Wilsonian ideology. The apostles of Empire argue that by maintaining American primacy, and by exporting democracy abroad, the United States can attain peace and security. As I have argued elsewhere, however, the peace promised by the American Empire is a peace of illusions.¹³⁵

Primacy is a strategy that causes *insecurity* because it will lead to a geopolitical backlash against the United States. In time, this will take the form of traditional great power counterbalancing against American primacy. The emergence of new great powers during the next decade or two is all but certain. Indeed, China already is on the cusp of establishing itself as a peer competitor to the United States. The U.S. grand strategy of maintaining its global primacy has put the United States on the road to confrontation with a rising China, and with Iran. In the short term, primacy has triggered asymmetric

responses—notably terrorism—in regions like the Middle East where America's geopolitical presence is resented.

Wilsonian ideology drives the American Empire because its proponents posit that the United States must use its military power to extend democracy abroad. Here, the ideology of Empire rests on assumptions that are not supported by the facts. One reason the architects of Empire champion democracy promotion is because they believe in the so-called democratic peace theory, which holds that democratic states do not fight other democracies. Or as President George W. Bush put it with his customary eloquence, “democracies don’t war; democracies are peaceful.”¹³⁶ The democratic peace theory is the probably the most overhyped and undersupported “theory” ever to be concocted by American academics. In fact, it is not a theory at all. Rather it is a theology that suits the conceits of Wilsonian true believers—especially the neoconservatives who have been advocating American Empire since the early 1990s. As serious scholars have shown, however, the historical record does not support the democratic peace theory.¹³⁷ On the contrary, it shows that democracies do not act differently toward other democracies than they do toward nondemocratic states. When important national interests are at stake, democracies not only have threatened to use force against other democracies, but, in fact, democracies *have gone to war* with other democracies.

The Bush administration and the neoconservative imperialists believe that by democratizing the Middle East, the United States will solve the problem of terrorism and bring stability to the region. There are three things wrong with this vision of American Empire in the Middle East. First, democratization is not the magic bullet cure for terrorism. A policy of regime change—using U.S. overt military power or covert capabilities to oust governments in the Middle East and install new regimes that will clamp down on radical Islam—is misdirected and will *not* make the United States safer. Radical Islam is fueled by resentment against American primacy; specifically, the U.S. military presence in the region. The expansion of that presence for the purpose of overthrowing regimes does not make America more secure from terrorist attacks. On the contrary, it simply adds fuel to terrorist groups like *al Qaeda*. As Robert Pape observes:

Spreading democracy at the barrel of a gun in the Persian Gulf is not likely to lead to a lasting solution against suicide terrorism. Just as al-Qaeda's suicide terrorism campaign began against American troops on the Arabian Peninsula and then escalated to the United States, we should recognize that the longer that American forces remain in Iraq, the greater the threat of the next September 11 from groups who have not targeted us before. Even if our intentions are good, the United States cannot depend on democratic governments in the region to dampen the risk of suicide terrorism so long as American forces are stationed there.¹³⁸

Second, the United States lacks the capabilities to democratize the region. As Brent Scowcroft has said: “The reason I part with the neocons is that I don’t think in any reasonable time frame the objective of democratizing the Middle East can be successful. If you can do it, fine, but I don’t think you can, and in the process of trying to do it you can make the Middle East a lot worse.”¹³⁹ Third, the administration and its neoconservatives should be careful what they wish for in the Middle East.

Even if the American Empire does bring about regime change and “democratization” in the Middle East, we probably will rue the consequences. As Katarina Delacoura points out, “democratization in the Arab world may have a number of outcomes unpalatable for the US.”¹⁴⁰ The electoral victory of the radical Hamas organization in the February 2006 Palestinian elections—coupled with the strong showing of the fundamentalist Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt’s 2005 parliamentary elections—proves the point: the United States is likely to be very displeased with the outcomes of democratic elections in the region. Indeed, the Bush administration was so upset with the victory of Hamas that it reportedly discussed with Israel a policy to destabilize the Palestinian Authority in order to force Hamas out of power.¹⁴¹ The overthrow of autocratic regimes will make the region even less stable than it currently is. Governments like Saudi Arabia’s may be distasteful, but there is truth to the adage that the devil one knows is better than the devil one does not know. For all of America’s Wilsonian traditions, the wisest of U.S. statesmen have accepted that the real world is not neatly divided between good regimes and bad ones, and that sometimes American interests are best served by dealing with nondemocratic regimes. This is especially true in a region like the Middle East where, as Lawrence Freedman reminds us, “the real alternatives are chaos or autocracy.”¹⁴²

Simply put, American efforts to export democracy easily may backfire. Why? Because *ill-liberal* democracies usually are unstable and often adopt ultranationalist and bellicose external policies.¹⁴³ As Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder have pointed out, “Pushing countries too soon into competitive electoral politics not only risks stoking war, sectarianism and terrorism, but it also makes the future consolidation of democracy more difficult.”¹⁴⁴ Far from leading to the touted (but illusory) “democratic peace” that is so near and dear to the hearts of American imperialists, “unleashing Islamic mass opinion through sudden democratization might raise the likelihood of war.”¹⁴⁵ Moreover, in a volatile region like the Middle East, it is anything but a sure bet that newly democratic regimes—which, by definition would be sensitive to public opinion—would align themselves with the United States. And, if new democracies in the region should fail to satisfy the political and economic aspirations of their citizens—precisely the kind of failure to which new democracies are prone—they easily could become a far more dangerous breeding ground for

terrorism than are the authoritarian (or autocratic/theocratic) regimes now in power in the Middle East.

Iraq has been the first test case of the new American Empire, and the Bush administration and neoconservative architects of Empire have flunked. Far from creating a stable democracy in Iraq, they have created chaos. At best, Iraqi "democracy" will result in a pro-Iranian Shiite regime that will be hostile to the United States (and to Israel). At worst, Iraq will fragment along ethnic and sectarian lines and plunge into civil war—a war that could draw in Iraq's neighbors and cause regional instability that is worse by an order of magnitude than the instability that prevailed in the region before March 2003. Finally, the imperial adventure in Iraq has both distracted the United States from the real war against the terrorist perpetrators of 9/11 and simultaneously increased U.S. vulnerability to terrorism. President Bush has stated repeatedly that Iraq is "the central front on the war on terrorism." But, if this is the case now, it was *not* before March 2003. There was *no* connection between *al Qaeda* and Iraq. Iraq only became a haven for terrorists *after* the American invasion—an invasion, as Bush's own CIA Director Porter Goss said, that served to heighten the terrorist threat to the United States.¹⁴⁶ One huge disaster is enough—more than enough—for any grand strategy. American Empire is a failed strategy. The time has come for the United States to adopt a new grand strategy that will avoid the errors of Empire, and actually enhance—rather than weaken—American security.

Notes

1. Max Boot, "The Case for American Empire," *The Weekly Standard*, October 15, 2001, pp. 28–30. As Boot put it, "Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets."
2. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 42.
5. Michael Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945–1954* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 8, 15.
6. This argument is developed in Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).
7. William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *July/August 1996, Foreign Affairs* 75 (4): 20.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
9. Ben Wattenberg, "Peddling 'Son of Manifest Destiny,'" *Washington Times*, 21 March 1990, quoted in Claes G. Ryn, "The Ideology of American Empire," *Orbis* (Summer 2003), p. 388.
10. Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," *The National Interest*, 70 (Winter 2002/03): 13.
11. Kristol and Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," p. 23.
12. Zalmay Khalilzad, "Losing the Moment? The United States and the World after the Cold War," *Washington Quarterly* 18 (2): 94.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Dick Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, January 1993), p. 6.

15. "Remarks by Dr. Condoleezza Rice to the International Institute for Strategic Studies," London, England, June 26, 2003, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/06/print/20030626.html.
16. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, September 2002), www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf.
17. Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, p. A1.
18. "Excerpts from Pentagon's Plan: 'Prevent the Re-emergence of a New Rival,'" *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, p. A14 (emphasis added).
19. *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (2002), (emphasis added).
20. Bill Clinton, "Remarks to the American Society of Newspaper Editors," April 1, 1993 (emphasis added), <http://clinton6.nara.gov/1993/04/1993-04-01-presidents-speech-to-am-soc-of-newspaper-editors.html>.
21. Press Conference by President Bill Clinton, Hong Kong, July 3 1998, <http://clinton4.nara.gov/WH/New/China/19980703-22272.html>.
22. James Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), p. xii.
23. "President's State of the Union Message to Congress and the Nation," *New York Times*, January 21, 2004, p. A14.
24. Richard A. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), p. 1.
25. Robert Kagan and William Kristol, "The Present Danger," *The National Interest* 59 (Spring 2000), p. 62; Kristol and Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," p. 27.
26. Kagan and Kristol, "The Present Danger," *Ibid.*, p. 64.
27. Letter to President Clinton on Iraq, January 26, 1998, <http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqclintonletter.htm>.
28. Charles Krauthammer, "The Real New World Order: The American Empire and the Islamic Challenge," *The Weekly Standard*, November 12, 2001, p. 27.
29. Charles Krauthammer, "In Defense of Democratic Realism," *The National Interest* 77 (Fall 2004), p. 15.
30. Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans*, p. 353.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
32. On offensive realism, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*.
33. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 33.
34. Henry A. Kissinger, "The Long Shadow of Vietnam," *Newsweek*, 1 May 2000, p. 50.
35. William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24 (1) (Summer 1999): 4–41.
36. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 533.
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61. Zoellick, "Remarks to National Committee."
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67. This is another example of "American exceptionalism." Obviously, U.S. policy-makers believe that the admonition that the pursuit of modern military capabilities is an "outdated path" that runs counter to achieving true national greatness applies only to others, and not to the United States.
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88. *National Security Strategy* (2006), p. 20.
89. Ibid.
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91. This belief is widely held by academic students of IR and of American foreign policy and has been pretty well summed up by Tufts University political scientist Tony Smith. As he puts it, the American national interest properly rests on the liberal internationalist belief "that only a world that respects the right of democratic self-determination, fosters nondiscriminatory markets, and has institutional mechanisms to ensure the peace can be an international order ensuring the national security and so permitting liberty at home." Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 327.
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93. Lloyd C. Gardner, *A Covenant with Power: America and World Order from Wilson to Reagan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 27.
94. *National Security Strategy* (2002), pp. 2-3.
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97. "President's State of the Union Message to Congress and the Nation," *New York Times*, 21 January 2004, p. A14.
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Reply to Christopher Layne

The Strength of the American Empire

BRADLEY A. THAYER

During World War I, the French statesman Georges Clemenceau famously defended his right to direct his country's military affairs over the objections of the military. He is often quoted as saying "War is too serious a matter to entrust to military men." I would like to amend that: American grand strategy is too serious a matter to entrust solely to academics, or politicians and policy-makers, or issue-advocates and lobbyists. It is the proper purview of all Americans and is too serious a business to entrust to anyone but them. The spirit that animates this book is that the American people, as well as people in other countries, should understand the costs and benefits of American grand strategy and debate the grand strategic alternatives available to the United States.

This book is an effort to promote understanding of the grand strategy of the United States, its grand strategic options, as well as the benefits and risks associated with them. Layne and I are powerful advocates of alternative grand strategies, but we join each other in recognizing the importance of this debate and in our desire to foster it. We recognize that Americans can and will disagree about the proper role of the United States in international politics and how best to advance and defend the interests of the United States.

To advance these goals, in this chapter I would like to respond to Layne's criticisms of the grand strategy of primacy made in chapter 2 and present some final reflections on the grand strategy of offshore balancing versus the grand strategy of primacy. I argue that primacy is the superior grand strategic choice for the United States because it provides the greatest benefit for the United States with the least risk. Furthermore, to abandon the grand strategy of primacy at this time would entail enormous dangers for the United States and its allies.