

The U.S. Power Complex: What's New

By Tom Barry, Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC)

To discern what's new about U.S. foreign policy and its power trip through history, you don't need to follow the debates in the foreign policy journals or in Beltway policy circles. The emerging grand strategy of U.S. foreign policy is readily evident in the pronouncements of President Bush and his top officials. It's an agenda distinguished by a "moral clarity," according to Bush, who has told the world that the United States has launched an "endless" war against "evildoers." His moral clarity about the "axis of evil" and his warning that you are "either with us or with the terrorists" reflect an unnuanced approach to using U.S. power.

The U.S. grand strategy developed by the Bush administration extends beyond the war on terrorism to a radical reassessment of U.S. foreign and military policy in this unipolar world. As high U.S. officials explain, the United States is intent on pursuing policies that prevent the rise of a "peer competitor." Tossing aside the traditional "realist" approach to U.S. security affairs, President Bush in a key foreign policy speech at West Point in June 2002 outlined a supremacist or neo-imperial agenda of international security. Not only would the United States no longer count on coalitions of great powers to guarantee collective security, it also would prevent the rise of any potential global rival—keeping U.S. "military strengths beyond challenges."

The devil is in the details, so it's the small things about the Bush administration rather than its major policy pronouncements that best reveal the character and dimensions of the new U.S. foreign and military policy. As part of the housekeeping underway in the administration's foreign policy apparatus, the Defense Department in early 2002 announced the closing of the Army's Peacekeeping Institute (PKI).¹ With its \$200,000 operating budget, the PKI is the only government agency devoted to studying how to secure peace in failed nations or post-conflict situations. "This is not our strength or our calling," candidate Bush said in 1999 address when he emphatically rejected a U.S. role in peacekeeping.² Close observers inside and outside the Pentagon said that the announced closure of the peacekeeping institute reflected the disdain with which Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and other hawks have for the soft side—the liberal internationalist side—of international relations.

The decision of the Bush administration to renounce the Clinton administration's signing of the treaty creating the International Criminal Court made international news. However, Arms Control Undersecretary John Bolton's statement that signing the letter renouncing the Rome Statute "was the happiest

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The Terms of Power

Balance of Power: This concept of international relations originated in Europe in the mid-1600s and asserts that hegemonic ambitions of nation-states will lead inevitably to war in the absence of power balancing, whereby weaker powers either strive to increase their own military power or to counter the superior military capacity of neighboring nations. Along with containment and deterrence, balance-of-power geopolitics has been a core component of realist foreign policy decisionmaking. A related strategy, sometimes used by hegemonic powers for managing international security, is “off-shore balancing,” which calls for increased participation of lesser powers in addressing international and regional crises.

Benign Hegemony: Unlike coercive forms of hegemony, such as Japan's prewar regional Coprosperity Sphere in East Asia, benign hegemony (also referred to as “benevolent hegemony”) ensures respect for leadership by encouraging a widespread sharing of economic benefits and frequent consultations with lesser powers. The actions of the hegemon, empire, or imperial power are commonly justified by the argument that they are motivated by benign or benevolent objectives. After the Second World War, the U.S. won respect as a benign hegemon because of its geopolitical strategy of liberal internationalism, its security umbrella in Europe and Asia benefiting former enemies, and its relatively transparent and democratic process of governance at home.

Collective Security: In response to the dismal failures of balance-of-power systems leading to the two world wars, the allied nations (led by the U.S. and Great Britain) launched two institutions—first the League of Nations following WWI and later the United Nations following WWII—that were founded on the principles that an attack on one nation was a concern to all nations and that the threat of collective response would prevent such aggression.

Common Security: This emerging concept of international relations advanced by NGOs and progressive scholars holds that “balance-of-power,” “collective security,” and hegemonic power fall short of building enduring peaceful international relations. The concept stresses that nations and civil society organizations, building on multilateral structures, need to begin defining common interests that will ensure not only national security but also “human security.”

Conservative Internationalism: Adherents of this grand strategy of U.S. global engagement trace its origins to the interventionism of Presidents William McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt and more recently to the interventionism and rollback strategy of the Reagan administration. Like liberal internationalism, the conservative variety rejects realist and isolationist approaches to foreign policy, which focus narrowly on U.S. economic interests and direct threats to U.S. national security, and posits instead that U.S. interests and security should be broadly interpreted to include the spread of economic and political liberalism. The differences between these two types of internationalism, however, are greater than their similarities. Conservative internationalism explicitly holds that the U.S. military should be the main enforcer of international order and norms and the main instrument to ensure that those nations that fall outside U.S. favor undergo regime changes. It asserts that in its role as hegemon, the U.S. is exempt (U.S. exceptionalism) from the constraints of international norms, rule of law, and multilateralism. Conservative internationalism stands firmly behind the nation-state as the main actor in global affairs and rejects notions that globalization and multidimensional international engagement are creating new foundations for multilateral governance. Neoconservatives are the main exponents of conservative internationalism.

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moment of my government service” told more about the administration’s ideologically driven campaign against multilateral constraints on U.S. power. Similarly, while the administration’s opposition to the Kyoto Protocol on climate change is well known, its determination to undermine all efforts to establish international norms on fossil fuel usage could be best appreciated in its maneuvering to replace Robert Watson, the respected chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, as a way to undermine the panel’s credibility. And the power of petropolitics in shaping U.S. policy was also exposed in a leaked memo from ExxonMobil that had previously asked the White House: “Can Watson be replaced now at the request of the U.S.?”³

Such details underscore the fundamental shifts in the policy discourse of the Bush presidency. What’s at stake for the Bush foreign policy team is the future of U.S. power. To make the 21st century the new American century, the hawks and neoconservatives who have gained the upper hand in the administration want a fundamental reordering of the strategy of U.S. global engagement. The old strategies of realism and liberal internationalism that worked in tandem to ensure that America reigned hegemonic during the 20th century are, they argue, outdated in today’s world in which U.S. power is no longer constrained by another

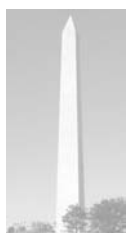
superpower.⁴ Realism—with its attendant balance-of-power politics, great power alliances, deterrence, and containment—is no longer applicable in a unipolar world characterized by major power imbalances between the United States and all other nations. Likewise, the Wilsonian and Rooseveltian strategies of enlightened self-interest designed to build economic and political alliances under U.S. benign hegemony are also deemed, for the most part, unnecessary and out of touch with today's global power structure. So, too, are liberal geopolitical strategies such as the democracy

“enlargement” policies and humanitarian interventionism of the 1990s that stressed inclusion and rules-based systems. For the Bush foreign policy team, the United States should now exercise power unimpeded by partnerships, alliances, and rules—and without apology for its imperial status.⁵

What's needed is a grand strategy of supremacy. No other nation has wielded such undisputed power—economic, military, technological, diplomatic, and cultural—over so much territory. The U.S. should rid itself of its power complex—its liberal guilt and ambivalence about its supremacy—

and pursue with conviction a grand strategy of neoimperialism.

Proponents of this neoimperial strategy of global engagement rest their case on two indisputable facts of post-cold war international relations: the depth of U.S. power and the absence of alternative manifestations of global leadership backed by military might. If one thinks first about U.S. national interests and national security, then the objective of any grand strategy, according to the new imperialists, should be to maintain and enhance this U.S. power—to prolong what neoconservative columnist Charles Krauthammer calls the “unipolar moment.”



FROM HEGEMONY TO SUPREMACY

Since the 1880s America has had hegemonic ambitions to shape the development of the international political and economic systems—first as a junior partner to Great Britain and then in its own right as the world's military and technological power with the leadership that proved key to defeating the Axis powers and setting forth the ideological vision of a postwar framework of capitalist international relations managed by a system of multilateralism under U.S. management.

The industrialized capitalist nations commonly regarded the U.S. as a benign hegemon—one that managed

an economic system in which all major players benefited, including former Axis nations, and provided a military umbrella that offered security without financial burden. But the ideological and military rivalry of the cold war checked the geographical reach of U.S. hegemony. The lofty visions of multilateralism, international cooperation, and international rule set forth by the architects of the UN system of global governance still largely framed the official discourse of global affairs, although the chessboard politics of the superpower rivalry defined the era. The Whites under U.S. hegemonic leadership and the Reds under the imperial sway of the Soviet Union

kept global affairs firmly rooted in balance-of-power politics.

The bipolar power balance kept U.S. in the check—constraining its unilateral, interventionist impulses while obliging it to rely on the “soft power” of aid and diplomacy to maintain allegiances. By the 1980s the realpolitik constraints on U.S. power began to loosen, as the U.S. sensed deepening deterioration of Soviet power and of the credibility of the socialist alternative. At the same time, the Reagan administration—benefiting from a new fusionist trend in rightwing thinking uniting anti-socialists, national security militarists, social conserva-

The Terms of Power

Empire: The territory controlled, directly or indirectly, by an imperial nation, which retains control of colonies and subjects by dictate and exercise of military power.

Exceptionalism: An enduring belief in U.S. moral superiority that gives America special rights to unilateralism and frees it from the rules and norms that bind other nations to the international community. This conviction in U.S. virtue and in America's messianic mission in global affairs has been reinforced through the centuries by its mounting economic, military, and cultural power.

Global Governance: The collection of multilateral institutions, international agreements, rules, norms, and standards, country groupings (like the G8), and other formal and informal processes that serve to regulate governmental and private behavior across national boundaries in matters ranging from international air transportation and postal service to security issues, environmental degradation, and trade.

Hegemony: The structure of power relations in which one nation (a hegemon) assumes leadership and responsibility over world or regional systems primarily by virtue of its superior financial, commercial, and productive power and secondarily by its military power.

Imperialism: A system by which the dominant power, through military conquest, colonization, or direct control of investment and trade, expropriates the land, natural resources, and labor of another people for its own enrichment.

Imperium: An informal empire, allowing some degree of autonomy to member states but requiring strong leadership backed by global policing and military power.

Isolationism: Strictly defined, U.S. isolationism refers to the political consensus of the founding fathers that the U.S. should define its foreign policy and interventionism apart from the balance-of-power dynamics of Europe. It was this isolationism that shaped populist America First sentiment against U.S. involvement in World War II and the League of Nations. Today, elements of this traditional isolationism remain and have come to the fore in the anti-European sentiment within the circle of neoconservative strategists shaping Bush's foreign policy. However, isolationism is commonly used to refer to inward-looking and antiglobalist sentiments against U.S. involvement in international crises (humanitarian, economic, and military) that do not directly affect U.S. national interests.

Liberal Internationalism: A policy framework most closely identified with President Woodrow Wilson that encourages U.S. international engagement, including military interventions, to bring U.S. values and political systems—freedom, democracy, free market economies—to the rest of the world. Driven by liberal values—both economic and political—U.S. liberal internationalism has often provided the moral argument for what in fact were policies of neoimperialism that directly served U.S. economic interests. As shaped by Presidents Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, America's liberal internationalism has been closely tied to its support of a multilateral framework as the best way of ensuring international peace and development. As such, America's liberal internationalist impulses contributed to widespread sentiment, both at home and abroad, that the U.S. was a benign hegemon.

Machtropolitik: Political relations defined by the decisive use of superior military power.

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tives, free market ideologues, and neoconservatives—mounted a military and ideological offensive. Its confident assertion that there is no alternative to “free-market democracies,” its move from “containment” to “roll-back” strategies, and its new military build-up foreshadowed and laid the global power trip of the George W. Bush administration. Although the militarism of the Reagan administration did reignite the type of transnational opposition to U.S. global leadership that arose during the Vietnam War (reviving talk of U.S. imperialism), the upsurge in backing for U.S.-style economic and political liberalism actually strengthened U.S. hegemonic influence.⁶

The end of the cold war left U.S. foreign policy without a defining legacy. In the absence of the anti-communist core of foreign policy, no political sector—left, liberal, centrist, conservative, right—could persuasively articulate a new vision for U.S. global engagement. The “New World Order” of the Bush Sr. administration was met with derision from the right, as was the “assertive multilateralism,” “strategic partner” policies, revived liberal internationalism of the Clinton administrations. The left focused almost exclusively on backlash politics opposing the new liberal-conservative consensus on free trade, while alternatively supporting and critiquing the liberal-centrist consensus around humanitarian interventionism. Also focused largely on backlash politics against the per-

ceived liberalism of the Clinton presidency and largely bereft of their core anticommunism, the right initially reacted rather than proposed a new vision of U.S. foreign and military policy.

In the mid-1990s, however, a new coherent vision of U.S. foreign and military policy started taking shape—one that brought together the traditionalist concerns of the social conservatives (culture wars, dominionism of Christian Right), military/industrial complex advocates, and neoconservative ambition to reassume control of foreign policy apparatus. Dismissive of arguments about new transnational threats to global stability (climate change, resource scarcity conflicts, infectious disease), the new vision was at once simple and grandiose. Simple in that U.S. foreign and military policy should not get bogged down in conflicts and humanitarian crises that had no direct bearing on U.S. national interests and U.S. national security.⁷ Grandiose in that U.S. foreign and military policy should embrace U.S. global dominance and do whatever is necessary to maintain

U.S. supremacy. The radical agenda, clearly articulated and promoted by administration hardliners from the start of the Bush presidency, quickly advanced after the September 11th terrorism.

But what's really new about U.S. foreign and military policy? After

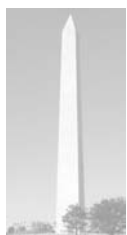
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all, the U.S. has a long history of throwing its weight around, intervening militarily, sidelining the United Nations, allying itself with dictators and human rights abusers, and asserting for itself high ground of morality and the blessing of the

almighty. It has even dropped the big one—twice—to demonstrate its overwhelming power.

What's different and what's so alarming about the new U.S. grand strategy are three qualitatively different components of U.S. foreign and military policy: aggressive anti-multilateralism, warlordism, and moral absolutism. Underlying and fortifying all three currents is the language of antiterrorism, which has replaced anticommunism as the core organizing and unifying principle.

Like anticommunism before it, a foreign policy framed by antiterrorism assures bipartisan consensus and has popular resonance. It establishes a logic for strategic alliances with unsavory partners (from Israel to Saudi Arabia), justifies increases in military budgets, and provides a persuasive rationale for an “endless war” against evil. As part of the “new realism” emerging in Washington, the focus is on coalitions and alliance of convenience with both minor regional powers such as Pakistan and with the second-tier “great powers” such as Russia.



CAMPAIGN AGAINST MULTILATERALISM

The threat of global governance, blue-helmeted peacekeepers, multilateral-

ism, and international rules and treaties has always featured prominently in right-wing agendas. In the

Reagan administration, this anti-multilateralism agenda came thundering out of the White House's

The Terms of Power

Multilateralism: A structure to manage international and regional affairs that constrains unilateral behavior through institutional mechanisms (treaties, international law, and a voting process) that ensure consultation and agreement. In the wake of World War II, there was broad consensus that national interests would be best served by multilateral systems that fostered consensus.

Multipolar, Bipolar, Unipolar: Since the beginning of the 20th century, the international system has evolved from a multipolar arrangement (including five great European powers, Japan, and the U.S.) to a bipolar standoff during the cold war to a unipolar world since the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

New Realism: With respect to U.S. foreign policy, new realism refers to the Bush administration's rejection of the liberal impulses of the Clinton administration—its inclination toward humanitarian interventionism, multilateralism, social clauses in trade agreements, etc.—and to the current unapologetic acceptance of U.S. supremacy. Great power relations, under this new realist framework, are to be managed not by traditional balance-of-power arrangements but rather as part of a grand strategy of maintaining and enhancing U.S. supremacy, particularly military superiority.

Realism: This approach to foreign policy decisionmaking focuses strictly on national interests and security, rejecting idealism and values-driven policies. It stresses the centrality of the nation-state and improving the position and power of the U.S. relative to other nations. It is closely associated with a worldview or philosophy of international relations known as *realpolitik*, which stresses that nations act in pursuit of their own interests and in accordance to their degree of power. Realists reject isolationism and internationalism in both their liberal and conservative manifestations.

Realpolitik: A hard-headed, cold-soul approach to international affairs by which foreign policy decisions respond directly and immediately to what furthers U.S. national interests and security. *Realpolitik* rejects the idealist, value-laden foreign policy of “liberal internationalism” as well as the supremacist assumptions of conservative internationalism, focusing instead on managing power relations and manipulating them through diplomacy deterrence—and force when necessary—to protect U.S. economic interests and national security.

Supremacism: This policy framework embraces the U.S. superpower status in a unipolar world. For its adherents, it is a policy firmly based in “new realist” assessment of power balances—namely, that as the predominant power whose military might is beyond challenge, the U.S. cannot and should not be bound by multilateral constraints. American power should be used to ensure that the U.S. maintains its dominance both in order to protect its national interests and because it is this very dominance that now underpins what the supremacists call “the American peace.”

Unilateralism: A pattern of international engagement in which one nation acts outside the framework of bilateral (between two countries) or multilateral (involving many countries) agreements and negotiation.

bully pulpit. Deprived of anticommunism as the belief holding disparate right-wing forces together, the populist right in the mid-1990s

found that attacks on the UN and all forms of global governance resonated with an economically and culturally more insecure America.

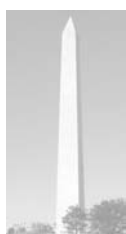
Rejecting as liberal hogwash the “assertive multilateralism” of Madeleine Albright, the Republican Congress appealed to the individualism of Americans, making simultaneous cases against big government and for U.S. unilateralism. The team around George W. Bush, departing from the internationalism and moderate conservatism of the Bush Sr. administration, steadily chipped away at a target list of international treaties and conventions that constrained U.S. freedom of action, while at the same time ensuring that the officials appointed to UN agencies and commission would do the U.S. bidding.⁸

Critics of the different assaults on instances of multilateralism, whether it be the climate change treaty, arms trade convention, or any other attempt to institute international norms and rules, argued that long-term U.S. interests and national security were being undermined, not protected. The thickening web of multilateral regimes and treaties is regarded, as one astute observer of multilateralism noted, as Lilliputian attempts to tie down Gulliver.⁹ Even more alarming than the adverse impact on any one international problem addressed by these multilateral efforts under U.S. attack is the possibility that the net result may be the disintegration of the entire post-World War II framework of multilateralism, thrusting global affairs into a Hobbesian world where power not reason prevails.¹⁰ The vision of Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and

Woodrow Wilson earlier in the 20th century of an intergovernmental framework to prevent war, promote peace and prosperity, and protect rights is being tossed into the historical dustbin by the Bush administration. Confident of its own military superiority, the U.S. government believes it can respond to all security threats.

Leaving aside the concern that as global sheriff the United States will address only military threats to its own security, the Bush administration's dismissal of multilateralism also deprives the world of the international mechanisms to respond to nontraditional security issues such as resource conflicts, rise in infectious disease, international crime, and environmental degradation.

Hardliners such as Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and Richard Cheney hold a very traditional view of national security that leaves little or no room for inclusion of threats to "human security," let alone for consideration of proposals for new forms of global governance to address these nontraditional yet very real threats.



WARLORDISM

Ironically, since the end of the cold war the influence of the Pentagon has increased while the State Department control over foreign policy has steadily diminished.¹¹ In the 1990s, foreign economic policy trumped traditional diplomacy, giving the imperatives of the Commerce and Treasury Departments a central place in U.S. international affairs. While the State Department and its Agency for International Development were being downsized, the power and responsibilities of the regional commands of the Pentagon deepened as training programs, joint military exercises, and U.S. military presence expanded around the globe—particularly in Africa, Latin America, and Eurasia.¹² It was a decade framed by two post-cold war wars, starting with the massive Persian Gulf deployment and ending with the bombing

of Yugoslavia. In this new era, the U.S. military found new freedom to act without fear of Soviet reaction

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while at the same time largely free from anti-interventionist backlash at home. Indeed, progressives and liberals were among the main proponents of a more assertive U.S. military, especially in cases of purported humanitarian intervention.

From this base, the national security militarists have seized control of

the Bush administration's foreign and military policy. Strategic outlooks, doctrinal changes, vast increases in military/homeland defense budgets, and dismissive treatment of the traditionalists and soft-power advocates—all summarized in the administration's "National Security Strategy of the United States" released in September 2002—constitute the rise of a new warlordism in the U.S. government. Reveling in U.S. military superiority, the administration left behind the stock strategic thinking about balance-of-power and common security arrangements. Instead of the realpolitik that has characterized conservative foreign policy strategizing, the United States has reverted to "machtpolitik" or the exercise of sheer military power, unconstrained by international norms, treaties, or alliances.

In launching its raids, policing actions, and invasions, the United States still recognizes the need for partners to increase credibility and logistical operating room. But these would be *ad hoc* coalitions of the willing, not preexisting alliances such as NATO—and the United States will always define the mission and lead it. In the early days of the Afghanistan bombing campaign, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld brushed aside diplomatic considerations and spoke with the confidence of a warlord: “The mission must determine the coalition; the coalition must not determine the mission. If it does, the mission will be dumbed down to the lowest common denominator and we can’t afford that.”¹³

The doctrinal changes follow logically from this powerball perspective. Instead of what Pentagon officials call a “threat-based” military doctrine, they are now moving toward a “capabilities-based approach.”¹⁴ Instead of defining real and imminent threats to national security, U.S. military doctrine is pursuing permanent military superiority that will give the United States the capacity to defeat any conceivable attack. This “break-out” strategy of ensuring military predominance did not emerge full-blown out of the Bush administration, but was developing since the early 1990s as military strategists and military/complex

lobbyists searched for a new bogeyman to replace the Soviet Union. It is what one Defense Intelligence Agency analyst identified as the “sum of all fears” approach.¹⁵

To ensure this “endless military supremacy,” the Pentagon wants—and is getting—lots of money. The largest increase in the military budget since the Reagan years provides plenty of pork for the “legacy” systems of traditional warfare along with hefty allocations for “transfor-

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mative” systems, including national missile defense, designed to ensure U.S. military supremacy far into the future. In keeping with the supremacy doctrine, President Bush shocked the international community with his announcement during a speech at West Point that the U.S. was shedding the old doctrines of containment and deterrence in favor of preemption.

The U.S. would no longer wait until attacked but would preempt future aggression with its own first strikes, not just against terrorist networks but nation-states themselves. Richard Falk warned that the United States is claiming “a right to abandon rules of restraint and of law patiently developed over the course of centuries.”¹⁶ Piggybacking on this new doctrine of preemption is the administration’s new nuclear doctrine. Rejecting a half-century of attempts to constrain the proliferation and use of nuclear weapons, the U.S. new nuclear posture proposes that the United States consider using nuclear weapons against five non-nuclear countries if it is determined by Washington that they are developing biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons. At the same time, the U.S. will develop for itself a new arsenal of nuclear-tipped conventional weapons. This is all part of what the administration calls its “counterproliferation” policy.

U.S. wardlordism doesn’t tolerate rivals, validates first-strike warfare, and spurns conflict-prevention strategies and negotiating frameworks. The new warlordism keeps counsel not with diplomats but with arms merchants. As is now commonly observed and acknowledged, Rumsfeld’s war department “doesn’t do windows.”



MORAL ABSOLUTISM

Our leaders have invariably couched U.S. foreign and military initiatives in the rhetoric of political idealism. This practice of dressing U.S. international engagement in the values of freedom, democracy, and rights came to be known as “liberal internationalism.” Bush’s foreign policy explicitly rejects the imperatives of liberal internationalism, but it is nonetheless heavily value-laden. The new supremacy agenda taps America’s deep moral roots and sense of messianic mission. Instead of liberal political values, the supremacists driving U.S. foreign policy are more comfortable with stark moral contrasts, linking America’s foreign policy mission to the apocalyptic conflict between good and evil.

This new moral absolutism has helped ease the transition from the targeted war on international terrorist networks to the much broader confrontation with the “axis of evil” nation-states. The grand moral scale of Bush’s foreign policy has also been used to justify its focus on the end goal of conquering evil and its dismissal of concerns about the

means employed. Allying ourselves with repressive regimes, overriding human rights conditionalities on U.S. aid, violating the conventions of international law, and standing

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behind a policy of “regime changes” and first strikes are all acceptable means in Bush’s endless war against evil.

The America First convictions of the Bush supremacists echoes the “city upon a hill” belief structure of

America’s Puritan underpinnings, as articulated in 1630 by John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts.¹⁷ Over the past five centuries, American society has continued to believe in its own moral transcendence, but our city on the hill has undergone major urban renewal. For the first several centuries, our vision of a moral beacon was decidedly U.S.-centric, explaining in part America’s isolationist tendencies when dealing with Europe. In the 20th century, especially after the start of the cold war, the moral values of our blessed city were commonly regarded as core Western principles. The neoconservative “end of history” and “clash of civilization” interpretations of history fortified American conviction that our Judeo-Christian transatlantic culture constituted the epitome of civilization. With the recent rise of U.S. supremacy thinking, “West against the rest” imaginings have been set in favor of America First principles and exceptionalism. Our new moral absolutism regards Europeans as moral relativists, political opportunists, and weak-kneed partners afraid to speak evil’s name.¹⁸

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A TURNING POINT

America is suffering from a power complex that is distorting national priorities. So wrapped up in its conviction of supremacy, the U.S. government forges ahead with its new foreign policy directions while ignoring the mounting global outrage, blowback, and impact of its aggressive unilateralism.

Politics, like history itself, is marked by cycles and pendulum swings. It may be that the recent rightward shifts in U.S. foreign and military policy will be turned back by the next administration or Congress. There are also signs that as the hawks and hardliners pursue their neo-imperial agenda they are coming up hard against the exigencies of realpolitik—the need for alliances, the importance of multilateral cover, and the successful diplomatic maneuvering of other powers to set alternative agendas in motion—and the need for the soft


power and the moderate multilateralism of the State Department as well as for nation-building and peacekeeping following war.

But politics and history are also marked by turning points when the confluence of events and human

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intervention cause fundamental shifts in prevailing ideologies and systems. The creation of a multilat-

eral framework for managing global affairs at the close of World War II certainly was one of those major turning points.

It remains to be seen if the supremacy agenda of the Bush administration—with its dismissal of international cooperation, its “peace through strength” credo, and its endless war on evil—will be only a passing political moment or the ideological and operative framework for international relations in the early 21st century. At least part of the answer will depend on the willingness of Americans to reach beyond their deeply felt sense of victimization in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and commit ourselves to some serious soul-searching about this country’s deepening power complex. Only then might America regain the capacity to exercise its power responsibly. 

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ENDNOTES

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- 2 President George W. Bush, "A Period of Consequences," Speech delivered at The Citadel, September 23, 1999, <http://citadel.edu/pao/addresses/pres_bush.html>.
- 3 Ian Williams, "The U.S. Hit List at the United Nations," *Foreign Policy In Focus*, April 30, 2002.
- 4 For an excellent treatment of ways realism and liberal internationalism combined to shape the U.S. grand strategy during the cold war see: G. John Ikenberry, "America's Imperial Ambition," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2002.
- 5 An early argument to this effect came from neoconservative godfather Irving Kristol at the American Enterprise Institute. Kristol, "The Emerging American Imperium," August 1997, <<http://www.aei.org/oti/otii7998.htm>>.
- 6 In the 1990s, the strong U.S. hegemonic position was well illustrated by the acceptance by most governments of the neoliberal principles of the "Washington Consensus."
- 7 National interests are rarely well defined, but in practice the national interests that the U.S. government has defended have been the interests of corporate America, not the broader interests of the polity. For a discussion of how national interests can be furthered by international norms and multilateralism, see Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Cornell University Press, 1996).
- 8 John Bolton, undersecretary of state for arms control, is the most outspoken opponent of multilateralism within the administration, representing the right-wing's ideological opposition to global governance. However, it has been National Security Adviser Condeleezza Rice who has best articulated the administration's pragmatic posture with respect to multilateralism. During the campaign, she criticized the Democrats for subordinating U.S. national interests to "the interests of an illusory international community" and for maintaining the liberal "belief that the support of many states—or even better, of institutions like the United Nations—is essential to the legitimate exercise of power." While not completely rejecting all instances of multilateralism, the administration would pick and choose—what the State Department's Director of Policy Planning called "multilateralism a la carte." It has long been accepted that nations must act unilaterally to defend their most basic interests—a practice described by the Clinton administration as "multilateral when we can, unilateral when we must." The Bush administration, in contrast, rejects the post-World War II premise that multilateralism is generally the best route in the pursuit of national interests. For an exploration of these themes, see Stewart Patrick, "Don't Fence Me In: A Restless Americas Seeks Room to Roam," *World Policy Journal*, Fall 2001.
- 9 Ikenberry, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2002. The growing size of the multilateral web is not the paranoiac perception of rightist ideologues but a fact of international relations. "Between 1970 and 1997, the number of international treaties more than tripled, and from 1985-1999 alone, the number of international institutions increased by two-thirds." Stewart Patrick, "Multilateralism and Its Discontents: Causes and Consequences of U.S. Ambivalence," in Patrick and Shephard Forman, eds., *Multilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), p. 12.
- 10 The first analyst to liken the Bush administration's philosophy of power to that of Hobbes was Jim Lobe. See Jim Lobe, "Welcome to a Hobbesian World," Inter Press Service, March 9, 2001.
- 11 In the U.S. international affairs budget, 93% is dedicated to the military and 7% to the State Department.
- 12 Dana Priest, "A Four-Star Foreign Policy? U.S. Commanders Wield Rising Clout," *Washington Post*, September 28, 2000, page A1; "Reinventing War," *Foreign Policy*, November/December 2001, no. 127, pp. 31-47.
- 13 "Q & A with Donald Rumsfeld," *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 18, 2001.
- 14 Michael Klare, "Endless Military Superiority," *The Nation*, July 15, 2002.
- 15 Russell E. Travers, "The New Millennium and a Strategic Breathing Space," *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 1997.
- 16 Richard Falk, "The New Bush Doctrine," *The Nation*, July 15, 2002.
- 17 In a precautionary addendum, one that may speak to U.S. supremacist hubris, John Winthrop warned that should we fail to make our city on the hill a model of hope and virtue and should we "deal falsely with our God," then we would be cursed. James Chace, "Imperial America and the Common Interest," *World Policy Journal*, Winter 2002.
- 18 For a representative presentation of this argument, see Robert Kagan, *Policy Review*, June/July 2002, <<http://www.ceip.org/files/print/2002-06-02-policyreview.htm>>. Kagan's lead sentence advises, "It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world, or even that they occupy the same world."

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