



WorkingPapers

## **9/11 and the Paradox of American Power**

Carl Conetta  
Project on Defense Alternatives  
Commonwealth Institute

International Affairs Working Paper 2008-11  
December 2008

Portions of this paper were presented at a symposium co-sponsored by the Graduate Program in International Affairs and the Security Policy Working Group, The New School, April 10, 2008.

This paper previously appeared as *Cul de Sac: 9/11 and the Paradox of American Power*, Research Monograph #13, Project on Defense Alternatives, February 5, 2008, [www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/0802rm13.pdf](http://www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/0802rm13.pdf)

Copyright 2008 by Carl Conetta

## **9/11 and the Paradox of American Power**

Carl Conetta  
Project on Defense Alternatives  
The Commonwealth Institute  
[www.comw.org/pda/](http://www.comw.org/pda/)  
[cconetta@commonw.org](mailto:cconetta@commonw.org)

International Affairs Working Paper 2008-11  
December 2008

### **ABSTRACT**

The September 2001 attacks on the United States facilitated the formation of an effective domestic consensus on post-Cold War US globalism – a goal that had eluded the Clinton administration. The centerpiece of that consensus is the "war on terrorism." This puts US global engagement in a "war-fighting" framework, which has strong institutional, cultural, and ideological resonances in the American polity. And it admits both neo-conservative and neo-liberal varieties. However, the attendant surge in US military activism has proved both fabulously expensive and largely counter-productive. Moreover, it has helped undermine America's already-troubled hegemonic position within the Western and allied camp.

## 9/11 and the paradox of American power

Carl Conetta  
Project on Defense Alternatives  
Commonwealth Institute  
186 Hampshire Street  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139  
cconetta@comw.org  
cconetta@comcast.net  
DC Office: 301-493-8769

*What's the point of having this superb military...if we can't use it?*

– former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, 1993, as quoted by former Secretary of State Colin Powell in *My American Journey* {1}

*The fundamental question that continues to confront American foreign policy is what to do with a surplus of power and the many and considerable advantages this surplus confers on the United States.*

– Richard Haass, November 2000 {2}

Contrary to the popular aphorism, the world did not change fundamentally on 11 September 2001 – nor did the challenges facing the United States change. By 9/11, America's battle with Osama bin Laden, for instance, was already underway, as were the conditions that spawned Al Qaeda and made it a serious security threat. November 9, 1989 – the day the Berlin Wall fell – remains a more important “pivot point” with regard to changes in the structure and dynamics of the strategic environment. And this is as true today as it was 2001.

What changed on 9/11 where the political conditions – mostly domestic – weighing on US policymakers. After that day, most Americans saw the post-Cold War world and America's place in it differently. This change in popular perspectives and expectations enabled a change in US policy which, in turn, is now gradually altering the geostrategic environment. What was lacking before 9/11 was an integrative policy framework around which a broad, public consensus favoring military activism might form. Today, the “war on terror” is that framework. The follow-on concept of a “long war” against Islamic radicalism serves a similar function. Neither framework, however, accurately models the current security environment and neither illuminates a sensible, sustainable approach to improving US and global security. If anything, present policy has set the United States on a course of diminishing security at increasing cost.

The most obvious changes in policy practice have been a 78 percent real increase in defense expenditures since 1998 and a dramatic surge in US military activity abroad. US spending on national defense and war is now about \$650 billion (FY 2008) *per annum*, which constitutes 50 percent of the world total. In real terms, the United States has not

spent so much in any year since 1946. As for military activity: The current (2007) number of US armed forces personnel deployed in crisis operations abroad exceeds 200,000. This is almost 300 percent the average level of crisis deployments during the years 1989-2001, measured in terms of the numbers of people deployed and the duration of their deployment. Notably, the baseline period encompasses the first Gulf War. As of 1 November 2007, more than 4,300 US military personnel have died in operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom – which is 10 times the number that died in major operations during the period 1989-2001.

The outcome of America's post-9/11 surge in military spending and activity is a testament to the limits on the utility of war and other coercive means. Unintended, unanticipated, and chaotic consequences have predominated. The principal missions – operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom* – have run aground, spreading not democracy but instability throughout several regions. America's military campaigning has seriously weakened its standing in the world, pushed Muslim populations toward Islamist politics, and helped energize and unify the most radical Islamist elements. While unsettling America's alliances, this activism has accelerated "balancing behavior" on the part of potential "big power" competitors: China and Russia. Together they have built out the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes as full members China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. (Observer status has been afforded to India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan.)

A key indicator of the success of current policy is progress in counter-terror efforts. On a global scale, terrorist activity and violence has grown worse, not better since 11 September 2001. Average levels of terrorist violence that would have been considered extreme in the period prior to 9/11 have become the norm in the years since. And there is no sign that this trend is abating. An analysis of the Rand Corporation database on terrorist activity shows monthly fatalities due to terrorism to have increased by 150 percent, on average. **{3}** Terrorist incidents have increased in frequency by 167 percent. A fair portion of the increased activity has occurred in Iraq -- but not all. Removing Iraq from the picture shows an increase in the average monthly rate of terrorism fatalities of more than 10 percent. The increase in the rate of incidents not counting Iraq is 75 percent. Notably, the baseline period -- the 44.5 months preceding 11 September 2001 – includes the fatalities of that day.

Despite this negative balance sheet, the "war on terror" framework will likely survive the Bush administration, as will essential elements of the "long war" formulation (although not the phrase). As of late 2007, it also seems likely that American troops will remain deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan for years to come – if not decades. None of the leading US presidential candidates are willing to propose a short time line for troop withdrawal from Iraq. And complete military withdrawal, as distinct from partial, is not a part of any leading candidate's platform. At a more general level: US security policy will continue to give pride of place to military and other coercive instruments. One might expect the negative outcomes and high costs of post-911 military activism to spur a more substantial shift.

Understanding the impediments to change requires a look at the longer-term challenges faced by the United States in the post-Cold War period.

### **The advent of primacy**

The collapse of the Warsaw pact and Soviet Union affected America's global prospects in two, contradictory ways. One seeming to increase the latitude for applying military power in the pursuit of national goals, the other diminishing it.

The first effect of Soviet collapse was to propel the United States to a position of historically unparalleled military primacy. Suggestive of the change, America's share of worldwide defense spending jumped from 28 percent to 34 percent (comparing 1986 and 1994 budgets). {4} Although in absolute terms, US military expenditures actually declined (for a while), the elevation in America's *relative standing* was profound. It was as though the nation had increased its military spending by 50 percent *vis a vis* the rest of the world, virtually overnight. The change was even more profound with regard to the set of potential threat and competitor states – China, Russia, and a few others; Relative to these, it was as though America had increased spending by 260 percent. The United States now loomed like a colossus over its potential foes and competitors

The change affected not only the balance in standing military forces, but also in command of the arms trade and in capacities for military assistance, global military presence, and military research and development. Notably, these margins have grown larger since the mid-1990s, despite increased spending by Russia and China. In 2006, the United States accounted for more than 50 percent of world military spending.

The advent of clear US military predominance prompted a decade-long discussion among US state managers and defense experts on the implications of a putatively “unipolar” world. What seemed clear was that the United States had gained additional leverage with which to buttress its leadership position and to pursue national objectives more vigorously and on a broader scale. Characteristically, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright asserted during her 1997 confirmation hearings that “We must be more than audience, more even than actors, we must be the authors of the history of our age.” Similarly, President Bush, proclaimed in his 2006 State of the Union address that “we accept the call of history to deliver the oppressed and move this world toward peace.”

Evident in such statements is what might be called a “hegemonic presumption” – a claim to exceptional leadership prerogatives. Among its axioms is the idea that superior power conveys both a special responsibility to act – unilaterally, if need be -- and a unique capacity to act responsibly. And this extends to the prerogative to use force. Thus, in 1998, when the episodic bombing of Iraq became more intensive and routine, Secretary Albright argued that the United States could initiate such action because, as a superpower, it stood taller and could see farther into the future than others could. “We see the danger

here to all of us”, she said. {5} Albright also repeated President Clinton’s earlier designation of the United States as “the indispensable nation”, meaning that it must assume the responsibility to do what only it can.

While Clinton and Albright offered functional justifications for the US arrogation of authority, President Bush has seemed to prefer metaphysical ones – variously evoking History (as above) or God as the source of its authority. Either way, what these statements construe as a diligent embrace of responsibility is actually an assertion of power – one that only optionally submits to external constraints.

That the United States should presume to speak and act as a hegemon is nothing new. Indeed, what has characterized US global engagement for nearly seven decades is America’s unique position of authority within an exclusive community of nations and its distinctive emphasis on the role of military power in foreign policy.

### **A troubled hegemony**

Since the Second World War the United States has enjoyed a hegemonic position within the “western” camp. By this we mean that it has enjoyed a predominant position among this group of states, especially in the economic and military fields – and that this position is partly institutionalized. Hegemony is a hierarchal, rule-governed system in which one polity enjoys predominant influence in defining the rules, adjudicating them, and enforcing them. {6} America’s position is not unlike the position of Athens in the Delian League as described by Isocrates (circa 300 BC); its hegemony is “the right of leadership conceded to one state by the others.” {7}

Hegemony depends on the acquiescence of the junior partners and on their expectation that deference to the hegemon will yield greater absolute gains. America’s hegemonic position among the “western” states does not depend on coercion; nor is the subordination of the junior partners complete. The terms and price of the relationship are always at issue – as are individual policies. But the United States can apply substantial leverage to get its way by financial means, or by threatening to withdraw from cooperative enterprises, or by threatening to “act on its own” as it sees fit (with system-wide effects). The hegemon disciplines its partners by reminding them that it is always best to bandwagon with it, the “indispensable nation”. Of course, the partners must be convinced of real, positive benefits in terms of security, stability, legitimacy, and growth.

In recent decades, US hegemony has been increasingly troubled. The American predilection for employing “decisive” and other coercive means often has been a point of contention with its partners – especially since the mid-1960s. More significantly: since the early 1970s, partners have increasingly viewed the United States as unwilling to pay the economic price of hegemonic privilege. And this perception has grown as globalization has accelerated and international economic competition has intensified. Still, for many years,

the presence of two million Warsaw Pact troops within easy striking distance of the western European heartland helped guarantee America's position and its preferences within the alliance. To put it simply: the "Soviet threat" cemented American hegemony within the Western group.

### **Primacy – what is it good for?**

Against the background of a troubled and contested hegemony, we can understand the second effect of Soviet collapse on America's global prospects. With the disappearance of the Soviet camp, the strongest inducement for European deference to American leadership evaporated. More generally, the relevance of the asset that America now held in incomparable abundance – military power – seemed diminished. With Soviet collapse, America won a windfall in a currency of power that – because of Soviet collapse – was simultaneously devalued. Post-cold war instability (such as civil conflict in the Balkans) was not been sufficient to bring the allies back around to acquiescing to American ways and means as a matter of course. Already by the late-1990s, a surge in anti-Americanism was evident.

During the 1990s and since, every US military involvement and initiative has entailed significant contention between the United States and key European allies. In this, Robert Kagan has seen a parting of ways between the United States and its long-time allies in "Old Europe." He detects a difference "on the all-important question of power - the utility of power, the morality of power..." {8} The power at issue is military, specifically. And its use (or the threat of using it) is what most divides us from those we propose to lead. But the dispute is not purely a philosophical one. It is grounded in different assessments of the risks and putative gains that attach to war and its alternatives.

During the 20th Century, Europe has suffered 40 times as many warfare deaths per capita as has the United States. Its greatest calamities in living memory – fascism and communism – are the effluent of war. Behind these are the experience of centuries of bloody ideological division. And, during the long night of the cold war, no Europeans could doubt that any serious East-West clash would utterly devastate their homelands. Partly as a result of these circumstances, Europe has made considerable progress in forging cooperative relations among its 47 nations, which together constitute one-quarter of the earth's total. This certainly contributes to a different vision of how to deal with instability and threat. And it seems that popular opinion in other war torn and divided regions – the Mideast, Persian Gulf, Africa – tends to favor the European view.

### **Another countervailing factor: domestic dissent**

The disappearance of the Soviet threat also made it difficult to form a stable US domestic consensus on overseas military activism. During the 1990s, almost every contingency

operation – Somalia, the Balkans, Haiti, Kosovo – quickly became a point of acute contention. Outside the context of the global East-West struggle, America’s security stakes in many far-flung conflicts seemed attenuated. Neither the notion of “humanitarian interests” nor that of “important if not vital interests” were sufficient to quell dissent. Of course, as noted above, the events of 11 September 2001 eventually gave rise to a more effective framework for foreign military action.

During the 1990s, the domestic US debate on operations abroad reflected more than different notions of national interest. Also at issue were the ways in which national authorities proposed to use American armed forces. Dissent (including by military leaders) focused, first, on the employment of US units under foreign (or United Nations) command – or otherwise outside US command and control structures. Similarly contentious was the expanded use of US forces in “peace and stability operations” – as opposed to warfighting and traditional deterrence tasks. Of course, these objections ran directly counter to allied (and global) preferences, which favored truly multilateral arrangements (ideally under UN command) and restrictive uses of armed forces (that is: peace operations, not war).

### **Peace operations *versus* warfighting**

The domestic US debate regarding peace operations and the differences in the US and allied practices of these can provide a guide of sorts to the range of leading opinion on the appropriate uses of force in the post-Cold War era.

What distinguishes “warfighting” from “peace and stability operations” (PSOs) is the former’s focus on destroying or disabling an enemy’s military and establishing a monopoly on force for one’s own units within an area of interest. Characteristically, the warfighting paradigm parses the world into friends and enemies. It prescribes disempowering the enemy and making it subject to one’s own will. By contrast, PSOs involve facilitating or enforcing a restricted mandate – which itself rests on a broad multilateral consensus (including the partial consent or acquiescence of the parties subject to control). The executive agent of a PSO polices violations of the mandate, but does not typically identify a particular party as a strategic enemy. PSOs may include combat operations of a limited type – for instance: self-defense, convoy protection, or protection of a threatened enclave. But these are usually episodic, reactive, tactical, and governed by restrictive rules of engagement.

Peace operations depend on strong international consensus and the interplay of compellence and assent to achieve desired objectives – an approach meant to minimize the destruction and chaos associated with war. Thus, PSOs are bound to be arduous and knotty. They can seldom promise quick, decisive results. European and other allied interest in them reflects acute concern about the relative costs of the alternative – war – and also reflects optimism about the power and prospects of broad multilateral action.



Even while the Clinton administration's interest in PSOs earned it the disapprobation of warfighting enthusiasts at home, the US practice of PSOs usually diverged significantly from that favored by allied powers. In American practice, PSOs tended to creep toward war or, at least, major combat. If we imagine a spectrum of force ranging from minimal to maximal, allied preferences tended toward the minimal, warfighters tended toward the maximal, and the Clinton administration fell somewhere in between – to no one's satisfaction. This was true not only in PSOs, but also in multinational combat operations. While warfighting enthusiasts bemoaned the Clinton administration's "pin-prick" applications of force – in Serbia and Iraq, for instance – allied opinion railed against the American proclivity to quickly bring air, missile, and artillery firepower into play.

### **Here and there: the contours of US globalism**

We can date the contemporary practice of US globalism to the declaration of war with Germany on 11 December 1941, although American involvement in the First World War was a precursor. In the decades since 1941, we can discern a set of preferences that together define an "equilibrium point" for US diplomatic and military activism abroad. Stray too far from these and the domestic political consensus begins to fray. (Here we are concerned not simply with "public opinion", but with organized, effective, or enabled opinion.)

First, the national security stakes in foreign involvements must be perceived as real, present, and substantial;

Second, the United States must retain freedom of action abroad. In alliance or other multinational endeavors, it must possess a distinct leadership role; and,

Third, the modes of action must be perceived as "decisive" – that is: perceived as likely to yield clear, positive results. In diplomacy, this implies a preference for "hard line" positions and a forceful stance – a "no nonsense" brand of diplomacy. In military operations, it implies the demand for clear, invariant objectives and for using overwhelming force to win them quickly.

These attributes define a type of internationalism suited to a nation with deep-seated "exceptionalist" and "isolationist" sentiments. Americans' sense of "separateness" even in the course of engagement is well expressed in George M. Cohan's immensely popular World War One mobilization song, *Over There* (1917) {9}

Over there, over there/ Send the word, send the word over there/ That the Yanks  
are coming.../ Send the word, send the word to beware/ We'll be over, we're  
coming over/ And we won't come back till it's over, Over there.

Cohan's lyrics focus on the act of going "over there" and give the impression that the "Yanks" carry with them a decisive solution to Europe's troubles. It is an internationalism that not only maintains, but hinges on maintaining the distinction between "here" and "there". The song implies an "us and them" that is not the Entente and Central powers so much as it is the United States and Europe – "here" and "there."

Cohan's song also reminds us that American internationalism always has been war-driven – in 1917, 1941, and 1950 (with peacetime engagement thereafter framed continuously in terms of the Cold War). One of the factors complicating US military activism during the 1990s was the absence of an overarching wartime framework, which pertains to the first and third preferences noted above.

### **From Clinton to Bush: continuity and change**

The Clinton and Bush administrations were in accord on advancing a new post-Cold War "rule set" to govern international relations – especially with regard to the proliferation of advanced weapons, missiles, weapons of mass destruction, and nuclear technology. Both agreed that a set of US-defined "rogue states" had to be generally proscribed and pressured to transform by a variety means, including forceful ones. The two also agreed that history had proved market democracy to be the best way to organize human society – and that its spread was essential to the long-term security of the United States. Enlargement of the community of market democracies, and not simply containment of America's adversaries, was a shared objective. Finally, the two agreed that military primacy and America's new status as sole superpower gave it the responsibility, opportunity, and means to act more proactively and more forcefully in compelling progress.

The Clinton administration placed greater trust in globalization as a motor of positive change. US military initiatives might serve to police the process on its edges, curbing weapon proliferation, blunting the depredations of rogue states, and managing the most dangerous instances of instability. In addition: discrete and limited applications of force might hurry along the demise of rogue regimes. With regard to most of its initiatives, the administration was able to pull allied leaders along, although it often found itself pushing hard at the edges of consensus. Global public opinion was less availing, especially as the number of US bombing campaigns and operations grew. Least availing was US public and elite opinion, as noted above.

From its inauguration, the Bush administration was less sanguine or patient about globalization as an independent motor of change. The advance of market democracy would need more energetic assistance. And, obviously, it felt less constrained by the requirements of allied consensus, which it thought would eventually bandwagon with American victories. With regard to the orientation of America's armed forces, its principal policy innovations were to restore the emphasis on traditional warfighting and warfighting

capabilities, beginning with the September 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)*. The Bush administration also brought maximum war objectives to the fore, as a matter of doctrine. The goals of American wars, according to the 2001 *QDR*, would include not only “decisive victory” on the battlefield, but also possibly “changing the regime of an adversary state” and occupying “foreign territory until U.S. strategic objectives are met.” (*QDR-01*, p. 13.) Further, the Bush administration significantly widened the scope for pre-emptive and “preventive” uses of force against terrorists, state-sponsors of terror, and adversary states attempting to acquire weapons of mass destruction or their means of development or delivery. The so-called “Bush Doctrine”, codified in the 2002 *National Security Strategy*, states that “America will act against...emerging threats before they are fully formed.”

The Bush administration’s re-emphasis on warfighting (in contrast to “operations other than war”) spoke to dissent in the armed services and to broad conservative opinion. The idea of putting *the option* of “regime change” on the military menu also had demonstrable support – in Congress, at least. Neither proposition necessarily implied fighting more wars, however. And, indeed, candidate Bush had given the impression that, under his watch, the United States would be less interventionary than during the Clinton years and would avoid “missions without end.” {10}

What made a more energetic and proactive interventionary policy broadly acceptable within the United States was the 9/11 attacks – together with the initial impression that the US armed forces would be used in ways best suited to their capabilities. What has proved far less acceptable – and, indeed, has been the Bush administration’s undoing – is the desultory occupation duties that followed the initial, conventional victories in Afghanistan and Iraq.

What the next US administration can learn from this is that the “war on terrorism” framework, together with popular fears about the spread of weapons of mass destruction, can enable greater military activism, but only of a *certain type*: fast and decisive. An entirely different matter are protracted campaigns of occupation and those that either seem detached from clear security threats or seem to diverge from the warfighting model. It is disconcerting, then, that the American policy “center” seems to be trending away from a recognition of this lesson. Instead, it is gravitating to a putative midpoint between the Clinton and Bush administration positions. Emblematic of this is the view that sees America’s troubles in Afghanistan and Iraq as largely a matter of execution and insufficient troop strength, that foresees our occupation of those nations continuing for decades, and that pins its hopes for success on the enlargement of US ground forces and the renovation of counter-insurgency doctrine.

### **From failure to empire?**

Complementing the official discourse on US global leadership has been one conducted in the broader US foreign policy community that more frankly promotes notions of US

hegemony – and even empire. {11} While America’s hegemonic position within the western group is a matter of fact (as noted above), it has not usually been a subject of mainstream US political or diplomatic discourse. The advocates of an imperial turn in US policy seek to publicly affirm America’s hegemonic role and extend it.

The ruminations about a new “liberal imperialism” began on the fringes of policy discourse in the mid-1990s, gathered steam around the turn of the millennium, and became quit commonplace after 9/11. Richard Haass, current president of the Council on Foreign Relations, was an “early adopter”. In 2000, he wrote that, for the United States to succeed at its objective of global preeminence, it would be necessary for Americans to "re-conceive their role from a traditional nation-state to an imperial power." {12}

What the “new imperialists” prescribe is not an explicitly exploitative or extractive enterprise. Rather they see US hegemony as the best or only guarantor of a relatively peaceful global system and the most reliable agent for the stable advance of market democracy. According to Haass, the effort would entail America enacting “a foreign policy that attempts to organize the world along certain principles affecting relations between states and conditions within them” – a new rule set. {13}

The sphere of *Pax Americana* would expand by a process of integration involving, to varying extents, the direct management of key unstable areas and some failed or failing states. There is an “inside” and an “outside” to the schema – or in Thomas Barnett’s rendering, a “core” and a “gap”. {14} The former comprises the hegemon and its partners; the latter, those states and areas subject to compulsion, control, or management. Thus, at its outer edges, the expanding sphere of hegemonic peace takes on a distinctly imperial aspect.

The idea that establishing or extending hegemony might serve as a path to peace is not a new one, of course Both Thucydides and Immanuel Kant examined (and rejected) it. Indeed, Thucydides sees in Athens’ efforts to extend its hegemony the source of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC). Kant’s description of the idea is incisive: “Every state, or its ruler, desires to establish lasting peace” by the “amalgamation of states under one superior power” – presumably their own. But Kant concludes that this effort “falls into anarchy after stifling the seeds of the good.” {15}

### **Boots on the ground**

The movement for a liberal imperialism has an air of frustration about it. Proponents routinely admonish US leaders and citizens to “pony up” the resources, will, and moral courage to do the work of global management. In Haass’ view:

The greater risk facing the United States at this juncture is that it will squander the opportunity to bring about a world supportive of its core

interests by doing too little. Imperial understretch, not overstretch, appears the greater danger of the two. {16}

Advocacy for this course seems to come in waves coinciding with sizable US troop engagements abroad – Bosnia in 1996, Iraq and Kosovo in 1998 and 1999, and Iraq again after 2003. A common target of enthusiasts is allied opposition to US interventions and also the domestic doubt and equivocation that have attended these interventions. And so it is this aspect of the project that seems pivotal: the willingness to put large numbers of US troops on foreign soil in a combat or constabulary role – and keep them there until stability and a new “rule set” takes hold.

In light of America’s misadventure in Iraq – its great costs and poor results – it seems unlikely that the US public will be easily won to attempt similar experiments on a grander scale. Not even the “war on terrorism” or the notion of a “global Islamic insurgency” seem sufficient motivators. Certainly, our allies are less ready today, not more, to follow the United States down an imperial path, liberal or otherwise. Thus, even should the prospect capture the US public’s imagination, it would further erode American influence abroad, adding to cost and friction.

The fact that the imperial option should gain a respectful hearing at this late date in human history is the best indicator that American policy has worked itself into a maddening *cul de sac*. As anyone who has driven into one knows, the way out is to reverse course. In terms of policy, this may mean trying something less ambitious than what we have attempted recently – and of an entirely different sort.

The first prerequisite of change is to rethink prevailing post-Cold War views on the utility of force.

## **Second thoughts on the utility of force**

In an April 2003 speech before workers at a Boeing aircraft plant, President Bush asserted that,

“By a combination of creative strategies and advanced technologies, we are redefining war on our terms. In this new era of warfare, we can target a regime, not a nation.” {17}

This is the “new warfare hypothesis” and it did not originate with the Bush administration. In one form or another it has helped shape US thinking about the utility of force since the 1990-1991 Gulf War. More important than its pedigree, however, is that the fact that it has proven false in its implications. Instead, our recent practice of war and military operations has shown that

\* Military power is less discrete, manageable, and predictable in its effects than US post-Cold War policy presumes; and,

\* Its negative effects are more far-reaching, costly, and complex than imagined by the new warfare proponents.

\* Achieving positive ends by coercive means – compellence and control rather than deterrence and defense -- has proven especially difficult and fraught with inadvertent consequences.

Programs of coercive social and political transformation in Iraq and Afghanistan have fallen far short of their goals despite the investment of 5,000 American lives (including contractors), one million personnel-years, and nearly \$600 billion – as well as the expenditure of more than 20 kiloton of explosives.

“Boots on the ground” were supposed to rectify the shortcomings of wars fought at a distance with stand-off firepower. But rather than winning control, they have prompted nationalistic (or “communalistic”) responses. Clearly, we have not understood the power and dynamics of “identity politics” – or how these react to efforts at coercive control by outsiders. This failure points to a more fundamental one: Seized by a sense of military primacy, we have failed to appreciate the difference and the distance between achieving military effects and achieving political-strategic ones.

Any true reassessment of the utility of force and its limits leads to a re-evaluation of our present condition of “military primacy”. It has become the cornerstone of our imagined role in the world – but what does it mean and what is it worth? In light of our Iraq experience, this much is clear: When weighing US military primacy, the most important comparison is not between the United States and other international actors but between means and ends – that is: between America’s power and what it hopes to do with it.

## Notes

1. Colin Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 573. At the time, Albright was the US representative to the United Nations. Powell was then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

2. Richard N. Haass, “Imperial America,” *Foreign Affairs* (11 November 2000).

3. *War & Consequences: Global Terrorism has Increased Since 9/11 Attacks, Project on Defense Alternatives Briefing Memo 38* (Cambridge MA: Commonwealth Institute, 25 September 2006).

4. *Post-Cold War US Military Expenditure in the Context of World Spending Trends PDA Briefing Memo #10* (Cambridge MA: Commonwealth Institute, January 1997).
5. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, interview, "The Today Show" with Matt Lauer, *NBC-TV*, 19 February 1998.
6. Walter Scheidel, *Republics between hegemony and empire: How ancient city-states built empires and the USA doesn't (anymore)*, Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics (Stanford University, February 2006); Niall Ferguson, "Hegemony or Empire?", *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2003); and, Paul Schroeder, "Is the US an empire?", *History News Network*, 3 February 2003, <http://hnn.us/articles/1237.html>
7. *Panegyricus of Isocrates* (Cambridge: John Bartlett, 1854)
8. Robert Kagan, "Power and Weakness", *Policy Review* (June/July 2002).
9. Cohan, *Over There*, sheet music (New York: William Jerome Publishing Corp., 1917).
10. *Governor Bush Discusses Foreign Policy In Speech At Ronald Reagan Library* (Bush/Cheney Campaign, 19 November 1999); [http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/usa/1999/pr111999\\_nn.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/usa/1999/pr111999_nn.htm)
11. Thomas PM Barnett, *Blueprint for Action: A Future Worth Creating* (New York City: Penguin, 2005); Robert D Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground* (New York City: Random House, 2005); Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case For Goliath: How America Acts As The World's Government in the Twenty-first Century* (New York City: Public Affairs, 2005); Thomas PM Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century* (New York City: GP Putnam & Sons, 2004); Niall Ferguson, "Hegemony or Empire?", *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2003), Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, "American Empire, Not 'If' but 'What Kind'," *New York Times*, 10 May 2003; Max Boot, "American Imperialism? No Need to Run Away From Label", *USA Today*, 05 May 2003; Thomas Donnelly, *What's Next? Preserving American Primacy, Institutionalizing Unipolarity* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, May 2003); Michael Ignatieff, "The American Empire; The Burden," *New York Times*, 5 January 2003; Stephen Peter Rosen, "An Empire, If You Can Keep It," *National Interest* (Spring, 2003); Haass, "Imperial America," *Foreign Affairs* (11 November 2000); Robert Kagan, "Benevolent Empire," *Foreign Policy* (Summer 1998); and, William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 1996).
12. Haass, "Imperial America," *Foreign Affairs* (11 November 2000). Haass also has led foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution and served in the State Department during both the George H.W. and George W. Bush administrations.

13. *ibid.*

14. Thomas Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century* (New York City: GP Putnam & Sons, 2004)

15. Immanuel Kant, *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, September 2003), "First Supplement: Of the Guarantee for Perpetual Peace".

16. Haass, "Imperial America".

17. President George W. Bush, "Remarks to employees at the Boeing F-18 production facility in St. Louis, Missouri - Transcript," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* (Washington DC: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration, 21 April 2003).