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The Perils of (and for) an Imperial America

by Charles William Maynes

In their public discourse, Americans have come to the point where it is hard to find a foreign-policy address by any prominent figure in either party that does not make constant reference to the United States as the indispensable nation, the sole superpower, the uniquely responsible state, or the lone conscience of the world. William Kristol and Robert Kagan, editors at the conservative *Weekly Standard*, have unabashedly called upon the United States to take the lead in establishing a “benevolent global hegemony”—though how benevolent it would be is unclear since they propose to attain it through a massive increase in U.S. defense spending. Likewise, former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his new book, *The Grand Chessboard*, speaks openly of America’s allies and friends as “vassals and tributaries.” He urges, only slightly tongue-in-cheek, an imperial geostrategy designed “to prevent collusion and maintain security dependence among the vassals, to keep tributaries pliant and protected, and to keep the barbarians from coming together.” In the pages of this very magazine, David Rothkopf, a former senior member of the Clinton administration, expressed this mood of national self-satisfaction in a form that would be embarrassing to put into print, were it not so ardently felt: “Americans should not deny the fact that of all the nations in the world, theirs is the most just and

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the best model for the future.” (See “In Praise of Cultural Imperialism?” in *FOREIGN POLICY* 107.)

The taproot of this growing geopolitical delirium, of course, is the extraordinary range of America’s current position internationally. Probably not since classic Rome or ancient China has a single power so towered over its known rivals in the international system: Today, only the U.S. military retains the ability to reach into any region in the world within mere hours. The U.S. economy has become the envy of the world. Others continue to copy our political system, hiring our media handlers and campaign strategists to work in countries whose languages and cultures they barely understand. Finally, the “soft” power of U.S. culture reigns supreme internationally. For what it is worth, few foreign pop stars can rival America’s Madonna or Michael Jackson, and American cinema smothers all foreign competitors.

Another characteristic of U.S. power deserves mention: The price America exacts from its “vassals” is more tolerable than the one previous imperial powers extracted from their subjects. The United States imposes extraordinarily light military burdens on its allies. Britain and France made their colonies fight for the motherland in World Wars I and II, and the colonies provided many of the soldiers that policed their empires. In the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf Wars, America permitted its Japanese and European allies to watch largely as bystanders, while American troops did most of the fighting. In a post–Cold War world, the United States remains willing to pick up a totally disproportionate share of the expense of maintaining the common defense for the indefinite future. By some estimates, the costs for NATO expansion could run as high as \$125 billion by 2012, prompting European commentators, such as former German defense planner Walther Stuetzle, to declare that the United States must be prepared to “pick up the tab.” What other imperial power would have remained silent while its allies made it clear by statements and actions that they would not pay a single extra penny for a common alliance objective such as NATO expansion?

Former imperial powers also made sure their colonies served the economic interests of the metropole, which maintained a monopoly in key industries and enforced schemes of imperial preference to favor the home economy. In contrast, America’s imperial strategy has evolved over the years into that of importer and financier of last resort. The United States has without much debate assumed the role of world economic stabilizer, often adversely affecting its own interests. America’s

political tradition of constitutional democracy, much more secure after the civil rights movement, also makes it difficult for Washington to follow a harsh imperial policy, even if it were so inclined. With their belief in the “white man’s burden” or “*la mission civilatrice*,” the European powers—and America for that matter in the conquest of the Philippines—were able to display, when necessary, extraordinary cruelty in the pursuit of stability. Now, in its recent imperial wars, America has been concerned about press reports of a few civilian casualties.

Ironically, of all the burdens the United States now imposes on its foreign subjects and vassals, Madonna may be the heaviest. Few foreigners accept the American position that market forces alone should dictate cultural patterns—that if the citizens want to buy it, the priests and professors should retire to their monasteries and libraries and let it happen. Many foreigners secretly sympathize with the French or Russian or Israeli position that they have the duty to protect their admittedly great cultures, even if doing so occasionally violates some of the finer points of free trade or speech. Indeed, one wonders whether American officials would cling so ardently to their own position regarding international free trade in cultural goods if it turned out that market forces were in fact overwhelming the United States with, say, the culture of the Middle East or Latin America. The number of Spanish-speaking immigrants arriving in the country, and their desire to hold on to their culture and language, represent a clear market test, yet Americans become very disturbed when these new entrants insist on maintaining their use of Spanish. The “English only” movement or the race to install V-chips in home television sets to control what minors may view each suggests that many Americans harbor some of the same concerns about preserving their culture as the French and others.

The cultural issue apart, American hegemony is benign by historical standards. Therefore, it is fair to ask, as Kagan has in several earlier articles: Why not entrench that hegemony for the betterment of all humankind? After all, one can acknowledge that one’s own country is not always as principled, consistent, benign, or wise as the national self-image persistently requires that its leaders regularly affirm, yet still reach the conclusion that while American hegemony may not be the best of all possible worlds, it may be the best of all likely worlds. In other words, American hegemony may be better than any alternative hegemonic arrangement, and, historically, hegemony has proved preferable to chaos.

THE CASE AGAINST U.S. HEGEMONY

What then is the case against Kagan's call for American hegemony? It can be summed up in the following manner: domestic costs, impact on the American character, international backlash, and lost opportunities.

Domestic Costs

Many like Kagan who support a policy of world hegemony often assert that the domestic cost of such a policy is bearable. They point out that the percentage of GNP devoted to American defense, around 3 percent, is the lowest it has been since Pearl Harbor, and the country is now much richer. True, the United States still spends more for defense than all the other major powers combined, but it is hard to argue that it would be unable to continue carrying this burden or even to increase it.

What proponents of this school of thought fail to point out is that the defense spending to which we are now committed is not terribly relevant to the policy of global hegemony that they wish to pursue. In an unintended manner, this point emerged during the last presidential campaign. Senator Robert Dole, the Republican nominee, publicly complained that his old unit, the 10th Mountain Division, had carried the brunt of America's post-Cold War peacekeeping responsibilities in places such as Haiti and Bosnia, and its men and women had gone months without rest or home leave.

He was, of course, right in his complaint. But the Clinton administration could not do much to reduce the burden placed on the 10th Mountain Division, for the United States has very few other units available for peacekeeping duty. If America is to strive to be the world's hegemon, in other words, not only will the U.S. defense effort have to be radically restructured, but the costs incurred will mount exponentially unless we are willing to cut existing sections of our military, a point on which the new hegemonists are largely silent. The U.S. commitment in Bosnia provides a glimpse into the future. The burden of U.S. involvement, initially estimated at \$1.5 billion, surpassed \$7 billion in April 1998 and will continue to grow for years to come.

Before the manipulation of budget estimates started in connection with the effort to gain Senate ratification of NATO expansion, even the most conservative estimates suggested that American taxpayers would be compelled to contribute \$25 billion to \$35 billion per year over the next 10 to 12 years to pay for NATO expansion. The true costs may well

be much higher. And NATO expansion is just one of the expensive building blocks required to pursue a policy of hegemony.

There is no clear geographical limit to the obligations that a quest for hegemony would impose. The American desire to remain the dominant

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security power in Europe drove Washington, against its will, to establish, much like the Austrians or the Turks at the beginning of this century, an imperial protectorate over the former Yugoslavia. Now, as officials spot disorder in other important parts of the globe, there is official talk of using NATO troops in northern or central Africa, if necessary. Corridor chatter

has even begun among some specialists about the need to send troops to the Caspian area to secure the oil there. Where will the interventionist impulse end? How can it end for a power seeking global hegemony?

The costs of hegemony will not just be military. Modern-day advocates of hegemony have lost sight of one of the crucial characteristics of the golden age of American diplomacy: From 1945 to 1965, America's dominant image rested more on the perception of its role as the world's Good Samaritan than as the world's policeman. Nearly 60 years ago, Henry Luce, the founder of *Time* magazine, issued one of the most famous calls for American dominance internationally. He understood that a quest for world leadership requires more than a large army. In his famous essay "The American Century," Luce urged his fellow citizens to spend at least 10 percent of every defense dollar in a humanitarian effort to feed the world. He recognized that to dominate, America must be seen not only as stronger but better. The United States needs to do its share internationally in the nonmilitary field and now, as the sad state of the foreign affairs budget demonstrates, it frankly does not. But is the country willing to pick up the nonmilitary costs of a quest for global hegemony?

With their neglect of this issue, today's new hegemonists are almost a parody of the Kaiser and his court at the beginning of this century. Like their German cousins, the new hegemonists are fascinated by military might, intoxicated by the extra margin of power America enjoys, and anxious to exploit this moment to dominate others. They want to reverse almost completely the direction American foreign policy has taken for most of the period following World War II. America's goal

has always been to lift others up. Now, it will be to keep them down. In Kagan's own words, American power should be deployed to control or prevent the "rise of militant anti-American Muslim fundamentalism in North Africa and the Middle East, a rearmed Germany in a chaotic Europe, a revitalized Russia, a rearmed Japan in a scramble for power with China in a volatile East Asia."

His choice of words is instructive. America's goal would be not simply to protect this country and its citizens from actions that militant Islam might direct against American interests but to prevent the very rise of militant Islam. We would not only stand up to Russia were it to become hostile to U.S. interests but would try to prevent the very revival of the Russian people and state. And we would attempt to control the spread of "chaos" in the international system. All these tasks would require the United States to intervene in the internal affairs of other states to a degree not seen since the immediate postwar period, when the United States and the Soviet Union stationed their vast land armies on the soil of former enemy territories.

One of the most bitter lessons of the Cold War was that when American and Soviet soldiers sought to impose a political order on populations (or at least resolute parts of them) that resisted such efforts—namely in Afghanistan, Korea, and Vietnam—casualties began to mount. If the United States attempts a policy of global hegemony, Kagan and other proponents cannot claim it will incur low costs by citing the size of the current defense budget or referring only to the dollars spent. The character of that budget will have to change, and the price will be not only in dollars spent but in bloodshed. Is the country prepared for that, particularly when those asked to die will be told it is in the name of hegemony, not national defense? Will Americans be comfortable with an image of their country as the power always brandishing the clenched fist and seldom extending the helping hand?

Impact on the American Character

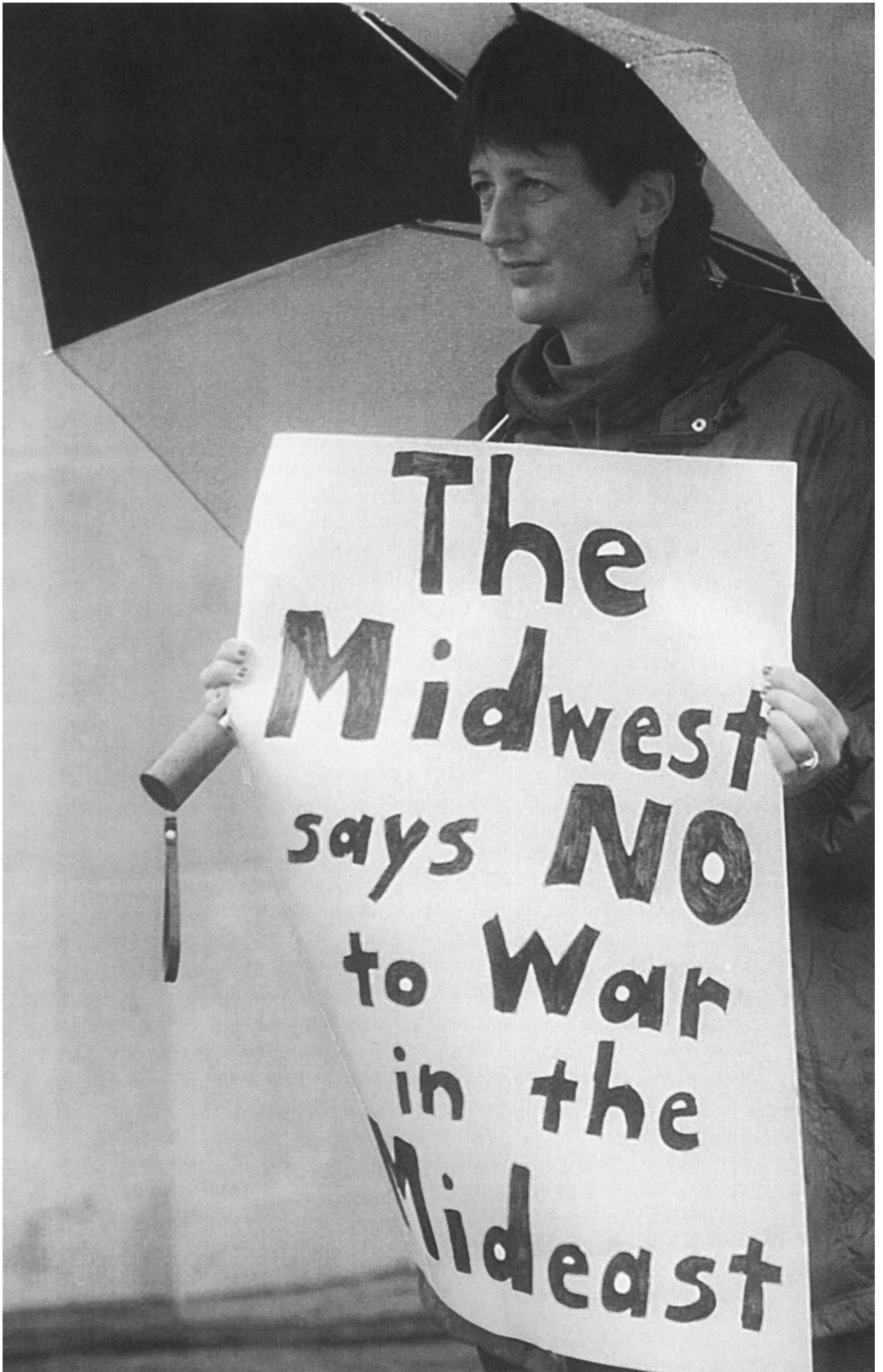
A quest for hegemony would have a corrosive effect on the country's internal relations. The United States could carry out such a quest only by using the volunteer army, which fills its ranks predominately with people who come from a segment of America that is less internationally minded than those who wish to use the U.S. military for geopolitical purposes. Former secretary of labor Robert Reich, among others, has pointed out that America is developing into two societies—not so much black

versus white but cosmopolitan versus national, or between those who have directly, even extravagantly, reaped the benefits in recent years from the new globalized economy and those who have paid its price in terms of military service, endangered jobs, and repressed wages. The former may represent between 15 to 25 percent of the population. Its representatives travel widely, speak foreign languages (or at least can afford to hire a translator), and feel as at home in Rome or Tokyo as they do in New York. Almost none of their sons and daughters serve in the U.S. military. Facing them are the vast majority of citizens who will no doubt be asked to pay the price of their country's policy of hegemony.

Can America embark on a quest for global primacy with those responsible for pursuing this course paying almost no price for its execution? Will American democracy permit a situation like that of ancient Rome, where the rich sit in the stands to watch the valiant exertions of those less fortunate below?

In the early days of the post-Cold War period, it was not at all uncommon to hear foreign-policy practitioners refer to the American military in terms that suggested they were modern Hessians, available for deployment to any corner of the globe that policymakers wished to pacify or control. Ironically, prominent among the new interventionists were a number of humanitarian-aid officials—who are normally not enthusiastic about military deployments abroad—arguing that since the U.S. army consisted of volunteers who had accepted the king's shilling and, after all, had little to do in a post-Cold War world, they should be ready to serve in humanitarian missions, even if these were not related to core American security concerns.

The ease of victory in the Gulf War contributed to this new enthusiasm for the use of military force. If Iraq, with one of the most powerful armies in the world, could be so easily subdued, how could there be much danger or pain in deploying U.S. troops into the growing number of ethnic or religious conflicts emerging around the world? After the disaster in Somalia, one heard less of such talk. But empires need to have either Hessians or a populace anxious to march off to war. Fortunately, America has neither. Not to understand this fundamental point risks causing a major political explosion domestically at some unexpected moment in the future. Of course, the argument that the United States should not seek global hegemony does not mean America should not work with others to develop a shared response to some of the new challenges on the international agenda . . . but that is a different subject and article.



International Backlash

Suppose, despite all of these obstacles, a quest for world hegemony could succeed. We still should not want it. As Henry Adams warned in his autobiography, the effect of power on all men is "the aggravation of self, a sort of tumor that ends by killing the victim's sympathies." Already the surplus of power that America enjoys is beginning to metastasize into an arrogance toward others that is bound to backfire. Since 1993, the United States has imposed new unilateral economic sanctions, or threatened legislation that would allow it do so, 60 times on 35 countries that represent over 40 percent of the world's population.

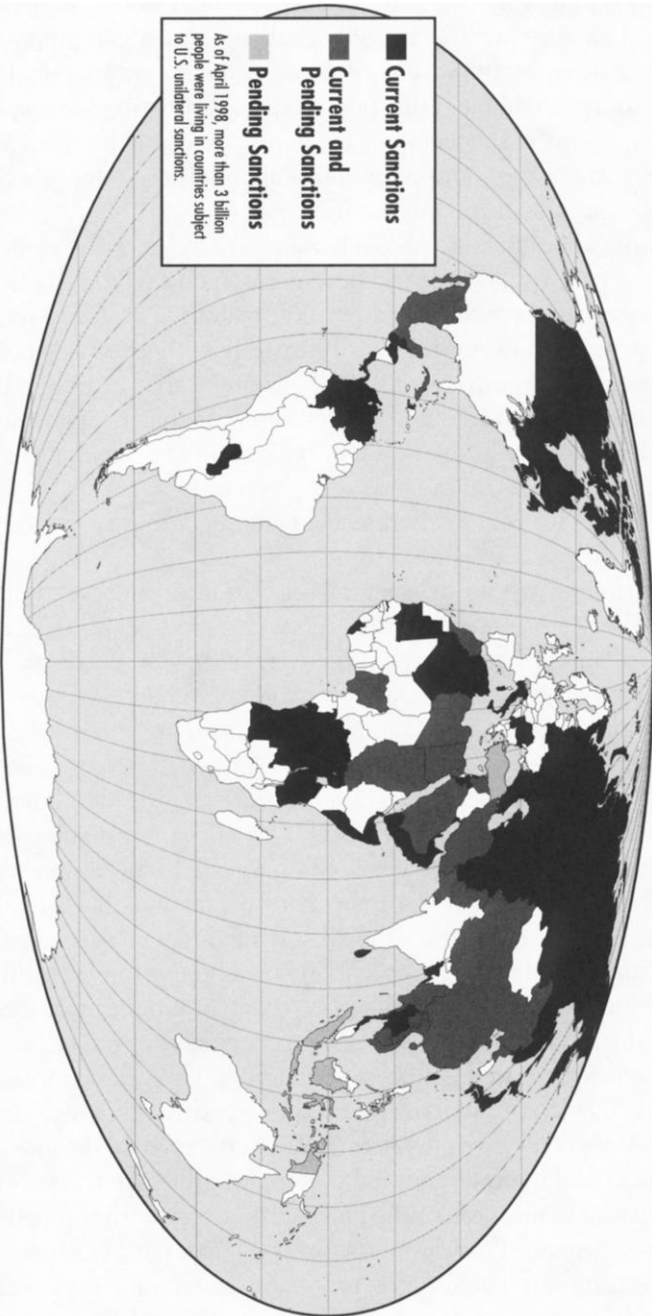
Increasingly, in its relations even with friends, the United States, as a result of the interplay between administration and Congress, has begun to command more and listen less. It demands to have its way in one international forum after another. It imperiously imposes trade sanctions that violate international understandings; presumptuously demands national legal protection for its citizens, diplomats, and soldiers who are subject to criminal prosecution, while insisting other states forego that right; and unilaterally dictates its view on UN reforms or the selection of a new secretary general.

To date, the United States has been able to get away with these tactics. Nevertheless, the patience of others is shortening. The difficulty the United States had in rounding up support, even from its allies, in the recent confrontation with Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was an early sign of the growing pique of others with America's new preemptive arrogance. So was the manner in which the entire membership of the European Union immediately rallied behind the French in the controversy over a possible French, Malaysian, and Russian joint investment in the Iranian oil industry that would violate America's unilaterally announced sanctions policy against Iran. In March 1998, while reflecting on President Bill Clinton's visit to South Africa, President Nelson Mandela strongly rejected a trade agreement with the United States that would limit transactions with any third country, declaring that "we resist any attempt by any country to impose conditions on our freedom of trade."

Lost Opportunities

Perhaps the biggest price Americans would pay in pursuing world hegemony is the cost in lost opportunities. Even those who propose such a policy of hegemony acknowledge that it cannot succeed over the longer run. As Kagan himself has written, we cannot "forget the truism that all

A Sanctioned World Countries Subject to or Threatened by U.S. Unilateral Sanctions



Source: For tracking of U.S. federal sanctions: *Unilateral Economic Sanctions: A Review* (Washington: President's Export Council, June 1997). U.S. state and local sanctions are tracked on the Web site of the Organization for International Investment. Sanctions pending in the U.S. Congress are reported on the Web site of USA-Engage. Map is derived from April 1998 data.

great powers must some day fall.” One day, in other words, some country or group of countries will successfully challenge American primacy.

There is an alternative. We could use this unique post–Cold War moment to try to hammer out a new relationship among the great powers. Today, the most inadequately examined issue in American politics is precisely whether or not post–Cold War conditions offer us a chance to change the rules of the international game.

Certainly, there is no hope of changing the rules of the game if we ourselves pursue a policy of world hegemony. Such a policy, whether formally announced or increasingly evident, will drive others to resist our control, at first unsuccessfully but ultimately with effect. A policy of world hegemony, in other words, will guarantee that in time America will become outnumbered and overpowered. If that happens, we will once and for all have lost the present opportunity to attempt to change the rules of the game among the great powers.

Why should we believe there could be an opportunity to alter these rules? There are at least three reasons:

- War no longer pays for the great powers. For most of history, wars have paid. The victor ended up with more land and people. Over time, almost all of the latter accepted the sway of the new occupier. That is how most of the great nations of the world were built. With the rise of modern nationalism, however, it has become more and more difficult to absorb conquered territories without ethnic cleansing. Successful recent examples of seizing territory include the Russian, Polish, and Czech border changes after World War II, which involved brutal exchanges of populations. Unsuccessful examples of seizing territory include those in which the indigenous populations have remained, such as Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Indonesia’s occupation of East Timor, and India’s incorporation of Kashmir. Moreover, although ethnic cleansing does still take place today in a number of locations worldwide, those carrying out such practices are not the great powers but countries still in the process of nation-building along nineteenth-century lines. For most of the great states, in other words, war is not an option for power or wealth seeking. War is reserved for defense.
- Instead of seeking international power and influence through external expansion, most established powers now seek both through internal development. Postwar Germany and Japan have confirmed that these are more reliable paths to greater international prominence than the ones pursued since 1945 by Britain and France, both of

which have relied on military power to hold their place in the international system only to see it decline.

- The behavior of great states in the international system that have lost traditional forms of power in recent decades has been remarkably responsible. Postwar Germany and Japan, as well as post-Cold War Russia, have all accepted being shorn of territories with notably few repercussions. A principal reason was the treatment of the first two by their rivals and the hope of the third that the rest of the world would not exploit its weaknesses so as to exclude Russia from the European system, but would instead take aggressive steps to incorporate it. In this regard, a policy of hegemony sends exactly the wrong message, particularly if one of our purposes is to prevent Russia from ever “reviving” in a way that threatens us.

Regrettably, as we approach the millennium, we are almost at the point of no return in our post-Cold War policy. We are moving along a path that will forsake the chance of a lifetime to try to craft a different kind of international system. Like France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain in the middle, and Germany at the end, the United States does much to influence international behavior by the model it sets. It is still not too late to make a real effort to write a new page in history. If we pass up this opportunity, history will judge us very harshly indeed.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

In their article “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy” (*International Security*, Winter 1996–97), Barry Posen of MIT and Andrew Ross of the U.S. Naval War College analyze the principal theoretical trends that have emerged in response to America’s “unipolar” moment. In particular, the authors examine the practical policy implications of neo-isolationism, selective engagement, cooperative security, and U.S. hegemony.

By making use of historical case studies, Josef Joffe, editorial page editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, suggests that post-Cold War America could learn a lesson or two from imperial Germany. In his article “Bismarck or Britain?” (*International Security*, Spring 1995), Joffe argues that the United States should update and improve the Bismarckian model of great-power relations by pursuing alliances that inexorably link the welfare of others with America’s and that discourage foreign nations from coalescing into rival power blocs.

In “**Less is More**” (*National Interest*, Spring 1996), Christopher Layne of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government relies on East Asia as a case study to argue that the United States should pursue a “minimalist grand strategy” that depends upon “global and regional power balances to contain newly emerging powers.” Because of America’s “relative immunity” from external threats, Layne endorses a “buck-passing” strategy that encourages regional U.S. allies to take the lead in dealing with East Asian security issues. In his book *Isolationism Reconfigured* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), the late Eric Nordlinger of Brown University argues that America’s military supremacy offers a unique opportunity to cut defense spending, end security alliances, and address problems primarily through multinational institutions.

Previous articles in FOREIGN POLICY that have addressed the issue of American primacy in the international system include: Albert Coll’s “**America as the Grand Facilitator**” (Summer 1992), Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz’s “**American Hegemony: Without an Enemy**” (Fall 1993), and Charles William Maynes’ “**Bottom-Up Foreign Policy**” (Fall 1996).

For a specific case study of the spiraling costs and potential pitfalls of American hegemony, readers should consult *NATO Enlargement: Illusions and Reality*, edited by Ted Galen Carpenter and Barbara Conry (Washington: CATO Institute, 1998). Richard Haass, director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, warns of the potential pitfalls of unilateral American sanctions, in his article “**Sanctioning Madness**” (*Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997).

Several recent public-opinion surveys illustrate the widening gap in attitudes between the general public and foreign-policy practitioners, particularly with regard to America’s perceived duties and obligations as a world leader: *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1995*, edited by John Rielly (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1995), *America’s Place in the World II* (Washington: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, October 1997), and *The Foreign Policy Gap*, by Steven Kull, I.M. Destler, and Clay Ramsay (College Park: Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland, October 1997).

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