Chapter 5

Whither the United States and Unipolarity?

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In terms of weight and influence, or power, America can be said to have sustained a strong, positive trajectory for well over a century.

Washington has presided over the world's largest economy since around 1900. The US share of the world economy ranged from 38 per cent in 1900 to 22 per cent in 1980, rising again to around 25 per cent at the present time. Indeed, for many of the last 100 years, the US economy has been at least twice as big as any other in the world. Today, the second-ranked economy, that of Japan, is about one-third the size of the United States. Moreover, the US economy has always been characterised by muscle and tone as much as by sheer mass, growing as much through gains in productivity as through increases in the quantity of capital and labour.¹ Moreover, the United States has repeatedly demonstrated the capacity to translate this economic weight into decisive military power: for example, by developing its navy from unranked in the 1880s to second-ranked by 1907, awesomely so following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, and more or less continuously following the onset of the Cold War.

America's stature, and the broadly positive regard for it across the world, grew continuously alongside its hard power. To illustrate, in his *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, a ruthless dissection of the Treaty of Versailles that followed the end of the First World War, John Maynard Keynes observed of America's economic aid in the immediate postwar period, that 'never was a nobler work of disinterested goodwill carried through with more tenacity and sincerity and skill, and with less thanks either asked or given'.²

Similarly, at the end of the Second World War, Washington's behaviour continued to defy the lessons of history, to display a light touch that belied its preponderance. It was a colossus with huge military forces, a monopoly in nuclear weapons and an economy that, unlike every other belligerent, was literally bursting at the seams. The United States now resolved to have a bigger hand in rebuilding Europe than it had considered desirable in 1918. The idealism of the United Nations, the far-sighted largess of the Marshall Plan, the early and not particularly popular resolve to make Germany and Japan key stakeholders in

the new international system, and the willingness, under NATO, to assume very demanding security obligations to Western Europe even as it continued to demobilise its wartime forces, were all decisively important but gave rise to no anxieties about disproportionate power.

Washington seemed always to manage to be both unmistakably the dominant power and to convey the impression that it had no instincts to take command and to actually exploit fully the power it possessed. Combining power and popularity was Washington's distinctive trick. The United States came to be admired, respected and considered indispensable. Its dominance was occasionally resented, but it was not feared and certainly never inspired countervailing coalitions.

It has always been important to Americans to stand apart from the pack of major powers of the present and the recent past. They had defined themselves in contrast to these powers and bristled at suggestions that the United States had become simply another manifestation of the imperial powers of the past. As America's strategic weight grew, and its presence around the world became more ubiquitous, the characterisations that it was an empire in all but name became harder to counter. It was harder still after 1945 but, as Niall Ferguson has written, the intellectual dilemma was rationalised by contending that the United States might be postured like an imperial power but that the threat from the Soviet Union, an entity that was even more unmistakably imperial in structure and intent, allowed no alternative.³

Washington continued to build its reputation through the tumultuous years of the Cold War, despite Vietnam and the tag that it was the pace-setter in the nuclear arms race. Thus, at the end of the Cold War in 1991, when the United States again stood starkly exposed as the highest form of predator the world had ever seen, its 41st, and perhaps most understated, president in 50 years could observe unremarkably that 'they (the rest of the world) trust us to do what is right'.

When the Soviet Union abruptly conceded defeat in the Cold War, America was nonplussed. Georgi Arbatov, an advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev, was being more than usually perceptive when he told Americans in a letter to the *New York Times* in 1987 that the Soviet Union's final unfriendly act would be to deprive the United States of an enemy. But George H.W. Bush, pursuant to his frank acknowledgement that he was not attracted to the 'vision thing', had no discernable appetite to think grandly about what the United States could do with its 'unipolar moment' in the post-Cold War world. Instead, he focused closely on unravelling the central front of the Cold War and reversing Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Similarly, President Bill Clinton's focus was the economy and domestic renewal. In the foreign policy arena, the umbrella objective became 'democratic

enlargement', but there was no drive to craft a proactive policy architecture to deliver such an outcome. Broadly speaking, the first two American Presidents of the post-Cold War era managed to sustain the knack of making America's disproportionate power accepted as benign and reassuring, characteristics that added immeasurably to its huge stock of hard and soft power.

Walter Lippmann may have put his finger on America's ability to be ominously powerful while not being regarded as an ominous power when he observed, in 1926, that 'our imperialism is more or less unconscious' and that the United States was an 'empire in denial'.⁴ Yet conveying the impression of indifference to pre-eminence of imperial proportions was neither accident nor artifice. It had everything to do with America's system of governance, the powerful attachment to checks and balances on authority at all levels. America's founding fathers operated from a remarkably honest and realistic self-assessment. They recognised that Americans, themselves included, would be as prone as leadership groups anywhere and at any point in history to gather as much power as they could get and ultimately expose the union to the abuse of that power. They therefore resolved to design a system of governance that would guard against this basic human trait and ensure that America's history would remain distinct from that observed in all other states. The way America went about its business internally provided the strongest possible reassurance that this awesome power would always remain pointed roughly in the direction of the ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as enshrined in its *Declaration of Independence*.

Still, even within an administration that sought, with the support of public opinion, a relatively low profile internationally, events conspired continuously to frustrate that preference. There were several dimensions to this phenomenon, all linked to the fact that the United States now stood exposed as never before in its history as the colossus on the world stage. On the one hand, ever more of the world's troubles and dilemmas found their way to Washington's door, not least the raft of ethnic hatreds that resurfaced after the Cold War. On the other hand, America became ever more exclusively the target of choice of rogue states and terrorists. And finally, even an administration committed to keeping the United States in the company of other states, and to not flaunting its disproportionate weight, began to appreciate that, particularly in the military arena, it did have something approaching absolute power, namely a unilateral capacity to secure a desired military outcome in almost any location and to a point rather high up the scale of conflict.

The Clinton Administration routinely stressed the limits to US capacities and declined being cast as the world's policeman, but it also developed assessments and policy settings little removed from those which we see today. In a Cable News Network television forum in May 1994, Clinton isolated Iraq, Iran and

North Korea as the key threats on the WMD front, stressed that the United States 'will not hesitate to act alone if necessary', and spoke more positively of 'working in partnership with other nations' (in effect, 'coalitions of the willing') than doing so through the United Nations.⁵ In an address to a joint sitting of the Australian Parliament in November 1996, he spoke of a 'nexus of new threats—terrorists, rogue states, international criminals, drug traffickers' and of 'taking the fight to the terrorists and drug traffickers' from a standpoint of 'zero tolerance'.⁶ By his State of the Union address in January 1998, this nexus of new threats had become an 'unholy axis'.⁷

In sum, the Clinton Administration saw a progressively sharper focus on irregular threats at the margin of the international system as the most immediate challenges to the order that Washington presided over. At the same time, while seeking relief from the broad security obligations it had carried through the Cold War, the administration declined to decrease Pentagon funding beyond the 25–30 per cent cut through about 1995 put in place by its predecessor, with the result that, by the late 1990s, the US defence budget began to approach 50 per cent of world military expenditure. Perhaps most importantly, the Clinton Administration presided over the longest sustained boom in US history, so that even a relatively huge outlay on defence became, at less than 3.5 per cent of GDP, quite inoffensive in economic and, more particularly, political terms.

The Neoconservative Thesis

If President George H.W. Bush was uncomfortable with the 'vision thing', preoccupied with tidying up after the Cold War and with Iraq, and disposed (out of fiscal responsibility) to retaining 'no more than the forces we need', and President Bill Clinton similarly disposed to leading from within the community of states, a radically different response to the end of the Cold War had been developed in the Pentagon in 1989–92. The key players were Richard Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Lewis Libby, Zalmay Khalilzad and, initially at least, Colin Powell. It began as a tactical response to the clamour from Congress and the general public for a major 'peace dividend' (of the order of 50 per cent of the Pentagon budget), but developed into a grand design for a new global order under US command based, pre-eminently, on unassailable US military superiority. A first cut in 1990 offered the President a fairly traditional package of arguments—America's international obligations, hedging against a revival of Soviet power, the challenge of containing the spread of WMD and other regional dangers like dictators and terrorism—to counter the pressure for a simplistic 50 per cent peace dividend. President George H.W. Bush endorsed the package and used it (on the very night, 2 August 1990, that Iraq invaded Kuwait) to propose cuts in active duty military personnel and military expenditure of 25 per cent and 30 per cent respectively over five years. But the President and his White House advisors revealed a mindset on America's role and the military

power needed to perform that role (no more than necessary) that the policy elite in the Pentagon began to regard as ignorant of the lessons of history and of the dimensions of the opportunity that history had presented to the United States.

With Iraq defanged in February 1991 following the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December that same year, the clamour for deep cuts at the Pentagon resurfaced and the then US Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney directed a new effort to devise a coherent strategy to thwart this pressure. This further work was also carried out entirely within the Pentagon—there is no indication that, at the time or since, it was subject to the usual whole-of-government review—and involved no small element of insubordination given the letter and spirit of the President’s *National Security Strategy* statement of August 1991. This document called for ‘deliberate reductions to no more than the forces we need to defend our interests and meet our global responsibilities’.⁸ This may explain the leaking of a draft of the Pentagon strategy to the *New York Times* in March 1992, and the President’s forceful disavowal of it.

An important inspiration for the Pentagon strategy was the view that the Reagan Administration, in aligning US foreign and security policy with America’s values and ideals, had recorded spectacular accomplishments, hastening the end of the Cold War and vastly increasing America’s influence worldwide in both strategic and ideological terms. This assessment of the Ronald Reagan years underpinned the neoconservative thesis that America’s rise to primacy had suppressed the instability and conflict that was endemic to both Europe and Asia prior to 1945. It seemed to follow that, if the United States vacated this position or sought to share it with others, the probable outcome would be a revival of the accident-prone ‘balance of power’ system that existed through the first decades of the twentieth century.

Despite his President’s disapproval, Cheney privately praised his team for discovering a ‘new rationale’ to define America’s role in the world. Somewhat more surprising is that Cheney managed to release a revised and softened version of this strategy as an official document from the Secretary of Defense just days before Bill Clinton was inaugurated as President in January 1993, placing it on the public record but ensuring its almost complete obscurity.⁹

The Cheney strategy rehearsed the neoconservative thesis that ‘it is not in our interests or those of other democracies to return to earlier periods in which multiple military powers balanced against one another in what passed for security structures while regional, or even global peace hung in the balance’, but avoided the explicit proposition in earlier drafts that the United States should establish and maintain a military superiority so stark and overwhelming that no other states would even consider seeking to compete. Regionally, Cheney’s document proposed that the US objective should be to preclude regional threats and

challenges or hostile non-democratic powers from dominating regions of importance to the United States. Such a posture, it asserted, 'is not simply within our means: it is critical to our future security'. Rather presciently, Cheney argued that the US interest in future security challenges may seem less apparent, making public support problematic. To address this problem, the strategy called for the capacity to respond decisively to regional crises, 'to win quickly and with minimum casualties'.

The Pentagon strategy remained buried until September 2000 when the conservative think tank Project for a New American Century revived its main premise as a possible blueprint for US security policy under a Republican president. When the team that had crafted the strategy reassembled under President George W. Bush, together with the like-minded Donald Rumsfeld, it was to become clear that their attachment to it was undiminished. Whether President Bush was fully briefed on the strategy, and endorsed it, is uncertain. It is clear however that no whiff of the doctrine surfaced in the election campaign. To the contrary, the election strategy responded to public sentiments favouring fewer rather than increased obligations and responsibilities abroad. Thus, in an oft-quoted remark, Bush argued in the second presidential debate on 11 October 2000 that a more 'humble' America would attract more respect.¹⁰

For the foreign and security policy leadership group under President George H.W. Bush, the United States under President Bill Clinton had dithered its way through the first decade of the post-Cold War era but, remarkably and fortunately, had emerged even better positioned, especially in economic terms, to implement its vision. And, as luck would have it, the United States had in its new president an individual with a near-perfect blend of personality traits to allow this vision to be endorsed as policy with absolute conviction. George W. Bush was poorly versed in international affairs and did not pretend to be eager to correct this gap in his experience. Indeed, recruiting the team of seasoned veterans, mostly from his father's administration, was characterised as a deliberate move to counter nervousness on this score. At the same time, the President was possessed—in part at least, many believe, because of his deep faith as a born-again Christian—of quite extraordinary qualities of self-confidence and a deep conviction that great things would be asked of him.

Even though the Bush campaign team had conspicuously avoided seeking a mandate for this new vision of the global role for the United States, it was taken forward at every opportunity provided by the relatively normal circumstances of the first half of 2001. The primacy of military power was particularly evident. Three weeks after his inauguration, Bush gave Defense Secretary Rumsfeld a mandate to embrace unreservedly the 'revolution in military affairs' and to transform the US armed forces to take the fullest advantage of these accumulated possibilities. In that context, the President made the sweeping declaration that

'the best way to keep the peace is to redefine war on our terms'.¹¹ In May 2001, having already declared that the United States would not ratify the nuclear test ban treaty, the President launched the expected move to abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. The message to Russia here, and in the associated position that the United States would no longer 'negotiate' nuclear arms reductions but rather determine its requirements unilaterally, was that the United States would cast Russia off as even a symbolic co-manager of the central nuclear balance. The *Quadrennial Defense Review*, released on 1 October 2001 but completed prior to 11 September 2001, similarly had the Pentagon viewing the world as an undifferentiated battlespace and setting out its initial thinking on how the United States could bring decisive force to bear anywhere at very short notice. Of particular note was a scarcely-disguised focus on China, not least through the identification of a new region, the East Asia Littoral (the area from south of Japan, though Australia and into the Bay of Bengal) where the United States needed to develop its capacities to shape developments and conduct military operations. Alongside these prominent signals, Washington's somewhat contemptuous disavowal of the Kyoto Protocol, and its insistence on insulating US armed forces from the reach of the new International Criminal Court, strengthened further the impression that the United States was stepping away from the community of states, positioning itself to shape and manage the international order while divesting itself of constraints on how it could perform this function.

Normalcy, of course, came to an abrupt end on the morning of 11 September 2001. This utterly devastating yet devastatingly simple terrorist strike momentarily felled the most powerful state in the world. In the months and years that followed, senior administration figures would often respond to criticisms of or requests for explanations on policy developments with the simple contention that '11 September 2001 changed everything'. While there is a great deal of truth in this contention, there was at least one constant of importance to this analysis. The neoconservative grand strategy was not set aside until such time as this unfamiliar threat had been dealt with. To the contrary, the grand strategy was hitched to the new 'war on terror', a combination that was to befuddle political and strategic judgements and cause the United States to stumble badly on both fronts. At the time, however, this hitching probably looked irresistible to the skilled operators at the top of the Bush Administration. The terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 had transformed the political landscape, essentially erasing the domestic political considerations that had mandated some caution in unveiling the new strategy.

By the end of 2001, the Bush Administration was pursuing two major security strategies: the 'war on terror', with its doctrine of pre-emption and the 'axis of evil' as its primary targets, and the grand strategy for a new global order founded on declared and accepted US pre-eminence. The latter strategy of course was

still undisclosed. The world at large had certainly noted, and been concerned about, the newly imperious tone and style of US behaviour, but it had not yet traced the dots back to the Pentagon strategy. President Bush lifted the veil in mid-2002. In a West Point speech on 1 June 2002 he said:

As we defend the peace, we also have an historic opportunity to preserve the peace. We have our best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where the great powers compete in peace instead of prepare for war. The history of the last century, in particular, was dominated by a series of destructive national rivalries that left battlefields and graveyards across the earth. Germany fought France, the axis fought the allies, and then the East fought the West, in proxy wars and tense standoffs, against a backdrop of nuclear Armageddon.

Competition between great nations is inevitable, but armed conflict is not. More and more, civilized nations find themselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos. America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.¹²

This was a declaration of empire, an assertion that the United States was taking command. It assembled the starkest formulations of the key propositions advanced in the several iterations of the strategy crafted a decade earlier. The fact that it was in some substantial measure merely codifying reality was beside the point. Most of the world felt that it had not declared a vacancy and instinctively resisted the role which the United States seemed to be claiming for itself; not to mention being so summarily relegated to the second division. Resentment and concern about the new thinking in Washington, which had emerged prior to 11 September 2001 and then been swept aside in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, now resurfaced as the Bush Administration insisted that its assessment of the terrorist phenomenon as an existential threat and its prescriptions for dealing with it, including regime change in Iraq, could not be contested. By March 2002, barely six months after the terrorist attacks, the most extraordinary 'coalition of the willing' that had assembled spontaneously around Washington was barely visible.

America's unique aura—those intangible qualities of respect, admiration and trust that added so immeasurably to its hard power, and which had been so painfully but magnificently accumulated over the preceding century—had been punctured.

America's dilemma was a real one. It was too powerful to easily blend in with the other powers. The neoconservative prescription was hardly the babbling of

madmen, and was not without merit. Its most conspicuous flaw, perhaps, is that it sought to discredit and replace a system of global governance, namely the 'balance of power' system that had functioned after a fashion for several centuries up to 1945—that had been overtaken and was no longer a realistic alternative. In the world of the 1990s—with its nuclear weapons, resurgent interdependence from the priority attached to free trade since 1945, transformed by the information and communications revolutions, anticipating further sweeping transformation through the phenomenon of globalisation, and with most of the former practitioners of 'balance of power' politics wrapped up in the European Union—the neoconservative thesis might have been challenged as a process that arrived first at the preferred solution and then contrived to formulate the problem to make the package as compelling as possible.¹³

Tragically, however, the Bush Administration was clueless on the marketing of its proposed solution to this dilemma, let alone re-shaping its solution into a marketable product. Indeed, a rather strong case can be made that the authors of the solution saw marketing as a sign of weakness, a possible signal to others that the United States lacked the resolve to impose its vision. The President, it would appear, relished the newly black and white world of a United States at 'war' and was quite simply mesmerised by his authority as commander-in-chief.¹⁴ He was not attracted to subtlety and nuance and took ownership of this second strategy, including the manner in which it should be presented, as readily as he had the global 'war on terror'.

Iraq became the issue that wobbled between the two security strategies in play in Washington in 2001–2003, a state of affairs that contributed very materially to the disastrous lead-up to the invasion (the dissipation of the post-11 September 2001 'coalition of the willing' and then the deep fissures within the Western alliance) and to the even more disastrous aftermath.

Regime change in Iraq had much more to do with the Pentagon strategy than with the 'war on terror'. It was seen as a move that would erase what was seen as a black mark on America's *curriculum vitae* as a power that finished what it started, while providing an enduring illustration of the fact that the United States had both the capacity and the will to impose its vision for international order in the future. Early in 2004, President Bush told Bob Woodward that he had been willing to be interviewed at length for the book *Plan of Attack*, because the book would have historic significance. That significance, in the President's view, lay in the fact that the military campaign against Iraq demonstrated that 'America has changed how you fight and win war, and therefore made it easier to keep the peace in the long run'.¹⁵

Although the case for action against Iraq was broad—the administration developed a veritable laundry list of reasons why it would be in the US interest—it lacked a concrete link to the attacks on 11 September 2001 and to

the political window of opportunity for decisive action that the attacks had opened. Regime change in Iraq therefore had to be positioned as a priority in the 'war on terror'. When expectations and hopes that proof of Iraqi involvement in the attacks and/or of some form of strategic association with al Qaeda had to be abandoned, the administration selected WMD as the remaining rationale that was sufficiently focused and compelling to bring Congress and the public on side. As we now know, confirming this rationale proved surprisingly difficult, but Iraq simply had to have a demonstrable WMD program to serve the administration's purposes. The administration therefore found itself slipping into the manipulation and hyping of the intelligence at its disposal only to have the most obvious explanation for the difficulty confirmed after the invasion: Iraq had not possessed WMD for some time, and was not poised to re-acquire them.¹⁶

The same imperative, using Iraq to herald America's grand strategy, was also important in shaping how the United States conducted the invasion. Doing so with an extraordinary economy of force was critical to the strategic message and this objective was pursued with little regard for the advantages of having an overwhelming military presence for the purposes of occupation and stabilisation.

Thirdly, but related to this point, the window of opportunity to deal with Iraq was deemed to be so precious that the administration elected to minimise the risk that thinking through or planning for possible worst-case developments might reach the public or Congress. This literally meant undertaking hardly any work on the aftermath of the defeat of the Iraqi armed forces.¹⁷ The result was that, after capturing Baghdad, US commanders in Iraq (with no guidance and a confused chain of command back to Washington) stood aside for what seemed like an eternity, dissipating the momentum of their military campaign. This left Iraqis wondering who, if anyone, had replaced Saddam Hussein, and gave those disposed to resist the occupation through insurgent operations a glimmer of hope.

Finally, as the potential enormity of their miscalculations began to sink in, penetrating and destroying the emergent insurgency became a matter of the utmost importance—essentially a matter of doing whatever it took to quell the threat. As the key lay in acquiring actionable intelligence on insurgents, this contributed rather directly, in my view, to the excesses at Abu Ghraib prison. This, together with the inevitably relentless stream of accidents and miscalculations involving Iraqi civilians when a lean top-end combat force is tasked to lighten its touch and engage in counterinsurgency operations, saw the United States lose all the moral high ground.

Iraq has been a catastrophe for the United States. It has in all likelihood intensified and prolonged the era of virulent terrorism; it has foreshortened America's 'unipolar moment'; it has made the United States more of an observer

than a player in the wider geopolitical transformations underway; it may have introduced a new inclination toward isolationism within the American public which will narrow the foreign and security policy options for future administrations; and, by generating perceptions of disorder at the top of the international tree, it may have fuelled recklessness and brinkmanship on the part of a number of lesser players.

Looking back, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the abrupt transformation in the style of US engagement with the world—a transformation toward imperious, unilateral leadership—was decisive in triggering a reaction of profound disappointment among so many allies and friends, both old and new. This disappointment matured into a concern that the United States had slipped its moorings, that even its system of governance, so profoundly reassuring for so long, could be subverted and allow a clique in the executive branch to pursue an ideological vision that, although having broad roots in strands of American thinking, had been constructed wholly within the Pentagon and was skewed by an inordinate faith in the utility of military power.

If there was a decisive moment when America's allies and friends sensed that Washington had decided in favour of command rather than leadership, it probably came in the immediate aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks. At that moment, essentially the entire world set aside the concerns that had accumulated over the preceding eight months and assembled spontaneously around Washington to jointly confront the new menace of mass casualty terrorism. It was a stunning signal of solidarity, a reflection of the huge stock of respect and goodwill that the United States had accumulated over more than a century, and clear evidence that its centrality to international order and stability was universally appreciated. The Bush Administration, however, seemed scarcely to notice and insisted on an even clearer acknowledgement that the United States was in command. It issued an undifferentiated test to the world community at large—'you are either with us or you are with the terrorists'—and bristled at any quibbling about the strategy, tactics and priorities that it had decided to pursue in response. From late November 2001, perhaps even earlier in diplomatic circles, this included the decision that regime change in Iraq was a priority of the highest order; so high in fact that it pushed out full consolidation of deposing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and finding Osama bin Laden.

Notwithstanding the tragedy of 11 September 2001, disappointment with the United States spread swiftly. Opinion polls across the world recorded sharp declines in positive attitudes toward the United States. Even governments that determined that they had powerful *realpolitik* reasons to stay with Washington confronted public sentiments to the contrary. And, although there was a great deal of activity to develop international cooperation and collaboration on the menace of terrorism, its effectiveness was diminished by these undercurrents

of disappointment with and resentment towards US behaviour, and by the Bush Administration's ever more exclusive focus on Iraq. As Iraq degenerated over the course of 2002 into the issue of determining who was in charge and how that authority would be exercised, the split between America and a number of its strong allies and friends grew. The result, predictably, was an unhappy one. The United States demonstrated that it could act, but also that it had, for the first time, lost the capacity to attract followers.

The frontal challenge to stability and order that attacks like 11 September 2001 so clearly represented was now reinforced by resentment and disunity among the world's leading states, compounding perceptions of a 'world out of balance'—a condition that gave encouragement to jihadist groups, and probably also to actors like Iran and North Korea who perceived in this disunity at the top opportunities to challenge the interests of these powers in comparative safety.¹⁸ More recently, the accelerating erosion of the Bush Administration's conservative support base has added a further dimension of uncertainty: with more than two years to run, what direction might this administration take in these circumstances, and what does it suggest about the inclinations of the next administration?

Looking Ahead

This chapter has argued that the explanation for the invasion of Iraq can be found in an extraordinary fusion of circumstances: the attacks on 11 September 2001; the power and conviction of a clique of officials with a grand vision for an era of American dominance; the personality of President George W. Bush; the conservative ascendancy within the United States, accompanied by rising religiosity; and the achievement of astonishing virtuosity in usable military power. These circumstances combined to allow the US system of checks and balances to be briefly overwhelmed, and for an action to proceed that, because it was viewed as a 'home run' on several fronts, was not critically second-guessed on any of them. The invasion of Iraq was at once an angry giant lashing out in shock at the impudence of the attacks on 11 September 2001 and supremely confident that it could now impose its grand vision more quickly and decisively than 'normal' circumstances might have allowed.

In the eyes of the world and in the eyes of a strong majority of its own citizens, the United States now stands diminished, its legitimacy as the world's pre-eminent state questioned more seriously than ever before. This legacy of the current Iraq War will not soon be erased and historians are very likely to characterise the 43rd president and his administration as the most damaging in the history of the republic.

Looking ahead to the more immediate future, I am inclined to be more optimistic than the views set out in this chapter might suggest. The reasons for

this optimism are twofold. First, a deeply-ingrained capacity for the United States to self-correct and (eventually) align itself with basic norms and principles ranks amongst its greatest political strengths. The United States has a singular capacity to renew itself, to step away from a course of action and take a new path with scarcely a trace of baggage from, or embarrassment about, its past policies. This process could be said to be underway. In his second inaugural address and the State of the Union speech in January 2005, President Bush recast the goal of an end to tyranny in the world as an ideal. He said plainly that making America fully secure once more would be the work of 'generations'. And he acknowledged that this task was beyond the gift of the Pentagon alone. Similarly, the administration has become more cognisant of the value of partnerships and consensus, especially as regards Iran and North Korea, and the US State Department under Condoleezza Rice has been permitted to exercise its traditional skills in these arenas. While encouraging, these pointers could still be more in the nature of pragmatic adjustments to a transforming domestic political scene than evidence of a propensity to re-visit earlier policy settings and consider the need for significant recalibration. I would not expect this administration to be attracted to such a recalibration. Nor, perhaps, could it be credible if it tried. The sad and simple fact is that its legacy is wholly inseparable from Iraq, and it has no choice but to press on and hope for something resembling an honourable outcome.

The second reason for optimism is that, even in its diminished and chastened state, America's shoes are way too big to be filled by any other state or, indeed, any imaginable grouping of states. As the prevailing turmoil so strongly suggests, a United States that is confident, engaged and leading remains indispensable to the necessary modicum of order and stability in world affairs. Nor will this state of affairs become questionable for some time. Depending on your projection, and on the exchange rate used, the United States will remain the single largest economic entity in the world for at least another 20 years. Its capacity to bring overwhelming force to bear anywhere in the world, precisely and relentlessly, is likely to remain unmatched for even longer. The point becomes more compelling if one asks when another country might arise with a package of attributes competitive with that offered by the United States: economic strength; military prowess; technological vibrancy; an admired political system; a very marketable set of basic values and beliefs; an appealing culture; a magnificent tradition of leadership and so on. That prospect, it seems to me, lies well into the indefinite future. This suggests that most governments will be only too ready to respond positively to overtures from the United States for a new compact on the governance of world affairs.

The Bush Administration miscued tragically and dissipated a probably unique opportunity to have unipolarity both accepted as a reality and endorsed as an acceptable construct for global governance over the foreseeable future. As Coral

Bell has argued so persuasively (including in this volume), the United States should and, indeed, may now begin to look toward arrangements with the flavour of a 'concert of powers'. A stepping-stone in this direction could be something that a Chinese leader might be tempted to describe as 'unipolarity with democratic characteristics'. The primary vehicle for any new accommodation will surely have to be a joint resolve and a shared agenda to stop the spread of, and gradually wind back, the phenomenon of extremism.

This process will be neither easy nor certain. We cannot return to the *status quo ante*. Equally, however, given the US pronounced and comprehensive edge in strategic weight, no imaginable new construct for relations between the major powers in the decades immediately ahead will be unrecognisably different from the arrangements that have evolved since the end of the Cold War. Despite the belated but resounding step back toward the centre at the mid-term elections in November 2006, the impulses that have driven the United States during the past six years will not vanish in January 2009 when the Bush Administration completes its term. A further complication may be that certain other powers, notably China and (perhaps) Russia and India, probably have a rather different view today as compared to 2000 on how the world should work and of their proper role in the process. We might also consider whether we have applied unreasonable standards to the United States. We may have expected too much 'good international citizenship' from this extraordinary country, and will have to learn to cope with less as its degree of dominance of the international system stops growing and eventually starts to lessen. Whether there will be enough statesmanship in the relevant capitals to forge or to manoeuvre gradually towards a new *modus operandi* is an open question. In my view, over the short to medium term the odds appear reasonably favourable.

ENDNOTES

¹ These statistics are taken from Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: Volume 2: Historical Statistics*, Development Centre Studies, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris, 2003.

² John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, Penguin Books, London, 1988 edition, p. 273.

³ Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, Penguin Books, New York, 2004, p. 83.

⁴ Cited in Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, p. 62.

⁵ See United States Information Service, 'Clinton: US Foreign Policy Must Be Willing to Risk Error', *Backgrounder*, 9 May 1994.

⁶ William Jefferson Clinton, 'Address by the President of the United States of America', House of Representatives, Australia, *Debates*, 20 November 1996, pp. 7167–72.

⁷ See William Jefferson Clinton, 'State of the Union Address by the President', 27 January 1998, available at <<http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/text/statun98.txt>>, accessed 8 November 2007.

⁸ US Executive Office of the President, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, August 1991, available at <<http://www.fas.org/man/docs/918015-nss.htm>>, accessed 24 October 2007.

⁹ See Department of Defense, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, Washington DC, January 1993, available at <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/pdf/naarpr_Defense.pdf>, accessed 8 November 2007.

¹⁰ See the transcript of the Second Gore–Bush Presidential Debate, 11 October 2000, on the Commission on Presidential Debates website, available at <<http://www.debates.org/pages/trans2000b.html>>, accessed 24 October 2007.

¹¹ ‘Remarks by the President to the Troops and Personnel’, Norfolk Naval Air Station, Norfolk, Virginia, 13 February 2001, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/20010213-1.html>>, accessed 24 October 2007.

¹² ‘President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech at West Point’, New York, 1 June 2002, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>>, accessed 24 October 2007.

¹³ For an insightful analysis of these and related issues, see Robert Jervis, ‘The Remaking of a Unipolar World’, *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 3, Summer 2006, available at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/siwps/publication_files/WQ1_JERVIS.pdf>, accessed 8 November 2007, pp. 7–19.

¹⁴ Bob Woodward reports an illuminating observation that President George W. Bush volunteered during an interview: ‘I’m the commander—see, I don’t need to explain—I don’t need to explain why I say things. That’s the interesting thing about being the President. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don’t feel like I owe anybody an explanation.’ See Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2002, pp. 145–46.

¹⁵ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2004, p. 425.

¹⁶ For two fuller analyses of this issue, that come to rather different conclusions, see Lawrence Freedman, ‘War In Iraq: Selling the Threat’, *Survival*, vol. 6, issue 2, Summer 2004, pp. 7–49; and Ron Huiskens, *We Don’t Want the Smoking Gun to be a Mushroom Cloud: Intelligence on Iraq’s WMD*, SDSC Working Paper, no. 390, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, June 2004.

¹⁷ A particularly good account of this astonishing process can be found in George Packer, *The Assassins’ Gate: America in Iraq*, Faber and Faber, London, 2006, especially pp. 100–48.

¹⁸ This phrase is taken from the title of a book by Coral Bell which examines the outlook for, and possible alternatives to, unipolarity. See Coral Bell, *A World Out of Balance: American Ascendancy and International Politics in the twenty-first Century*, Longueville Books and *The Diplomat*, Woollahra, NSW, 2004.