

Imperial politics, imperial will and the crisis of US hegemony

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ABSTRACT

Under George W. Bush, the United States has chosen to revolutionize world affairs by abandoning successful forms of hegemonic governance, based on the institutionalization of collective economic and security regimes, in favor of militarism, or the pursuit of global domination through force. Starting from a critique of structuralist approaches, this paper examines the ideational transformation of the American right and situates it within the context of the US's emergence in 1991 as a unipolar strategic actor and as the core state in the newly globalized capitalist political economy. While these synchronous transformations considerably augmented America's autonomy, giving the US the opportunity to reconfigure the world system to its advantage, one must distinguish between the current imperial expansionism of the revived and expanded US national security state and earlier forms of US hegemonic rule. The aim: to account for a fundamental shift of the way in which the US has governed the capitalist world system since 1945.

KEYWORDS

Hegemony; empire; power; decline; state; militarism.

Since 2001, the United States has been engaged in a phase of militarization and imperial expansion that has fundamentally changed the grammar of world politics. Seized by an imperialist urge reminiscent of the expansionist euphoria of the late 1890s when it began its century long ascent to world hegemony, the United States under George W. Bush has been attempting to reconfigure world affairs through the force of arms. In the context of a broad military–technological mobilization,¹ the US armed forces have swept across Central Asia and the Gulf, occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, and established a dense new network of forward military bases in the strategically sensitive arc stretching from the Gulf to South Asia. At the same time, far from that central theater of operations, hence far from scrutiny, covert military and intelligence operations have been launched

or intensified in dozens of countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the course of this offensive against a supposed new global totalitarian threat made apparent by the attacks of September 11, 2001, the US has abandoned deterrence in favor of a doctrine of preventive war, trampled the provisions of the United Nations Charter regarding state sovereignty, and simply discarded international humanitarian law. It has thereby deeply undermined the international legal and political order established since 1945, set a dangerous precedent for future preventive wars, and severely strained interstate relations within the Atlantic core. Worse still, if things could be worse, the 'Bush revolution in foreign policy', as this ensemble of policies has become known (Daalder and Lindsay, 2003), may well have set the stage for a generation-long conflict between the US and radical social forces within the diverse communities of Islam.

So, is the world headed towards global anarchy and a convulsive collapse of American hegemony, as Immanuel Wallerstein suggests (Wallerstein, 2003)? Or an authoritarian global order disciplined by American foreign legions and their auxiliaries? Even if these two dystopias can be avoided through an eventual readjustment and downsizing of US strategic ambitions, it is hard to imagine a return to the *status quo ante*: the imperial experiment, as it might better be called, marks the end of the liberal interlude that followed the end of the Cold War. It has extinguished the post cold war prospect of a 'prolonged period of peace and cooperation' (Cumings, 1993) and the establishment of a more balanced and democratic international order regulated not by force but by transnational legal regimes set by mutual consent.

Whatever the shape of things to come, that experiment has yet to be adequately, much less fully, explained. It challenges a range of social scientific hypotheses, stemming from different disciplinary approaches, about US decline, the diffusion of power under conditions of globalization, the taming power of institutions and, above all, the supposed stabilizing effects of hegemonic distributions of power. The real world crisis has thus caused a mini crisis of sorts in International Relations theory. It raises particularly important problems for neo-realist approaches: It is difficult if not impossible to argue today that the US State is a unitary rational actor with unified objectives, much less that a hegemon is required to establish a stable, liberal and relatively cooperative world order (Gilpin, 1987). Nonetheless, American neo-realists still stubbornly cling to both assumptions, hoping, one suspects, to somehow rescue US hegemony from the wreckage of the Bush administration's imperial adventures.

This has led some authors to argue, somewhat curiously, that the Bush doctrine, whose core purpose they recognize to be 'the establishment of American hegemony, primacy or empire' (Jervis, 2003: 376), may ultimately be the 'normal reaction' of a 'normal state' to external threats and challenges, in other words that it flows naturally from the objective

configuration and distribution of world power. In a recent paper, Robert Jervis thus argues that 'the United States may be acting like a normal state that has gained a position of dominance'. He also makes the claim that 'the adoption of a preventive war doctrine may be a mistake, especially if taken too far, but is not foreign to normal state behavior'.² Ultimately, Bush administration policy can be understood 'as the product of idiosyncratic and structural factors, both a normal reaction to an abnormal situation and a policy that is likely to bring grief to the world and the United States. The US may be only the latest in a long line of countries that is unable to place sensible limits on its fears and aspirations' (Jervis, 2003: 380, 383, 366).

This argument raises a series of problems: since no distinction is made between the foreign policy behaviors of democratic and totalitarian states, are we to understand that both respond to structure similarly? Moreover, Jervis never spells out the criteria to determine what 'too far' is. How far is too far? While he cautions against 'imperial temptations', how can he expect self restraint from when deep structures are at work? Other neo-realist authors face similar conceptual and ethical dilemmas. Manifestly dismayed at the diplomatic wasteland produced by the Iraq war and its aftermath, Joseph Nye has been chiding the administration for its lack of subtlety in failing to understand his distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' power. He advocates modifications of form rather than substance, a different mix of policies less focused on but still underpinned by US military power (Nye, 2002, 2004). Nye's disagreement with the Bush administration, as he makes crystal clear, is over the means not the ends of imperial policy: 'The change in focus of foreign policy to deal with (new threats) after 9/11 is a correct focus. My difficulty comes more in the means that have been chosen to deal with them. I think we've chosen to focus too much on our military capacities and not enough on our soft power'. He suggests that intangible power assets should thus be mobilized to 'supplement military' capabilities and help get America's 'message across' (Nye, 2004).

Despite positivist claims to detachment and objectivity, these various neo-realist discourses are in fact prescriptive. They are centrally concerned about the preservation of American power, and normatively designed to secure 'American preponderance well into this century' (Nye, 2002: 546). Since they do not question the purpose of US hegemonic action, despite their formal critiques they are hardly distinguishable from the administration's own rhetorical posture which views US power as providing international public goods, peace and security, to the world as a whole. According to the President, the world has become 'a safer place' since the 2003 war. According to his Vice President, the administration's wars will 'advance the cause of freedom and the peace that freedom brings'.³ American national interests, or more precisely, the narrow interests of its present ruling caste are thus conflated with the global interest. Richard Ashley's powerful

mid-1980s critique still stands: neo-realism is 'part of a historical justificatory framework by which dominant coalitions legitimize and secure consent for their precarious rule' (Ashley, 1984).

The above is not meant to imply that the distribution of world power did not play a structuring role in the US's imperial campaign. As argued below, the emergence of the US as a unipolar strategic actor and as the core state in the newly globalized capitalist economy in 1991 did create the conditions for the drive for empire. The new configuration reduced external constraints on American unilateral action and significantly expanded America's autonomy. But that does not suffice to explain why a world-hegemonic power 'having the predominant power to shape frameworks and influence outcomes' (Strange, 1989: 169) would choose to revolutionize world affairs by abandoning successful forms of hegemonic governance, based on the institutionalization of collective economic and security regimes, in favor of militarism, or the pursuit of global domination through force. Nor do the events of 9/11 explain the *choice* of the Bush administration to 'change the status quo' in the Middle East and indeed the world (Daalder and Lindsay, 2003). As discussed below, 9/11 was a *causa proxima* not the *causa causans* of a transformation rooted in long established factors of structure and agency.

A different critique can be leveled at those Marxist structural approaches which conceive the present moment of American expansion as the natural, if exacerbated, expression of long-range imperialist trends. For instance, Peter Gowan argues in favor of continuity when he suggests that the Bush administration's imperial drive is indistinguishable from the Clinton administration's earlier efforts to expand NATO and the 'US protectorate system', the aim of which was to counter the 'European Union project (that is) perceived as a major threat to American global dominance' (Gowan, 2002: 25). In our opinion, this veers dangerously close to a Hegelian night in which all cows are black, a sameness that blurs the concreteness of historic development. In point of fact, there is not a great deal of empirical evidence supporting the claim that Europe was or is perceived as a major threat. On the contrary, during the Clinton presidency, there was a perceptible shift of US interest from Europe to the Asia Pacific as a new center of wealth and power. Moreover, rather than being seen as a danger, Europe's unification and growing autonomy was perceived as rather benign. At the end of the 1990s analysts close to the Clinton White House were writing that 'relations between the US and Europe are as healthy as they have ever been . . . the challenge for the US and Europe in the years ahead will be to manage the particular problems confronting them in ways that help rebalance that relationship – away from European dependence and American dominance toward a more nearly equal partnership' (Daalder, 2000).⁴

Immanuel Wallerstein has recently revived this debate by arguing that the early 21st century manifestations of US imperialism are the response

of a declining hegemon to the long-range redistribution of world wealth and power begun in the late 1960s in Europe and East Asia's favor. His account of Bush policy is that it is a pathological expression of a tired world power trying to re-establish control of a world system sliding inexorably out of its hands. This hypothesis has the advantage of elegantly situating the present within patterns of hegemonic ascent, supremacy, decline and condominium or war. It relies on a vision of the systemic cycle of American hegemony in which US power peaked in 1945–1965 and has been in irremediable fall ever since, due to the combined effects of strategic retreats (Vietnam), counter-systemic social movements (1968), and the rise of economic challengers in Europe and East Asia. In Wallerstein's reading, the US was only 'partially successful' in dealing with these challenges in the 1980s and 1990s, and was delivered the *coup de grace* by the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991: 'The collapse of the Soviet Union . . . was a disaster for the United States; it removed the most important political weapon they had in relation to Western Europe and East Asia', i.e. the ability to unify the capitalist world behind US leadership against a common external threat. Hence the drive of 'the hawks', a group of 'frustrated outsiders who for fifty years did not get their way' to 'intimidate Europe' through the war in Iraq (Wallerstein, 2004). How these 'frustrated outsiders' fit into the grand scheme of world history is never made clear.

In the dialectic between structure and agency, structuralist approaches give insufficient weight to actors, to the subjective socially constructed dimensions of power. The point here is not that we should dispense with structure but rather explore explanatory schemes that shed light on the interplay between the sphere of historic determinations and the sphere of ideas, leaving room for political and ideational autonomy. It needs be stressed that we are in an area of great uncertainty: our questions about the world's trajectory may in fact only be resolved by *ex post* theorization, once the curtain closes. The case made here is that early 21st century US militarism was a possible but not a necessary outcome of a new configuration of power, reflecting specific agent agendas in a structuring context. Our analysis relies on the classical distinction between hegemony and domination. Whereas dominance rests primarily or entirely on coercion, hegemony is understood in the Gramscian sense as an exercise of leadership and governance through which rule is secured through the fabrication of consent. Moreover, as Giovanni Arrighi argues, hegemonic world powers distinguish themselves by their capacity to 'place all the issues around which conflict rages on a "universal" plane' and to claim to represent the general interest (Arrighi, 1994: 28). In an attempt to resolve the tension between structural and ideational based explanations, the approach taken here is to privilege a perspective that takes neither level as primary. Our argument unfolds in three steps: first, it critically addresses the issue of decline and tries to model US post cold war policy options. Second, it discusses the

ideational shift of the American right since the late 1980s. In conclusion, it discusses the sustainability of the United States' new imperial project.

I

Given our limited abilities to scan the historic horizon, there is considerable room for debate over which phase of its hegemonic cycle the United States finds itself in. Wallerstein's idea that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a disaster for American power is provocative but it unfortunately makes reality conform to theory rather than the contrary. While there is widespread agreement among social scientists that the US's century long movement from the confines to the center of the world system peaked in the mid 20th century, when US economic and political power became synchronous, and that it is relative power declined in the 1970s (Arrighi, 1994, 2003; Cumings, 1993; Keohane, 1984; Kennedy, 1987), there is far less consensus on the subsequent evolution of American power.⁵ Giovanni Arrighi argues convincingly that the 'precipitous decline' of US power in the seventies was largely reversed in the 1980s by the 'stunningly successful monetarist counter-revolution' which brought about 'a massive rerouting of global capital flows towards the United States and the dollar'. These capital flows allowed the re-consolidation of US hegemony and helped set the stage for the subsequent defeat of the Soviet Union:

It allowed the United States to achieve through financial means what it could not achieve by force of arms – to defeat the USSR in the Cold War and tame the rebellious South. Massive borrowing from abroad, mostly Japan, was essential to Reagan's escalation of the armament race – primarily, though not exclusively, through the Strategic Defence Initiative – well beyond what the USSR could afford. Combined with generous support to Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation, the escalation forced the Soviet Union into a double confrontation neither side of which it could win: in Afghanistan, its high-tech military apparatus found itself in the same difficulties that had led to the US defeat in Vietnam; while in the arms race, the United States could mobilize financial resources wholly beyond the Soviet reach.

(Arrighi, 2003: 54)

If that is so, decline is not a useful prism in explaining the imperial turn. Indeed, rather than declining, the US found itself in the aftermath of the Cold War in 'the best of all possible worlds' (Cumings, 1999: 214), having decisive if temporary competitive advantages over all of its potential strategic rivals and economic challengers.

First and foremost, the disintegration of the US's unique peer-competitor in 1991 introduced a deep force asymmetry between the US and all other state actors. It left the US as the only state having the means to produce

and mobilize vast military–technological resources, and project force on a global scale. Strategic unipolarity constitutes a historic singularity: despite the expanse of its formal and informal empires, its unquestioned global industrial dominance, and its oceanic supremacy, Great Britain at its apex never enjoyed a unipolar strategic position. Quite to the contrary, it had to contend with roughly equal continental European rivals which were dealt with through skillful management of the balance of power rather than the deployment of military might.⁶

Second, the post 1991 global spread of capitalism primarily benefited America. In the early 1990s, Japan and Europe, respectively, entered prolonged periods of economic stagnation and weak growth from which they have still not fully or even partially recovered. There was a perceptible sigh of relief in New York when Japan plunged in 1990 into recession after the Tokyo FIRE sector (finance, insurance, real estate) bubble burst (Johnson, 2000). According to American critics, the crisis proved that the Japanese model was not a different type of capitalism but rather an infantile stage of capitalism. It proved nothing of the sort, of course, but it soothed long-standing American (and European) anxieties over a coming tectonic shift in the distribution of world economic power in East Asia's favor.

Third, after some hesitation, in 1992 the Chinese leadership confirmed its mid 1980s decision to integrate the capitalist world economy and submit to its institutional disciplines (the World Trade Organization) by accelerating opening and liberalization. This decision, of world-historic importance, may in the long run prove threatening to American dominance as China gains in wealth and power. However, in the shorter run it allowed the US to create a market dependency relationship that effectively inhibits China's foreign policy autonomy.⁷

Fourth, as global liberalization deepened during the 1990s, the US's aggressive promotion of neo-liberal policies in Asia, Latin America and Africa locked the peripheries into ever deeper dependency as raw materials producers, export processing zones and/or targets of financial accumulation for the capitalist core.

Lastly, in ideological and cultural terms, the end of the Cold War amplified the US's position as a diffuser of cultural signifiers producing and defining the contents of 'modernity' (consumption patterns, lifestyles, branding and design, technological tropes, etc.). 'Like Rome in the days of the Roman Empire, the US [became] the center of webs of control and communication that span the world and the source of an ubiquitous visual lingua franca conveying American culture to the rest of the world' (Kroes, 1999). While none of these dimensions of American power is entirely new – the US has been the heart of world capitalism since the early part of the 20th century, the predominant military–technological power since the early 1940s, and a locus of 'high' and 'low' cultural modernity since the fifties⁸ – they combined after 1991 into effective world hegemony.

Taken together, these trends considerably enhanced American autonomy and gave the US the ability to reshape the post-cold-war world system to its advantage. Three main options of global management thus opened to the US after 1991, reflecting different forms of exercise of power. From most liberal to most authoritarian, these were: (1) *Liberal globalism*, or the widening of informal empire through the consolidation of the institutional frameworks and regimes required to secure and support the emergence of the global free market. (2) *Traditional realism*, or classical hegemonic action mixing co-operation and coercion to maintain the balance of power and the post cold war status quo. (3) *Militarism and neo-imperialism*, or the use of the US's force monopoly to extend the US's strategic lead, secure key nodes of wealth, and guarantee long-range American primacy. There is of course great fluidity between and even within these simplified categories and their corresponding worldviews. Just as 'informal and formal empire appear as variable political functions of the extending pattern of overseas trade, investment, migration and culture' (Gallagher and Robinson, 1953) of the British empire in the 19th century, US globalism has always been underpinned by military might. To varying degrees and in different ways, they are all intrusive, impacting on the domestic affairs of other countries and shaping their external environments. However, while the first two post cold war options flow from classical patterns of hegemonic governance, the first being particularly suited to the pursuit and deepening of globalization under conditions of interstate peace, militarism constitutes a distinct and exclusive exercise of power. As has become fully apparent today, it also differs considerably in its outcomes.

In the early years after the post cold war, US system management focused on deepening globalization and consolidating the new strategic status quo. For all the imperial resonance of his 'new world order', George H.W. Bush (1998–2002) ultimately pursued classic balance of power policies. He left Saddam Hussein in power in Iraq after the 1991 Gulf war to avoid shattering the Iraqi state and upsetting the regional balance, made discreet overtures to North Korea, withdrew US nuclear weapons from the peninsula, and avoided escalating tensions with China. He began drawing down the US armed forces, a process that continued in the early Clinton years. During the first Clinton period, the dominant thrust of US foreign policy moved from power politics and permanent war mobilization to trade and finance as vehicles of American influence and power.

These were logical hegemonic choices under conditions of globalization and the end of bipolar rivalry. Initially, the new policy led to a shift of the center of institutional gravity within the executive from the national security bureaucracy to the Treasury and Commerce Departments; from the military industrial complex to Wall Street high finance. Timid efforts were made to curtail the institutional power of the national security apparatus, including refocusing military operations on humanitarian

interventions and centering security thinking increasingly on global issues and the promotion of democracy through 'assertive' multilateral action. In 1993, the Clinton administration even briefly flirted with the idea of mothballing missile defense, a key neo-conservative program for strategic supremacy since the early 1980s.⁹ Prior to that, Clinton's unsuccessful campaign for the recognition of gay rights in the military was an indirect attempt to gain control of the Pentagon. However, for personal and political reasons, Clinton never brought these early efforts to fruition. His policies provoked bitter recriminations on the part of the American right and a national security establishment that dreaded the prospect of cold war demobilization and that despised the President for his anti-Vietnam war activities in the 1960s. As Stanley Hoffman notes, 'for reasons that have more to do with his past than his philosophy, Clinton (was) eager not to overrule the defense establishment' (Hoffman, 2002). Fierce Pentagon resistance and the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994 combined to paralyze the Presidency. As discussed below, after 1994, there were two centers of power often pursuing distinct agendas. This helps to explain the oscillation of US foreign policy during that period between unilateralism and inconsistent efforts to establish an efficient multilateral agenda (Smith, 2000).

What the Clinton administration did succeed in doing was to spread global financial and trade liberalization. Unlike the present imperial campaign, liberalization was a sophisticated instrument of hegemonic governance. It allowed the US, and the West more broadly, to discipline the peripheries and deal with the incipient challenge posed by East Asian developmentalism. The US efficiently advanced its interests through the construction of powerful webs of economic dependence, via the opaque operations of globalized markets managed by servile regulatory institutions (Panitch, 2000). The process of expansion of the global free market affirmed America's comparative advantages, calling into question the national economic and social systems of Third World countries and reshaping those of the East Asian 'developmental state'. America was not alone in making this possible. The ruling élites of the European Union were and remain active, indeed enthusiastic participants in this reshaping, in the global free-market utopia: whatever its other political divisions, and notwithstanding often bitter transatlantic trade disputes, the 'western state conglomerate' (Shaw, 2003) under primary US hegemony acts within historic patterns of center-periphery dominance. In East Asia, the process was not entirely consensual. When favorable results could not be obtained through the 'natural' workings of globalized free markets, they were secured through direct state intervention. In late 1997, in an instance of coercive hegemonic action, the US vetoed a Japanese proposal to create an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) which would have pooled Asian monetary resources to provide much needed liquidity, with few conditions attached, to countries

then facing massive capital outflows. The trouble, in American eyes, was that the AMF would have formed the kernel of an alternative regional institution of financial governance, able to compete with the IMF, and hence threaten US control (Golub, 2003). Overall, the US succeeded in setting a hegemonic neo-liberal discourse (the 'Washington Consensus') and in using market opening as a hegemonic tool.

Neo liberal globalization constrained the autonomy of most states (notably, but not only, the weaker dependent states), and accentuated the disparity between the centers of capital and scientific and technical know-how, and the peripheries. It deepened the hierarchy of sovereignties in the world system – the relative autonomy of states. Unlike other state actors, the 'minimal' American state was not constrained by the growing reach of the invisible hand. Global liberalization augmented the country's autonomy by allowing the US to affirm its comparative advantage in post-industrial service sectors (FIRE, communications, entertainment, etc.) and impose a normative global culture of business and social practices (Sassen, 1996). During the 1990s, the US laid down the ground rules – the dominant economic norms, the regulatory criteria, and the juridical frameworks – of the world economy. American capital thus operated in a universe of rules and standards it had defined, and which determined global systemic constraints.

Over the decade, the respective power and wealth maximization strategies of the state and capital coincided to an extraordinary degree. The symbiosis of the two spheres can be compared to the late 19th century symbiosis between British capital and the British imperial state (Feis, 1974). As the hegemonic actor in the global political economy, the US is not subject to the rules it imposes on others. The 'increasing mobility of information, finance and goods and services frees the American government of constraints while putting everyone else under tighter constraints' (Wade, 2002). To say this differently and synthetically, during the 1990s America sought to establish its ideological hegemony and to globalize the informal empire, using institutional vehicles as the means to its ends. One would presume that the US has a strong if not overwhelming incentive to maintain this very potent system of rule; one which not only conceals its power political purposes behind the veil of free trade ideology, but does so with the consent of ruling castes elsewhere.

II

Under George W. Bush this has turned out not to be the case. An explicit and robust discourse of Empire has replaced the silky discussion on interdependence of the 1990s. In practice, the US is becoming a quasi-territorial global empire, whose nodes of control are the military legions stationed in the heart of dozens of semi-sovereign states. To paraphrase Stephen

Peter Rosen, a leading ideologue of American empire, the US is now in the business of 'bringing down governments', leaving in place 'imperial garrisons for decades', and planning for 'imperial wars' using 'the maximum of force . . . to demonstrate that the empire cannot be challenged with impunity'. In the longer run, the US's aim must be to prevent 'the emergence of powerful, hostile challengers to the empire, by war if necessary but by imperial assimilation if possible. China is not yet powerful enough to be a challenger to the American empire, and the goal of the US is to prevent that challenge from emerging' (Rosen, 2002). This is not merely Rosen's personal view. The same case is made in the White House's *National Security Strategy 2002* document which defines the US's central objectives as follows: 'It is time to reaffirm the essential role of American military strength. We must build and maintain our defenses beyond challenge . . . The US must and will maintain the capability to defeat any attempt by an enemy to impose its will on the US, our allies, or our friends . . . Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States'.¹⁰ Though these visions of endless military supremacy post-date September 11, they were first articulated in doctrinal form in 1992 in the still classified first draft of the Pentagon's Defense Planning Guidance 1992–1994. Authored soon after the 1991 Gulf War by Paul Wolfowitz and I. Lewis Libby, now respectively, Undersecretary of Defense and Chief of Staff of Vice President Dick Cheney, *DPG 1992–1994* recommended to 'prevent any hostile power from dominating regions whose resources would allow it to attain great power status', to 'discourage attempts by the advanced industrial nations to challenge US leadership or upset the established political and economic order', and to 'preclude the emergence of any potential future competitor'.¹¹

The 1991 Gulf war was an important moment in the definition of this policy. Just as the Cold War closed, it re-mobilized the US armed forces, justified maintaining the US defense budget at cold war levels and created a new rationale – fighting the new threat supposedly represented by 'rogue states' – for the maintenance of the National Security State. In February 1991, soon after the war, then Defense Secretary Dick Cheney told Congress that the Gulf war 'was a prefiguration of the type of conflict that we could face in the new era . . . (the US must configure its policies and forces) to deter or to allow us to quickly vanquish similar future regional threats'.¹² The Gulf War had an additional and decisive strategic benefit as far as the unipolarists were concerned: it demonstrated that 'military power remained as significant as ever in interstate relations'. It dealt a 'possibly fatal blow' to the post cold war vision of a multipolar world by revealing that the US's European and Asian economic competitors were 'as dependent as ever' on US military might (Tucker and Hendrickson, 1992: 9). As Bruce Cumings put it: 'if Korea was the alpha of the military-industrial

complex, Iraq was the omega. The end of the cold war had done nothing by mid 1990 to dismantle the enormous machine set in motion in the 1950s, a perpetual motion machine that was built for war and that advances its interests in making war' (Cumings, 1993: 29). With hindsight, we know that the 1991 war was not omega: it was merely a step in the revival of a militarist establishment whose drive for power stalled during the first years after the end of the Cold War and resumed with a vengeance under George W. Bush.

DPG 1992–1994 was the formalized expression of a wider ideational shift of the American right towards imperial thinking after the Cold War.¹³ In a well-known article published at the time, the neoconservative journalist Charles Krauthammer triumphantly claimed that 'the center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies' (Krauthammer, 1990–1991). In 1998, in an article entitled *The Second American Century*, the same author wrote: 'America bestrides the world like a colossus . . . Not since Rome destroyed Carthage has a great power risen to the heights we have . . . The unipolar moment will surely last for at least a generation'. Gazing further into the future, another new right author, Mortimer Zuckerman, asserted in a piece entitled *A Second American Century*: 'France had the seventeenth century, Britain the nineteenth, and America the twentieth. It will also have the twenty-first' (Zuckerman, 1999).¹⁴ These views were not confined to the chattering neoconservative caste. They were shared by prominent and powerful figures of the Republican Party in Congress. In 1996, Senator Jesse Helms declared: 'We remain uniquely positioned at the center and that is where we must stay . . . by being the standard-bearer of moral, political and military might and right, an example to which all others aspire' (Helms, 1996). Fueled by teleological notions of American destiny and purpose deeply rooted in the American political tradition, these and other American 'exceptionalists', who assert the supremacy of US law over international law, launched an all out assault the rules based UN system. After the 1994 takeover of Congress by the Republican Party, the US withdrew from international conventions and agreements that they claimed thwarted American freedom of action and sovereignty.¹⁵ As the liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. points out, the Republicans initiated a concerted attack against the UN system itself: 'the culmination of resurgent unilateralism was and is the campaign against the United Nations. The UN was an American vision . . . but it is today under unrelenting attack' (Schlesinger, 2000: 26).

In the course of the 1990s, that campaign, supported by parts of the national security establishment, notably the Pentagon, took a number of forms: the refusal to pay UN dues, the imposition of unilateral economic sanctions against 35 UN member states, the passage of extraterritorial legislation infringing international law and usual rules of conduct (Iran–Lybia

sanctions Act, Helms-Burton law), and the refusal to ratify important international conventions. After 1994, Congress and the Pentagon worked together to block the ratification of the Ottawa Convention banning the production, trade and use of anti-personnel land mines (1997), and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (1999). While it ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1997, Congress inserted exemptions that effectively undermined the Convention.¹⁶ The 'mood' of Congress was exemplified by House Speaker Newt Gingrich (now a member of the Pentagon's Defense Planning Board), who accused President Clinton of wanting to 'subordinate the US to the United Nations'. During the 1994 Congressional Campaign, President Clinton was denounced, in the words of the Republican Party's *Contract With America*, penned by Gingrich, of 'saluting the day when American men and women will fight, and die, in the 'service' of the United Nations' (Gingrich and Armev, 1994: 101). President Clinton gave in to these domestic political pressures by issuing a Presidential Directive giving Congress a greater say in deciding which UN peacekeeping missions the US would support. Likewise, after having timidly tried to curb the Pentagon in the first year of his presidency, he later allowed the Pentagon to behave 'increasingly as a sovereign agency, animated by a deep distrust of limitations imposed by foreigners' (Hoffman, 2002).

These post cold war trends were well established when George W. Bush came to power. Prior to September 11, the Bush administration renewed and expanded the earlier campaign against the United Nations with great vigor. In early 2001, the new administration repudiated the Kyoto protocol, signed by President Clinton, rejected a draft UN program of action to control the trade in small arms and light weapons, refused the OECD's program to control tax havens, blocked efforts to add a verification protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention, and simply dumped the ABM Treaty. The most important symbolic act was of course its rejection of the International Criminal Court and the renouncement of the Rome Statute, an act that John Bolton, the neoconservative Undersecretary of State for Arms Control, characterized as the 'happiest day in my government service'. This set of coherent acts fits into a radical nationalist worldview in which US sovereignty should not be constrained in the least by international institutions. Ms. Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's National Security Adviser, summarized the view concisely during the 2000 presidential campaign, accusing President Clinton of subordinating the US to 'the interests of an illusory international community' and of 'clinging to the belief that the support of many states, or even better of institutions like the UNO, is essential to the legitimate exercise of power' Instead, Ms. Rice proposed a return to 'power politics' and a reconfiguration of the armed forces. The aim was to be 'able to meet decisively the emergence of any hostile military power in the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and

Europe', and to deal 'decisively with rogue regimes and the threat of hostile powers' (Rice, 2000). Tellingly, a few months into his tenure as Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld commissioned a still classified comparative study of ancient empires to better understand the mechanisms of their rise and fall (Priest, 2003). The administration also planned to go to war with Iraq.¹⁷

Triumphalist ideology, carefully nurtured by new right think tanks,¹⁸ morphed into overtly imperialist outlooks and discourses after 9/11. Rome became the distant mirror, Victorian Britain the nearer, in which US reactionary élites began measuring themselves (Golub, 2002). The Bush White House set out to craft a new 'international division of labor in which America does the bombing and fighting, the French, British and Germans serve as police in the border zones, and the Dutch, Swiss and Scandinavians provide humanitarian aid . . .' (Ignatieff, 2002). It also set out to establish a lasting hegemony of the radical right at home. September 11 is relevant here as an explanatory factor, but only because it gave the various strands of the radical right the opportunity they had been seeking since Vietnam to restore their institutional hegemony *within* the United States, as well as to consolidate US primacy in the world system. September 11 transfigured a politically weak president into an American Caesar, and created the conditions for an unchecked concentration of executive power. Indeed, step by incremental step, from the decision to set up a parallel secret military justice system, to the repudiation of two centuries of constitutional law, to Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and the Justice Department's infamous 'legal opinion' that the President is not bound by US or international laws prohibiting torture, George W. Bush reached what a government lawyer called 'the apex of presidential power'.¹⁹

Freed until very recently from legislative scrutiny, the executive branch has been acting for the past three years under a thick, monarchical veil of secrecy. As time passes, a pattern has emerged: The administration's constant appeal to fear (Ms. Rice's and Mr. Bush's ominous warnings about 'mushroom clouds' or the constant warnings of imminent terrorist threats), and its claim that the US faces a situation of permanent emergency, are being used to impose institutional *fait accomplis* that future administrations will find hard to undo. As William Pfaff notes: 'a quasi paranoia was officially fostered following the Trade Center towers and the Pentagon attacks (and since), as was an intellectually incoherent elevation by the Bush government of terrorism, a tactic or method of combat employed throughout the ages, to metaphysical standing: Terror' (Pfaff, 2004).

During most of the Cold War, the existence of an existential enemy gave meaning to American power. It grounded the country's collective identity by generating cohesion behind unifying national objectives. For the most part, Vietnam being the major exception, cohesion and acceptance of the 'permanent war economy' (Melman, 1974) was obtained

relatively effortlessly thanks to the guns and butter offered by the Keynesian warfare–welfare state. However, as Peter Katzenstein suggested in 1996, in the post cold war ‘America’s collective identity can no longer be reinforced by the invocation of an overpowering foreign enemy – unless, of course, one was to reinvent that enemy for political reasons in a new cultural gestalt’ (Katzenstein, 1996: 536). That is what the Bush coalition has been attempting to accomplish. Post September 11 state-led mobilization against a newly defined global enemy aimed to unify the country behind a power political group that had repeatedly failed, as Wallerstein rightly notes, in its efforts to consolidate domestic hegemony. The intellectual lineage of the project can indeed be traced back at least to the mid-1970s when the new right emerged as an ideological force within the national security apparatus and the university-think tank complex orbiting the state (Golub, 2003). At the time, radical cold warriors embittered by Vietnam and fearing a collapse of the American population’s ‘will to fight’ launched a concerted campaign to ‘show that (Soviet–American) détente could not work’ and to ‘re-establish objectives of victory’ (Perle, 1997). Reviewing these mid-1970s efforts in 1997, Richard Perle frankly stated:

Most Americans are not eager to project American power. It’s tough to get budgets out of Congress for that purpose. The isolationist tendency is very strong. The fear of the Soviet Union, a nuclear armed power, massively armed, overwhelmingly armed in the center of Europe, was certainly an animating factor and we would not have voted the budgets we did or supported the activities we did without that. In its absence, we probably would not have expanded into places that we went, in order to contend with and confront the Soviet Union, and we wouldn’t have missed it for a minute. We’d have been quite happy to stay at home.

(Perle, 1997)

Karl Schmitt’s ghost can be felt hovering in the air. For Schmitt, the State accomplishes itself, discovers its true essence in situations of emergency when it ‘chooses the enemy and . . . decides to combat him’. That choice creates meaning, unifies the nation, depoliticizes civil society, and concentrates power. The state of emergency allows the State at war to rise far above society and to establish dictatorial autonomy. Having thus acquired the monopoly of political action, the State nonetheless leaves the economic sphere free. Thus, as Renato Cristi indicates, Schmitt allows for the simultaneous ‘affirmation of an authoritarian state and a free liberal economy’ (Cristi, 1994). Whether or not American neoconservatives and their allies have been directly inspired by Schmitt, as some critics argue,²⁰ their pursuit of domestic hegemony and global primacy through war is an authoritarian experiment that circumscribes contemporary experience.

Under its present leadership, the United States is definitely not acting like a normal democratic country.

III

Is the American right's authoritarian project sustainable? The international and domestic dimensions of that question are part of one continuum. The global agenda of the 'Bush Revolution' was to remove residual constraints on US sovereignty, to lock in long range strategic supremacy, to establish power 'beyond challenge', to secure unipolarity well into the 21st century. As Stanley Hoffman writes, this can only be achieved at the expense of all other actors in the world system and by dismantling the post 1945 institutional order:

One aspect of the wrecking operation that the administration has undertaken is worth special attention: the destruction of some of the main schemes of co-operation that have been established since 1945 and that are aimed at introducing some order and moderation into the jungle of traditional international conflicts . . . Pushing aside the UN, or refusing to accept curbs on the use of US force, can mean one of two things. The US may want to return to pre-1914 conditions . . . or else, the US, seeing itself as the guardian of world order, would leave restraints on other states standing, and reserve to itself the right to select those restraints of international law and institutions that serve its interests and to reject all the others . . .

(Hoffman, 2003).

The US was the main initiator and the primary beneficiary of the institutionalization of world politics after 1945. It employed the institutions it helped create to stabilize the post war capitalist world economy and to create webs of dependence linking its allies in the Atlantic and Pacific to the American center. It exchanged 'restraints on its power for institutional agreements' and traded off 'short term gains for longer-term gains' (Ikenberry, 2000). Rather than simply dominating through force, it gave a say, however small, to some if not all the actors inserted in the American security and economic system. In so doing, the US created incentives for smaller and weaker states to enter into binding institutional arrangements that favored the US without compromising the positions of its junior partners. Within the Atlantic core, the US set outer limits to the sovereign action of the still standing but much diminished European imperial states while simultaneously integrating them into regional spheres of global system management.

France thus became the West's regional gendarme in Africa during the Cold War while Great Britain played a junior partner role in the Gulf and parts of Asia. Both were shown the precise limits of their post war

autonomy during the Suez crisis in 1956.²¹ The losers of the Second World War, Germany, Italy and Japan, became semi-sovereign states but were given powerful economic incentives to stay firmly and docilely within the American fold. Generally speaking, though the US often oscillated 'between multilateral cooperation when needed and unilateral action when desired and when possible' (Hoffman, 2002), within the core western system, it usually resorted to multilateral rather than unilateral action: The international institutions and the alliance systems were not only useful levers of American influence and necessary tools in the accomplishment of US cold war aims, but also a key ingredient of US hegemonic legitimacy. Most US allies (France being the only limited exception to the rule) deferred to American leadership, consenting to subordinate status in return for tangible security and economic benefits. The transnational class glue that held the American system together, founded on mutual interests of wealth accumulation and a common vision of the Soviet threat, was solidified by this implicit pact.

Under Bush, the US has changed the basic rules of the game by getting rid of the rules. While doing so, it has made a claim to universality: the expansion of American might provides indispensable international public goods to the world as a whole. Never mind that the institutions and regimes, the sets of rules and procedures governing international affairs that it is tearing down are themselves an international public good (Golub and Maréchal, 2004). Drunk with power, the administration has demanded deference and subordination ('either you are with us or against us') without counterpart from all states, including the US's most important allies. When the White House did not obtain what it desired from the UN Security Council as far as Iraq was concerned it threatened 'to punish France and ignore Germany', in words attributed to Ms. Rice. This coercive behavior has deeply undermined one of the key components of US hegemonic rule: its ability to induce favorable behaviors through consent. Consent, as Gramsci suggested, is an essential component of hegemonic rule. To obtain consent, a world hegemonic state must be able to *credibly* claim that any increase of its relative power is in the general interest, or at least in interest of the ruling castes enmeshed in its webs of influence and control (Arrighi, 1994). This is especially true in cases of deep power asymmetries that lead weaker states to seek protection from the arbitrary use of power by the hegemon, notably through laws and institutions regulating the use of force.

While it is terribly imperfect, the post 1945 international legal order created moral restraints on the exercise of brute force by setting collective rules and norms governing interstate behavior. Imperialism, wars of aggression and preventive wars are thus banned by the UN Charter whose aim was and remains to protect the weaker states of the international system from the arbitrary use of force by the major powers, and to prevent a

return to pre-WWII interstate anarchy. (The fact that the Charter has often been broken or ignored by one state or another does not invalidate the principles enunciated or reduce their importance. Quite to the contrary, it points to the need for a more binding rules based system of post-hegemonic global governance.)

Hence the reactions of most members of the UN Security Council, including Mexico and Chile who, despite serious potential costs, refused to back the US's drive to war. Clearly, they fear the emergence of an unconstrained and militarized world-Leviathan. They fear it more than the 'focused enmity of the United States', to borrow the neo-realist William Wohlforth's menacing words (Wohlforth, 1999). Samuel Huntington's clash between the 'West and the rest' has transmuted into a fracture between the US and the rest. Or, at least, most of the rest. In Europe, the US can count on the UK which still clings to lost grandeur and craves for a 'special relationship' which is nothing but a faint substitute for Empire. In Asia, Japan is still tied by its own post war pact with the United States and remains (for how long?), 'an American defined economic animal shorn of its pre-war military and political clout' (Cumings, 1999: 31). But overall, the US has suffered a deep and possibly irreparable loss of credibility and legitimacy throughout the world. The collapse of US legitimacy was already apparent prior to the revelations of torture, sanctioned by the highest levels of government, occurring in the archipelago of detention centers run by the United States. As the transnational polls of the PEW Center for the People & the Press highlight, the US's assault on the UN and the subsequent Iraq war caused a global backlash in world public opinion which has not subsided since.²² Coming on top of this, the torture scandal has ruined America's image. Nye is right that perceptions count. However, no amount of 'soft power' or campaigns designed to highlight the attractiveness of American society will remove the indelible image of an angry and unpredictable great power practicing torture while talking democracy, and trying to 'shock and awe' the world into submission.

Nor will it mask the failure of the administration's imperial experiment on the ground in Iraq or the growing disarray at home. The Bush administration's effort to obtain 'unilateral world domination through absolute military superiority' (Lieven, 2002) is not far from collapse. As senior active duty US officers themselves acknowledge, the occupation of Iraq is headed towards failure.²³ This reality has revealed a deep and growing fracture within US institutions over the neo-imperialist agenda of the new right. Realist critics within the armed forces and intelligence agencies, whose concerns had been brushed aside in the run-up to war, have begun questioning the basic rationales of administration policy. Jeffrey Record's critique is emblematic of this trend. A Professor at the US Army War College, Record writes that the 'conflation of al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a single, undifferentiated terrorist threat . . . was a strategic error of

the first order'. The declared objectives in the global war on terror, he adds, are 'unrealistic and condemn the United States to a hopeless quest for absolute security'. His disquiet over White House policy and the danger of imperial overstretch is widely shared within the armed forces and the 'intelligence community'. The density of public criticism by former high-ranking intelligence officers points to serious unrest in the CIA. Richard E. Clarke, a former senior counter-terror official, thus accuses 'the president of the United States' of having 'greatly undermined the war on terrorism' by invading Iraq. Milt Bearden, a senior CIA veteran, compares America's predicament in Iraq to the one in which Soviet troops found themselves in Afghanistan: 'the Pentagon seems to understand little about the identity of its enemy'. Ray close, former CIA station chief for Saudi Arabia, goes further: 'The general US strategy for dealing with Iraq, which has been based on predictions and recommendations of the neoconservative cabal in Washington is becoming exposed at last as the disaster that informed analysts always knew it would become'. Dissent within the State Department is just as intense. Larry Wilkerson, Colin Powell's Chief of Staff, recently defied convention and etiquette by publicly denouncing the 'utopians who have never been in the face of battle and . . . who are making cavalier decisions about sending men and women out to die'.²⁴

In short, the collapse of US credibility world-wide is being accompanied by a rapid erosion of the Bush administration's domestic ideology hegemony. Its ability to carry through its dual imperial agenda hinged on its ability to maintain the permanent mobilization of the population and élites behind unifying national security objectives. It appears to be failing on both counts.²⁵

The institutional disarray noted above does not necessarily prefigure a fundamental policy transformation. A change of administration would likely lead to policy adjustments, shifts of emphasis and a change of tone. A return to realism and more traditional hegemonic practices might occur. However, at this late stage, this may not be enough to save America from itself. As Giovanni Arrighi rightly suggests, the US is not threatened from outside but from inside: 'There are no credible aggressive new powers that can provoke the breakdown of the US-centered world system, but the United States has even greater capabilities than Britain did a century ago to convert its declining hegemony into an exploitative domination. If the system eventually breaks down, it will be primarily because of US resistance to adjustment and accommodation' (Arrighi, 2003: 71).

The authoritarian ideology of the American right makes such accommodation improbable. If it remains in power, the effects on US influence could be dramatic: Seen in the wider perspective of US historic practices, the Iraq war appears the 'worst foreign policy error in American history' (Kupchan, 2004). America's early 21st century imperial campaign may indeed mark a turning point. Just as Napoleon's march through the plains of

continental Europe fathered modern German nationalism and generated the conditions that ended France's bid for European hegemony, George W. Bush's imperial overreach is more likely to hasten rather than extend the century long American era.

NOTES

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- 1 The US defense budget was \$399.1 billion in Fiscal Year 2004, as compared to \$270 billion in 1999. If one factors in supplemental costs such as the wars and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, it is in fact at least \$100 billion higher, accounting for 50% of world defense spending. For further statistical material and analyses on the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the defense buildup, see *Center for Defense Information*, Washington DC.
- 2 The word 'normal' is used thrice in important contexts in Jervis' article. The author completely overlooks the fact that preventive war has definitely not been the norm since 1945 when it was outlawed by the UN Charter.
- 3 Remarks to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council, January 14, 2004.
- 4 The author, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, was the Director for European Affairs at the National Security Council in 1995–1996.
- 5 Fernand Braudel was an early skeptic of the thesis of American decline. In the early phases of that debate during the late seventies he argued in a lecture series at Johns Hopkins University (1977) that he did not think 'New York would succumb' to the 'durable crisis' of capitalism that had become apparent: 'If the US resists, as everything would seem to indicate, they can emerge strengthened from the ordeal' (Fernand Braudel, 1985).
- 6 Throughout the 19th century the British armed forces were smaller than France's and balanced with those of the Habsburg Empire. In 1880, Great Britain had a 240,000 man standing army, against 430,000 in Prussia/Germany, 544,000 in France, 909,000 in Russia, and 36,000 in the United States (Kennedy, 1987: 154).
- 7 On China's foreign policy constraints, see Fu Bo (2003). Fu Bo is the pen name of a social scientist of the Academy of Sciences in Beijing.
- 8 Abstract expressionism made Promethean claims and participated in the construction of an image of the US as the incarnation of modernity. Later, the fusion of US mass consumer culture and art (Pop Art) created a system of signs and meanings that swept across the world. Andy Warhol made the ultimate statement of American cultural hubris when he transformed Mao Zedong into a global pop consumer product. New York modernism may not have played an explicit role in the ideological management of the Cold War but by placing the US as the leading edge of pictorial invention it did promote an image of America that played into cold war US policies. On this topic, see Max Kozloff (2000).
- 9 Clinton's Secretary of Defense Les Aspin prematurely announced the 'end of Star Wars' in 1993.
- 10 *The United States National Security Strategy*, White House, Washington DC, September 2002.

- 11 Small parts of *DPG 1992–1994* were leaked and published in the *New York Times*, March 8, 1992.
- 12 Statement to the Senate Armed Forces Committee, February 21, 1991.
- 13 The sociological transformation of the Republican Party since the seventies has a great deal to do with this. The older internationalist realist wing of the Party – ‘Eisenhower Republicans’ – were progressively pushed aside by the southern based Religious Right on one hand, and northeastern elitist neoconservative defense intellectuals on the other. The transformation was made apparent by the ‘Conservative Revolution’ agenda of the 80’s under Reagan.
- 14 In 1997, leading neoconservatives founded a new Washington think tank called the ‘Project for A New American Century’. Its better known Directors include the Chairman William Kristol who publishes *The Weekly Standard*, and Robert Kagan, an essayist who writes columns for the *Washington Post* and has become known for his essay ‘Power and Weakness’ on the US and Europe. See Policy Review No. 113, June 2002.
- 15 For a comprehensive statement of their legal and political arguments, see Jeremy Rabkin, ‘International Law Versus Our Constitution’, *The National Interest*, No 55. Spring 1999, pp. 30–41.
- 16 For a discussion of this see Stewart Patrick (2001).
- 17 It is now well established that the Bush administration planned war on Iraq in the weeks following its assumption in power. The decision to change the world status quo did not hinge on September 11. The terrorist attacks merely created the strategic opportunity to do just that. See Richard C. Clarke, *Against all Enemies, America’s War on Terror*, Free Press, New York, 2004.
- 18 The role of the radical right think tanks in Washington such as the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), in the production of a new imperial consciousness requires further detailed enquiry. They were the incubators of the Bush ‘revolution’.
- 19 Quoted by William Pfaff, *International Herald Tribune*, June 13, 2004.
- 20 See, for instance, Grant Havers and Mark Wexler (2000).
- 21 France was also challenged by the US in Algeria, though less aggressively. See Irwin M. Wall, *France, the United States, and the Algerian War*, University of California Press, 2001.
- 22 The PEW Center for the People & the Press’s Global Attitudes Project released two polls conducted on March 18th just prior to the war and the second on June 3, 2003, two months after the war, showing that world public opinion had turned decisively against the US and the Bush administration. See <http://Mpeople-press.org/reports>.
- 23 For instance, Army Maj. Gen. Charles H. Swannack Jr, the Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division that spearheaded the campaign in Iraq, told the *Washington Post* in early May that while the US was winning every battle, it was on the verge of losing the war. Another unnamed general officer quoted by the *Post* says that ‘the United States is already on the road to defeat . . . It is doubtful we can go on much longer like this’, he said. ‘The American people may not stand for it – and they should not’. See Thomas E. Ricks ‘Dissension Grows In Senior Ranks On War Strategy’ *Washington Post*, May 9, 2004; pp. A01.
- 24 For the sources of all these quotes see Philip S. Golub (2004).
- 25 Opinion polls conducted over the past six months show a steady deterioration of President Bush’s popularity levels, now down to 42%. Among other opinion studies, see James Carville and Stanley Greenberg ‘Bush’s Long Odds: A Report on the New Phase of the 2004 Election’. www.democracycorps.com

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