

The Benevolent Empire

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The Benevolent Empire

by Robert Kagan

Not so long ago, when the Monica Lewinsky scandal first broke in the global media, an involuntary and therefore unusually revealing gasp of concern could be heard in the capitals of many of the world's most prominent nations. Ever so briefly, prime ministers and pundits watched to see if the drivewheel of the international economic, security, and political systems was about to misalign or lose its power, with all that this breakdown would imply for the rest of the world. Would the Middle East peace process stall? Would Asia's financial crisis spiral out of control? Would the Korean peninsula become unsettled? Would pressing issues of European security go unresolved? "In all the world's trouble spots," the *Times* of London noted, leaders were "calculating what will happen when Washington's gaze is distracted."

Temporarily interrupting their steady grumbling about American arrogance and hegemonic pretensions, Asian, European, and Middle Eastern editorial pages paused to contemplate the consequences of a crippled American presidency. The liberal German newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau*, which a few months earlier had been accusing Americans of arrogant zealotry and a "camouflaged neocolonialism," suddenly fretted that the "problems in the Middle East, in the Balkans or in Asia" will not be solved "without U.S. assistance and a president who enjoys respect" and demanded that, in the interests of the entire world, the president's accusers quickly produce the goods or shut up. In Hong Kong, the *South*

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China Morning Post warned that the “humbling” of an American president had “implications of great gravity” for international affairs; in Saudi Arabia, the *Arab News* declared that this was “not the time that America or the world needs an inward-looking or wounded president. It needs one unencumbered by private concerns who can make tough decisions.”

The irony of these pleas for vigorous American leadership did not escape notice, even in Paris, the intellectual and spiritual capital of anti-hegemony and “multipolarity.” As one pundit (Jacques Amalric) noted wickedly in the left-leaning *Liberation*, “Those who accused the United States of being overbearing are today praying for a quick end to the storm.” Indeed, they were and with good reason. As Aldo Rizzo observed, part in lament and part in tribute, in Italy’s powerful *La Stampa*: “It is in times like these that we feel the absence of a power, certainly not [an] alternative, but at least complementary, to America, something which Europe could be. Could be, but is not. Therefore, good luck to Clinton and, most of all, to America.”

This brief moment of international concern passed, of course, as did the flash of candor about the true state of world affairs and America’s essential role in preserving a semblance of global order. The president appeared to regain his balance, the drivewheel kept spinning, and in the world’s great capitals talk resumed of American arrogance and bullying and the need for a more genuinely multipolar system to manage international affairs. But the almost universally expressed fear of a weakened U.S. presidency provides a useful antidote to the pervasive handwringing, in Washington as well as in foreign capitals, over the “problem” of American hegemony. There is much less to this problem than meets the eye.

The commingled feelings of reliance on and resentment toward America’s international dominance these days are neither strange nor new. The resentment of power, even when it is in the hands of one’s friends, is a normal, indeed, timeless human emotion—no less so than the arrogance of power. And perhaps only Americans, with their rather short memory, could imagine that the current resentment is the unique product of the expansion of American dominance in the post-Cold War era. During the confrontation with the Soviet Union, now recalled in the United States as a time of Edenic harmony among the Western allies, not just French but also British leaders chafed under the leadership of a sometimes overbearing America. As political scientist A. W. DePorte noted some 20 years ago, the schemes of European unity advanced by French financial planner Jean Monnet and French foreign

minister Robert Schuman in 1950 aimed “not only to strengthen Western Europe in the face of the Russian threat but also—though this was less talked about—to strengthen it vis-à-vis its indispensable but overpowering American ally.” Today’s call for “multipolarity” in international affairs, in short, has a history, as do European yearnings for unity as a counterweight to American power. Neither of these pro-

posed desires is a new response to the particular American hegemony of the last nine years.

And neither of them, one suspects, is very seriously intended. For the truth about America’s dominant role in the world is known to most clear-eyed international observers.

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States is good for a vast portion of the world’s population. It is certainly a better international arrangement than all realistic alternatives. To undermine it would cost many others around the world far more than it would cost Americans—and far sooner. As Samuel Huntington wrote five years ago, before he joined the plethora of scholars disturbed by the “arrogance” of American hegemony: “A world without U.S. primacy will be a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth than a world where the United States continues to have more influence than any other country shaping global affairs.”

The unique qualities of American global dominance have never been a mystery, but these days they are more and more forgotten or, for convenience’ sake, ignored. There was a time when the world clearly saw how different the American superpower was from all the previous aspiring hegemony. The difference lay in the exercise of power. The strength acquired by the United States in the aftermath of World War II was far greater than any single nation had ever possessed, at least since the Roman Empire. America’s share of the world economy, the overwhelming superiority of its military capacity—augmented for a time by a monopoly of nuclear weapons and the capacity to deliver them—gave it the choice of pursuing any number of global ambitions. That the American people “might have set the crown of world empire on their brows,” as one British statesman put it in 1951, but chose not to, was a decision of singular importance in world history and recognized as such. Ameri-

ca's self-abnegation was unusual, and its uniqueness was not lost on peoples who had just suffered the horrors of wars brought on by powerful nations with overweening ambitions to empire of the most coercive type. Nor was it lost on those who saw what the Soviet Union planned to do with its newfound power after World War II.

The uniqueness persisted. During the Cold War, America's style of hegemony reflected its democratic form of government as much as Soviet hegemony reflected Stalin's approach to governance. The "habits of democracy," as Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis has noted, made compromise and mutual accommodation the norm in U.S.-Allied relations. This approach to international affairs was not an example of selfless behavior. The Americans had an instinctive sense, based on their own experience growing up in a uniquely open system of democratic capitalism, that their power and influence would be enhanced by allowing subordinate allies a great measure of internal and even external freedom of maneuver. But in practice, as Gaddis points out, "Americans so often deferred to the wishes of allies during the early Cold War that some historians have seen the Europeans—especially the British—as having managed *them*."

Beyond the style of American hegemony, which, even if unevenly applied, undoubtedly did more to attract than repel other peoples and nations, American grand strategy in the Cold War consistently entailed providing far more to friends and allies than was expected from them in return. Thus, it was American *strategy* to raise up from the ruins powerful economic competitors in Europe and Asia, a strategy so successful that by the 1980s the United States was thought to be in a state of irreversible "relative" economic decline—relative, that is, to those very nations whose economies it had restored after World War II.

And it was American *strategy* to risk nuclear annihilation on its otherwise unthreatened homeland in order to deter attack, either nuclear or conventional, on a European or Asian ally. This strategy also came to be taken for granted. But when one considers the absence of similarly reliable guarantees among the various European powers in the past (between, say, Great Britain and France in the 1920s and 1930s), the willingness of the United States, standing in relative safety behind two oceans, to link its survival to that of other nations was extraordinary.

Even more remarkable may be that the United States has attempted not only to preserve these guarantees but to expand them in the post-Cold War era. Much is made these days, not least in Washington, of

the American defense budget now being several times higher than that of every other major power. But on what is that defense budget spent? Very little funding goes to protect national territory. Most of it is devoted to making good on what Americans call their international “commitments.”

Even in the absence of the Soviet threat, America continues, much to the chagrin of some of its politicians, to define its “national security” broadly, as encompassing the security of friends and allies, and even of abstract principles, far from American shores. In the Gulf War, more than 90 percent of the military forces sent to expel Iraq’s army from Kuwait were American. Were 90 percent of the interests threatened American? In almost any imaginable scenario in which the United States might deploy troops abroad, the primary purpose would be the defense of interests of more immediate concern to America’s allies—as it has been in Bosnia. This can be said about no other power.

Ever since the United States emerged as a great power, the identification of the interests of others with its own has been the most striking quality of American foreign and defense policy. Americans seem to have internalized and made second nature a conviction held only since World War II: Namely, that their own well-being depends fundamentally on the well-being of others; that American prosperity cannot occur in the absence of global prosperity; that American freedom depends on the survival and spread of freedom elsewhere; that aggression anywhere threatens the danger of aggression everywhere; and that American national security is impossible without a broad measure of international security.

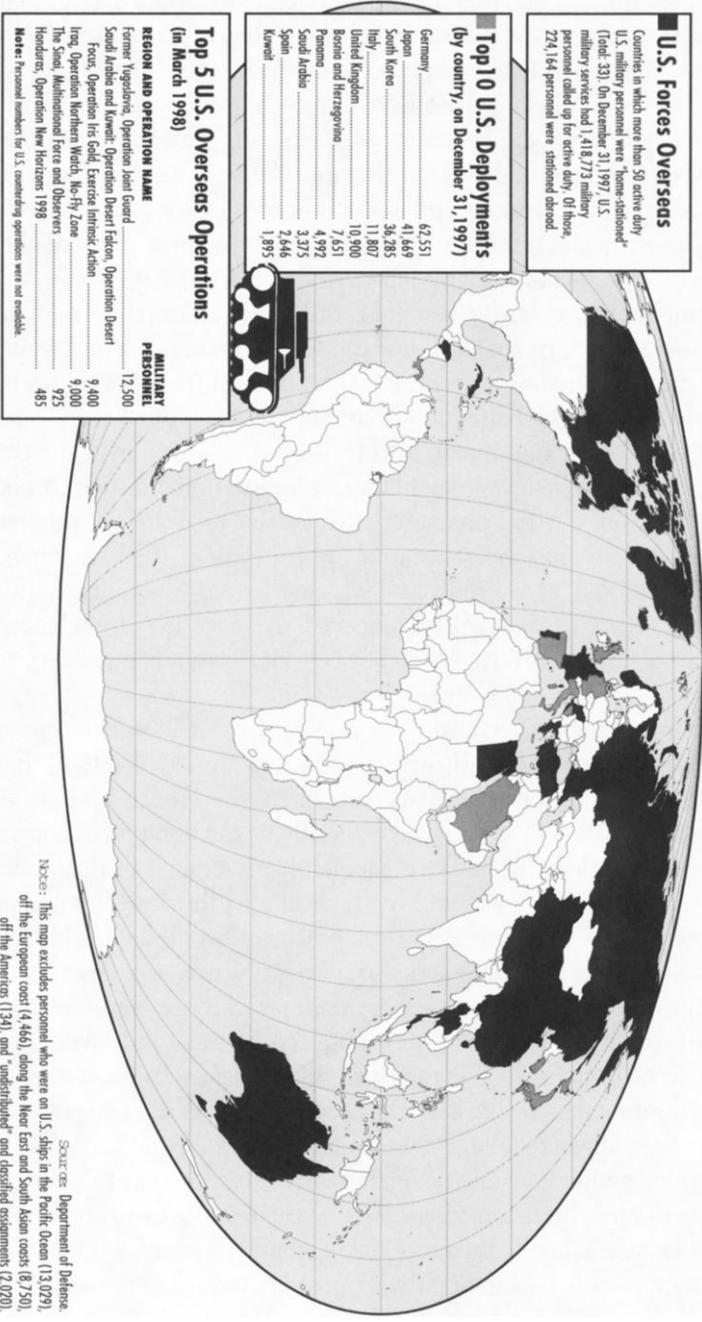
Let us not call this conviction selfless: Americans are as self-interested as any other people. But for at least 50 years they have been guided by the kind of enlightened self-interest that, in practice, comes dangerously close to resembling generosity. If that generosity seems to be fading today (and this is still a premature judgment), it is not because America has grown too fond of power. Quite the opposite. It is because some Americans have grown tired of power, tired of leadership, and, consequently, less inclined to demonstrate the sort of generosity that has long characterized their nation’s foreign policy. What many in Europe and elsewhere see as arrogance and bullying may be just irritability born of weariness.

If fatigue is setting in, then those nations and peoples who have long benefited, and still benefit, from the international order created and upheld by American power have a stake in bolstering rather than denigrating American hegemony. After all, what, in truth, are the alternatives?

Whatever America’s failings, were any other nation to take its place,

"The Sun Never Sets..."

Global Deployment of U.S. Forces



U.S. Forces Overseas

Countries in which more than 50 active duty U.S. military personnel were "home-stationed" (Table 33). On December 31, 1997, U.S. military services had 1,418,273 military personnel called up for active duty. Of those, 224,164 personnel were stationed abroad.

Top 10 U.S. Deployments
(by country, on December 31, 1997)

Germany	67,551
Japan	41,649
South Korea	36,285
Italy	11,807
United Kingdom	10,900
Bosnia and Herzegovina	7,651
Panama	4,972
Saudi Arabia	3,375
Spain	2,646
Kuwait	1,895

Top 5 U.S. Overseas Operations
(in March 1998)

REGION AND OPERATION NAME	MILITARY PERSONNEL
Former Yugoslavia	12,500
Saudi Arabia and Kuwait	9,400
France, Operation Desert Falcon	9,000
France, Operation Desert Storm	9,000
France, Operation Iris Gold, Exercise Inherent Action	9,000
France, Operation Northern Watch, No-Fly Zone	9,000
The Sinai, Multinational Force and Observers	9,725
Honduras, Operation New Horizons 1998	485

Note: Personnel numbers for U.S. counterdrug operations were not available.

SOURCE: Department of Defense. Notes: This map excludes personnel who were on U.S. ships in the Pacific Ocean (13,029), off the European coast (4,466), along the Near East and South Asian coasts (8,750), off the Americas (1,341), and "undistributed" and classified assignments (2,020).

the rest of the world would find the situation less congenial. America may be arrogant; Americans may at times be selfish; they may occasionally be ham-handed in their exercise of power. But, *excusez-moi*, compared with whom? Can anyone believe that were France to possess the power the United States now has, the French would be less arrogant, less selfish, and less prone to making mistakes? Little in France's history as a great power, or even as a medium power, justifies such optimism. Nor can one easily imagine power on an American scale being employed in a more enlightened fashion by China, Germany, Japan, or Russia. And even the leaders of that least benighted of empires, the British, were more arrogant, more bloody-minded, and, in the end, less capable managers of world affairs than the inept Americans have so far proved to be. If there is to be a sole superpower, the world is better off if that power is the United States.

What, then, of a multipolar world? There are those, even in the United States, who believe a semblance of international justice can be achieved only in a world characterized by a balance among relative equals. In such circumstances, national arrogance must theoretically be tempered, national aspirations limited, and attempts at hegemony, either benevolent or malevolent, checked. A more evenly balanced world, they assume, with the United States cut down a peg (or two, or three) would be freer, fairer, and safer.

A distant, though unacknowledged cousin of this realist, balance-of-power theory is the global parliamentarianism, or world federalism, that animates so many Europeans today, particularly the French apostles of European union. (It is little recalled, especially by modern proponents of foreign policy "realism," that Hans Morgenthau's seminal work, *Politics Among Nations*, builds slowly and methodically to the conclusion that what is needed to maintain international peace is a "world state.") In fact, many of today's calls for multipolarity seem to spring from the view, popular in some Washington circles but downright pervasive in European capitals, that traditional measures of national power, and even the nation-state itself, are passé. If Europe is erasing borders, what need is there for an overbearing America to keep the peace? America's military power is archaic in a world where finance is transnational and the modem is king.

We need not enter here into the endless and so far unproductive debate among international-relations theorists over the relative merits of multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar international "systems" for keeping the peace. It is sufficient to note that during the supposed heyday of multipolarity—the eighteenth century, when the first "Concert of Europe" operated—war



The world's crossing guard?

among the great powers was a regular feature, with major and minor, and global and local, conflicts erupting throughout almost every decade.

We should also not forget that utopian fancies about the obsolescence of military power and national governments in a transnational, “economic” era have blossomed before, only to be crushed by the next “war to end all wars.” The success of the European Union, such as it is, and, moreover, the whole dream of erasing boundaries, has been made possible only because the more fundamental and enduring issues of European security have been addressed by the United States through its leadership of NATO, that most archaic and least utopian of institutions. Were American hegemony really to disappear, the old European questions—chiefly, what to do about Germany—would quickly rear their hoary heads.

But let's return to the real world. For all the bleating about hegemony, no nation really wants genuine multipolarity. No nation has shown a willingness to take on equal responsibilities for managing global crises. No nation has been willing to make the same kinds of short-term sacrifices that the United States has been willing to make in the long-term interest of preserving the global order. No nation, except China, has been willing to spend the money to acquire the military power necessary for playing a greater role relative to the United States—and China's

military buildup has not exactly been viewed by its neighbors as creating a more harmonious environment.

If Europeans genuinely sought multipolarity, they would increase their defense budgets considerably, instead of slashing them. They would take the lead in the Balkans, instead of insisting that their participation depends on America's participation. But neither the French, other Europeans, nor even the Russians are prepared to pay the price for a genuinely

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multipolar world. Not only do they shy away from the expense of creating and preserving such a world; they rightly fear the geopolitical consequences of destroying American hegemony. Genuine multipolarity would inevitably mean a

return to the complex of strategic issues that plagued the world before World War II: in Asia, the competition for regional preeminence among China, Japan, and Russia; in Europe, the competition among France, Germany, Great Britain, and Russia.

Kenneth Waltz once made the seemingly obvious point that “in international politics, overwhelming power repels and leads other states to balance against it”—a banal truism, and yet, as it happens, so untrue in this era of American hegemony. What France, Russia, and some others really seek today is not genuine multipolarity but a false multipolarity, an honorary multipolarity. They want the pretense of equal partnership in a multipolar world without the price or responsibility that equal partnership requires. They want equal say on the major decisions in global crises (as with Iraq and Kosovo) without having to possess or wield anything like equal power. They want to increase their own prestige at the expense of American power but without the strain of having to fill the gap left by a diminution of the American role. And at the same time, they want to make short-term, mostly financial, gains, by taking advantage of the continuing U.S. focus on long-term support of the international order.

The problem is not merely that some of these nations are giving themselves a “free ride” on the back of American power, benefiting from the international order that American hegemony undergirds, while at the same time puncturing little holes in it for short-term advantage. The more serious danger is that this behavior will gradually, or perhaps not so gradually, erode the sum total of power that can be applied to protecting

the international order altogether. The false multipolarity sought by France, Russia, and others would reduce America's ability to defend common interests without increasing anyone else's ability to do so.

In fact, this erosion may already be happening. In the recent case of Iraq, America's ability to pursue the long-term goal of defending the international order against President Saddam Hussein was undermined by the efforts of France and Russia to attain short-term economic gains and enhanced prestige. Both these powers achieved their goal of a "multipolar" solution: They took a slice out of American hegemony. But they did so at the price of leaving in place a long-term threat to an international system from which they continue to draw immense benefits but which they by themselves have no ability to defend. They did not possess the means to solve the Iraq problem, only the means to prevent the United States from solving it.

This insufficiency is the fatal flaw of multilateralism, as the Clinton administration learned in the case of Bosnia. In a world that is not genuinely multipolar—where there is instead a widely recognized hierarchy of power—multilateralism, if rigorously pursued, guarantees failure in meeting international crises. Those nations that lack the power to solve an international problem cannot be expected to take the lead in demanding the problem be solved. They may even eschew the exercise of power altogether, both because they do not have it and because the effective exercise of it by someone else, such as the United States, only serves to widen the gap between the hegemon and the rest. The lesson President Bill Clinton was supposed to have learned in the case of Bosnia is that to be effective, multilateralism must be preceded by unilateralism. In the toughest situations, the most effective multilateral response comes when the strongest power decides to act, with or without the others, and then asks its partners whether they will join. Giving equal say over international decisions to nations with vastly unequal power often means that the full measure of power that can be deployed in defense of the international community's interests will, in fact, not be deployed.

Those contributing to the growing chorus of antihegemony and multipolarity may know they are playing a dangerous game, one that needs to be conducted with the utmost care, as French leaders did during the Cold War, lest the entire international system come crashing down around them. What they may not have adequately calculated, however, is the possibility that Americans will not respond as wisely as they generally did during the Cold War.

Americans and their leaders should not take all this sophisticated whining about U.S. hegemony too seriously. They certainly should not take it more seriously than the whiners themselves do. But, of course, Americans are taking it seriously. In the United States these days, the lugubrious guilt trip of post-Vietnam liberalism is echoed even by conservatives, with William Buckley, Samuel Huntington, and James Schlesinger all decrying American “hubris,” “arrogance,” and “imperialism.” Clinton administration officials, in between speeches exalting America as the “indispensable” nation, increasingly behave as if what is truly indispensable is the prior approval of China, France, and Russia for every military action. Moreover, at another level, there is a stirring of neo-isolationism in America today, a mood that nicely complements the view among many Europeans that America is meddling too much in everyone else’s business and taking too little time to mind its own. The existence of the Soviet Union disciplined Americans and made them see that their enlightened self-interest lay in a relatively generous foreign policy. Today, that discipline is no longer present.

In other words, foreign grumbling about American hegemony would be merely amusing, were it not for the very real possibility that too many Americans will forget—even if most of the rest of the world does not—just how important continued American dominance is to the preservation of a reasonable level of international security and prosperity. World leaders may want to keep this in mind when they pop the champagne corks in celebration of the next American humbling.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Spring 1993 issue of *International Security* invited a number of authors to comment on American hegemony in a forum entitled “**Primacy and its Discontents.**” In his article “**The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise,**” UCLA professor Christopher Layne cites Kenneth Waltz and employs neorealist theory to argue that multipolarity will blossom again sometime between 2000 and 2010; Columbia University professor Robert Jervis, in his article “**International Primacy: Is the Game Worth the Candle?,**” argues that primacy is no longer a worthy goal, since “with the development of nuclear weapons, the spread of liberal democracy, and the diminution of nationalism, war among the most powerful actors is unlikely”; and Har-

vard University's Samuel Huntington, in "Why International Primacy Matters," advances an argument for American primacy that he may no longer believe in. Charles Krauthammer, in "The Unipolar Moment" (*Foreign Affairs: America and the World*, Vol. 70, No. 1, 1990-91), also makes a case for American hegemony, an opinion he now seems largely to have abandoned.

A good source on American policy, already cited in this article, is John Lewis Gaddis' *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Drawing on archival material from former communist countries, Gaddis argues that Western scholars have traditionally underemphasized the role of ideology during the Cold War.

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