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AMERICAN HEGEMONY —WITHOUT AN ENEMY

by Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz

It is commonly held that the Cold War's end allows the United States to conduct a searching reexamination of its role in world politics. In fact, however, that has not happened and there is no reason to believe it will. As the debate on U.S. intervention in the Balkans has made clear, the unspoken assumptions that have guided American policymakers since 1945 have not lost their potency. The driving force behind America's foreign policy has shown itself to be more basic than the containment of its Cold War adversary. Since the late 1940s, two paradoxes have shaped American foreign policy. First, although the Soviet Union was the immediate focus of U.S. security strategy, it was really quite incidental to America's liberal internationalist policy. Second, the Soviet Union's existence, ironically, was indispensable to that policy's success.

At the end of World War II, Washington was committed to an active internationalist agenda and would have pursued it even if the Soviet Union had not emerged as a geopolitical and ideological rival. That essential point was acknowledged in NSC 68, the 1950 National Security Council document that articulated America's Cold War strategy "as one designed to foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish." Motivated by their conviction that American security and prosperity depend on world order, NSC 68's authors argued that the "policy of attempting to develop a healthy international community [was] a policy which we would probably pursue even if there were no Soviet threat." George Bush's call for the United States to forge a "new world order," echoed by

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President Bill Clinton's assertion that U.S. security requires that America help ensure "a just, enduring and ever-more democratic peace in the world" shows that America's "Cold War" grand strategy is being reaffirmed today, rather than reexamined.

The debate over American military intervention in the former Yugoslavia made this clear. Although interventionists advanced humanitarian reasons for U.S. involvement, they couched their primary arguments in terms of upholding a set of principles that have come to be associated with world order, and, hence, vital interests. These principles (which were also invoked during the Persian Gulf war) include punishing aggression, preserving the inviolability of borders, and preventing instability.

Should American foreign policy continue to be driven by a world view that inexorably perceives American interests to be endangered by events in places like the Balkans? To answer that question, the "official mind" of American foreign policy—the assumptions underpinning the foreign policy elite's peculiar notion of national interest—must be dissected and examined.

The belief that American security is endangered by events in places that most agree have no intrinsic strategic value is a longstanding tenet of U.S. foreign policy. In 1966 John McNaughton, one of then defense secretary Robert McNamara's chief aides, observed that "it takes some sophistication to see how Vietnam automatically involves our [vital interests]."

As was the case with Vietnam, specific arguments for U.S. intervention in the Balkans are so recondite that they only make sense within the broader context of America's relentless pursuit of a world order that will safeguard its purported strategic and economic interests. Only then does it become apparent why the foreign policy elite sees so much at stake in an area that is, at best, of marginal strategic importance. The Clinton administration and the foreign policy community generally have viewed the Balkan crisis as a crucial test of America's leadership in creating order in the post-Cold War world. Clinton has said the Balkans will set "the standard for addressing other ethnic conflicts and the effectiveness of vital interna-

tional institutions, including the European Community, the Atlantic Alliance and the United Nations itself.”

Resurrecting the domino theory, Clinton fears that unstanching instability in the former Yugoslavia will spread to other countries and thereby somehow endanger the United States. With the same logic that propelled American intervention in Indochina, Clinton argues that America’s interests require the United States to lead an effort to build a world order shaped by U.S. values. The choice, he says, is “between unstable, highly nationalistic states with centralized and potentially oppressive governments, on the one hand, and democratic states...on the other.” If America fails in its awesome responsibilities, Clinton asserts “we will miss an opportunity to create a more democratic and stable world.”

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To those outside the foreign policy elite, the tenor of discussion of the Balkan crisis must seem stilted. After all, visions of falling dominoes, the perception that world politics is a bipolar ideological confrontation between democracy and dictatorship, an obsession with reaffirming U.S. leadership and resolve, and concern for the vitality of alliances such as NATO all seem to belong to another era. To the uninitiated, the Cold War’s end renders implausible the entire rationale for continuing American security obligations to Europe and East Asia.

To understand why the U.S. foreign policy elite still regards American commitments in Europe and East Asia as vital, one must look beyond the Soviet Union. After World War II Washington sought an international order based upon—to quote NSC 68’s primary author, Paul Nitze—“preponderant [American] power.” That objective had very little to do with any existing or projected Soviet actions; in fact, American statesmen knew that their wide-rang-

ing objectives would increase Soviet insecurity and thereby the risk of war.

If fear of Soviet expansion had been the only, or even the most important, reason to bring Western Europe and East Asia under the American security umbrella, why did the United States persist in its strategy long after it was apparent that Western Europe, Japan, and South Korea could provide their own security? And now that the USSR itself has disappeared, why does Washington continue to insist that an American-led NATO and the U.S. defense commitments to East Asia are still indispensable to America's security? The answer is that the basic aspiration of U.S. security policy since the Second World War has not been to contain the Soviets.

The Cold War provided the impetus for the strategy of preponderance, which was directed against both the Soviet Union and the Western sphere. By integrating Germany and Japan into a network of U.S.-dominated security and economic arrangements, Washington achieved two important objectives: Germany and Japan were co-opted into the anti-Soviet coalition, and, just as important, these erstwhile enemies were, themselves, contained. Through this policy of "double containment," the United States assumed responsibility for maintaining peace among the states in those areas. By constraining Germany and Japan, America "reassured" their neighbors that these allies would remain peaceful and thereby assuaged the neighbors' fears of resurgent German and Japanese economic domination. For Washington, the pacification of Europe and East Asia was the key to creating and sustaining an open global economic system, which was seen as vital to American prosperity.

In postwar Western Europe, American policy was spectacularly successful. Freed from looking nervously over their shoulders, the West Europeans were able to set aside their historical animosities and security fears and work together to achieve economic integration within Europe and economic interdependence between Europe and the United States. Because stability and reassurance were based on economic cooperation, it was at least as important for the United States to defend the Europeans from them-

selves as it was to protect them from the Soviet Union. Likewise, in East Asia, the U.S. reassurance against resurgent Japanese power enabled the region to concentrate on commerce rather than on power politics.

Since the aims of the preponderance strategy transcended the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, it is not surprising that the foreign policy community now seeks to employ the same approach after the Cold War. Indeed, the Soviet Union's disappearance has seemingly removed the last barrier between Washington and the complete attainment of its world order aspirations. The USSR's demise has also forced the American foreign policy elite to be more candid in articulating the assumptions that underpin its view of American strategy.

The continuity in U.S. strategy was—and is—explained by the belief that preponderance prevents spiraling regional tensions by obviating the need for other powers to provide for their own security. Removing the umbrella of U.S. protection would force other states to “renationalize” their foreign and security policies. As former deputy assistant secretary of defense Alberto Coll argued in the winter 1993 *Washington Quarterly*, the security commitment in Western Europe and East Asia makes it unnecessary for Germany and Japan to maintain powerful military forces, and thus help to restrain “traditional rivalries” among regional powers “that otherwise could unravel into unrestrained military competition, conflict and aggression.” Such regional turmoil, it is feared, would seriously damage U.S. interests. Thus, Coll concludes, preventing renationalization “is a signal contribution to international order.”

As long as the United States can use its superpower capabilities to manipulate, regulate, and calibrate regional politics in Europe and East Asia, it can continue to prevent international politics from relapsing into normal patterns. Thus Washington must retain its preeminent role in world politics, as the Pentagon's now infamous draft of the *Defense Planning Guidance for the Fiscal Years 1994–1999* argued. That document asserted that to ensure a favorable international environment, America must prevent other states “from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the estab-

lished political and economic order [and that] we must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role." "Potential competitors" were, of course, widely known to mean Germany and Japan. Those goals mirror the imperatives formulated for America's Cold War national security policy in the late 1940s. As historian Melvyn Leffler has written, those imperatives dictated that "neither an integrated Europe nor a united Germany nor an independent Japan must be permitted to emerge as a third force."

The Importance of Bosnia

The quest for world order is the missing link that purports to connect the Balkans to American national interests. Events in the former Yugoslavia—and possible crises of a similar nature elsewhere—are regarded as dangerous because they could set in motion a chain of events inimical to American interests. That, not Bosnia per se, is what the Balkans crisis is all about.

Those who called for American intervention in Bosnia argued that unquelled Balkan instability and unpunished Serbian aggression would reveal NATO's post-Cold War impotence. Without an effective NATO, the interventionists' argument ran, Europe would lapse into those same bad old habits that the Alliance was supposed to cure—power politics, nationalist rivalries, and ethnic turmoil. NATO had to be validated in the Balkans as an instrument of post-Cold War security. If not, it was feared, the five-decade trend toward deepening European political and economic cooperation would be reversed, and the Continent would return to its normal condition as a geopolitical morass.

Even if that nightmare scenario did come to pass, it may be wondered how it would imperil American interests. The interventionist response is that if the United States fails to act in the Balkans, it will ultimately suffer economically. The starting point of the interventionist position—and the foundation of America's world order strategy—is the conviction that America's prosperity depends upon international economic interdependence and that the precondition for economic interdependence is the

geopolitical stability and reassurance that flow from America's security commitments. Thus, as then defense secretary Dick Cheney said in September 1992, the United States cannot afford "to step down from our world leadership role" because

simply stated, the worldwide market that we're part of cannot thrive where regional violence, instability, and aggression put it at peril. Our economic well-being and our security depend on a stable world in which the community of peaceful, democratic nations continues to grow. Hostile and anti-democratic regimes must know that aggression is a risk that will not pay.

So, what is at stake for the United States in the Balkans? The answer is the same one that high-level Bush administration officials gave when a similar question was posed before the Persian Gulf war—jobs. As Richard Lugar (R-Indiana) of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee warned, there "will be devastating economic effects in Europe of a spread of war and, thus, loss of jobs and loss of income in this country as we try to base a recovery upon our export potential." The former director of the National Security Agency, William Odom, has, in a November 1992 Hudson Briefing Paper, elaborated upon the argument that economic imperatives impel American military involvement in the former Yugoslavia:

Only a strong NATO with the U.S. centrally involved can prevent Western Europe from drifting into national parochialism and eventual regression from its present level of economic and political cooperation....That trend toward disorder will not only affect U.S. security interests but also U.S. economic interests. Our economic interdependency with Western Europe creates large numbers of American jobs. Thus, Yugoslavia stands as a test of the resilience of the Atlantic community. That is indeed a major strategic challenge for U.S. leadership.

That kind of argument has clearly influenced the Clinton administration. As one U.S. official said, the economic stakes in the Balkans were similar to those in the Gulf war, although more difficult to articulate: "There you were sitting on oil and there were clear-cut economic interests that the American people could understand; here the consequences are more indirect, and while they are just as important, they are less easy to describe." The idea that American

prosperity depends upon a world order imposed by the United States has extremely unsettling implications.

The Open Door Revisited

Underpinning U.S. world order strategy is the belief that America must maintain what is in essence a military protectorate in economically critical regions to ensure that America's vital trade and financial relations will not be disrupted by political upheaval. This kind of economically determined strategy articulated by the foreign policy elite ironically (perhaps unwittingly) embraces a quasi-Marxist or, more correctly, a Leninist interpretation of American foreign relations. Such views surprisingly echo the radical "open door school" view of American foreign policy advanced by William Appleman Williams and other left-wing historians. Williams argued that because American statesmen believed that U.S. economic welfare, and ultimately the survival of American democracy, depended upon exports and overseas financial relationships, Washington needed to impose an informal empire of "virtuous omnipotence" that guaranteed a secure and stable environment conducive to profitable and expanding trade relations. As Williams argued, for liberal internationalists the American government has always had a critical responsibility: "the protection and extension of the market in which the principle of free competition could operate. As with mercantilism, classical liberal economics led to an expansionist foreign policy."

The view that economic interdependence compels American global strategic engagement puts an ironic twist on liberal internationalist arguments about the virtues of free trade, which held that removing the state from international economic transactions would be an antidote to war and imperialism. The nineteenth-century Manchester school of liberalism held that free trade would increase prosperity worldwide and thus contribute to peace by giving states a vested interest in cooperative political and economic regimes.

In some respects, the American foreign policy elite's vision of world order springs from the Manchester school's outlook. Today, proponents of "complex interdependence" argue

that America's economic links with Western Europe and East Asia are crucial to the prosperity of the United States and its partners and that war among or affecting them would be too economically costly to contemplate. The champions of this "trading state" outlook assert that war does not pay because commercial intercourse affords the best means for increasing a country's wealth and power.

But the American foreign policy community turns Manchesterism on its head by accepting the economic but not the political logic of free trade theory. Instead of subscribing to the classical liberal view that free trade automatically creates a natural harmony of interests among states that leads to peace, the foreign policy community looks to American military power to impose harmony so that free trade can take place. Thus, U.S. security commitments are viewed as the indispensable precondition for economic interdependence. In that respect, Cheney's, Lugar's, and Odom's all too candid comments reveal that modern Manchesterism is a fraud. Rather than being the stimulus to peace that it is touted to be, economic interdependence—and the need to protect America's stakes in it—is invoked to justify a post-Cold War U.S. military presence in Europe and East Asia and military intervention in the Balkan conflict. The strategy dictates that the United States be prepared to risk war, if necessary, to ensure that the markets and raw material sources with which it is linked are not closed by "renationalized" economic and foreign policies that will result from regional instability. In effect, the foreign policy establishment has embraced the proposition that wars (or at least continuous preparations for war) are necessary for the American economy to prosper. So much for the peaceful effects of interdependence.

What is most frightening about the economic rationale of the strategy of preponderance is its open-endedness; the logic of economic interdependence leads inevitably to the exhausting proliferation of American security commitments. The late-nineteenth century English statesman Lord Rosebery recognized such an effect, and he warned that commitments must be made discriminatingly:

Our commerce is so universal and so penetrating

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that scarcely any question can arise in any part of the world without involving British interests. This consideration, instead of widening rather circumscribes the field of our actions. For did we not strictly limit the principle of intervention we should always be simultaneously engaged in some forty wars.

The British historians Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher have noted that if a region is potentially unstable and a great power believes it has vital economic or security interests there, as well as the means to forestall the instability, then the great power will seek imperial control. Nineteenth-century British policymakers, for example, believed that Great Britain's economic health rested upon possession of India. The British, therefore, embraced as a strategic imperative the safeguarding of the routes to the East. That necessitated London's propping up the tottering Ottoman Empire, acquiring extensive territories in the Mediterranean and East and South Africa as well as a sphere of influence in the Persian Gulf, and assuming responsibility for the security and stability of Egypt. The subsequent verdict of history is clear: While economic imperatives seemed to demand that Britain pacify large areas of the globe, "the whole British position in the Middle East and Southeast Asia was in fact," as British military historian Correlli Barnett writes, "a classic, a gigantic, example of strategic overextension. Far from being a source of strength to England, India served only to weaken and distract her."

Stretching the Empire

Whether an empire of free trade or an empire by invitation, the American role in Europe and East Asia (which together are America's India) is imperial in the strategic sense of the term. A world order policy based on pacification, reassurance, stability, and economic interdependence expands the frontiers of insecurity for the United States. As the frontiers of insecurity expand, so do security commitments. U.S. forces must deter and defend not only against direct threats to American interests but, even more important, against threats to the security of others. The latter requirement is the hallmark of America's postwar world strategy. As the draft of the *Defense Planning Guidance* stated, the United States "will retain the pre-

eminent responsibility for addressing selectively those wrongs which threaten not only our interests but those of our allies or friends, or which could seriously unsettle international relations." The assumption is that if Washington cannot solve others' security problems for them, the world order strategy will collapse. Compelled to provide for their own security, others would have to emerge as great or regional powers, build up their conventional forces, possibly acquire nuclear weapons, and generally behave like independent geopolitical actors. U.S. strategists assert that such a process of "renationalization" would destroy the reassurance and stability upon which American interests are presumed to rest.

It is, of course, an exaggeration to suggest that the quest for world order will, in Lord Rosebery's phrase, involve the United States in 40 wars simultaneously. But it is not an exaggeration to observe that the strategy of preponderance will inexorably result in a globe-girdling empire. To accept the reasoning behind the calls for American action in the former Yugoslavia—and, more generally, for the U.S. strategy of preponderance in Europe and East Asia—is to accept a permanent and ultimately crushing burden. Arguing last year to maintain a U.S. reassurance strategy in Asia and Europe, a then senior Pentagon policy planner asked: "If we pull out, who knows what nervousness will result?" The problem, of course, is that we can never know; therefore, according to the assumptions guiding U.S. security policy, we must always stay.

During the Vietnam War, then secretary of state Dean Rusk let slip that the United States "is safe only to the extent that its total environment is safe." Rusk's remark, in fact, was not excessive in the context of the American elite's thinking. Cheney, Odom, and others would now use Rusk's formula for security to protect economic interdependence from the nebulous threats of instability and aggression. Threats to economic interdependence have replaced Marxism-Leninism as America's global *bête noir*.

As long as U.S. interests are defined in terms of world order, Bosnias will be like buses: Kosovo, Macedonia, the Baltics, Ukraine—there will always be another one coming down the

street. The same logic advanced to support U.S. intervention in the Balkans applies to unrest across the former Eastern bloc. Atlantacists' hand-wringing over the dangers of instability "spilling over" from East to West and their accompanying calls to have NATO guarantee the borders of all European states stem from their appreciation of the disastrous consequences regional instability might have for America's leadership. Consequently, both international political cooperation and economic integration would be threatened. Hence, the foreign policy establishment's recent spate of reports on the post-Cold War "security agenda" argues that NATO must not only extend security guarantees to Eastern and Central Europe, the Balkans, Russia, and the European states of the former Soviet Union, but also must ensure stability in the former Central Asian republics (since instability there could spread to Turkey, which could, in turn, spur massive immigration to Western Europe, which could destabilize a region vital to American prosperity) and in North Africa as well for the same reason.

The rationale behind this view is similar to the containment era's domino theory: Instability even in economically unimportant areas like the former Yugoslavia could infect other areas regarded as essential to global economic interdependence. The domino theory, however, has never reflected the real dynamics of international politics. Unlike the chain reactions posited by physics, in the world of statecraft crises are usually discrete happenings—not tightly linked events. The outcome of events in potential hotspots like Nagorno-Karabakh, Moldova, the Baltics, Ukraine, Transylvania, and Slovakia will be decided by local conditions, not by what the United States does or does not do in the Balkans. Put another way, Slobodan Milošević was not deterred by U.S. action against Iraq; Saddam Hussein was not deterred by U.S. action in Panama; Manuel Antonio Noriega was not deterred by U.S. action in Grenada, Lebanon, or Vietnam; Ho Chi Minh was not deterred by U.S. action against North Korea; and Kim Il Sung and Joseph Stalin were not deterred by U.S. action against Adolf Hitler. The post-Cold War domino theory, like the Cold

War domino theory, will doom America to a string of military interventions in strategically peripheral regions.

Rethinking the Axioms

The time has come for the United States to have a real debate about its post-Cold War grand strategy. Since 1945, “discourse” about foreign policy has sounded like a broken record—endlessly replaying the “lessons” of the 1930s and the clichés of the Wilsonian variant of classical liberalism. That kind of discussion is no longer good enough. The balance of world forces is shifting dramatically, undercutting the whole edifice of postwar American policy. It is time to reexamine the first principles and assumptions—both stated and unspoken—that have shaped America’s vision of world order and the imperial conception of security that underpins it.

As long as the apparent dictates of economic interdependence guide U.S. policy, America will feel a need to ensure stability in Europe and East Asia—both of which are likely to be geopolitically volatile. Of course, the American foreign policy community always plays down the costs of a world order policy, even as it highlights the supposed economic benefits. To use an example, the defense burden entailed in protecting U.S. access to Persian Gulf oil is supposedly justified by the cheap and ready supply of a vital commodity. When, however, all the costs of protecting access to that oil are considered, the oil is not at all cheap.

In the same way, the continuing cost of pacifying Europe and East Asia must be weighed against the supposed benefits of interdependence. Many thoughtful Americans are concerned about U.S. dependence on overseas oil because of the risks inherent in relying upon an unstable region for their prosperity. Should not the same concerns apply to Europe and East Asia? In both cases, relying on risky economic ties acts like a straitjacket, dictating expensive and potentially dangerous defense commitments. Depending on unstable regions for economic prosperity has, of course, brought many empires to ruin. Any real fundamental reassessment of America’s grand strategy would carefully assess the costs and benefits of inter-

dependence and its concomitant, America's world order strategy. In doing so, it must be remembered that not only does the United States depend far less on foreign trade than its major economic "partners," but to a large degree the interconnection is volitional. To be sure, efficiency and consumer choice, which interdependence promotes, are important values. But they are not the only important values. Maximizing national autonomy, achieving foreign policy solvency, and minimizing the risk of war are also important—indeed much more important.

Although the task is complex, it is possible to perform an audit of the costs and benefits of the American empire. In assessing the importance of maintaining undisturbed access to markets in Europe and East Asia, the following factors have to be considered: (1) the harm to the United States if access to those markets is disrupted; (2) the likelihood of such disruption; and (3) the availability of alternatives to those markets—such as increasing domestic demand to make up for lost exports or shifting to overseas markets in regions less vulnerable to political turmoil. Any economic benefits generated by interdependence would have to be balanced with the ongoing costs of maintaining military forces dedicated to the task of pacifying Europe and East Asia and the potential costs if war occurs. Also, it would be necessary to consider the opportunity costs of investing resources in military capabilities versus freeing up those resources for other economic and social purposes by discarding the preponderance strategy in favor of a more discriminating grand strategy. Without prejudging the outcome of such an audit, one suspects that the verdict on U.S. economic interdependence with Europe and East Asia would be similar to the conclusion that British prime minister Arthur James Balfour reached about defending India at the beginning of this century: "Were India successfully invaded," he said, "the moral loss would be incalculable, the material loss would be important—but the burden of British taxation would undergo a most notable diminution."

The need to reassess American security arrangements ought to be apparent. As the Princeton political economist Robert Gilpin

points out, the overhead costs of empire are great. Thus, over time, a predominant power's internal position begins to erode because the costs of sustaining its preeminence undermine its economic strength and thereby its geostrategic capabilities.

As long as it remains wedded to a world order mindset, however, the American foreign policy establishment will categorically reject "declinist" solutions that seek to redress America's imperial overstretch. Former defense secretary James Schlesinger succinctly explained America's strategic quandary: "The United States, as a great power, has essentially taken on the task of sustaining the international order. And any abandonment of major commitments is difficult to reconcile with that imposing task." Simply put, the U.S. foreign policy establishment does not want international responsibilities to be reallocated because it fears diminished American leadership and a greater—perhaps even equal—German and Japanese voice in international affairs. Better, they say, to bear disproportionate costs than to yield American control.

It is not surprising, therefore, that far from worrying about the costs of America's world order policy, many analysts have inverted the imperial overstretch thesis, taking the position that the great post-Cold War danger actually is imperial *understretch*. According to that argument, if U.S. defense spending declines, regional powers, no longer "assured" by the United States, will pursue nationalist goals. The resulting regional turbulence will imperil U.S. economic interests and ultimately force a dramatic surge in U.S. defense spending. Thus, so the argument goes, rather than demanding a reduction in America's imperial expenditure, economic imperatives require greater defense spending now to forestall even higher costs in the future. While such thinking is consistent with the logic of America's strategy of preponderance, it will doom America to the same economic fate that has brought down history's other predominant powers.

Because the United States discourages others from assuming greater international responsibilities, it often finds itself taking the lead in security interventions—despite the rhetorical mantra

that it is not the “world’s policeman.” Clinton nicely encapsulated that outlook in April 1993 when he said, in reference to the Balkans, “We are, after all, the world’s only superpower. We do have to lead the world.” Of course, if Washington policymakers better understood the logic of collective action they would realize that this belief inevitably becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When the United States says only it can lead, others have every incentive to sit back and let it do so—which is, of course, exactly what the Europeans have done in the Balkans. Western Europe has refused to take punitive military action against Serbia unless the United States leads the effort by contributing substantial ground as well as air forces.

So, what is at stake for the United States in the Balkans? The answer is jobs.

Apart from the costs and consequences of an imperial strategy, there is an even more basic objection to the strategy of preponderance: It cannot survive the Cold War’s end. The Soviet Union was a necessary foil for the attainment of America’s larger world order objectives. Thus, while it is doubtful that the United States will miss the Cold War *per se*, the Soviet Union will, in a perverse sense, be greatly missed by America’s foreign policy establishment.

At home, the Soviet threat induced the American public to sustain the high economic and political costs associated with the national security state. Most Americans never understood that, for this country’s foreign policy leadership, the requirements of containment fortuitously coincided with those of the world order strategy that would have been pursued even without a Soviet threat. Thus the American public still wonders why post-Cold War defense spending must remain so high and overseas commitments so extensive. Abroad, the Soviet Union performed a similarly useful function for the American foreign policy establishment. For the strategy of preponderance, the Soviets were a convenient adversary. While the Soviet Union was never powerful enough to be truly dangerous, it was just threatening enough

to cause Japan and Western Europe to enfold themselves in the security and economic structures the United States constructed after 1945. As historian Anders Stephanson observed, the Soviet Union

erved exceedingly well as an open-ended justification for the enormous American expansion—political, economic, and military—that took place after the war, as a mechanism, in other words, for the United States to defend vigorously its global interests and to intervene without compunction wherever intervention was felt necessary.

Without a hostile USSR, however, the geopolitical equation changes because Japan and Western Europe need not sacrifice their autonomy and interests to secure American military protection. Moreover, a unipolar world will spur the emergence of Germany and Japan (and possibly others) as great powers to balance unchecked American power. Without the bipolarity that existed after World War II, America's world order policy becomes untenable.¹

In the final analysis, American foreign policy probably would not change even if an audit clearly established that the costs of empire and interdependence exceed the gains. Notwithstanding an occasional dissent (such as Under Secretary of State Peter Tarnoff's May 1993 comments), for the foreign policy establishment it is axiomatic that America is bound to lead. The drive to inflict American leadership upon the world—manifested in the strategy of preponderance—reflects a commitment to a definition of U.S. interests that is a tapestry of ideological, security, and economic factors. To remove one thread would unravel the entire fabric.

As James Chace and Caleb Carr have observed in *America Invulnerable*, "for over two centuries the aspiration toward an eventual condition of absolute security has been viewed as central to an effective [U.S.] foreign policy." The American foreign policy establishment continues to believe that its vision of a perfectable international order must be transformed into reality if the United States is to be

¹ For a fuller discussion, see Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* (Spring 1993).

safe and prosperous. For nearly 250 years, liberal internationalists have predicted that “the end of international politics”—brought about by free trade, interdependence, and the spread of democracy—was just around the corner. Today, the American foreign policy establishment believes that the goals of the preponderance strategy are at last within reach. That view represents the apotheosis of American exceptionalism because it posits that, unlike history’s other great powers, the United States cannot tolerate any uncertainty, instability, or danger in the international environment. In other words, America must shape a world order that transcends the inevitable patterns of world politics: war, instability, great power security and economic rivalries, multipolarity, and the formation of power balances.

Realists, on the other hand, believe that the United States can and should act as an ordinary great power. They understand what the foreign policy establishment does not: that because of the interlocking factors of geography, nuclear deterrence, and still formidable (albeit relatively diminished) economic capabilities, the United States in a relative sense is far more secure than any great power in history. The paradox facing the country is that although the United States lives in a safe neighborhood, an increasing number of its citizens do not because accumulating social and economic tensions have been neglected. Relative immunity from external threat gives America great latitude in defining its interests and in striking a more reasonable balance between external aspirations and domestic needs.

Today, America’s insecurity is the self-inflicted consequence of a foreign policy that equates national interests with the maintenance of world order. In the post-1945 bipolar world, the United States at times seemed tantalizingly close to achieving its grand ambitions. However, in today’s less-predictable international system, attaining world order is a Sisyphian task. The foreign policy establishment’s elegiac comments on the Cold War’s passing are an implicit acknowledgement that Washington regards any change in the international status quo as a challenge to its world order aspirations. Like the British prime minister Lord

Salisbury a century ago, the American foreign policy community is reduced to hoping that nothing at all happens in world politics because anything that does happen is bound to be bad.

But international politics is dynamic, not static, and the United States must face the emerging geopolitical realities rather than attempt to escape from them. In the post-Cold War world, the United States will not find absolute security in a unipolar system. Indeed, even to pursue such a chimera would have the perverse effect of making the United States less secure. The emerging multipolar world will be turbulent and competitive; but while other powers will be seriously threatened and highly insecure, the United States will—in traditional strategic terms—be shielded from most of the effects of international conflict.

As a great power, the United States will be able to stand back and watch international events from a posture of discriminating detachment. Only those with a willful blindness to history's lessons can find virtue in pursuing the empire's siren song. Realists do not agree with Clinton when he says that the United States cannot be "simply...another great power." Rather, they believe that America must heed Walter Lippmann's sobering injunction: "In the real world we shall have to learn to live as a great power which defends itself and makes its way among other great powers." Unfortunately, as realists also understand, a radical—and thus unlikely—transformation in the establishment's world view must occur if America is to avoid the path of folly in the Balkans and beyond.