

# The September 12 Paradigm

America, the World, and George W. Bush

*Robert Kagan*

THE WORLD does not look today the way most anticipated it would after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Great-power competition was supposed to give way to an era of geoeconomics. Ideological competition between democracy and autocracy was supposed to end with the “end of history.” Few expected that the United States’ unprecedented power would face so many challenges, not only from rising powers but also from old and close allies. How much of this fate was in the stars, and how much in Americans themselves? And what, if anything, can the United States do about it now?

Hard as it may be to recall, the United States’ problems with the world—or, rather, the world’s problems with the United States—started before George W. Bush took office. French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine complained about the “hyperpower” in 1998. In 1999, Samuel Huntington argued in these pages that much of the world saw the United States as a “rogue superpower,” “intrusive, interventionist, exploitative, unilateralist, hegemonic, hypocritical.”

Although Huntington and others blamed the Clinton administration’s constant boasting about “American power and American virtue,” the Clintonites did not invent American self-righteousness. The source of the problem was the geopolitical shift that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subtle psychological effects of this

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shift on the way the United States and other powers perceived themselves and one another. By the late 1990s, talk of a crisis in transatlantic relations had already begun, and despite all the finger-pointing, the underlying cause was simple: the allies did not need one another as much as before. The impulse to cooperate during the Cold War had been one part enlightened virtue and three parts cold necessity. Mutual dependence, not mutual affection, had been the bedrock of the alliance. When the Soviet threat disappeared, the two sides were free to go their own ways.

And to some extent, they did. Europe, liberated from fear of the Soviet Union, became consumed with the hard work of building the new Europe. In the 1990s, the European Union charted a new course in human evolution, proving that nations could pool sovereignty and replace power politics with international law. This helped fuel an era of international norm setting and institution building. For many around the world, but especially for Europeans, a new international conversation about global governance supplanted old Cold War preoccupations. Concerns about climate change produced the Kyoto Protocol. A new International Criminal Court was in gestation. Many worked for international ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, a strengthening of the nuclear nonproliferation regime, and a new treaty outlawing land mines. British Prime Minister Tony Blair spoke of a “doctrine of international community” in which the common interests of humanity overrode the individual interests of nations.

In the United States, the conversation remained more traditional. Clinton officials shared the European perspective, but they also believed that the United States had a special role to play as the guardian of international security—the “indispensable” leader of the international community—in a traditional, power-oriented, state-centric way. Faced with crises over Taiwan or in Iraq or Sudan, they dispatched aircraft carriers and fired missiles, often unilaterally. Even Bill Clinton would not endorse the land-mines treaty or the International Criminal Court without safeguards for the United States’ special global role. There were still international “predators,” he warned—terrorists and “outlaw nations” seeking “arsenals of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the missiles to deliver them.” Nor could Clinton officials

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hide their impatience with what they regarded as a European lack of seriousness about these perils, especially Iraq. As then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put it, "If we have to use force, it is because we are America. . . . We see further into the future."

The end of the Cold War gave everyone a chance to take a fresh look at one another, and the Europeans, in particular, did not like what they saw. American society seemed to them crass and brutal—just as it had to their nineteenth-century ancestors. Védérine called on Europe to stand against U.S. hegemony partly as a defense against the spread of Americanism. "We cannot accept . . . a politically unipolar world," he said, and "that is why we are fighting for a multipolar" one.

By the late 1990s, the moment for multipolarity seemed ripe. U.S. relations with China and Russia were also turning sour. The Chinese had long complained about the United States' "superhegemonist" ambitions, and Beijing justifiably considered Washington to be hostile to China's rising power. Anti-American nationalism exploded after the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 by U.S. pilots during a war in Kosovo that both the Chinese and the Russians regarded as illegal. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov called the war the worst aggression in Europe since World War II. It did not help the Russian mood that 1999 was also the year the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO. The days of a quiescent Russia, yearning for integration into the liberal West, on the West's terms, were ending. Russian President Boris Yeltsin made Vladimir Putin prime minister in August 1999. Putin invaded Chechnya in September, and in less than a year he was leading Russia under a more nationalist, less democratic banner.

### BUSH, THE REALIST

INTO THIS fracturing world stepped George W. Bush. Even before he took office, cartoonists were drawing him as a Texas cowboy with six-shooters and a noose. The French politician Jack Lang called him a "serial assassin." *The Guardian's* Martin Kettle wrote, on January 7, 2001, in *The Washington Post*, that "the mounting global impatience" with the United States predated Bush but that his election was the "best recruiting sergeant that the new anti-Americanism could have hoped for."

The irony, one of many, was that Bush came to office hoping to pare down U.S. global pretensions. Foreign policy realism was in vogue. When asked in the presidential debates what principles should guide U.S. foreign policy, the Democratic nominee, Al Gore, said it was “a question of values.” Bush said it was a question of “what’s in the best interests of the United States.” Gore said the United States, the world’s “natural leader,” had to “have a sense of mission” and give other peoples the “blueprint that will help them be like us more.” Bush said the United States should not “go around the world and say this is the way it’s got to be,” that this was “one way for us to end up being viewed as the ugly American.”

But the Bush administration’s brand of realism, it turned out, did not win friends around the world either. Bush officials had contempt for the international conversation of the 1990s. In its first nine months, the administration pulled out of the Kyoto process, declared its opposition to the International Criminal Court and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and began pulling out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Some of these had already died under Clinton, but whereas Clinton had tried to soothe international anger by holding out hope that the United States might eventually ratify them, Bush opposed them on principle. As in the 1920s, Republicans worried about agreements that might diminish U.S. sovereignty. Condoleezza Rice, then Bush’s foreign policy adviser and a self-described “realpolitiker,” complained in 2000 in these pages about all the airy talk of “humanitarian interests.” U.S. foreign policy had to be rooted in the “firm ground of the national interest,” not in the “interests of an illusory international community.”

Lying behind the new approach was a realist calculation: in the new post-Cold War world, U.S. interests and obligations had contracted. What was needed was a more circumscribed, interests-based foreign policy. Most Bush officials agreed with the political scientist Michael Mandelbaum’s critique, also published in these pages, in 1996, that the Clinton administration had engaged in international “social work” in the Balkans and Haiti, where no vital national interests were at stake. Candidate Bush, asked whether he would have sent troops to Rwanda, said that the United States should not “send troops to stop ethnic cleansing and genocide in nations outside our strategic interest.” Once in office, the Bush realists, from Vice President Dick Cheney

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to Rice to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to Secretary of State Colin Powell, all agreed that humanitarian interventions and nation building were to be avoided.

The strategy was to turn the United States into something of an offshore balancer, a savior of last resort, or in the words of Richard Haass, a “reluctant sheriff.” During the 2000 campaign, Rice spoke of a “new division of labor,” in which local powers would keep the regional peace while the United States provided logistical and intelligence support but no ground troops. Richard Perle argued for a new military posture in which U.S. ground forces would be cut in half. Global problems would be dealt with not with armies but with precision-guided missiles. The one immediate threat—from rogue states armed with long-range missiles—could be addressed unilaterally through missile defense. It was a time of “strategic pause,” when the United States could lighten its global burden and prepare for the threats that might emerge 20 or 30 years down the road. In the realist view, a world in which U.S. national interests were not seriously threatened was a world in which U.S. power and influence should contract.

The United States, to put it another way, was no longer in the global leadership business, at least not as it had been during the Cold War. In 1990, with communism and the Soviet empire defeated, Jeane Kirkpatrick argued that the United States should cease carrying the “unusual burdens” of leadership and, “with a return to ‘normal’ times, . . . again become a normal nation.” As John Bolton put it in a 1997 essay, it was time “to acknowledge that our greatest challenge is now behind us.” Much of the world could take care of itself now, as would the United States.

This was roughly the policy Bush pursued during his first nine months in office, and the rest of the world quickly got the message. According to a Pew Research Center poll released in August 2001, 70 percent of western Europeans surveyed (85 percent in France) believed that the Bush administration made decisions “based only on U.S. interests.”

NOUS SOMMES TOUS AMÉRICAINS, MAIS . . .

THIS WAS the mood when the terrorists struck on September 11, 2001. The attacks naturally brought about a shift in the Bush administration’s foreign policy, but it was not a doctrinal revolution. The administration

did not abandon its national-interests-based approach. It was just that the protection of even narrowly defined interests—such as the defense of the homeland—suddenly required a more expansive and aggressive global strategy. The “strategic pause” was over, and the United States was back in the business of extensive global involvement in what became known as “the war on terror.”

Did that mean that the United States was also back in the business of global leadership? The Bush administration believed that it did. Yet there were serious obstacles to returning to the old Cold War style of leadership in a post-Cold War, post-9/11 world.

One was the understandable self-absorption of Americans and their leaders after September 11. The first sign that the old solidarity would

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not be so easily revived came in Afghanistan. The invasion of Afghanistan—unlike both the war in Kosovo and the first Gulf War—was about U.S. security first, not about forging a “new world order.” Unlike during the Persian Gulf War of 1991, when George H. W. Bush made painstaking efforts to summon the international community, during the war in Afghanistan, the second Bush administration, with many of the same people in top positions, preoccupied itself with

the task of eliminating al Qaeda bases and overthrowing the Taliban. This meant acting quickly and without the alliance-management problems that had bothered General Wesley Clark in Kosovo.

This narrower approach was hardly surprising given the panic and rage in the United States. But neither was it surprising that the rest of the world saw the United States not as a global leader seeking the global good but as an angry Leviathan narrowly focused on destroying those who had attacked it. For this effort, the world had less sympathy. And this was the second great obstacle to a return to the old style of U.S. global leadership: the rest of the world, including the United States’ closest allies, was also self-absorbed.

There was no escaping the reality of the post-9/11 situation. What had happened to the United States had happened only to the United States. In Europe and most other parts of the world, people responded

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with horror, sorrow, and sympathy. But Americans read more into these outpourings of solidarity than was really there. Most Americans, regardless of political party, believed that the world shared not only their pain and sorrow but also their fears and anxiety about the terrorist threat and that the world would join with the United States in a common response. Some American observers cling to this illusion even today. But in fact, the rest of the world shared neither Americans' fears nor their sense of urgency. Europeans felt solidarity with the superpower during the Cold War, when Europe was threatened and the United States provided security. But after the Cold War, and even after 9/11, Europeans felt relatively secure. Only the Americans were frightened.

When the shock and horror wore off, it turned out that the September 11 attacks had not altered fundamental global attitudes toward the United States. The resentments remained. A Pew poll of opinion leaders around the world taken in December 2001 revealed that while most were "sad to see what America [was] going through," equally large majorities (70 percent of those polled worldwide, 66 percent in western Europe) believed it was "good that Americans know what it is like to be vulnerable." Many opinion leaders around the world, including in Europe, said they believed that "U.S. policies and actions in the world" had been a "major cause" of the terrorist attacks and that, to borrow a phrase, the chickens had come home to roost.

Many also felt that the United States was undertaking the fight against terrorism strictly in its own interests. In western Europe, 66 percent of the opinion leaders surveyed said they believed that the United States was looking out only for itself. This was not surprising given how little the Bush administration was attempting then to make U.S. allies feel differently or to turn the struggle in Afghanistan into a struggle for international order.

Yet Americans did not perceive themselves as self-interested. A full 70 percent of the American opinion leaders surveyed said they believed that the United States was acting also in the interests of its allies. This gap in perceptions revealed a central problem with the "war on terror" paradigm. Americans, suddenly back in the business of extensive global involvement, believed that they were also back in the business of global leadership. Most of the world did not agree.

Judged on its own terms, the war on terror has been by far Bush's greatest success. No serious observer imagined after September 11 that seven years would go by without a single additional terrorist attack on U.S. soil. Only naked partisanship and a justifiable fear of tempting fate have prevented the Bush administration from getting or taking credit for what most would have regarded seven years ago as a near miracle. Much of the Bush administration's success, moreover, has been due to extensive international cooperation, especially with the European powers in the areas of intelligence sharing, law enforcement, and homeland security. Whatever else the Bush administration has failed to do, it has not failed to protect Americans from another attack on the homeland. The next administration will be fortunate to be able to say the same—and will be contrasted quite unfavorably with the Bush administration if it cannot.

The problem with the “war on terror” paradigm is not that the war has failed in its main and vitally important purpose. It is that the paradigm was and is an insufficient one on which to base the entirety of U.S. foreign policy.

In a world of selfish states and selfish peoples—which is to say, the world that exists—the question is always, “What is in it for us?” The inadequacy of the “war on terror” paradigm stems from the fact that very few nations other than the United States consider terrorism to be their primary challenge. The United States' fight has not been regarded as an international “public good” for which the rest of the world can be grateful. On the contrary, most nations believe that they are doing the United States a favor when they send troops to Afghanistan (or Iraq), often at a perceived sacrifice to their own interests.

All foreign policy paradigms are flawed, of course. The anticommunist containment paradigm was also inadequate, since there was much more going on in the world from 1947 to 1989 than the struggle between communism and democratic capitalism. Still, anticommunism did tend to attract the allegiance of others to the United States and persuade them to accept U.S. leadership. This was more important than the United States' image, which was not always pristine. If the Vietnam War did not produce the same rifts in the United States' alliances that the Iraq war has produced, it is not because Lyndon Johnson's and Richard Nixon's America was more beloved than Bush's America is. It is because the United States was providing things that other peoples



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believed they needed—primarily protection against the Soviet Union—which made many of them overlook U.S. actions in Vietnam and an American culture that in the space of only seven years managed to produce the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, the Watts riots, the Kent State shootings, and Watergate.

The war on terror has never attracted that kind of international allegiance. China and Russia have welcomed it because it has distracted the United States' strategic focus away from them—and because both have seen utility in a war on terror that for Moscow has meant a war on the Chechens and for Beijing a war on the Uighurs. But to most of the United States' traditional allies, it has been at best an unwelcome distraction from the issues they care about more.

In Europe, it has been more than a distraction. Americans believe that Europeans share their concern about radical Islam. But European concerns are different. For Americans, the problem is largely “out there,” in faraway lands from which radical Islamic terrorists can launch attacks, and therefore the solution is also “out there.” For Europeans, Islamic radicalism is first and foremost a domestic issue, a question of whether and how Muslims can be assimilated into twenty-first-century European society. To European eyes, U.S. actions only inflame Europe's problems. When the United States whacks a hornets' nest, the hornets fly to Europe, or so Europeans fear.

The war on terror, in short, has been a source more of division than of unity. The United States, which in the 1990s was already seen by many as a bullying hegemon, came to be viewed after September 11 as a self-absorbed, bullying hegemon, heedless of the consequences of its actions.

### THE INCOMPETENT HEGEMON?

IT WAS from this perspective that many viewed the decision to attack Iraq in 2003. And that is yet another irony. The toppling of Saddam Hussein was one of the less selfish actions of a post-9/11 United States, more in keeping with the pre-9/11 U.S. self-image as an active and responsible world leader than with Bush's narrower, interests-based foreign policy.

The invasion was partly related to the war on terror. The Clinton administration had also worried about Saddam's terrorist ties and had

used those suspected links to justify its own military action against Iraq in 1998. Clinton himself warned that if the United States did not take action against Saddam, the world would “see more and more of the very kind of threat Iraq poses now—a rogue state with weapons of mass destruction, ready to use them or provide them to terrorists, drug traffickers, or organized criminals who travel the world among us unnoticed.” After September 11, a dramatically lowered tolerance for threats helps explain

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why realists such as Cheney, who had earlier believed Saddam could be safely deterred and contained, suddenly felt differently. The same logic drove Senator Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) and many other Democrats and moderate Republicans in Congress to authorize the use of force in October 2002, producing the lopsided Senate vote of 77–23. It was why outspoken opposition to the war was so rare. The *Time*

columnist Joe Klein reflected the mood in an interview on the eve of the war: “Sooner or later, this guy has to be taken out. . . . The message has to be sent because if it isn’t sent now . . . it empowers every would-be Saddam out there and every would-be terrorist out there.”

The principal rationales for invading Iraq predated the war on terror, however, and also predated Bush’s realism. They were consistent with the broader view of U.S. interests that had prevailed in the Clinton years and during the Cold War. Iraq in the 1990s had been seen by many not as a direct threat to the United States but as a problem of world order for which the United States had a special responsibility. As then National Security Adviser Sandy Berger had argued in 1998, “The future of Iraq will affect the way in which the Middle East and the Arab world in particular evolve in the next decade and beyond.” That was why people such as Richard Armitage, Francis Fukuyama, and Robert Zoellick could sign a letter in 1998 calling for Saddam’s forcible removal. That was why, as *The New York Times*’ Bill Keller (now the paper’s executive editor) wrote at the time, liberals in what he called “The I-Can’t-Believe-I’m-a-Hawk Club” supported the war, including “op-ed regulars at [*The New York Times*] and *The Washington Post*, the editors of *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic* and *Slate*, columnists in *Time* and *Newsweek*,” as well as many former Clinton officials.

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Those liberals and progressives who favored war against Iraq did so for much the same reason they had favored war in the Balkans: as necessary to help preserve the liberal international order. They preferred to see the United States get UN backing for the war, but they also knew this had been impossible in the case of Kosovo. Their chief worry was that the Bush administration, after toppling Saddam, would take a narrow realist approach in dealing with the aftermath. As Senator Joe Biden (D-Del.) put it, "Some of these guys don't go for nation-building." A former Clinton official, Ronald Asmus, asked, "Is this about American power, or is it about democracy?" If it was about democracy, he believed, the United States would "have a broader base of support at home and more friends abroad."

This broad consensus among American conservatives, liberals, progressives, and neoconservatives, however, was not replicated in the rest of the world. For Europeans, there was a big difference between Kosovo and Iraq. It was not about legality or the UN. It was about location. Europeans were ready to go to war without UN authorization in a matter that concerned them, their security, their history, and their morality. Iraq was another story. To American liberals such as the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, "Europe's cynicism and insecurity, masquerading as moral superiority," was "insufferable."

Iraq had long been a divisive issue. In the 1990s, a wide gap had opened up between the United Kingdom and the United States on one side, which favored containing Iraq with sanctions and military pressure, and China, France, Russia, and most other nations on the other, which favored an end to containment. By 2000, the Clinton administration feared that containment was becoming unsustainable, but it had already lost the battle to convince others that this was so. Not much had changed by 2003. The rest of the world's tolerance of Saddam's Iraq had not been reduced by the September 11 attacks, as the United States' tolerance had. On the contrary, it was the world's tolerance of the United States that had decreased.

By 2003, few nations were moved by the urgency of the war on terror, by humanitarian concerns in Iraq, or by a desire to see the United States once again lead an international crusade to bring order by force, as it had in the Persian Gulf War of 1991. Few could believe that the United States, especially under Bush, was now suddenly acting on behalf of world order. Hence, many could only explain the war as a war for oil, or for Israel, or for U.S. imperialism, or as anything but what its supporters across the

U.S. political spectrum thought it was: a war that was both in the United States' interests and in the interests of the better part of humanity.

Who knows what would have happened had the United States discovered the weapons materials and programs that everyone, including the Europeans and antiwar critics in the United States, believed were in Iraq? Even when no weapons were discovered, how would the world have reacted if the United States had quickly brought relative order and stability to Iraq? Then Secretary of State Colin Powell believed at the time that "once we have been successful and we have prevailed, and people realize that we have come to provide a better life for the people of Iraq," it will be possible to turn world opinion around "rather quickly."

That is not what happened, of course. The United States, after successfully toppling Saddam, immediately began to fumble the task of bringing order and stability to post-Saddam Iraq. There were many reasons for this failure, including the combination of bad judgment and bad luck that can occur in any war and the inherent difficulties of a fractious Iraqi society. But part of the problem was the worldview that many top Bush officials still retained from the 1990s and the early days of the administration. Top officials at the Pentagon were still wedded to the concept of "strategic pause" and hostile to a heavy reliance on ground forces. In addition, as Biden had feared, the Republican realists' allergy to nation building persisted. The consequence, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, was the deployment of too few troops to take effective command of the countries and to suppress the inevitable power struggles following the fall of the previous dictatorships and too little civilian capacity to undertake the massive social and economic regeneration necessary in the inescapable task of postwar national reconstruction. In Iraq, these errors became apparent within months of the invasion. It took the administration another four years to adjust.

The Bush administration did finally adjust its strategy, and as a result the prospects for success in Iraq are considerably brighter today than would have seemed possible two years ago. But the United States has paid a huge price for the years of stumbling. Whatever damage was done to the United States' reputation by the invasion itself, the damage done by four years of failure—including the more spectacular manifestations of that failure, such as the Abu Ghraib prison scandal—has been incalculably greater. In a fracturing world, the only thing worse than a self-absorbed hegemon is an incompetent self-absorbed hegemon.

POWER AND ILLUSION

THE NEXT administration has a chance to learn from the Bush administration's mistakes, as well as to build on the progress the Bush administration has made in correcting them. The United States' position in the world today is not nearly as bad as some claim. Predictions that other powers would join together in an effort to balance against the rogue superpower have proved inaccurate. Other powers are emerging, but they are not aligning together against the United States. China and Russia have an interest and a desire to reduce the scale of U.S. predominance and seek more relative power for themselves. But they remain as wary of each other as they are of Washington. Other rising powers, such as Brazil and India, are not seeking to balance against the United States.

Indeed, despite the negative opinion polls, most of the world's great powers are drawing closer to the United States geopolitically. A few years ago, France's Jacques Chirac and Germany's Gerhard Schröder flirted with turning to Russia as a way of counterbalancing U.S. power. But now, France, Germany, and the rest of Europe are tending in the other direction. This is not out of a renewed affection for the United States. The more pro-U.S. foreign policies of French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel reflect their judgment that close but not uncritical relations with the United States enhance European power and influence. The eastern European nations, meanwhile, worry about a resurgent Russia.

States in Asia and the Pacific have drawn closer to the United States mostly out of concern about the rising power of China. In the mid-1990s, the U.S.-Japanese alliance was in danger of eroding. But since 1997, the strategic relationship between the two countries has grown stronger. Some of the nations of Southeast Asia have also begun hedging against a rising China. (Australia may be the one exception to this broad trend, as its new government is tilting toward China and away from the United States and other democratic powers in the region.) The most notable shift has occurred in India, a former ally of Moscow that today sees good relations with the United States as critical to achieving its broader strategic and economic goals.

Even in the Middle East, where anti-Americanism runs hottest and where images of the U.S. occupation in Iraq and memories of Abu

Ghraib continue to burn in the popular consciousness, the strategic balance has not shifted against the United States. Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia continue to work closely with the United States, as do the nations of the Persian Gulf that worry about Iran. Iraq has shifted from implacable anti-Americanism under Saddam to dependence on the United States, and a stable Iraq in the years to come would shift the strategic balance in a decidedly pro-U.S. direction, since Iraq sits on vast oil reserves and could become a significant power in the region.

This situation contrasts sharply with the major strategic setbacks the United States suffered in the Middle East during the Cold War. In the 1950s and 1960s, a pan-Arab nationalist movement swept across the region and opened the door to unprecedented Soviet involvement, including a quasi alliance between the Soviet Union and the Egypt of Gamal Abdel Nasser, as well as a Soviet alliance with Syria. In 1979, a key pillar of the U.S. strategic position in the region toppled when the pro-American shah of Iran was overthrown by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's virulently anti-American revolution. That led to a fundamental shift in the strategic balance in the region, a shift from which the United States is still suffering. Nothing similar has yet occurred as a result of the Iraq war.

Those who today proclaim that the United States is in decline often imagine a past in which the world danced to an Olympian America's tune. That is an illusion. Nostalgia swells for the wondrous U.S.-dominated era after World War II. But although the United States succeeded in Europe then, it suffered disastrous setbacks elsewhere. The "loss" of China to communism, the North Korean invasion of South Korea, the Soviet Union's testing of a hydrogen bomb, the stirrings of postcolonial nationalism in Indochina—each was a strategic calamity of immense scope, and was understood to be such at the time. Each critically shaped the remainder of the twentieth century, and not for the better. And each proved utterly beyond the United States' power to control or even to manage successfully. Not a single event in the last decade can match any one of those events in terms of its enormity as a setback to the United States' position in the world.

Chinese strategists believe that the present international configuration is likely to endure for some time, and they are probably right. So long as the United States remains at the center of the international

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economy and continues to be the predominant military power and the leading apostle of the world's most popular political philosophy; so long as the American public continues to support American predominance, as it has consistently done for six decades; and so long as potential challengers inspire more fear than sympathy among their neighbors, the structure of the international system should remain as it has been, with one superpower and several great powers.

It would also be an illusion, however, to imagine that there can be an easy return to the U.S. leadership and the cooperation among U.S. allies that existed during the Cold War era. There is no single unifying threat along the same lines as the Soviet Union to bind the United States and other nations together in seemingly permanent alliance. The world today looks more like that of the nineteenth century than like that of the late twentieth. Those who imagine this is good news should recall that the nineteenth-century order did not end as well as the Cold War did.

To avoid such a fate, the United States and other democratic nations will need to take a more enlightened and generous view of their interests than they did even during the Cold War. The United States, as the strongest democracy, should not oppose but welcome a world of pooled and diminished national sovereignty. It has little to fear and much to gain in a world of expanding laws and norms based on liberal ideals and designed to protect them. At the same time, the democracies of Asia and Europe need to rediscover that progress toward this more perfect liberal order depends not only on law and popular will but also on powerful nations that can support and defend it.

In a selfish world, this kind of enlightened wisdom may be beyond the capacities of all states. But if there is any hope, it lies in a renewed understanding of the importance of values. The United States and other democratic nations share a common aspiration for a liberal international order, built on democratic principles and held together, however imperfectly, by laws and conventions among nations. This order is gradually coming under pressure as the great-power autocracies grow in strength and influence and as the antidemocratic struggle of radical Islamic terrorism persists. If the democracies' need for one another is less obvious than before, the need for these nations, including the United States, to "see further into the future" is all the greater.🌐