

Imperialism Versus Internationalism: The United States and World Order

David C. Hendrickson

Neo-conservatives close to the George W. Bush administration say that the second Gulf War may begin earlier than many believe. What is the logic behind the White House's strident call for preventative war and its insistence that the United States will act alone if need be? These arguments diverge from important international relations traditions for which the United States has been respected. Misjudgment could damage the legitimacy of American power in the world.

The role that the United States has played and should play in the international system is an important and fascinating question. The present situation in world history is unprecedented. "Not since Rome," say many observers, has any one state so dominated the system of states to which it belongs. The United States has stood apart in power and influence from the rest of the world for many years, but the events of the last year, particularly the stunning use of force in Afghanistan, have accentuated that nation's unique global military domination. We cannot even speculate on the future of world order without understanding what the United States will do. Its power, for both good and ill, is incalculable.

The disparity in military power between the United States and everybody else was a marked feature of the world before 11 September, but that event has served to widen the gap even further, and we can be sure it will continue to do so. It has also given new prominence in the Bush administration to a group centering around Richard Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz who wish to use this power in novel ways. They have crafted a strategic doctrine for the United States that entails large increases in the military budget (nearly \$500 billion annually by 2005), American withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, and a new doctrine of preventive war to address the scourge of weapons of mass destruction.

Alongside these substantive changes has come a pronounced emphasis on unilateral behavior in the conduct of American policy. The new outlook sees the United States as possessing a blank check to use at will in addressing the perceived exigencies of the national interest and international security. Even when the Bush administration makes an approach to international institutions, as it did in its September 2002 demands on the U.N. Security Coun-

cil, it does so with the explicit reservation that it intends to pursue its chosen course, thus impugning the authority of the council even while appealing to it. Nor does the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) count in this reckoning. The disparity in military expenditure between the United States and its European allies—destined to grow even larger over the next several years—is seen by the administration to legitimize a power over peace and war that belongs to the United States alone by virtue of its preeminent power.

These are new realities and new convictions, and they promise to fundamentally change the role of the United States in the world. Together with other actions of this administration, including its sour and unconstructive withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol, its protectionist measures in trade, and its overall hostility to international treaties and institutions, the new course in Washington raises disturbing questions about the kind of international order—or disorder—the world will experience in the coming years. Will it be an era of American cooperation or of American dominance, of American multilateralism or unilateralism? Will the United States set a good example by staying within the boundaries of international law, or will it justify its own transgressions of international law by appealing to some higher good? Will the United States be satisfied with the modest and accustomed role of leader of a partnership of democratic nations, or will it strive, in effect if not in name, to assume the mantle of universal empire?

There are two very different visions of international order at stake in these choices, and two very different models of American conduct. Whereas the Bush administration has gone far in the direction of the latter course, it is my argument that the former course offers a better way to secure the national interest and to serve the needs of international security.

Preventive War

Neo-conservatives close to the George W. Bush administration say that the second Gulf War may begin earlier than many believe. What is the logic behind the White House's strident call for preventative war and its insistence that the United States will act alone if need be? These arguments diverge from important international relations traditions for which the United States has been respected. Misjudgment could damage the legitimacy of American power in the world. To embrace a doctrine of preventive war is a highly significant step. It represents a radical departure from the two pillars of Cold War national security policy—containment and deterrence. It also runs contrary to a long established rule in international society that forbids the first use of force except in narrowly-drawn circumstances. Repugnance for preventive war became deeply embedded in the world community because the use of that doctrine in the twentieth century led to results nearly fatal to civilization. That perception prompted the quest to institutionalize restraints on the first use of force and aggression that were registered successively in the League of Nations, the United Nations, and NATO. In the epoch of the world wars, doctrines of preventive war were closely identified with the German and Japanese strategic traditions, but not the American.

The emerging strategic doctrine of the Bush administration is clearly inconsistent with the international consensus against the first use of force. Although it is described as a policy of "preemption," Bush's approach is actually a doctrine of preventive war. In preemptive war, force is used only when it is apparent that the enemy is on the verge of striking. To qualify as justified preemption, as Secretary of State Daniel Webster observed in 1842, the necessity for force must be "instant" and "overwhelming," "leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation." Preventive war is the first use of force to avert a more remote though still ostensibly formidable danger. It has a simple logic, historically sanctioned in the endless wars of the European state system. War, say the advocates of prevention, is inevitable in any case, and so it is better to fight under circumstances of our own choosing. Today we are told that once Iraq or some other "evil" state develops the capability to use weapons of mass destruction, it will use them. We must therefore strike first to avert certain calamity, and sooner rather than later.

A preventive war against Iraq is entirely distinguishable from the war that toppled Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. In that case, the United States was justified in making war in response to direct attacks on its soil. Since Saddam's complicity in those attacks has not been alleged by the administration and cannot plausibly be inferred from what evidence is available, the justification for the war against Iraq must rest on the logic of prevention. The difference may appear to be negligible, but it is the difference in law between offensive and defensive war, and between aggression and self-defense. Preventive war, indeed, is directly contrary to the principle that so often was the rallying cry of American internationalism in the twentieth century.

Deterrence will not work against a madman such as Saddam, say the advocates of preventive war. They give no persuasive reasons, however, for their verdict. The cruelties and massacres that Saddam has committed in his career of wielding power confirm rather than disprove the argument that he continues to place first priority on his own survival and that of his regime. Iraq's ability to make use of chemical or biological agents currently in its possession, or at what point it could achieve a nuclear capability, are still not fully known. But since Saddam would most likely use such weapons in the course



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of a war to eliminate him, and would almost certainly not use them in a “bolt from the blue,” preventive war is a gambler’s substitute for the safer method of containment and deterrence. There is considerable danger that the first use of force could bring on the very mass destruction we fear. Even if chemical or biological weapons are not used in the war or prove less destructive than feared, massive loss of life could still occur if the Iraqis fight for Baghdad or if the country collapses in civil war. If such destruction occurs anywhere as a consequence of the war, even in Iraq, the remedy must be judged far worse than the disease.

As a solution to the terrible problems raised by weapons of mass destruction, preventive war is an untested and highly risky strategy. It not only sets a bad example for others, but compromises the ability of the United States to restrain potentially impulsive actors, like India, that have security problems every bit as serious as those of the United States. These bad consequences would ensue even if Saddam’s overthrow is greeted as a liberation by the Iraqi people and is achieved rapidly. If the Iraqis fight, or if Saddam’s overthrow causes political earthquakes elsewhere in the region, preventive war will reveal itself as a foolish strategy.

Despite these obstacles, the administration is certainly eager for another Iraqi war, and it seems likely that President Bush will get his wish. The domestic and international obstacles are not great. At home, the Democrats are scared of challenging Bush in an area regarded as his strong suit. Support in American public opinion for an Iraq war falls significantly if it is undertaken unilaterally, so the U.N. Security Council has some leverage in restraining the administration. But Bush has made clear that he intends to proceed even without U.N. approval. One neo-conservative weekly with close ties to the administration has declared that the second Gulf War is coming “sooner than you think.”

American Unilateralism

Like the doctrine of preventive war, the administration’s hostility to international institutions represents a sharp break from an important tradition in American foreign policy. In rhetoric, at least, the break is not total. State department spokesmen speak of “multilateralism à la carte,” making a modest though not particularly significant bow toward the principle of cooperating with others as opposed to “going it alone.” Secretary of State Colin Powell still preaches sermons on multilateralism and international cooperation, but the affirmations ring increasingly hollow. In security policy, particularly, the terrorist threat is deemed too serious a business to be subject to the constraints of either Euro-Atlantic or international security institutions.

In a narrow sense, it is probably true that America now has sufficient power to defy the world without paying much in the way of an immediate penalty. From a longer-term perspective, however, acting outside international institutions or behaving dictatorially within them cannot fail to seriously undermine the legitimacy of American power. Ultimately, the outsized power of the United States in relation to the rest of international society is tolerable only on condition that it is harnessed to a larger purpose than simply the vindication of America’s national interest. Observance of basic principles of the law of nations, together with keeping its action within the constraints of an international consensus, are two basic modes of conduct by which the United States has acquired such legitimacy as it now enjoys in the international system. Take those factors away, and the legitimacy of American power would be gravely impaired.

Americans should be the last people who need reminding that any situation of unbounded and unchecked power sends off danger signals of incipient political pathology. That idea is central to the American constitutional heritage and to the checks and balances in government bequeathed to us by the founding fathers. Far more than is appreciated, it has also figured strongly in American diplomacy, both in the early years of the republic and in its twentieth century commitment to internationalism.

When the United States rose to superpower status in the aftermath of World War II, it led in the creation of an international system that both contained the power of the Soviet Union and created an array of international institutions that embedded American power in a system of reciprocal restraints. In their totality, these approximated a constitutional system within the western world. In the late 1940s, the United States rejected both isolationism and imperialism, opting instead to construct a constitutional partnership of free nations in the struggle against the totalitarian enemy.

The complex web of international institutions that arose after World War II owed a great deal to American leadership. Now the object of profound suspicion among apostles of the new empire, those institutions then expressed a grand design that entailed a novel bargain: the United States offered to surrender the policy of the lone hand in exchange for allied support of a liberal international order. Today’s champions of unilateral methods argue that the more our power grows, the less we need anyone else, and the more we should look to a purely national standard. As the architects of the post-World War II order understood, however, the reverse is true. The more powerful the state, the more important it is to submit to widely held norms and consensual methods. The more it overawes the rest of the system, the more vital it is that its power be restrained, either by itself or by others. With wisdom and far-sightedness, that generation of American statesmen applied that historic lesson to the containment of the Soviet Union and to the construction of the great concert among the advanced industrialized democracies that arose after the Second World War.

There is no simple way of articulating the complex bargains that have supported the legitimacy of American power. Some multilateral restraints are substantive, and consist in adherence to treaties and other rules of interna-

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tional law; others are procedural, and seek the development of an international consensus. So far as decisions concerning war and peace are concerned, probably the most important substantive rule is the presumptive judgment against the first use of force. So far as procedural requirements in this domain are concerned, the two most important institutions have been the U.N. Security Council and the NATO. At no time in the last fifty years has the United States' position been so antagonistic to both the primary norms and the central institutions of international society. President Bush is impatient under the restraints that these impose, and he has little regard for the legitimacy they ostensibly bestow. Increasingly, his administration

seems to view these institutions in a purely instrumental way. If they are useful in supporting immediate U.S. interests, the administration is not averse to working through them. Its larger message, however, is dictatorial in tone: If you want to support us, fine. If not, we intend to proceed as planned.

The Major Relationships

Of all the major relationships of the United States, that with Japan has been the least affected by the events of 11 September and the ensuing war on terrorism. Though it may doubt the wisdom of its war policy, Japan does not want a quarrel with the United States over this issue, and is unlikely to press a dissent. Interestingly, the conviction that force must truly be a last resort runs deepest among the people of the defeated powers of World War II, Japan and Germany. Critics may scoff that such an attitude in the two great civilian powers arises from weakness and irresponsibility. The alternative explanation, and I think the better one, is that it reflects wisdom born of bitter experience.

Whereas the U.S.-Japan relationship is stable, U.S. relations with Europe are deeply troubled. Tony Blair in Britain faces a Labor party in revolt against his compliance with U.S. policy, and it will take much good fortune for him to stay in office another year. France, considering its significant interests in Iraq and fearing isolation after a war, seems inclined to go along with rather than forge a balance against American power, though France shares with Germany a visceral discontent with the militaristic and unilateralist visage of the United States.

As the United States flexes its muscles and seeks to divide the allies from one another—as it has done in pressing its dispute over the International Criminal Court—European opinion begins to consider, if as yet only dimly, the possibility of a separate security identity from the United States. Though a formal break seems still a long way off, the basis of estrangement exists in public opinion and may be considerably reinforced by a war against Iraq and

its aftermath. Future crises in the ongoing war on terrorism (to which European police and intelligence agencies are making an important contribution) are likely to highlight the wide gulf between American and European formulas for the use of force and the achievement of security.

Relations with Russia improved significantly in the aftermath of 11 September, but Russia's dealings with the "axis of evil" states—North Korea, Iran, and Iraq—now provoke stern warnings from Washington and signal a potential source of rupture. Like France, however, Russia sees

benefits from cooperation with the United States; its vote and support for the Iraq war can probably be had for a price, such as a freer military hand in its southern borderlands and respect for its economic interests in Iraq. The stern reprimand given Berlin shows that Washington is determined to exact a penalty on those countries that have the temerity to state their convictions. So far at least, the method appears to be working.

The U.S. relationship with China has not noticeably worsened in the past year, but brewing in the administration's new strategic doctrine (and reflected in the political ascendancy of its "China hawks") are a set of policies that seem likely to aggravate Sino-American relations. Given its withdrawal from the ABM treaty, the United States could well acquire the functional equivalent of a first-strike capability against China. Whatever American intentions are, China will probably understand the new offense-defense combination as a threat to its nuclear deterrent. Among the dangers that the new U.S. strategic posture will entail is the possibility of a Chinese nuclear buildup that will in turn press India to redress the regional imbalance, and make Japan's refusal to consider the nuclear option even more awkward. Little attention has been paid to this question over the past year. The administration's withdrawal from the ABM treaty in late 2001 occurred in the heat of the Afghan war and passed almost without notice in domestic politics. Looming on the horizon, however, are serious dangers arising from these dawning strategic realities.

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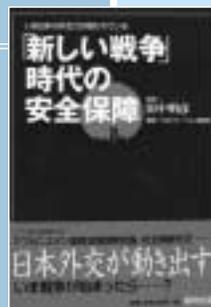
Internationalism in Recession

During the twentieth century, Americans became accustomed to viewing their problem in foreign policy as a choice between isolationism and intervention, between the historic policy of nonentanglement and the new-found imperative of far reaching involvement. That seems a quaint way of posing the choice today, however. The United States is too big and powerful, and the legacy of past actions too pronounced, for it to avoid entanglement in the world. Given the brute fact of American power, even insularity can be a form

of involvement and entanglement. The real choice is between internationalism and imperialism, between a model of consensual leadership and a pattern of hegemonic dictatorship. The former model is too deeply ingrained in past American traditions to disappear, and I believe—I certainly hope—that it will come back in force once the inadequacies of the new policy become manifest. Internationalist ideals and methods, however, are now in deep recession in the United States. Their recovery seems as distant a prospect as a durable boom in the financial markets.

About this Article

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