

# 1

---

## *The Idealism of Preponderance*

Forty years of Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union produced a canon of received wisdom about the nature and limits of American and Soviet power, the parameters of national and international security, and the structure and dynamics of the international system. The bipolar distribution of power was taken for granted. Leading scholars saw it as the principal cause of a ‘long peace’ among the great powers, and they confidently predicted its persistence well into the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> Mutual deterrence and the preservation of alliances and spheres of influence were seen as essential to national and international security. International institutions, such as the United Nations, were considered marginal to the main game of superpower politics. The United States was recognized as the most powerful state, but even the most conservative commentators and policy-makers saw it as fundamentally constrained by the fact of bipolarity.

The dramatic end to the Cold War pulled the rug out from beneath these assumptions. Although some commentators were slow to admit it, the bipolar order was finished – the Soviet Union had relinquished control over Eastern Europe, the Velvet Revolutions had displaced the region’s communist rulers and the Soviet Union had eventually voted itself out of existence. The distribution of

international power was fundamentally altered, raising multiple questions about the sources of change, the meaning and principal contours of such change, and about the 'new world order' that would emerge. Not surprisingly, American scholars proffered a bewildering array of competing answers to these questions, particularly concerning the implications for the United States as the sole surviving superpower. Proclamations of a 'unipolar moment' vied with claims of a new multipolarity. Ideas of 'the end of history' were challenged by fears of a 'clash of civilizations'. And concerns about competition from rising powers, such as Japan, were countered by arguments about America's enduring 'soft power'.

A decade later, and two years after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, this contested terrain of ideas has generated a new, ascendant discourse of American power and global order, most ardently expressed in the policy prescriptions of the present Bush Administration. This new discourse weaves together four core themes: a celebration of America's unparalleled material preponderance; a quasi-religious belief in the universality of American values and priorities; an unfettered confidence in Washington's capacity to translate its material resources into intended outcomes in the international arena; and an abiding sense of threat, sufficient to justify institutional adjustment at home and pre-emptive action abroad. These ideas were catalysed by the events of September 11, but they are rooted in the 1990s neo-conservative discourse on American power and international relations. In the early 1990s, this discourse was but one voice in a cacophony of voices, but a decade later it is ascendant. Its ascendance, however, has been syncretic; ideas of unipolarity and American primacy have been fused into a curious ideological amalgam with those of democratic peace, the end of history, a clash of civilizations, and more.

This chapter traces, in a necessarily brief fashion, the rise to prominence of this new discourse of American power and world order, which I term ‘the idealism of preponderance’. After surveying the main characteristics of the Cold War’s end, and the near total failure of mainstream scholars and commentators to anticipate such a momentous change, I discuss in greater detail the struggle for understanding it engendered within the United States. My focus then turns to a strand of neo-conservative thought that eventually emerged from the margins to define the parameters of George W. Bush’s national security doctrine. For John Lewis Gaddis, the dean of Cold War history, this doctrine could well be ‘the most important reformulation of US grand strategy in over half a century’.<sup>2</sup> Its genesis, however, was marked by two features: it evolved into a fully fledged ideology of American power by conscripting and taming other potentially antithetical ideas; and it grew out of a bounded realm of American debate, one noted as much for its silences, blind spots and cognitive refusals as its apparent diversity.

### **The shock of the new**

Throughout the 1980s, scholarly debate about international relations in the United States was dominated by an internecine debate between neorealists and neoliberals, neither of which were especially well equipped to comprehend or explain major transformations in the international system. Neoliberals stressed the role that institutions could play in facilitating coexistence and managing cooperation problems between states, arguing that it is often rational for self-interested actors to prefer cooperation over conflict, and that institutions could facilitate this.<sup>3</sup> Buried

within these ideas was a conception of incremental change, the kind of change that occurs through structured cooperation and reciprocal exchange. But neoliberalism had little to say about epochal, systemic changes, such as the end of the Cold War. Neorealists were primarily concerned with understanding continuity in world politics, but in contrast to their neoliberal counterparts they did have an argument about systemic change. Change was said to occur when there was a major shift in the international balance of power, from bipolarity to multipolarity or unipolarity. Such changes were driven by the rise and decline of great powers, which was in turn driven by the struggle for relative power.<sup>4</sup> The only problem was that neorealists considered bipolarity the most stable of all balances of power, and in the 1980s they failed to see any major shifts in the balance of power or any potential challengers for supremacy on the horizon. China was still considered a developing nation, Japan was thought to lack the requisite military power, Europe was not sufficiently unified, and no one seriously imagined that the Soviet Union would give up the race.<sup>5</sup>

At a purely descriptive level, the end of the Cold War seemed to be an instance of systemic change as neorealists understood it. Robert Gilpin, in his classic study of war and change, defined systemic change as 'the rise and decline of dominant states or empires that govern the particular international system'.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, the Cold War's end fitted neatly within the neorealist conceptual frame. Yet there was much about this epochal change that this frame could not accommodate. Gilpin and others held that 'the essence of systemic change involves the replacement of a declining power by a rising dominant power'.<sup>7</sup> The end of the Cold War, however, involved not a rising power, but a retrenching one. While neorealists assume that states seek survival above all else, the Soviet

Union not only relinquished its empire, it voluntarily dissolved into its constituent republics. After the fact, realists argue that the Reagan Administration forced these changes through its renewed arms offensive and invigorated ideological crusade. But this asks us to ignore some of the most interesting and salient features of this change, such as the roots of Mikhail Gorbachev's 'new thinking' in the alternative trans-European security discourse of the 1980s, the role of Western European peace movements and Eastern European dissidents – from Solidarity to Charter 77 – in undercutting the legitimacy of the Cold War's political and military structures, the persistence of detente between Europe and the Soviet Union throughout the second Cold War, and, finally, Ronald Reagan's own 'road to Damascus' conversion from confrontation to constructive engagement.

Convinced of continuity in world politics, and comprehending change only in terms of rising or falling hegemony, neorealists were blind to these ideational developments and international social forces. In 1979, Kenneth Waltz predicted that the bipolar order would persist well into the twenty-first century, and a year later Gilpin surveyed factors that might destabilize such an order, concluding that 'none of these destabilizing developments appears immanent in the contemporary world [1980], at least in the immediate future'.<sup>8</sup> After the event, realist policy-makers were quick to claim responsibility.<sup>9</sup> As Dan Deudney and John Ikenberry observed, though, the 'Cold War's end was a baby that arrived unexpectedly, but a long line of those claiming paternity has quickly formed'.<sup>10</sup> For their part, realist scholars have responded by abandoning the stark precepts of neorealism in favour of a return to richer strands of classical realist thought, which they claim provides a compelling *post hoc* explanation for the Cold War's demise.<sup>11</sup> This strategy has

been strongly criticized, however, for stretching realism to include ideas about world politics pillaged from other traditions of thought.<sup>12</sup>

While it is widely held that the end of the Cold War caught all commentators unaware, there were some who were not so surprised. In 1980 the Hungarian intellectual and dissident Ferenc Feher wrote that it 'is unavoidable that during the eighties in certain countries open social conflict will break out in order to bring about a modicum of political pluralism . . . [T]here is little doubt in our mind that Poland is again likely to have the dubious distinction of becoming a world-historical nation: the centre of the gathering storm.'<sup>13</sup> Two years later, the British historian and peace activist Edward P. Thompson predicted that:

we may now be living . . . through episodes as significant as any known in the human record. . . . There would not be decades of detente, as the glaciers slowly melt. There would be rapid and unpredictable changes: nations would become unglued from their alliances; there would be sharp conflicts within nations; there would be successive risks. We could roll up the map of the Cold War, and travel without maps for a while.<sup>14</sup>

These writers foresaw what mainstream American commentators could not because they were attuned to aspects of political life occluded by realist lenses, particularly the fact that the Cold War was in essence a structure of domination, the social legitimacy of which was fast eroding.<sup>15</sup>

### **The struggle for understanding**

The dramatic conclusion to the Cold War sparked a wave of new imaginings about the nature and future of world

*The Idealism of Preponderance*

19

politics in general, and about the place and role of the United States in particular. What had been a stiflingly narrow mainstream discourse on international relations gave way to a much more diverse, if bounded, debate. As Greg Fry and Jacinta O'Hagan observe in their definitive study of this debate, each of the new contending images 'represents a different position on the issue of what entities and forces matter in world politics, on the possibilities of peace and war, about the moral basis of global order, about how "security" is to be viewed, and about whether the world should be seen as one polity, or two, or many'.<sup>16</sup> For some authors, fundamental, world-transforming shifts were occurring in the underlying foundations of world politics; for others, we were witnessing yet another turn in the eternal cycle of recurrence and repetition that characterizes relations among sovereign states. This debate can be carved up in any number of ways, but the most apparent divide lies between the euphoric and the anxious, the optimistic and pessimistic, the brave new worlders and the harbingers of a more dangerous, 'primordial' future.

*Euphoria*

There was no equivalent to VE or VJ day to mark formally the cessation of Cold War hostilities. The fall of the Berlin Wall has become symbolic of this end, but the full import and magnitude of the process unfolded over several years, from 1989 to 1992. This lack of a victorious moment, however, did not dampen victorious sentiment, particularly in the United States. The end of the Cold War was cast variously as a victory for American policy, for the American system of government and economic life, for capitalism and democracy, for a particular kind of civilization, and for that amorphous community called 'the West'.

More sober and reflective voices argued that in fact ‘We all lost the Cold War’,<sup>17</sup> but for many it seemed patently obvious that, in the last of the twentieth century’s great contests between contending political and economic systems, one superpower remained standing and one system prevailed, vibrant and expanding.

For some, the simple fact of there being a sole remaining superpower defined the essence of the victory. This was the ‘unipolar moment’. Charles Krauthammer proclaimed in a 1990 *Foreign Affairs* article that there ‘is but one first-rate power and no prospect in the immediate future of any power to rival it’.<sup>18</sup> So pre-eminent was the United States in the crucial military, diplomatic, political and economic fields, that it could ‘be a decisive player in whatever part of the world it chooses to involve itself’.<sup>19</sup> Neo-conservatives like Krauthammer challenged Americans to recognize and embrace this new-found supremacy. Multipolarity was a myth, and multilateralism dangerous nonsense. ‘The United Nations,’ Krauthammer wrote, ‘is guarantor of nothing. Except in a formal sense, it can hardly be said to exist at all.’<sup>20</sup> The only alternative was for the United States to have ‘the strength and will to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them’.<sup>21</sup> This was essential because, despite the victory over the Soviet Union, the world was likely to become more rather than less dangerous. ‘Weapon states’ were likely to arise, characterized by authoritarian rule and anti-Western sentiment, and armed with weapons of mass destruction. Iraq was considered the prototype of such a state, and North Korea one in the making.

While not denying the unipolar moment, another strand of victorious thinking stressed the victory of liberal democracy as an ideology and form of governance. For Francis Fukuyama, the Cold War’s end marked nothing less than



the end of history.<sup>22</sup> Not history in the sense of the ongoing parade of life, death, love and drama, but history understood as a process of social and political evolution driven by a dialectical clash of ideologies. After more than two centuries of often violent competition, liberal democracy had triumphed over hereditary monarchy, fascism and then communism. More than this, though, Fukuyama argued that ‘while earlier forms of government were characterized by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse, liberal democracy was ultimately free from such fundamental internal contradictions’.<sup>23</sup> This victory of liberal democracy – which encompassed the triumph of capitalism – was ultimately due to the inherent dynamics of modern science, with its impact on technology and economic life, and to the innate human struggle for recognition, which only liberal democracy could satisfy.<sup>24</sup> Fukuyama predicted that for the foreseeable future the world would be divided into an expanding ‘post-historical’ realm of liberal democracies and a contracting ‘historical’ realm of authoritarian states, almost exclusively in the developing world. In the first of these worlds, power politics would be replaced by largely peaceful forms of economic competition; in the second, power politics would continue, fuelled by religious, national and ideological conflicts. For the most part, these worlds would ‘maintain parallel but separate existences’, but control over oil, problems of immigration and the spread of dangerous high technologies would give the liberal democracies common cause to protect themselves against threats emanating from those states still mired in history.<sup>25</sup>

Integral to Fukuyama’s thesis was a set of ideas about how democratic states relate to one another, ideas that were being vigorously promoted by a group of newly empowered neo-Kantian thinkers. Since the end of the Cold War it has become almost a truism that democracies do

not fight wars with each other, even if they confront perceived dictatorships with some enthusiasm. Throughout the post-1945 period, Immanuel Kant was seen as a naive idealist who had little if anything of substance to say about world politics. Yet one of his central insights – that ‘republics’ are unlikely to go to war with one another – was now embraced in the United States as a virtual law of international relations. Scholars went to elaborate empirical lengths to demonstrate the historical veracity of this law,<sup>26</sup> and the Clinton Administration, re-embracing long-neglected Wilsonian strands in American foreign policy, used it to justify the central policy principle that if you want to preserve world peace, spread democracy.<sup>27</sup> Several reasons were advanced as to why democracies might have such peaceful inclinations, including their mutual recognition of each other as legitimate, the fact that those who bear the costs of war have some say in its declaration, and the calming effects of international trade and interdependence. The crucial thing was that the end of the Cold War was hailed by those advancing these arguments as the ‘democratic moment’, in which ‘the world [sic] people have come, through bitter experience, to a new appreciation of political freedom and constitutionalism as ends in themselves’.<sup>28</sup> The opportunity for the United States was clear. ‘By promoting democracy abroad, the United States can help bring into being for the first time in history a world composed mainly of stable democracies.’<sup>29</sup>

The final strand of victorious discourse brought together elements of each of the above imaginings. Its roots lay in 1980s debates about America’s impending hegemonic decline. A series of major works had suggested that the United States was experiencing serious imperial overstretch, in which the costs of empire were outpacing its economic capacity to meet those costs. Meanwhile, less encumbered great powers were rising to challenge

America's position, setting in train yet another grand historical cycle of hegemonic rise and decline.<sup>30</sup> The end of the Cold War coincided with the articulation of a highly influential neoliberal response to this thesis. To be sure, America would never again have the relative power it enjoyed at the end of the Second World War, a situation attributable as much to the utter devastation and exhaustion of the other great powers as to America's own attributes. But this did not mean that American primacy was in question. In addition to its unparalleled military and economic resources, the United States was also said to have something called 'soft' or 'co-optive' power. 'Co-optive power', Joseph Nye argued, 'is the ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own.'<sup>31</sup> This form of power derives from having a culture and ideology that are enticing, from being able to shape international norms to suit these, and from being able to structure international institutions, and, in turn, the consenting behaviour of other states. Not only did the United States enter the 1990s with far greater soft power than any other state, the highly interdependent and institutionalized nature of the world was increasingly privileging such power. In Nye's words, the 'United States retains more traditional hard power resources than any other country. It also has the soft ideological and institutional resources to preserve its lead in the new domains of transnational interdependence.'<sup>32</sup>

### *Anxiety*

Each of the above celebrations admits, at the margins, mild anxiety about the potential aspects of the unfolding world order, whether it be fears that domestic isolationism

would undermine the unipolar moment or that the historical world might intrude upon life beyond history. There were other strands in post-Cold War American thinking, however, in which anxiety was the predominant rather than the secondary impulse.

There were those who were deeply sceptical about the unipolar moment and its durability. Most vocal among these were the neorealists, who argued that the unipolar moment was precisely that, a 'moment'. A situation in which there is a single remaining superpower is one in which there is a profound imbalance of power, and history tells us that other states will do whatever they can to re-establish a balance. 'Other states, uneasy about America's dominant position, will equip themselves as Great Powers,' Kenneth Waltz wrote.<sup>33</sup> The United States could struggle to retain its pre-eminence, to use its current advantage to deter, co-opt or defeat potential challengers, but this was bound to fail. Even a policy of benign hegemony, marked by the provision of global public goods, would simply encourage other great powers to free ride, enhancing their own positions while draining the United States. More than this, a strategy of benign hegemony was either nonsense or it would be interpreted as such. An unbalanced hegemon was unlikely to be consistently benign, and attempts to export its values and prosecute its interests were more likely to be seen as threatening than comforting.<sup>34</sup> Unipolarity was thus destined to give way to multipolarity, and this would occur sooner rather than later. The problem was that this would make the world considerably more dangerous. John Mearsheimer argued provocatively that we were heading 'back to the future', returning to the multipolar instabilities that fuelled centuries of warfare in Europe. Bipolarity had been the key to global security, and once this had gone alliances would come unstuck, collective institutions, such as the

European Union, would erode, and national military and economic cooperation would intensify.<sup>35</sup>

This concern about a slide into multipolarity was reinforced by a second group of commentators anxious about America's declining economic primacy. This concern pre-dated the end of the Cold War by at least a decade, but was given added impetus by America's growing indebtedness and economic sluggishness in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and by the apparent dynamism of its principal rivals, particularly Japan. Contrary to those who attributed such decline to imperial overstretch, this group stressed the internal deficiencies of the American economy itself. The United States had not only become the world's largest debtor nation, its share of global production and trade had receded, and its level of industrial development had fallen behind Japan.<sup>36</sup> Reversing this trend became the catch-cry of those calling for a Democratic presidency after 1992. The Reagan and first Bush Administrations were berated for neglecting the domestic roots of American power: '[O]n the morning after an ostensible American victory, the U.S. economy has fallen into a recession and our relative standing in the world has fallen in measures of economic growth, competitiveness, balance of trade, national debt, public health, and education,' wrote Harris Wofford, the newly elected Democrat Senator for Pennsylvania.<sup>37</sup> Decline of this sort was doubly problematic, as economic power was now considered the currency of world politics. And, as John Zysman argued at the time, as 'economic power increases in importance, the basis for influence shifts from the domain of military force, where America remains strong, to the domain of economics, where its position is weakened.'<sup>38</sup>

The idea that the world was taking a multipolar turn, with all its attendant dangers, was given a special twist by Samuel Huntington. Like the neo-conservatives, he

argued vigorously for the defence of American primacy, which Japan's 'strategy of economic warfare' was threatening.<sup>39</sup> His innovation, however, was to claim that '[g]lobal politics has become multipolar and multicivilizational'.<sup>40</sup> The most distinctive thing about the post-Cold War era, he claimed, was the rise of identity politics, in which people seek answers to the question 'who are we?' by invoking their deepest of cultural values. At the broadest of levels, this was creating a world divided into civilizations. 'The most important groupings of states are no longer the three blocs of the Cold War but rather the world's seven or eight major civilizations.'<sup>41</sup> For Huntington, relations between these civilizations would be much the same as relations between competing great powers – the struggle for power would be the norm, and conflict would be endemic. 'In this new world the most persuasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities. . . . And the most dangerous of these conflicts are those along the fault lines between civilizations.'<sup>42</sup> The most dangerous of these fault lines, he argued, concerned 'the interaction of Western power and culture with the power and culture of non-Western civilizations', particularly those of the Islamic and Confucian worlds.<sup>43</sup>

These euphoric and anxious imaginings of the post-Cold War world did not exhaust debate within the United States, let alone beyond. There were some who anticipated a new multipolar order, but who saw it as desirable, as laying the foundations for a new concert of great powers and the equilibrium this might foster.<sup>44</sup> There were others who proffered their own visions of impending chaos that made Huntington's look mild by comparison.<sup>45</sup> The perspectives surveyed above, however, were particularly prominent in America's struggle to comprehend the new

world order and its emergent role. They also became ingredients, both major and minor, in the discourse of America's power that emerged ascendant almost a decade later.

### **The idealism of preponderance**

One can read the 1990s as an interregnum, as a period in which Americans struggled to come to terms with life beyond the Cold War, and in which ever so gradually, through struggle and chance as much as rational adjustment, a rejuvenated neo-conservative ideology, or 'grand strategy', triumphed in Washington. Neorealists think that grand strategies are driven by the imperatives of the international system, that they are rational responses to external threats, constraints and opportunities. But the story of this ideological triumph is as much one of ideological inheritance and long-standing agendas as it is of sober strategic adjustment. The attacks of September 11 were certainly more than sufficient to catalyse such adjustment, but the die was cast well before then.

#### *The neo-conservative ascendancy*

Despite victory in the Gulf War, the presidency of George Bush senior was a disappointment to Reaganite neo-conservatives. America's capacity to set the agenda, provide decisive leadership in the UN Security Council and deliver devastating military force to uphold international law in far-flung parts of the world had been demonstrated, at least partially, by the first Gulf War. But the full potential of this capacity had never been realized. Not only was

Saddam Hussein still in power, constrained only by an ad hoc system of no-fly zones and economic sanctions, but Bush's vision of a new world order seemed increasingly vision-less, lacking both coherent purpose and effective punch. Bush's foreign policy credentials were never in question, having served both as ambassador to China and the UN, and as Director of the CIA. Yet his approach to the new world order was pragmatic and managerial, and he was criticized from all points of the political spectrum for offering 'foreign policy without strategy, management without leadership, a kind of competent drift'.<sup>46</sup> This was the context in which Krauthammer made his plea for the United States to seize the unipolar moment, a plea targeted at a Republican, not a Democratic, presidency.

It was unlikely that the neo-conservatives would gain much comfort from the Clinton Administration. In 1992, the American public was less animated about international affairs than it had been for more than a decade, and Bill Clinton was elected with a mandate to focus on a litany of persistent domestic troubles, from the parlous state of the economy to health care, education and urban crime. Slow to articulate his foreign policy agenda, Clinton's approach might best be described as a half-hearted Wilsonian internationalism, the central motif of which was a commitment to the 'enlargement of democracy and free markets'. In the second of these areas the Administration scored some notable successes, such as the conclusion of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the associated creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the establishment of the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA). Its record in promoting global democracy was less noteworthy, however. Behind the rhetoric lay vacillation on conflict in the Balkans, an inconsistent pattern of dealing with human rights in authoritarian states and an ambivalent attitude



towards the development of international law, most clearly apparent in the on-again-off-again approach to the International Criminal Court. This latter stance reflected a deeper ambivalence towards international institutions, in which declarations of support for multilateralism were contradicted by instances like the circumvention of the UN Security Council in the case of Kosovo. During its second term, the Administration's rhetoric and practice took a more unilateralist turn, partly in response to attacks from Congress.<sup>47</sup> Senior figures proclaimed repeatedly that the United States was the 'indispensable nation'. Echoing Louis XIV's claim that a king 'is of rank superior to all other men, he sees things more perfectly than they do',<sup>48</sup> Madeleine Albright argued that 'We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the dangers here to all of us.'<sup>49</sup> The neo-conservatives found little that was objectionable in Clinton's commitment to spreading democracy and promoting free trade, but they hated his weak and inconsistent internationalism, and his failure to give full expression to America's 'indispensable' role. Like Bush before him, Clinton had failed to capitalize on the unipolar moment; to articulate a clear and ambitious plan for the transformation of the global order according to American values, to lead forcefully and unilaterally if necessary, and to secure American primacy by bolstering its military predominance.

As the 1990s progressed, conservative forces challenged the Clinton Administration on multiple fronts. After the 1994 mid-term congressional elections, Newt Gingrich launched his 'Contract with America', setting out a conservative social and political agenda to rival the Administration's. This was a time of growing influence for the Christian Right, which came to have considerable sway over Republican policy. In the 1998 mid-terms, voter guides distributed by the Christian Coalition to millions

of American homes claimed that on average Republican Representatives had voted according to the Coalition's agenda 88.7 per cent of the time, with Gingrich scoring 100 per cent.<sup>50</sup> The campaign against the Administration was not confined to its legislative agenda. Conservative groups inside and outside Congress scoured the Clintons' financial and personal histories, leading ultimately to the Lewinsky case, the Starr Commission and Clinton's near impeachment. In spite of this concerted campaign, Clinton left office after his second term with record popularity.

One of the less dramatic, though ultimately most influential, strands of the anti-Clinton campaign was waged by a group of neo-conservative specialists on foreign affairs. This group, which coalesced under the banner of the Project for the New American Century, included such figures as Jeb Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Richard Armitage and Francis Fukuyama, most of whom would later gain senior positions in the administration of George W. Bush. Calling for a 'Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity', they sought a return to 'the essential elements of the Reagan Administration's success: a military that is strong and ready to meet both present and future challenges; a foreign policy that boldly and purposefully promotes American principles abroad; and national leadership that accepts the United States' global responsibilities'.<sup>51</sup> Donning the mantle of the Committee for the Present Danger, which had helped lay the ideological foundations for Reaganism, key members of the Project stressed a new 'present danger', a danger from within, the danger of American 'moral and strategic disarmament'.<sup>52</sup>

The Project for the New American Century proposed a grand strategy of unbounded ambition, encapsulated in an early article by Zalmay Khalilzad. Central to this strategy

*The Idealism of Preponderance*

31

was the idea that the United States should ‘seek to retain global leadership and to preclude the rise of a global rival or a return to multipolarity for the indefinite future’,<sup>53</sup> an idea first articulated in 1992 in a memo leaked from Paul Wolfowitz’s office in the Pentagon to the *New York Times*. Transforming the unipolar moment into a ‘unipolar era’, it was thought, would create an environment ‘more open and more receptive to American values’, more conducive to dealing with problems of nuclear proliferation, rogue states and low-level conflicts, and less prone to cold and hot wars among the great powers. To guarantee American primacy, and the realization of these goods, the United States had to prevent a hostile hegemon emerging in Europe, East Asia or the Persian Gulf, preserve American military pre-eminence, extend and strengthen the zone of peace among liberal democracies, and bolster the technological and productive bases of its economic strength.<sup>54</sup> In addition to these broad strategic goals, Project members insisted that the dangers posed by states such as Iraq and North Korea could only be met through ‘regime change’.<sup>55</sup> They also stressed the need for the United States to counter threats from states with chemical, biological and possibly nuclear weapons by threatening nuclear retaliation, developing the capacity to pre-emptively destroy such weapons, and building active and passive defence systems.<sup>56</sup>

*The Bush Doctrine*

The triumph of these ideas was only partially due to their perceived merit in the marketplace of contending visions. To be sure, the Project for the New American Century was immensely successful in capturing the policy high ground within the Republican Party, particularly over the more

cautious realists such as Henry Kissinger and Jeanne Kirkpatrick. Their broader victory, however, was due more to chance and circumstance than reason and persuasion. When the Supreme Court handed George W. Bush the 2000 presidential election, the Project's members moved from a position of minority protagonists in a vigorous public debate to one of policy mandarins. Even then, doubts over the legitimacy of Bush's election, and the fact that the Republicans quickly lost control of the Senate, partially stayed their hands. The attacks of September 11 changed all this. From that moment, the shackles were off. Convinced already of American power and righteousness, the spectre of an abiding yet amorphous global threat gave the Administration a mandate, in their view, to cement American primacy and unashamedly reshape the global order – unilaterally if necessary.

Before proceeding, a few words are needed about neo-conservative influence within the Bush Administration. The number of Project members who joined the Administration is striking, as is the similarity between their agenda and subsequent policy directions. But not all of Bush's cabinet came from this stable; Bush himself was never a member, and nor were Colin Powell or Condoleezza Rice. It is clear, however, that key Project members, particularly Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, have had considerable influence over the development of the Administration's grand strategy. Bush has injected a strong element of moral righteousness, Rice has been drawn ever closer to the hard-line centre of gravity, and Powell has fought rearguard actions to moderate the militant unilateralism of his Project colleagues. The net result is that the Administration's grand strategy has strong missionary overtones, and internal struggles have occurred over issues such as the need for Security Council endorsement. Yet, as we shall see below, it is the Project's neo-conservatives who

have provided the basic template for Administration policy, even if that template has been modified by the politics of circumstance and implementation.

Central to the Administration's world view is a celebration of American predominance. The opening words of its 'National Security Strategy for the United States of America' reads: 'The United States possesses unprecedented – and unequaled – strength and influence in the world. Sustained by faith in the principles of liberty, and the value of a free society, this position comes with unparalleled responsibilities, obligations, and opportunity.'<sup>57</sup> In none of the Administration's public pronouncements or documents is this confidence even partially qualified. America's military and economic supremacy is understandably treated as a simple matter of fact. After almost a decade of sustained national economic growth and further improvements to military technology, the domestic foundations of American power are assumed secure. And with Japan in persistent recession, Europe grappling with sclerotic growth, Russia in visible decline, and China at best a handicapped competitor, potential challengers are thought to be well beyond the horizon. With such supremacy, it is taken for granted that Washington has the capacity to pursue and achieve a set of ambitious global objectives. 'We will work', the 'National Security Strategy' states, 'to translate this moment of influence into decades of peace, prosperity, and liberty.'<sup>58</sup> The Administration tips its hat to the need to cooperate with allies and touts its support for multilateral institutions, but this is always qualified by insistence that America 'will be prepared to act apart when our interests and responsibilities require'.<sup>59</sup>

In the early 1990s Nye and others sought to reaffirm American primacy by pointing to its unrivalled soft power. Even if other states were closing the material power gap, the United States had a culture and ideology of universal

appeal. A decade later, fears about material decline have receded, but the idea that America is uniquely endowed with soft power has been thoroughly internalized. In fact, it is the supposed universality of American values, manifest in the culture and institutions of the American polity, that provides an unquestionable licence for the pursuit of Washington's global objectives. Echoing Fukuyama's thesis about the end of history, Bush's letter prefacing the 'National Security Strategy' declares that '[t]he great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom – and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise'. Although the United States is considered both the embodiment of, and a beacon for, these values, they are said to be universally valid. 'These values of freedom are right and true for every person, in every society – and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies is the common calling of all freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages.'<sup>60</sup>

When the memo proposing that the United States should seek to deter other great powers from challenging its primacy was leaked from Wolfowitz's office in 1992, the Administration of Bush senior went into damage control. Today it is declaratory policy. Confident of the material and ideological bases of American primacy, the Administration makes no bones about the fact that American 'forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in the hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States'.<sup>61</sup> This reflects both a belief that it is possible to achieve such a task – that the United States economy, ingenuity and industry can sustain perpetual military primacy – and a faith in the benevolent nature of American hegemony. Not only are American values those to which all rational

peoples strive, but the United States provides, as would no other state, a long list of public goods essential for global order and well-being. In Robert Kagan's words, 'the truth is that the benevolent hegemony exercised by the United States is good for a vast portion of the world's population. It is certainly a better international arrangement than all realistic alternatives. To undermine it would cost many others around the world far more than it would cost Americans – and far sooner.'<sup>62</sup>

Securing American primacy in the service of American values is what the Bush Administration calls 'creating a balance of power that favors human freedom'.<sup>63</sup> After the Napoleonic Wars, Prince Metternich and other European leaders used the term 'balance of power' to describe a situation of equilibrium, in which states consciously adjusted their alliances to ensure that no single state could predominate. While Henry Kissinger and others hanker nostalgically for such a world, this is not the Administration's view. 'Balance of power' does not mean equilibrium; it means primacy, precisely the situation the European powers were seeking to avoid. It is sustained American ascendancy that will favour human freedom. Of course 'human freedom', like balance of power, has a distinctive meaning here – it means the freedom to choose the 'single sustainable model of national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise'. Those who are comfortable with the idea that we have reached the end of history, and that American values are indeed universal, will see this as natural and unproblematic. Others might be more troubled.

While the Administration is committed to deterring and defeating challenges to its hegemony from other rising great powers, it has sufficiently absorbed the democratic peace thesis to trust that conflict will be less likely if Russia and China can be encouraged to make successful democratic and capitalist transitions. The principal threats are

thought to come from global terrorists and rogue states commanding weapons of mass destruction. The first of these is essentially new, exploding on to the agenda after the attacks of September 11. In the words of the 'National Security Strategy', the 'enemy is not a single political regime or religion or ideology. The enemy is terrorism – premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents.'<sup>64</sup> Confronting this enemy, the Administration has adopted a comprehensive offensive and defensive strategy, encompassing attacks on terrorist leadership; command, control, and communications, material resources, and finances; as well as strengthening 'homeland security'.

As we saw earlier, the Administration's concern with rogue states is not so new. Bush's infamous State of the Union reference to the 'axis of evil', comprising Iraq, Iran and North Korea, merely placed on the public agenda, in the most dramatic of fashions, one of the causes célèbres of the Project for the New American Century. The difference is that the case against these states, and in support of regime change, rests not just on their purported possession of weapons of mass destruction but on their alleged support for regional and global terrorist organizations. Hence Bush's speech on Iraq to the United Nations General Assembly sought to establish a tight connection between the two threats. '[O]ur greatest fear is that terrorists will find a shortcut to their mad ambitions when an outlaw regime supplies them with the technologies to kill on a massive scale. In one place – in one regime – we find all of these dangers, in their most lethal and aggressive forms, exactly the kind of aggressive threat the United Nations was born to confront.'<sup>65</sup>

While the Administration has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to international law and multilateralism, it appears that this is at best conditional. First, the



Administration has called for a revision to the laws of war to permit pre-emptive strikes in self-defence. 'The greater the threat, the greater the risk of inaction – and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack.'<sup>66</sup> Since it is unlikely to gain the required two-thirds majority of the General Assembly to change the relevant articles of the Charter, it can only be assumed that it intends to change international norms through precedent-setting – yet law-breaking – acts of pre-emption, such as the war in Iraq and the extrajudicial execution of alleged al-Qaeda operatives in Yemen. Second, the concept of 'regime change' is a clear violation of the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, for better or for worse. These norms were already being challenged in the 1990s in the name of humanitarian intervention, and the Administration is doing its best to portray regime change in Iraq or elsewhere, along with intervention in Bosnia or Kosovo, as all of a kind. Third, the Administration's attitude towards the collective security procedures of the United Nations Security Council appears to be that they are illegitimate and ineffectual unless they endorse Washington's prescriptions for international peace and security. As we shall see, the need to legitimate American actions has drawn it into these procedures, and once engaged its room to manoeuvre is circumscribed in critical ways. The fact remains, though, that the Administration struggles against the reality that these are deliberative fora, designed to produce negotiated rather than dictated decisions. Finally, the Administration has been willing to jettison international treaties when these constrain its strategic designs. For instance, claiming that the traditional logic of deterrence would not work against rogue states or terrorists, it withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia so that it could

construct a national missile defence system, appropriately nicknamed ‘son of Star Wars’.

## **Conclusion**

We like to think of national policies as rational constructions, formulated by pairing objective national interests with the most efficient of available means. Yet this is seldom the case. Policy-makers have ideological and normative commitments that define how they respond to new and old challenges. At times these are conscious; at times they are not. Politics have political cultures that frame debates about what constitutes national interests, making some goals and strategies seem natural and others literally unimaginable. History has structural features that produce patterns of continuity, some seen, and others not. History is also full of contingency, which throws up surprises. From the perspective of members of the Project for the New American Century, who were empowered in the Bush Administration, the Bush Doctrine would undoubtedly appear as a rational construction. But from a step or two removed, the victory of their ideas bears the marks of long-standing ideological commitments, dating back at least as far as the Reagan years; deep-rooted politico-cultural conceptions of American exceptionalism, democratic mission and security through world order tutelage; and the chance confluence of historical events.

I have described the resulting ideology of American power as ‘the idealism of preponderance’. There is nothing idealistic about the fact of America’s material preponderance, of course. Yet the idealistic aspects of the Administration’s discourse about that preponderance should be clear to all. All ideologies have an idealistic dimension;

*The Idealism of Preponderance*

39

otherwise they would fail to command the imagination and inspire action. More than this, though, the Bush Doctrine is idealistic in other ways. To believe that overwhelming material power translates unproblematically into political influence and intended political outcomes is idealistic. To imagine that one's values are universal and that all reasoning human beings will see them as such is idealistic. And believing that one can pursue a project to transform the global system based on these values, without resistance, is idealistic. Each of these assumes that the United States stands outside or above the diversity of social and political life of the globe, or that this life has no autonomy. This, more than anything else, is idealistic, and it may ultimately prove self-defeating.