

# The political support system for American primacy

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Much of the world seems exasperated by American foreign policy. Why does the United States exercise its primacy in the global distribution of power with such relish and such indifference to the anxieties of other states? A *realpolitik* explanation is that this is simply what great powers do whenever they can get away with it. With rare exceptions such as Germany under Bismarck, states expand until they are stopped. Bush is no Bismarck, and in a unipolar world there is no one to stop the United States.

The simple explanation may suffice, but it does have to overcome two impediments. First, other major states could form a potent coalition to stop Washington if they wanted to do so. The United States is disproportionately powerful, but it still controls only a quarter of the world's productive resources, and could be balanced by a genuinely united Europe, or several of the major European states in combination with Japan, not to mention possible additions of Russia, China, India, or other large and growing states. Second, the United States is not a nation where norms of *realpolitik* are consciously respected among political elites; so the logic of power politics does not serve very well to explain how aggressive primacy is rationalized in the policy-making process.

The first impediment sounds fanciful, since there is no sign of any interest anywhere in forming the sort of counter-coalition suggested. The second impediment sounds naïve, since material motives are rarely acknowledged in such a way as to reveal the influence of raw power politics in the thinking of statesmen. The fact remains, however, that there is no demonstrated material reason why US primacy, or its exploitation of that position, should be seen as inevitable. It persists because, in both the international and domestic spheres, objections have been more to style than to substance. Despite the much-bruited alienation of world opinion, foreign governments have so far continued to acquiesce in American policy to a greater degree than can be accounted for by American coercion. Despite the high pitch of anxiety about how much the future hinged on whether Bush or Kerry won the presidential election, a Kerry victory would have been likely to prove more significant for the style of American policy than for its substance.

## Puzzles and propositions

The English language distinguishes more sharply between ‘policy’ and ‘politics’ than do many continental languages, which use the same word (*politique*, *Politik*, *politica*) to denote both. Policy consists of government objectives and strategies for achieving them. Politics is the process of contention and competition among interest groups, ideologies and institutions that produces policy. To probe the politics behind US national security policy we should start by noting two puzzles.

First, the role of military force in American foreign policy has been as great since the Cold War as during it, by some measures, despite the fact that the country faces no threat remotely comparable in power to that of the old Soviet Union. The United States has fought four wars in the past 14 years (against Iraq twice, Serbia and Afghanistan), twice as many as during more than 40 years of Cold War (Korea and Vietnam). Despite having vanquished a superpower whose capabilities included more than 175 divisions and approximately 40,000 nuclear weapons, the US defence budget is now almost as large as the military spending of all of the rest of the world put together, and more than five times as great as the combined military spending of all potential US enemies. Terrorism has become the new primary threat preoccupying the United States, but it has only accentuated a propensity to use force that accelerated after the Cold War.

Second, both American political parties have been complicit in the vigorous assertion of American primacy that fuels the surprising continuity in the militarization of foreign policy. The differences between the policies of Clinton and Bush, and between the attitudes of principal figures in the Bush administration and those of the foreign policy advisers that surrounded John Kerry, were smaller than their political rhetoric implied. It has been said that the Clinton policy was ‘multilaterally if we can, unilaterally if we must’, and that Bush’s is the reverse—which means that they disagree over process and the priority placed on cooperation, but not nearly so much on the outcomes sought. Democrats push primacy with a human face, dressed up in the rhetoric of multilateralism, and they use military power with much hesitancy and hand-wringing. Republicans push primacy ‘in your face’, with unapologetic unilateralism, and they swagger brazenly. To a surprising degree, however, the two sides come out in the same place. Many liberals supported the war against Iraq. Even Kerry and his vice-presidential running mate John Edwards voted for the authorization for war.

The differences in approach are by no means trivial—Democrats, for example, are more interested in using military forces for charity (humanitarian intervention) than for the management of a favourable balance of power among states, and Republicans have the reverse priorities—but the results are not dramatically distinct. For example, once the Bush administration had to forget the threat of weapons of mass destruction, the principles involved in the wars against Iraq in 2003 and against Serbia in 1999 were similar: both

governments were violating human rights within their own borders, but not threatening to attack other countries. The war against the Milosevic regime over Kosovo was not as controversial as the one against Saddam Hussein because the United States succeeded in getting an international institution, NATO, to bless the attack and to participate. Aha! one might say: this made all the difference from Bush's unilateralism, and reflected Clinton's respect for principles of international law. This is only half true. Washington ignored the recently evolved but now prevalent notion that United Nations Security Council authorization is required for the legal initiation of any war that is not direct self-defence. Knowing that UN authorization would not be forthcoming, Clinton settled for a symbolic substitute, NATO authorization, but one he knew he could get for what he wanted to do in any case.

There is dissent in the United States from the enthusiasm for exploiting primacy, but the dissenters have been unable to capture a base big enough to exert political leverage. Primacy has so far been popular among Americans—and tolerated by foreigners—because of the balance between moral and material interests. Americans have long been able to indulge moral interests (for example, promotion of values such as democracy and human rights) because Americans' margins of material power and security are so large that it is often easy to do so at low cost, and if mistakes are made they rarely hurt them much. In terms of material costs and benefits, Americans are happy to intervene abroad if the benefits for foreigners and American *amour propre* are high while the costs in American blood and treasure are low. In this, and in the conditional approval conferred by other major states (when US control proceeds under the norms and forms of international consultation and cooperation with international institutions), we see the global hegemony of classic liberal ideology, and political globalization as western hegemony within which the United States is dominant. The liberal values that Americans used to think of as part of their national exceptionalism have now permeated the identity, policies and diplomacy of the rest of the developed world. In the twenty-first century the old realist norms of balance-of-power politics traditionally associated with European diplomacy, and rejected by Wilsonian idealism, now have scarcely more overt respect in other rich countries than they do in the United States.

Periodically, however, material interests diverge from moral motives. This happens with greatest impact when costs are miscalculated because US leaders confuse power in terms of material resources (economic and military) with power to bring about political reform in non-western societies (such as South Vietnam, Somalia or Iraq). Failure has been all that modifies ambitious objectives, and it may be all that restrains the exercise of US primacy. (The exception is the 'war on terror', where a future failure against Al-Qaeda and its ilk could lead not to retrenchment but to increased American ferocity.)

Domestic political interplay on these issues occurs at two levels. The first is the electoral level, where the interaction of ideologies, parties and voters determines who sits in the White House and the State and Defense departments, and

who controls Congress. The second is the bureaucratic politics of competition among departments, groups and individual officials within government to control policy-making and presidential decisions.

## Electoral politics

Except in times of crisis, less than 20 per cent of the American public pays close attention to foreign policy. Political debate about what US policy should be occurs primarily within the ‘attentive’ public and foreign policy elite. The prevalent view that foreign policy has little impact on US elections, however, is seldom correct. It was true in 1992 and 1996. (In the televised debate between Bill Clinton and Robert Dole, in which the candidates responded to questions from an audience of voters, the moderator had to ask plaintively after two hours, ‘Doesn’t anyone have a question about foreign policy?’) The low priority placed on foreign policy goes a long way to explaining why Clinton won those first two elections of the post-Cold War era. It is very unlikely that he could have been elected during the Cold War—or after September 11—given his personal history of draft evasion, which crippled his moral authority on national security issues. Foreign policy also remained low in salience for the most part in the 2000 election. But it was not low in importance in any other presidential election since the Second World War,<sup>1</sup> nor was it in the 2004 election, the first since September 11 2001. Whenever there is a significant perceived external threat, American voters care very much about foreign affairs.

The structure of political alignments that push policy in one direction or another has evolved markedly since 1945. For the first two decades of the Cold War there were no identifiable consistent differences between the stances of the two parties on foreign affairs or in their credibility on these issues in the eyes of voters. Clearer differences emerged in the second half of the Cold War. Any taxonomy of policy traditions is problematic because there are so many cross-cutting cleavages, depending on preferences about issues, values and instruments of policy.<sup>2</sup> Also, the main lines of division within the foreign policy elite are not quite the same as those within the mass public.<sup>3</sup> In one sense, none the less, two schools within the foreign policy elite have vied for control of US policy since 1972. They are quite different in principle, but less so in practice, at least since the decade of distaste for military intervention that followed the Tet offensive in Vietnam. The two schools have often converged on similar initiatives for different reasons. While the differences in substance are less than the differences in tone and style, the latter affect access to power, because they

<sup>1</sup> John H. Aldrich, John L. Sullivan and Eugene Borgida, ‘Foreign affairs and issue voting: do presidential candidates “waltz before a blind audience”?’ *American Political Science Review* 83: 1, March 1989.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Walter Russell Mead’s *Special providence: American foreign policy and how it changed the world* (New York: Knopf, 2001) presents an engaging characterization in terms of four traditions—Hamiltonian, Wilsonian, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian; but it proves difficult to lump very many individuals or groups wholly within any one of the four.

<sup>3</sup> See William Schneider, ‘Public opinion: the beginning of ideology?’ *Foreign Policy* 17, Winter 1974–5.

affect voters' beliefs about which is the more trustworthy custodian of nationalism.

One school places primary emphasis on the military dimension of policy and the role of force—actual or latent—in pursuing national interests; it embraces military power forthrightly, not tentatively, as an instrument of national interest and American values, and focuses little attention on other aspects of foreign policy. The other school places primary emphasis on principles of world order, rule of law, and collective security, and is attentive to economic, environmental, humanitarian and other issues apart from the international balance of power. It appears uncomfortable with military power as a value in its own right, preferring to see the proper function of the armed forces as something akin to policing breaches of law rather than as waging war on behalf of the American nation. It sees US national security as indistinct and inseparable from international security. This school resembles conventional wisdom in most European countries, but its influence on US policy is greatest when the public is least concerned with foreign affairs. There is ample evidence of public support for cooperation with international institutions,<sup>4</sup> but the argument here is based on the results of national election choices when one candidate is seen as more nationalistic than the other. Over the course of the past few decades these two schools have come to be associated respectively with the two major political parties. The one that embraces military power proudly dominates the Republican party, and the one that emphasizes cosmopolitan interests and non-military instruments dominates the Democratic party.

Nationalism and cosmopolitanism divide the foreign policy elite more than the public, which has never given a majority to a presidential candidate overtly less nationalistic than his opponent in any election since the Second World War, with the single exception of 1964, when Lyndon Johnson successfully presented himself as judiciously muscular in contrast to a Barry Goldwater portrayed as a reckless yahoo. Otherwise, the confidently patriotic style of the Republican party has given it a big advantage in electoral politics ever since the Vietnam War temporarily wrecked the Cold War consensus. Before the crack-up, Democrats Truman, Kennedy and Johnson were not suspected of weakness anywhere near as much as were later candidates McGovern, Carter, Mondale and Dukakis. In the Reagan years many nationalist, pro-military Democrats migrated to the Republican party in the course of a general realignment in which the wide margin of voter identification with the Democratic party that began with Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal eroded completely. Recently, for the first time in 70 years, some polls showed slightly more voters identifying as Republicans.

In recent years the anti-military image of the Democrats has not been rooted in the formal policy positions of the party, which has learned the lesson of its vulnerability on the issue and has explicitly declared its devotion to national

<sup>4</sup> Steven Kull and I. M. Destler, *Misreading the public: the myth of a new isolationism* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

security and support of the military. Rather, the suspicion on the part of voters on the centre and centre-right is that the Democrats lack conviction, that their avowed support for the military is disingenuous, that their party is home to anti-American foreign policy sentiments and that they have about them the smell of weakness. (This unflattering estimate of perceptions is the product of sadness, not hostility. I am a Democrat myself.) John Kerry owed his selection as nominee for the presidency in 2004 in no small part to the hope that his decorated service in Vietnam—contrasted with President Bush's incomplete National Guard record—would neutralize the Republican advantage on the national security issue. That hope was dashed by Republican advertisements challenging Kerry's veracity about his actions in combat and calling attention to his record of anti-war activism after his return from naval service.

The differences in the smell of the two parties over most of the past three decades, however, do not yet translate into a significant difference on the question of whether the United States should exploit its primacy in global power in the post-Cold War world. No political group in the United States even uses the words primacy, hegemony or dominance to describe American ambitions. None admit, and few even recognize, that this exploitation is implicitly imperial, however benign in intention it is. Instead they use euphemisms, especially 'leadership', which allow the simultaneous denial and affirmation of dominance. For example, Democratic candidate John Kerry declared: 'America wasn't put here to dominate the world ... We have a higher calling: to lead it.'<sup>5</sup> Democrats emphasize American 'soft power' as the best source of leadership and leverage, and the Republicans emphasize 'hard' military power;<sup>6</sup> both, however, want to use US power to shape the world in the American image. Indeed, it was Clinton's official defence policy statement that cited 'shaping the international environment' as an American military objective.<sup>7</sup>

Both of these schools are rooted in the liberalism that suffuses American political culture. The nationalist variant has more in common with principles of realpolitik than does the 'world order' variant, but, especially in its most recent incarnation in the administration of Bush the Younger, it is severely infected with idealism. This did not happen clearly until September 11. During the election campaign of 2000 Bush had criticized the Clintonite notion of the United States as 'the indispensable nation' and campaigned against humanitarian intervention and the mission of nation-building—a mission that he has ironically taken up on a greater scale (in Iraq) than has any other president since the 1960s. The shift appears to have come from the moral impact of September 11 on the president's psyche. The new aggressively unilateralist Bush strategy is (or was, until it foundered in Iraq) the evil twin of Clinton's hesitantly aggressive

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in David M. Halbfinger, 'Shedding populist tone, Kerry starts move to middle', *New York Times*, 8 May 2004, p. A14.

<sup>6</sup> See Joseph S. Nye, *Soft power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, May 1997), p. 9.

multilateralist brand of primacy. Both see themselves as morally driven, but both rely on American hegemony and unconsciously produce liberal imperialism.

Is there an alternative? The opposition in both parties comes from realists of a cautious stripe; but, except on the occasions when disasters inhibit the enthusiasm of the other realists who are hawkish, as well as the idealist interventionists, dovish realists are minorities with scant influence. This is largely because the end of the Cold War and the fact of American supremacy have made cautionary arguments seem unnecessarily timid. Realist caution is not likely to pose a major challenge to the popularity of primacy until a major disaster discredits activism abroad in the eyes of large numbers of the foreign policy elite. Iraq might do that, but the mess there does not yet match the catastrophe of the Vietnam War.

In theory, there are two overlapping alternatives to the enthusiasm for primacy. First, US foreign policy could reject interventionist primacy and become 'isolationist'. This alternative is implicitly espoused, in different ways, by a motley assortment of minorities from opposite ends of the political spectrum: libertarian conservatives such as those affiliated with the Cato Institute, disaffected communitarian conservatives represented by Patrick Buchanan, radical fringe groups of the sort that riot against the World Trade Organization, and leftist supporters of Ralph Nader. Buchanan and Nader together gained no more than 4 per cent of the national vote in 2000—enough to defeat Al Gore, but not to advance their agendas in any way. In 2004 Nader sank to irrelevance in the presidential contest.

Second, the United States could return to a balance of power orientation, dominant in the Cold War because it was dictated by the fact of bipolarity, but then rendered unnecessary by the collapse of the challenger to US power. A balance of power policy in a post-balance world would focus on potential threats rather than using force to promote political globalization or a civilizing mission, reserving humanitarian interventions for cases where the costs are low and benefits high, anticipating the emergence of a new superpower (for example, China or a more unitary European Union) and managing the transition to a new balance, rather than exercising primacy in an offensive way likely to hasten the rise of opposition.

This balance of power alternative (which is my own preference) has barely more political backing than the isolationist variant. Realpolitik thinking had a foothold in the Democratic party in the Carter administration via the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and won the internal debate against Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in the last year of that administration, but it is almost invisible within the party's foreign policy elite now. Defeated in 1980, Vance had his revenge as his lieutenants came to populate the Clinton administration while Cold War hawks who had triumphed late in the Carter administration were excluded.<sup>8</sup> Balance of power thinking has been longer-lived in the moderate wing of the Republican party establishment.

<sup>8</sup> The only representative of the hawkish wing of the party appointed to a high foreign policy position by Clinton was James Woolsey, but this was a post supposed to be separated from policy decisions:

Influential under Nixon and Ford, it was rejected by Reagan but revived under Bush the Elder, and was represented by figures such as Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft. These Republicans were either sidelined by the neo-conservative ideologues in the administration of Bush the Younger, or were converted to interventionist zeal by anger against Saddam Hussein and the experience of September 11. Balance of power thinking is still favoured by many in the professional military (in the army more than the other services) and in academic strategic studies, but neither of these constituencies has large numbers or much public influence outside its own ranks.<sup>9</sup>

### Intragovernmental politics

Ideological cleavages on defence policy run in two dimensions: between hawks and doves, in terms of the propensity to use force as an instrument of policy; and between realists and idealists, in terms of general motivating rationales for policy. In the course of the Reagan administration, most idealist hawks who were Democrats—particularly neo-conservatives identified with Senator Henry ‘Scoop’ Jackson and opposed to Nixon and Kissinger’s detente strategy—became Republicans. (Realist hawks who were Democrats stayed in the party, but they have had negligible influence since they are few in number compared to idealists, concentrated in academia—which is also full of professors complicit in liberal interventionism—and unplugged from the circuits of debate among the real power elite inside the Washington Beltway.<sup>10</sup>)

The neo-conservatives are often credited with malign control over Bush policy but, at least in his first administration, they did not actually control much outside the civilian secretariat of the Defense Department, where the principal figures were Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, Under-Secretary for Policy Douglas Feith and Under-Secretary for Intelligence Stephen Cambone. Several ‘neo-con’ members of the Defense Policy Board, a panel of outside consultants which included former Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle, have also been prominent. Neo-cons are sprinkled elsewhere around the government in mid-level positions. In the American system, in contrast to most other western systems, where officials below ministerial level are usually career civil servants, political appointees penetrate departmental staffs several layers down; and neo-conservatives are not the only source of radicalism or militancy within the bureaucracy. Some traditional rightists of several sorts have also had footholds—for example, in their different ways, John Bolton, Under-Secretary of State for International Security Affairs and Arms Control, or Lieutenant-General William

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Director of Central Intelligence. In any case, Woolsey soon became persona non grata in the White House and resigned after two years.

<sup>9</sup> An anti-imperial analysis by someone with a foot in both professions, military and academic, is Andrew J. Bacevich, *American empire: the realities and consequences of US diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> For examples see the signatories of the manifesto ‘War with Iraq is *not* in America’s national interest’, *New York Times*, 26 Sept. 2002, p. A29.

Boykin, Deputy Under-Secretary of Defense for Intelligence. (What qualifies someone for identification in any of the categories I suggest is a slippery question, and some would quarrel with my characterizations.<sup>11</sup>)

It is those popularly identified as neo-conservatives, however, who have promoted the idea of American Empire with the least shame or subterfuge. Their influence grew after September 11, when some of the realists in the administration, or palaeo-conservatives like the president himself, were converted to a new sense of moral mission and fastened on the overthrow of Saddam Hussein as a step in ridding the world of 'evil-doers'. At that point the institutional opposition to an American crusade was to be found in parts of the State Department and the professional military.

Few professional foreign service officers have influence on high policy decisions. Secretary of State Colin Powell, however, did get a hearing. By most accounts he impeded the Bush administration's march to war in Iraq, even if he did not explicitly oppose it. His whole career as a military officer operating in high policy circles was marked by reluctance to use US armed forces in combat. As chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff he dragged his feet in 1990 on the decision to go to war against Iraq,<sup>12</sup> and he opposed military intervention in the Balkans. (Frustrated over the reluctance of professional soldiers to intervene, Clinton's ambassador to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright, once asked Powell: 'What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?' Powell wrote: 'I thought I would have an aneurysm.'<sup>13</sup>)

Although Powell got a hearing, President Bush regularly chose the course recommended by Donald Rumsfeld, the most aggressive secretary of defense since the office was created in the National Security Act of 1947. Under Bush the Pentagon—more specifically, the civilian political appointees at the top of the department, not the uniformed military below them—has usurped the role of the State Department to a greater degree than at any time since Secretary of State Cordell Hull was sidelined in the Second World War. Rumsfeld came to his second term as secretary of defense committed to a sweeping programme of 'transformation' of the armed services into an efficient twenty-first-century force designed around high-technology, integrated information systems and new operational doctrines, with greater reliance on air power and less on ground forces. In 2003 Iraq seemed to him a place in which the wisdom of his bold ideas could be easily demonstrated and the resistant services forced into experimenting with the concepts. He overrode the preferences of the military leadership for a large invasion force, cut it down to barely half of what the army initially considered prudent, and interfered in details of logistical planning in order to suit his vision of a crisp and quick operation.

The military could resist Clinton's interest in intervention during the 1990s more easily (although they did not block it in the end) than they could resist

<sup>11</sup> See Max Boot, 'Neocons', *Foreign Policy*, 140 (Jan.–Feb. 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Bob Woodward, *The commanders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), pp. 38, 42, 299–301.

<sup>13</sup> Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 576.

Bush. Clinton did not dare to challenge their judgement on military matters because of his own impaired legitimacy as commander-in-chief. Bush laboured under no such constraint, and Rumsfeld relished exerting his authority in the Pentagon. (Similarly, Vice-President Dick Cheney had no qualms about dictating to professional soldiers. As secretary of defense under Bush the Elder, Cheney was a decisive manager, and fired a service chief—General Michael Dugan of the air force—in only the second instance of such a dismissal since the Second World War.) In his micromanagement of programmes, brash self-confidence and willingness to substitute civilian analysis for military judgement, Rumsfeld resembled no one as much as Robert McNamara, the activist secretary of defense of the 1960s who presided over the US descent into Vietnam. And as the military came to resent the civilian ‘whiz kids’, economists and analysts who staffed McNamara’s secretariat, so disgruntled members of the military today resent the ‘neo-con cabal’ running the department.

Rumsfeld and the strident supporters of the war in Iraq were wounded by developments after the fall of Baghdad, but Bush did not turn away from their convictions. In the election campaign he vowed to stay the course, and his utterances suggest that he has felt that pacifying and democratizing Iraq is a mission from God, from which he should not be deflected by mere adversities. At the same time, he is a consummate politician, and if he sees the war as a losing game he might look for a ‘decent interval’ fig leaf to cover a retreat. A President Kerry might have proved less aggressive than Bush, but there were no signs in his campaign rhetoric that he would turn away from the embrace of primacy as an instrument in pursuit of America’s moral mission. On Iraq he vowed not to cut and run, and indeed promised to press on to ‘victory’.

## **Politics and primacy**

The American embrace of primacy is not attributable simply to greed or hubris. History offers few opportunities to test whether countries given the opportunity to exploit unipolarity fail to take it. Countries that have moderated the pursuit of power in the past have usually done so because of counterpower, competition that made accommodation the only alternative to wasted expenditure in pursuit of an unobtainable supremacy.

The US government has little reason, moreover, to assume that real attempts to share power would be welcomed. Early in the Clinton administration Washington did make a notable attempt at genuine consultation of allies, as opposed to demands that they simply follow US policy. Secretary of State Warren Christopher was dispatched to Europe to ask countries there what they thought should be done about Bosnia. This undomineering initiative did not get a good response. Christopher was met with confusion and chagrin that Washington was too passive in failing to propose a plan and lead the alliance.

Nor did US allies resist the project that most reflected American indifference to balance of power considerations and extended US influence in Europe: the

expansion of NATO to Russia's doorstep. On one level NATO expansion represented a collective dominance by the West, washing away any remnant of bipolarity to which Russia might have hoped to cling after the collapse of the USSR. In this sense Europe was complicit in hegemonism, even if it was a collective sort of western hegemony. But on another level, the more pertinent one, NATO expansion ratified US military domination of Europe. Expansion of the European Union might be seen as an alternative to this, but NATO is a military alliance which has always been led by a US commander. Given the unanimity rule for NATO decisions to admit new members, any single European member could have prevented this extension of American primacy if it had wanted to do so. None exercised the option.

Nor do allies seem to object consistently to attacking bad states even if those states are not threatening to attack other states. Although many objected to the assault on Iraq, most allies signed up to the war over Kosovo in 1999, although Milosevic's regime was less threatening and less atrociously repressive than Saddam Hussein's. Objections to US war-making seem to flow more from concerns about principles of procedure (consultation and collective authorization) than about consistent principles of substance. From the vantage point of realist analysis it seems that most major states object not so much to US primacy as to impolite primacy, and are willing to be pulled along on American projects if Washington asks for blessing through multilateral forms. If so, there is no strong reason why the actual impact of American power on the world should have been expected to differ substantially under a Kerry administration, given that the advisers around him suggested that the new team in foreign policy would be more or less a Clinton restoration. The likelihood of other countries constraining Washington would be somewhat greater if views on a specific case were irreconcilable, but this circumstance is unlikely to arise unless the US administration again perceived a link between terrorism and other threats that allied governments did not see—in which case even a Democratic president would be unlikely to wait for international approval. Indeed, Kerry affirmed strenuously that he would never give allies a veto over US action.

Neither allies nor adversaries, moreover, have made any significant attempt to balance American power. Among major allies, only France, and to a lesser degree Germany, have been vocal in opposing US policies, and among other major states there has been no collaboration yet to resist Washington. Russia and China have been critical of US policy in their diplomatic rhetoric, but not energetic or coordinated in opposition. Since September 11 both have submerging differences and moved closer to Washington.

Judging from the behaviour of others, then, the problem seems to be less American primacy in principle than its most extreme manifestations in practice, most particularly the invasion of Iraq. In this, US allies seem close to the multilateralist brand of American primacy that dominates the Democratic party's foreign policy establishment. This stance unites many of the elites on both sides of the Atlantic in celebration of international institutions, cooperation and

globalization. It also provides the facade of equality, even if the alliance usually winds up dancing to the American tune.

There are many political currents in the United States pushing sentiments about foreign policy in various directions. On prospects for the use of force to manage a de facto American empire, a couple stand out. Most obviously, the war in Iraq will have a strong impact on future decisions. Unless there is a surprisingly successful recovery of the US occupation effort and a smooth transition to stable self-government in the country, the experience since 2003 will almost certainly promote more caution about using military power for ambitious missions of reform abroad. If the next year witnesses drastic failure, and a chaotic and bloody mess left unfixed after more than 1,000 US fatalities and \$200 billion invested in the effort, the effect could prove profound, souring the public and elite on intervention in general, much as failure in Vietnam did.

The American domestic reaction against intervention that came with failure in Vietnam, however, lasted barely a decade. Moreover, it did not translate into electoral rejection of a war-waging president. In 1972 George McGovern ran on an anti-war platform but was buried by President Nixon in the biggest landslide in modern history, carrying only one of the 50 states. Jimmy Carter won the following election in 1976, but he did not appear less concerned with American power than President Ford. (Ford also stumbled badly in debate with Carter when he said that he did not believe that the Soviet Union dominated eastern Europe.) Concerns about domestic policy were then free to carry the day with voters. This was the *only* Democratic victory in the *six* presidential elections between the Tet offensive and the end of the Cold War; and Carter soon became unpopular. The failure in Vietnam, combined with a resurgence of the Soviet threat after the breakdown of detente in the 1970s and the humiliation of the Iran hostage crisis, left the public ready, indeed hungry, for renewed competition to reaffirm American security and power. Ronald Reagan's presidency was the result.

As long as there is no competing superpower in the world of the twenty-first century, there is no analogue to the Soviet threat in the 1970s as a reason for voters to renew commitment to activism abroad. The 'war on terror', however, more than fills that role, despite the infinitesimal power of Al-Qaeda compared to the old Soviet Union, or the fact that the Viet Cong and North Vietnam cost more American lives and dollars than did the destruction of the World Trade Center. The attacks of September 11 had a dramatic effect on Americans because of the widespread illusion that the end of the Cold War had left no significant threats in the world—or, at least, that threats were something that occurred and were faced abroad, rather than at home. Only in an America accustomed to an inherent state of domestic security provided by fortunate geography, and so accustomed to thinking of national security as something pursued abroad, would it be assumed that an entire new department must be created separate from the Department of Defense—the Department of Homeland Security—to protect the nation's territory itself. One of the main

reasons for public support of the assault on Iraq in 2003 was Bush's conflation of the threat from Al-Qaeda and the threat from Saddam Hussein. In any case in which war abroad is rationalized as war against terrorism, political support for action will be high. But if the threat from Osama bin Laden's organization appears contained and diminished, as it has since September 11, the shock of disaster in Iraq will militate against more adventurism.

One other trend works against caution about the use of force: the decline of experience of military service in the US population. It is not only the professionals in the armed forces who have resisted intervention abroad.<sup>14</sup> Systematic research has shown that civilians who have served in the military tend consistently to be more opposed to the use of force than those who have not. This has implications for opinion in Congress as well as among the elites who staff the executive branch. For American men born between 1910 and 1950, military service was a defining generational experience, but conscription ended in 1973. During the Cold War, veterans were overrepresented in Congress; that is, the percentage of members who had served in the military was higher than the percentage of veterans in the population at large. Since the Cold War, the pattern has been reversed, and experience of military service is now underrepresented in Congress.<sup>15</sup> Combining these facts suggests that, all other things being equal, there would be less opposition in Congress to the use of US forces than in the past several decades.

US freedom of action may well continue to be underwritten by the passivity of the 'international community', however unhappy it may be with Washington. As yet there are no strong signs that other major states will not accept US 'leadership' (primacy) if Washington goes through the motions of consultation, paying lip service to international institutions even as it shoves them along. The biggest constraint on American activism will continue to come from domestic politics. The exploitation of primacy will rise or fall depending on experience. It will rise if the Iraq disaster passes and there are a subsequent number of easy successes in the use of force. It will fall if Iraq festers or collapses, or there are other failures or pyrrhic victories. Retreat from primacy is unlikely to last long, however, especially if, over time, friction grows with a potential 'peer competitor', such as a rising China. The probability that exploitation of primacy will persist is an unsurprising conclusion, consistent with the logic of power politics. It is congenial to those realists who are comfortable with a global hierarchy and foresee no real challenge to American dominance on the horizon,

<sup>14</sup> Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, statesmen, and Cold War crises*, 2nd edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); David Petraeus, 'The American military and the lessons of Vietnam: a study of military influence and the use of force in the post-Vietnam era', PhD dissertation, Princeton University, Oct. 1987.

<sup>15</sup> Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing your battles: American civil-military relations and the use of force* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), chs 2-3; William T. Bianco and Jamie Markham, 'Vanishing veterans: the decline of military experience in Congress', in Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds, *Soldiers and civilians: the civil-military gap and American national security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

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but unwelcome to other realists who prefer a balance of power and fear the instability that is to be expected when a challenge to hegemony does arise. To liberals, especially those outside the United States, who hope for the obsolescence of power politics and its replacement by multilateralism, the conclusion can be welcome only to those content with a multilateralism that is more symbolic than substantive.