Throughout most of the 20th century, the goal of U.S. foreign policy was to contain communism. In the post-cold-war era, what will America’s goals be? How will it pursue them?

by Charles William Maynes

Any discussion of America’s role in the world ought to begin with these two statements because they are among the most famous comments ever made in modern times about the nature of diplomacy. They reflect the way that the game of diplomacy has been played from the days of the ancient Greeks. Most governments throughout history have acted as amoral creatures, following no principles save self-interest in the name of advantage over others. The world of diplomacy has been a cold, heartless but logical domain where affection and even legal commitment have played a very limited role. It has been a world in which the strong did what they wished and the weak did what they were ordered to do. Will this be the world of the 21st century?

To act otherwise in the past was to court disaster. One’s “friends” also followed Palmerston’s logic. They also had no eternal allies. They also had no eternal enemies. They also might suddenly turn on their friends or embrace their enemies whenever such a move served the national interest.

In a world where no commitment seems eternal, necessarily principles will play a restricted role. The kind of honor that is appropriate to private behavior will not be seen as appropriate to the statesman. He will do what is necessary to protect his country, even if by most private legal and moral codes his actions would constitute illegal or immoral behavior.

All states, democratic and nondemocratic, have played this game, including America. During the period when the Nixon, Ford and Carter Administrations reached out to China, no one would deny that China, then in the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), was by far a much more totalitarian hell than the Soviet Union of Leonid I. Brezhnev in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, for strategic reasons, the U.S. sided with the morally less attractive state. The U.S. progressively entered into an informal strategic alliance with China against the relatively more benign but much more powerful and therefore much more threatening Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the Communist Soviet Union became the informal strategic ally of democratic India! It may truly be said that traditional diplomacy makes for ideologically odd bedfellows.

During the cold war, Hungary was in the Communist world and Guatemala in the free world, but the human-rights conditions in Guatemala were undoubtedly worse than in Hungary. Historians are now contending that “genocide” took place in Guatemala during the cold war, while in Hungary one had “goulash communism.” Welcome to the world of what geopoliticians call

ASKED IF HE FELT indebted to Russia for helping crush the Hungarian uprising of 1848, the Austrian prime minister, Prince Felix Schwarzenberg, replied, “Austria will astound the world with the magnitude of her ingratitude.”

Commenting on the course of British foreign policy, Lord Palmerston, prime minister of Britain in the mid-19th century, stated: “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual and those interests it is our duty to follow.”

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realism or balance-of-power politics.

In this hemisphere, the U.S. traditionally played the game of realism as aggressively as many others. Nevertheless, what distinguishes America is the existence of an opposing tradition that is probably more closely associated with the U.S. than with any other country. This opposing tradition asserts that the classic balance-of-power approach to international relations has led to disaster again and again and will do so in the future. Cold egoism in the international realm, it is pointed out, has brought an endless series of wars and over the course of the centuries has probably led to the death of hundreds of millions of people. A better approach, it might be argued, would be to introduce the principles of law, morality and reciprocal obligation into international affairs so that states would behave more honorably in the future than they have in the past.

Those who hold such views are often called Wilsonians because Woodrow Wilson, then President of the U.S., justified America’s entry into World War I as an effort to bring law and honor to international relations. Realists, who hold the more traditional view of international relations, have long regarded Wilsonians as misguided or dangerously naive.

Many believe that one of the principal weaknesses of American foreign policy is a fatal addiction to legalism and moralism, which form the taproot of Wilsonianism. In his book Diplomacy, Henry A. Kissinger (secretary of state, 1973–77) suggests that at the turn of the century the U.S. had a chance to develop a mature, more European foreign policy. The country was emerging from the era of isolationism and faced a choice between a Palmerston-like foreign policy based on national interest, which President Theodore Roosevelt (1901–09) personified, and a foreign policy of legalistic internationalism, which Wilson espoused. According to Kissinger, Wilson won this argument and, in his view, American foreign policy continued to be handicapped by its historic inability to adopt the European approach to international affairs, one based on a quest for power and a determination to act according to the standard of national interest.

The Kissinger view is widely held among practitioners of international relations, that is to say, the people who are charged with the formal responsibility of managing the nation’s affairs. There are, however, two major difficulties with the realist critique of American foreign policy. First, as Kissinger himself admits, the American people have never been comfortable with a pure balance-of-power approach to international affairs. And second, if it is true that balance-of-power politics is the appropriate way to manage international relations and the U.S. has difficulty following this approach, how can one explain that by almost any standard no state in the 20th century has had a more successful foreign policy than the U.S.?

Nazi Germany and the Communist Soviet Union, which followed realism’s amoral code in the most ruthless fashion imaginable, have disappeared. Britain and France, which historically have championed this approach, have been reduced to middle powers. Japan, which struck the U.S. when the moment seemed opportune—a realist tactic—has virtually become an American protectorate.

Post–World War II debate

The realist point of view has always had strong academic champions. A key book published after World War II outlined the balance-of-power, realist view. In 1948, Hans J. Morgenthau of the University of Chicago published his enormously influential textbook, Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace. A refugee from Europe and a brilliant student of international relations, Morgenthau worried then that the U.S. might not live up to its new global responsibilities after World War II, just as many express this concern in the post-cold-war era. Morgenthau believed that for the U.S. to act responsibly, it would need to abandon its preoccupation with international law and institutions and embark on a foreign policy rooted in the concept of national interest. His book went through several editions and influenced several generations of students of international affairs to adopt the so-called realist approach.

Morgenthau explained the nature of a realist foreign policy in this way: “The lawyer asks: ‘Is this policy in accord with the rules of law?’ The moralist asks: ‘Is this policy in accord with moral principles?’ And the political realist asks: ‘How does this policy affect the power of the nation?’”

The implication seems clear: If an action is illegal or immoral but advances the power of the state, it is permissible. Indeed, a statesman would be derelict in his duties if he failed to take the necessary action to advance the nation’s self-interest simply because he feared that his decisions might be judged by others as illegal or immoral. It is this kind of logic that permits states to engage in actions abroad—aggression, assassinations or bribery—that would be considered crimes at home.

Morgenthau’s book became the most influential textbook in international affairs in America, but the school he pioneered never totally won the debate. Most Americans continue to believe that law and morality should play a central role in American foreign policy. They feel that law and morality are in the country’s national interest. Most realists make some accommodation to that national predisposition. They concede that a foreign policy without a moral and legal component will not receive public support.

Nevertheless, during the cold war it is fair to say that the realist school predominated. When a nation concludes it is in a war, its people expect its government to take decisions that might trouble public opinion more in peacetime. Particularly if a nation’s very survival is at stake, there may be a general lowering of the moral code. In war, after all, the objective is to defeat the enemy, by killing him (or her) if necessary.

Indeed, it is now known from archival revelations made possible with the end of the cold war that standards were lowered in the struggle between the Communist and the democratic worlds, even among the democracies. As a secret report prepared as part of the 1954 Hoover Commission study on government noted with respect to America’s struggle with the Soviet Union: It is now clear that we are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply. If the U.S. is to survive, long-standing American concepts of ‘fair play’ must be reconsidered. We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services. We must learn to subvert, sabotage, and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated and more effective methods than those used against us. It may become necessary that the American people will be made acquainted with, understand and support this fundamentally repugnant philosophy.
During the cold war, America’s strategists thought they understood the national interest. It was to halt the spread of Moscow-controlled communism, full stop. They were particularly concerned with the spread of communism in Western Europe and Japan. Those two areas represented such massive centers of power and wealth that, were they ever to come under the control of Moscow, the balance of power in the world might tip decisively in Moscow’s favor.

U.S. policymakers also worried about the spread of communism elsewhere. This fear drew the U.S. into two major ground wars in Asia, first in Korea (1950–53) and then in Vietnam (1965–75). The debate over those two wars was often framed in terms of law and morality. Nevertheless, the core dispute was whether the U.S. had the same national interest in opposing the rise of communism in mainland Asia that it did in opposing the rise of communism in Western Europe and Japan. In the end, even the strategists—led by Morgenthau—decided in the case of Vietnam that it did not.

Now that the Soviet Union has disappeared, American strategists suddenly find themselves at sea. What is the national interest in circumstances where the U.S. has no great enemy?

Balance of power for the U.S.

For most countries the concept of the national interest endures decade after decade, century after century. Most countries have no strategic choice. Geography and history frame the debate and predetermine the policy. In the case of the Britain of Palmerston’s day, pursuing the national interest meant acquiring mastery of the seas so that no other European power could launch a successful military assault on the island. It also meant opposition to any power on the Continent, regardless of its ideological predisposition, that seemed within reach of uniting Europe under its leadership. A united Europe would in time be able to subdue Britain, only a few miles off the coast of the Continent.

Following this doctrine, Britain joined with illiberal Prussia and Russia to defeat Napoleonic France and then joined with liberal France and autocratic Russia to defeat the semi-democratic Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm II (1886–1918). Then it united with the totalitarian Soviet Union to defeat totalitarian Nazi Germany, only to quickly join with the U.S. in embracing defeated Germany as part of an alliance to contest the now-feared Soviet Union.

It is no accident that as soon as Germany reunited, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, some prominent British commentators immediately voiced concern that Germany might now achieve peacefully what it had failed to accomplish through arms—the domination of Europe. Nor was it an accident that French statesmen immediately began pressing the Germans to bind themselves irrevocably to the European Union, the 15-nation group formed in 1991 to promote political, economic and social cooperation. Both responses reflected centuries of British and French statecraft.

What does the concept of the national interest mean, however, for a country like the U.S.? For most of its history, it has seemed to enjoy a larger margin of strategic choice than other states. And today, with no visible enemy and towering over all other major states, it clearly has a wide margin of strategic choice.

The U.S. is strong enough that it could retreat from the world, venturing out occasionally to strike down those that would dare to challenge it in some fundamental way. The U.S. also has within its power to enter the world scene with the goal of establishing a form of global hegemony. Provided it did not overreach by attempting to intervene in the internal affairs of too many states, it could hold the ring internationally, in effect becoming the world’s policeman. No other power can challenge it militarily, and its economic resources are sufficient to buy the support of a number of governments.

Or the U.S. could reach out to key partners to establish the more orderly...
and lawful world toward which its historical traditions have inclined it. The end of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union seem, at least temporarily, to have freed the U.S. almost completely from history and geography.

The historical legacy

It is customary to argue that the U.S. has followed a diplomatic tradition different from other states from the beginning—pursuing for most of its history an “isolationist” policy that avoided involvement with balance-of-power politics. And some scholars cite this tradition as proving that the U.S. is different from other states in the way it conducts its international affairs.

But is that true? It is, in fact, possible to argue that the U.S. simply played the same game of power politics as every other state only a little more successfully. Thus, in the early days of the Republic, the more prudent and eminently realist policy was to find a way to avoid unnecessary risks in order to ensure the survival of the new state. Had the U.S. become swept up in European diplomacy, there was always a chance it would choose the wrong side; in that event, the American experiment might end. Hence George Washington in his famous Farewell Address wisely urged his compatriots not to become involved in European diplomatic quarrels.

The wisdom of Washington’s words was apparent in 1814 when the U.S. found itself at war with powerful Britain and suffered the humiliation of having British troops occupy Washington, D.C., and burn the Capitol. America narrowly exited the war without serious damage to the future prospects of the country.

But it was not easy for America to stay out of European politics. After all, Europe was in the Americas in the form of British, French, Russian and Spanish colonies. A realist might thus argue that the primary U.S. goal should have been to drive these states from the hemisphere. And that is precisely what the U.S. over several decades set about to accomplish.

Its first break came from an unexpected source. Ironically, America can credit much of the subsequent success of its 19th-century foreign policy to the poor people of Haiti. A slave revolt erupted on the island, then the richest colony in the world, owing to its sugar production. Napoleon attempted to suppress the revolt and failed. France’s financial loss was America’s diplomatic gain. Napoleon, short of cash and having lost the pearl of the French empire in America, decided to sell America most of the rest in the form of the Louisiana Purchase.

America then turned its sights on Russia. Troubling moves by Moscow in the Pacific persuaded President James Monroe to issue the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, which warned European states not to consider this hemisphere any longer open to colonization.

During the American Civil War, France made another bid to reenter the hemisphere. But when France exploited unsettled conditions in Mexico in the 1860s to install a pro-French emperor in Mexico City, the hapless Maximilian of Austria, Washington ordered troops moved to the Mexican border as soon as the course of the Civil War permitted. It was clear that if the Mexicans did not succeed in getting rid of Maximilian, which they did, the U.S. would have.

When Russia offered to sell Alaska and leave the hemisphere permanently, Washington paid $7.2 million in 1867 to remove another powerful rival.

To eliminate Spain, the U.S. through military pressure forced Madrid to sell the state of Florida to Washington in 1819 and at the end of the century, Washington provoked a war with Spain over Cuba that finally drove the Spanish from the hemisphere.

The final step was to put Britain in its place. A long-standing border dispute between Venezuela and British Guinea had festered for decades. The quarrel intensified when gold was discovered in the area. With the British refusing to arbitrate, by 1895 the U.S. felt strong enough to deliver to London a virtual ultimatum to agree to arbitration. London ceded to the American demand and Washington had achieved its century-long quest—total domination in its own hemisphere.

A more realist approach to national interest is hard to imagine.

The change

Viewed from this perspective, in other words, U.S. foreign policy may not deviate as much from the Palmerston norm as many popular accounts of American foreign policy suggest. Americans, like others, have followed their national interest quite deliberately and resourcefully.
Once America became master of its own hemisphere, however, its strategic situation changed. Bordered by two countries that could not challenge its superior position and guarded by two wide oceans, the U.S. by the early part of this century became one of the few nations on earth with true strategic freedom. It could decide whether to tend to its own knitting or to seek a world role.

It had the power to play such a role. It was by then the greatest industrial power in the world. It had a huge population, so it could raise large armies. It had major commercial interests to defend worldwide. With the completion of the Panama Canal, it had a two-ocean navy.

Nevertheless, isolation was also a credible option. The oceans were so wide and the U.S. so strong that no one could seriously challenge Washington in its own hemisphere.

For most of this century Americans have debated how to use the unusual degree of strategic freedom with which they have been blessed. First, they stood apart from the world. Then in World War II they launched a crusade for democracy. Following victory, they entered a decade or more of withdrawal.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 seemed to end the debate between isolationism and internationalism forever. It seemed clear that if the U.S. did not go to the world, the world would come to it. It could not remain safe by standing apart.

### Six schools of thought

_Since 1941 Washington has been resolutely internationalist. The issue now is whether it should continue to be so with the end of the cold war. America has again returned to a period of strategic choice and a debate has understandably broken out over the course America should take. At this point there seem to be six identifiable schools of thought._

**Hegemonic realism**

At the end of the Bush Administration, a draft Pentagon strategy paper, leaked to the press, called for the U.S. to exploit the demise of the Soviet Union to prevent the rise of any other power that could challenge America’s position. It argued that U.S. policymakers should take steps not only to prevent the re-emergence of another threat based in Moscow but also to make sure that America’s allies, in particular Germany and Japan, remained in a dependent condition.

The American press judged the paper a bid for world hegemony. To end the ensuing public furor, the Bush Administration repudiated the paper as a policy document.

Repudiation, however, did not end the debate. The position expressed in the paper remains a legitimate option for the U.S. in the eyes of what might be called the hegemonic realists.

This school of thought begins with an observation. America has power unparalleled in the modern era. Perhaps not since the days of Imperial Rome or Ancient China has a single nation so dominated the international system as it has known it. Like Rome or China, the U.S. towers above others in military technology, economic development, political cohesion and cultural magnetism. America has arrived at an extraordinary position of power and influence.

Why not exploit that moment to entrench American superiority, argue writers clustered around the conservative weekly, _The Weekly Standard_ , namely chief editor William Kristol and contributing editor Robert Kagan. Both held key positions in the Bush Administration. The case they make can really be traced back to arguments developed by Morgenthau in his seminal book. According to the realist case as presented by Morgenthau, “human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece endeavored to discover those laws.” If this statement is true, then it means that much better behavior cannot be expected from modern states than has been recorded in the behavior of ancient states. They were consumed with the struggle for power internationally and so will the U.S. be consumed.

International politics will forever remain a ruthless game of domination. There can be few rules except to do what is necessary to prevail. With such a pessimistic view of human nature, a few guidelines for policy develop:

- The U.S. should seek hegemony because if it does not, someone else will. Better America dominating others than others dominating America.
- The international system, inherently anarchic, needs someone in control. Today, the U.S. is the only power able to impose control on the international system. If America does not exercise control, there will be chaos.
- Others will strive to displace the U.S. from its position of superiority and some of them may be dangerous. The U.S. must use its superiority to retard others in their effort to develop weapons that can challenge it.
- Though no one likes a hegemon, America will be a better hegemon than others. On balance, it will exercise its power with some restraint. American hegemony will be relatively benign. At least it will be benign compared to the hegemony others might impose.
- Whoever dominates the international system militarily will be able, to a significant extent, to dictate to it politically and economically. This is an opportunity to spread the borders of democracy and free-market capitalism, the expansion of which should be in the American national interest.

Though the proponents of traditional realism acknowledge that ultimately other powers will rebel against American hegemony and at some point will coalesce to pull America from its perch, they argue that it is in U.S. interests to delay that moment as long as possible. They acknowledge that attempting this
delay will be expensive. The editors of The Weekly Standard call for sharp increases of $80 billion in the already enormous American defense budget.

Prudent realism

A number of thinkers who also consider themselves realists are disturbed by calls for hegemony. They fear a backlash in Russia similar to the reaction in Weimar Germany, which led to the rise of Adolf Hitler. They also question whether the political culture of the U.S. is suited for the role of hegemon.

Adherents of this school argue for what might be called prudent realism. Former Department of Defense officials in the Clinton Administration like William Perry, Joseph S. Nye Jr. and Ashton Carter are concerned that the U.S. is losing sight of its true national interest, which is protection of the heartland. Instead, in their view, press sensationalism is diverting the nation’s attention and energies into intervening in areas that are not critical to the nation’s future.

These prudent realists divide threats to the U.S. into three categories.

■ Category A: Threats that will determine America’s future. Examples would be a Russia that begins to resemble Germany just before Hitler; a hostile China that begins to challenge America’s position in Asia; the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to “rogue states” or terrorists who might strike the heartland; or catastrophic terrorism generally.

■ Category B: Major regional wars that might break out in Southwest Asia or Northeast Asia. Here the prudent realists are thinking primarily of Iraq or North Korea, where either treaty commitments or policy declarations require the U.S. to take action to prevent aggression.

■ Category C: Important problems that do not threaten U.S. interests. Examples, according to the prudent realists, would include Kosovo, Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia and Haiti.

It is striking that virtually all of the world’s attention in recent years has been given to Category C while very little has been devoted to Category A. The prudent realists would reverse that order. Nevertheless, their own understanding of the country in which they live causes them to acknowledge that powerful nations like the U.S. must do more to deal with humanitarian disasters than great powers in the past might have done.

Nye, for example, urges a differentiated approach to problems like Kosovo and Haiti. He realizes that American policymakers cannot just unplug their television sets and refuse to acknowledge that there is a humanitarian crisis, say, in Haiti. He calls for a variety of nonmilitary pressures, reserving force for only the most egregious situations and these he defines as those cases where America’s “humanitarian interests are reinforced by the existence of strong national interests.” He would therefore endorse the use of force in the Persian Gulf but would have preferred to have avoided the recent war with Serbia over Kosovo (although once the U.S. had entered, he argues, then it had to prevail for the sake of its larger interests in Europe).

Yet another prudent realist is Richard N. Haass, director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, an important think tank in the nation’s capital. He argues that according to the laws of the realist school, U.S. primacy cannot last forever. America’s goal should therefore be to persuade other centers of power to support “constructive solutions” to the issue of how world society should be ordered in the future. He urges that the U.S. attempt to build an international order based on four premises: less resort to force to resolve international disputes; reducing the number of WMD; accepting only a limited doctrine of humanitarian intervention; and economic openness.

Again, a prudent realist.

Hegemonic liberalism

Hegemonic liberalism is the progressive’s answer to the question of what to do with America’s enormous and unchallenged military power. Most progressives are not enamoured of balance-of-power politics. They distrust a foreign policy based on the cold, traditional definition of national interest, an approach to international affairs that has led to repeated wars.

At the same time, many progressives recognize that the international system is hardly benign in character. There are states governed by evil people. Since America enjoys such superiority militarily, why not, the hegemonic liberals ask, act to eradicate that evil?

The case for hegemonic liberalism rests on what might in turn be called optimistic realism. Its proponents accept the harsh realities of international life but believe that at least America has risen above them. The world consists of the civilized and the uncivilized. It is the duty of the former to impose order on the latter.

Authors like David Rieff, deputy editor of World Policy Journal, urge the U.S. to exploit its military superiority to impose a world hegemony not over potentially dangerous powers like China, Germany, Japan and Russia, but over the so-called uncivilized powers. In Rieff’s words, “our choice at the millennium seems to boil down to imperialism or barbarism.”

In the last century, people talked of the “white man’s burden.” As this century draws to a close, the hegemonic liberals seem to urge America to assume a “decency burden.” This school of thought holds that America is a decent country that happens to have enormous and unchallenged power. It should use that power to force others to adhere to a higher moral code.

Giving the hegemonic liberal position tremendous emotional force is the very disparity between America’s military power and that of the rest of the world. The size of the disparity in itself creates an obligation to act. America is like the adult in a school playground who spots a large teenager mercilessly beating a five-year old. Does the adult not have an obligation to step in and stop the abuse?

Internationally, America resembles that adult.

Previously, it would have been impractical for America to act in all the cases championed by the hegemonic liberals. That is no longer the case. The U.S. defense budget is now 20% higher than the combined defense budgets of all of America’s European and Asian allies together. The U.S. is the only country in the world that can project military power to any point on the globe within hours. Moreover, America is the only country in the world that now aspires to a world role. Consequently, when America does not act, it seems craven and heartless. Perhaps emotions like these persuaded the Bush Administration, which had earlier blocked even United Nations involvement, to order the U.S. military to intervene in Soma-
lia in 1992 to feed the starving people there.

And, the hegemonic liberals ask, if the U.S. does not act, then why is it spending so much money on the military? Both the director of the Central Intelligence Agency and the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency have acknowledged in congressional testimony that the U.S. no longer faces any major threat to its security. China is decades away from any serious military competition with the U.S., even within Asia itself. It has only 149 strategic nuclear warheads compared with more than 7,000 for the U.S., and its conventional weaponry dates from the 1950s. Russia is a declining power. Its official gross national product (GNP) is now less than that of New Jersey and Pennsylvania combined, its conventional forces are melting away because the central government can no longer afford even to meet the payroll, and its defense production is now less than 15% of what it was in 1991.

The so-called rogue states of North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Cuba are certainly foreign policy problems but their combined GNP is about 2% of that of the U.S. Their weapons are antiquated, their economies are in ruins, and their diplomacy operates with no major friends or allies.

Reflecting these new realities, Michael Elliott, editor of *Newsweek International*, has written: “For many of those who live in the advanced democracies, the old definition (of national interest) no longer indicates what is worth fighting for, because in today’s world no conceivable external military threat to those countries exists.” He concludes: “For whatever wars the U.S. may wage in the next century, this can be said with certainty: None of these will look remotely like World War II. But a lot of them may look like Kosovo.”

Of course, Americans could ignore stories of misery in some remote part of the world. But globalization and modern communications ensure that all will know that America did not act when it had the power to intervene. Like the adult in the schoolyard, America will enjoy no respect if it allows the bully to proceed.

Meanwhile, the legal bar to action has been lowered. According to traditional international law, states did not intervene in the internal affairs of others. This convention was the result of Europe’s terrible experience during the religious wars of the 16th century. Wars then depopulated whole regions of Europe; millions lost their lives because states intervened in one another’s affairs over the issue of religion. After decades of slaughter, the rulers of Europe decided that all were better off if a doctrine of nonintervention prevailed. Henceforth, no matter how brutally a sovereign might treat his citizens over the issue of religion, it was agreed that fewer people would suffer if others stood aside and watched the abuse take place than if they attempted to intervene.

This doctrine of nonintervention reigned unchallenged until World War II. Then came the shocking experience of the Holocaust. Its searing memory gave birth to a postwar human-rights movement that over time has shaken the convention against intervention. As Canadian scholar Michael Ignatieff has noted about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) military campaign in Kosovo in the spring of 1999, its legitimacy depended on “what 50 years of human rights has done to our moral instincts, weakening the presumption in favor of state sovereignty, strengthening the presumption in favor of intervention when massacre and deportation become state policy.”

The dilemma for the U.S. is that the Ignatieff statement seems to impose equal moral obligations on all powerful states that aspire to be decent, but the reality is that in most crises America alone can act. Hence the moral pressure to respond seems to be directed primarily at one capital alone, namely, Washington.

This reality explains why in the 1990s the U.S. has taken the lead in organizing international interventions in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo. When others have tried, they have usually failed unless the intervention was very close to the home country, as was the case with the Italian intervention in Albania. If the crisis is far afield or involves a significant logistical effort, only the U.S. has the aircraft and ships to support such operations on quick notice and at long distances.

There are political dangers in a policy of hegemonic liberalism just as there are in a policy of hegemonic realism. The rest of the world may not like either. Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa and one of the world’s most revered statesmen, probably spoke for many when he recently said that his country “cannot accept that a state assumes the role of the world’s policeman.” Other developments suggest that at some point more powerful states than South Africa will begin to coalesce in opposition to American presumption of hegemonic leadership. Meetings between senior Chinese and Russian officials regularly and pointedly condemn the concept of a world hegemon. French officials have begun talking about the U.S. as a “hyperpower.”

There are also questions as to whether the American people would support either “hegemonic realism” or “hegemonic liberalism” over a sustained period. George F. Kennan, the famous U.S. historian and diplomat, expresses the views of a significant number of Americans when he urges that the U.S. not engage in humanitarian interventions that would require our taking over the powers of government in a number of non-European countries. He contends that “neither dollars nor bayonets” could assure success. He also suggests that America would not have the staying power. He takes a somewhat different view of humanitarian interventions in Europe, of which the U.S. is “still largely a part,” but even there he
A new liberal internationalism

The Clinton Administration has been more cautious than the "hegemonic liberals." It has been reluctant to engage in humanitarian interventions although under political or diplomatic pressure it has launched several. Its fundamental approach, however, has been to trust history's "invisible hand" in the form of the alleged benign effects of the spread of democracy and free markets.

Research by scholars such as political scientist Michael W. Doyle has suggested that democratic states are much less likely than nondemocratic states to go to war against one another. Indeed, depending on the nature of one's definitions, it is possible to argue that democratic states have never attacked one another. (Britain and the U.S. were not "true" democracies when they went to war in 1812 because the electorates were sharply limited in both countries to property holders.) A corollary of the policy is that democracy depends on the development of a middle class, which to further its own interests will insist on an opening of the political process. Since the economic development of capitalism and free markets builds that middle class, the invisible hand thus ensures that politics and economics are linked.

Here, then, begins a virtuous circle that operates in America's national interest: Free trade and open markets lead to the development of a middle class; that middle class in turn brings pressure on nondemocratic governments to open up the political process; once that opening occurs, democracy develops; and finally, once a state becomes democratic, it will cease to war with its neighbors provided they, too, are democratic.

Following this logic, the Clinton Administration has favored the establishment of free-trade agreements with a growing number of countries around the world. It has also presented the issue of enlarging the membership of NATO as a step toward entrenching democratic gains in Europe.

Free trade supposedly contributes to the development of the middle class everywhere. This expanding middle class will gradually enlarge prospects for democracy worldwide, not just in Europe.

In the best of all possible worlds, every country will become democratic and peace will prevail.

In the case of NATO, the reasoning is more complicated. Some critics assert that America's most important long-run national interest in Europe today is to enhance the chances that Russia will make the transition to a democratic, free-market society. NATO expansion to the East greatly complicates the task of those fighting inside Russia for democratic change there. Democracy's enemies inside Russia are able to portray the West as taking advantage of Russia's current weakness to advance militarily toward its borders.

The Clinton Administration has tried to soften the impact of NATO enlargement by taking the position that additional states to the East will be eligible to join NATO and that at some point, assuming adequate reform, even Russia can become a member. Many question whether this is a realistic position. America's West European allies, as well as a number of U.S. senators voting for NATO expansion, tend to see the alliance in more traditional security terms. They would not favor Russian membership under any conditions. The question of whether NATO expansion will turn out truly to be in the national interest probably cannot be resolved until the political fate of Russia itself is more settled. If Russia becomes a true democracy, those in favor of NATO expansion will argue it had no effect. If Russia falters, the debate over NATO expansion is likely to endure for decades.

World-order liberalism

A venerable tradition in foreign policy holds that men go to war not so much because they are evil but because they are desperate. A realist believes with Morgenthau that war is an entrenched feature of the international system because it is part of the never-ending struggle for power. An idealist believes that men (and women) would cease fighting if they were not struggling to gain the necessities of life or if they had an alternative way of resolving their differences.

Certainly, many wars in history have involved a struggle over resources—access to water, land, or treasure. Throughout most of history, the more land and people a sovereign possessed, the more powerful he became. Throughout most of history, the citizens of a conquered territory accepted the role of the conqueror. It was almost immaterial to whom they paid taxes since their lot in life was fixed anyway. More land, more people, more treasure—each and all meant more power. Kings sought all of them and accepted war as the necessary price of success.

In the post-cold-war era, however, conquest usually does not bring greater wealth but greater expense. Conquered populations do not acquiesce. They fight. They continue fighting until they are freed. Land and treasure are less important than well-educated and hard-working populations that can participate in the modern economy based on information. The path to power, in other words, lies more in internal development than in external expansion.

Of course, there are exceptions. Had Iraq seized Kuwait with its oil wealth, Iraq would have been richer. Egypt would fight to protect its main water source, the Nile River. Many Middle East countries would go to war to gain access to water. (It is ironic, however, that the cost of desalinization of seawater, though high, is still much cheaper than almost any major war one can imagine in the Middle East.)

Germany, by contrast, would not be richer or more powerful if it again tried to seize some of the territory of one of its neighbors. It would immediately be poorer and more vulnerable.

These are fundamental changes in the character of modern politics and economics. They give hope to some that for the first time in history the realists may be wrong. It may be possible to abolish war. Thomas L. Friedman, Foreign Affairs columnist for The New York Times, expresses this view graphically and somewhat tongue in cheek when he argues that no countries have ever gone to war with one another when their citizens could buy "Big Macs" on their own terrain. He further asserts that the poor of the world are more anxious to go to Disneyland than to mount the barricades against the rich.

These images are Friedman's shorthand for saying that the process of globalization has made war obsolete for a growing number of nations. Fail to participate in the global economy and a country will be poor. Join it and a country will not only be rich, it will be peaceful.

The world-order liberals suggest that the new security threats in the world are...
common to all and therefore all states
have an interest in cooperating with one
another in solving them. It makes little
difference if one nation is slightly richer
than another if both are breathing pol-
luted air. Global warming will affect
everyone. Free trade can bring greater
wealth to all only if there are common
rules that all accept.

A globalized economy cannot work
without cooperation and accepted rules.
All will be richer and more secure if they
cooperate. And the rich have a special
interest in the development of the poor.
The rich countries are graying. Their older
populations need investments with high
returns. They are much more likely to
find them if the developing world can
resume the growth patterns of the early
1990s.

The hegemonic realists call for a sig-
nificant increase in the U.S. defense bud-
get. The world-order liberals would prefer
that the U.S. significantly increase the
amount of money it devotes to America’s
soft power—development assistance and
international cooperative regimes to con-
trol the environment or to regulate the
market.

All Americans of whatever school
have a bit of world-order liberalism in
them. America is fundamentally a com-
mercial power favored by the status quo,
which it wishes to protect. America there-
fore has a fundamental national interest
in developing international rules and in-
stitutions that can guard that status quo.

President George Bush (1989–93) was
expressing this attitude when he called
for a new world order at the end of the
cold war. So was the Clinton Adminis-
tration when it talked of “assertive multilateralism.” In each case, the fun-
damental assumption was that there
should be international cooperation to
maintain international peace and promote
international commerce.

America first and alone

Patrick J. Buchanan, as part of his effort
to seek the U.S. presidency in 2000, has
proposed a populist, isolationist foreign
policy that in his opinion would better
serve the national interest than any of
the schools mentioned above. Buchanan’s
analysis builds on the reality of Ameri-
can preeminence but instead of using that
preeminence to establish some form of
American-led global position, Buchanan
would have the U.S. retreat to its own
shores, ready to lash out at any power
that dared to challenge the country in any
fundamental way.

Like internationalism, isolationism
comes in many shades. Not every iso-
lationist would adopt the same policy, but
as a general principle all isolationists
would interpret very narrowly the dic-
tum of Walter Lippmann (renowned edi-
tor and foreign affairs analyst) that na-
tional interests are those “for which the
people of the nation are agreed they must
defend at the risk of their lives.” Most
isolationists would offer U.S. security
guarantees to very few countries. They
would oppose U.S. involvement in any
repetition of the Persian Gulf war and
they would vehemently oppose U.S. par-
ticipation in such peace-enforcement ef-
forts as those the U.S. has undertaken in
Haiti or the Balkans.

In the post-cold-war world, Buchanan
believes the U.S. should:

撤离1947年《里约热内卢公约》对
collective security action between the
U.S. and governments in Latin America,

abrogate any security treaties that
require us to go to war automatically in
the event of an attack by a third party.

withdraw from the 1947 Rio Pact for
and withdraw U.S. ground troops
abrogate any security treaties that
from Western Europe and South Korea.
require us to go to war automatically in
the event of an attack by a third party.

U.S. foreign policy options

Foreign policy is always a mixture of the
planned and the unexpected. The U.S.
was planning to wage the cold war for
decades to come. It was totally unpre-
pared for its end. It is therefore no acci-
dent that there is considerable confusion
within government and outside about
the path that the U.S. should follow.

At the same time a nation will not be
ready to exploit the unexpected unless
it has a long-term strategy with respect
to the international system it would like
to see develop. The realist who expects
the worst even from friends must have
in mind some sense of the direction in
which he would hope to encourage
other states to move. So a debate about
what constitutes America’s national in-
terest in this remarkable period follow-
ing the end of the cold war is not a mat-
ter for academic experts only.

America has an enormous margin of
strategic choice today. That fact ex-
plains why recent debates over foreign
interventions have been so controver-
sial. During the cold war, some Ameri-
cans on the far left or far right might
contest the direction of American for-
egn policy. But the Soviet threat, in-
volving as it did the possibility of the
very annihilation of the American ex-
periment, concentrated the minds of
policymakers and rallied support for the
policies they urged.

With the end of the cold war, it was a
matter of strategic choice whether the
U.S. entered the Persian Gulf war. It
was, in a sense, America’s first voli-
tional engagement since the attack on
Pearl Harbor. From the Japanese attack
on Pearl Harbor until the
Berlin Wall fell, the
U.S. believed its core
security was threat-
ened by states abroad
that might well strike
the American heart-
land. For the
foreseeable

future, it sees no such threats. Hence, a
debate over intervention in the Persian
Gulf war or in Haiti or Bosnia is to be
expected.

At some point, however, if it wishes
to shape the international system and
not simply react to it, America must
choose. It must decide through a consen-
sus at the elite level and supported by a
majority of the people what course it
wishes to follow.

Using the yardstick of the national
interest can help focus that debate so
that Americans as a people one day
reach that consensus.

Opinion Ballots are on
pages 19–20


### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Should the U.S. exploit its great military superiority vis-à-vis others to seek world hegemony? What is it about the character of the international system that makes you conclude that such a step would be in the nation’s national interest? Would you be willing to support a major increase in U.S. defense spending to achieve that goal?

2. Should the international community attempt to take over certain territories that are not governed according to modern standards of human rights? What role should the U.S. play? Should it help finance such operations, provide logistical support, or participate with others in providing ground troops as we are in the Balkans?

3. Do you agree with George Kennan that the U.S. should not participate in a policy of “hegemonic liberalism” with the possible exception of Europe? In other words, is it in American national interests to intervene in Europe but not in Africa or Asia? Why?

4. Do you believe it is in the national interest to use America’s current moment of dominance to try to change the character of the international system? Which is the best way to change that system’s character—the promotion of policies of free trade and democracy as favored by the Clinton Administration or world-order measures that would strengthen organizations like the UN, the World Trade Organization, and regional partnerships?

5. Should the U.S., in the words of one “realist” skeptic, Michael Mandelbaum, professor of international relations at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, engage in the “missionary work” of assisting failed states? If it does intervene, what is the responsibility of other powers to assist the U.S.?

### READINGS AND RESOURCES


Eland, Ivan, “Tilting at Windmills: Post-Cold-War Military Threats to U.S. Security.” Cato Policy Analysis No. 332. Washington, DC, Cato Institute, 1999. 43 pp. Though serious military threats to the U.S. have diminished since the end of the cold war, the author states that the threat of the proliferation of chemical, biological, nuclear and missile technology by rogue states and terrorists remains large.*

Morgenthau, Hans J., Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1993. 419 pp. $35.75. This updated abbreviated version of Morgenthau’s classic work on international relations presents the major themes, issues and analyses of international politics.

Nye, Jr., Joseph S., “Redefining the National Interest.” Foreign Affairs, July/Aug. 1999, pp. 22–35. Nye states that the information age has changed the nature of national interests and power. The U.S. needs to define American interests and redefine its policy in the world beyond moral values to ensure the success of the international system.


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