

18 The American World Role

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'We can see a new world coming into view. A world in which there is a real prospect of a new world order . . . in which the principles of justice and fair play . . . protect the weak against the strong. A world where the United Nations, freed from cold war stalemate is poised to fulfill the historic vision of its founders . . . Even the new world cannot guarantee an era of perpetual peace. But enduring peace must be our mission.'

– George H. Bush, March 1991

'We will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively . . . our best defense is a good offence . . . We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries . . . To forestall or prevent hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively.'

– George W. Bush, September 2002

Over the past 70 years the United States has been transformed from one of 6 or 7 world powers with a standing army of under 200,000 and few foreign alliances or military bases, into a country with a military machine of one and a half million men and women under arms (over a quarter of a million of whom are stationed overseas), alliances with nearly 50 countries and unrivalled military and diplomatic status and capacity. From being isolationist and contemptuous of the 'corruption' and imperialism of the old European powers, the United States is itself, in spite of recent uncertainties, now in a position to exploit and dominate other countries and, unlike the pre-war powers, literally to determine the fate of all humankind.

The country's political processes and institutions have not always handled these new responsibilities well. Indeed, one school of thought argues that a country infused with a past characterized by a combination of isolationism and idealism is

ill-suited to playing the role of world police officer. Certainly, there have been many foreign and military policy mistakes in the post-war era, including the Vietnam War, which caused serious domestic conflict and terrible suffering and instability throughout Indochina, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which led to the US becoming embroiled in a prolonged police action. This chapter does not, however, concentrate on normative questions of fortune and folly in American foreign policy. Instead, our discussion focuses on the policy-making process and on the constraints imposed on foreign policy by institutional arrangements and public opinion.

The Institutional Context

As with social and economic affairs, it is somewhat misleading to refer to an American foreign *policy*, for there are at least three distinct types of foreign and defence policies. There is, first, strategic foreign policy, or the general stance of the United States in relation to other countries over time. Scholars have been quick to identify two competing themes in the post-war period – realist and idealist. Realism is, simply, the pursuit of ‘national self-interest’, and is associated with international power politics and the implementation of policies that have clear military, diplomatic or economic benefits.¹ Idealism, in contrast, injects a moral or normative element into policy, as such presidential rhetoric as ‘making the world safe for democracy’ or achieving ‘peace with honour’ in Vietnam implies. We return to these two characterizations of strategic policy later. Although strategic policy is influenced by the broader society and polity, its main institutional context comprises the presidency, National Security Council (NSC) and State Department.

Second, crisis management is a crucial part of foreign policy. Since the Second World War, the Berlin airlift, Suez, the Cuban missile crisis, numerous military actions in Indochina, American reactions to military activity in the Middle East, including the first Gulf War, intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo, and the terror attacks of 9/11 have all involved the United States in quick crisis-management decisions. Generally, the presidency and National Security Council are the institutional foci of these decisions, although, the longer the crisis drags on, the more likely are Congress and the public to become involved. Just this happened with the year-long Iranian hostage crisis in 1980–1.

Third, logistical or structural defence policy involves the deployment of billions of dollars worth of material and over a quarter of a million personnel around the globe. As we established in earlier chapters, this process entails voters, organized interests (defence contractors), state and local governments and congressional committees, as well as the more obvious institutions of the Department of Defense and the presidency. While this policy system is much more open and accessible than strategic and crisis-management policy, it is almost certainly less fragmented and pluralistic than the processes associated with social or economic policy. Oligopolistic defence industries are protected by government contracts,² and the defence budget has a powerful base of support in Congress.

These three contrasting institutional settings for foreign and defence policy do impinge on one another. Logistics and weapons systems can influence strategic



Plate 18.1 President George W. Bush helps troops hand out Thanksgiving dinner at the Bob Hope Dining Facility in Baghdad, Iraq, 2003

thinking (the Cruise missile) and crisis management (the Iranian hostage crisis, the bombing of Libya, the Gulf War), while strategic considerations are obviously important determinants of logistical policy. Similarly, crisis management is profoundly affected by the strategic context. During the Cuban missile crisis, for example, President Kennedy referred constantly to the infringement of an American sphere of influence (the Western Hemisphere), which was a long-established part of American foreign policy.

How has decision-making in each of these policy areas changed over time? Perhaps obviously, crisis management has always primarily been the prerogative of the president and his closest aides in the National Security Council. Quick response requires tightly knit decision-making structures, and, as commander-in-chief, the president has the constitutional, as well as political, position to assume the leadership of such structures. Not that this means that the president and the aides are completely insulated from the outside world during a crisis and make their choices according to strictly rational criteria. As Graham Allison has shown in his brilliant study of the Cuban missile crisis, at least three competing models of decision-making can be used to explain the events of the crisis, two of which put great premium on outside information and political and bureaucratic procedures and pressures.³ But crisis management is, compared with other policy-making processes in American government, relatively free from political and societal pressures.

The main development in strategic foreign policy-making in the post-war period has been the gradual centralization of power in the president and National Security Council, at the cost of State Department influence. This showed itself most graphically in the eclipse of some recent Secretaries of State in the shadow of National Security Advisers – most notably Henry Kissinger under Nixon (although he eventually became Secretary of State) and Zbigniew Brzezinski under Carter. More recently Secretary of State Colin Powell often took a back seat in relation to National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and, more often, to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice-President Dick Cheney. Presidents have increasingly eschewed State Departments and their secretaries, because they can represent independent sources of authority and control over particular issues and areas. Certain countries or policy options are championed within the department, and it is simply not convenient for presidents to have to join battle with the professional bureaucrats when foreign policy is formulated. White House–departmental antagonism occurs in other areas, of course, but, within foreign policy, presidents do at least have the option of, if not ignoring the State Department, at least bypassing it. For the State Department effectively has no domestic constituency, and its officials are unusually neutral and apolitical, versed as they are in the arts of diplomacy and moderation. So while presidents may find it almost impossible to disregard the Departments of Defense, Agriculture or Commerce, they can almost do this in the case of State. Foreign policy is also more insulated from the other ‘traditional’ centres of power in American government. House and, particularly, Senate Foreign Relations Committees are important forums for discussion and criticism, but their function is qualitatively different from (say) those of the Armed Services and Agriculture Committees, with their entrenched relationships with big spending bureaux and powerful corporate clients.

In other words, foreign policy decision-making is different. Within the White House the NSC is uniquely important and, in theory at least, consistency and coherence are almost certainly more achievable in foreign affairs than in many domestic areas. It may be, of course, that clarity and coherence can lead to greater errors of judgement and strategy, and that more pluralistic arrangements would lead to greater moderation. But it should be noted that, in *cross-national* context, American presidents are not particularly free from institutional and political constraints in foreign policy-making. Public and congressional opinion has been exerted on presidents with increasing intensity since the events of Vietnam and Watergate. Earlier chapters have catalogued some of these constraints, including the 1973 War Powers Act. President Reagan’s 1983 remark, when he heard of British Prime Minister Thatcher’s carefully disguised visit to the Falklands, that he ‘couldn’t even go to church in secret’, reveals a great deal. Presidents and their policy-makers are constantly exposed to public scrutiny. They may be able to secrete themselves away in the NSC and plan general strategy. They may also be relatively free from direct and immediate congressional or bureaucratic pressure. But they still have to operate in the context of the American political system, with all that this implies in terms of openness and accessibility. So individual ethnic groups, such as Americans of Cuban or Jewish origin, constantly monitor the administration policy towards Cuba or Israel. Right-wing congressional caucuses campaign strongly in favour of a hard line towards Cuba.

Between the Vietnam War and 9/11, the involvement of American troops in counter-insurgency wars abroad became especially difficult because of the ever-present potential for serious domestic political opposition. This was graphically illustrated in the case of the American-led NATO bombing of Kosovo in 1999. Using air power alone to solve the problem was directly a result of the domestic political costs of the alternative – American casualties resulting from the use of ground troops. In addition, the openness of the American system can lead to the conflation of domestic and foreign policy in ways that are unusual in some other countries. Presidents have been accused of using foreign interventions to divert attention from their domestic troubles. Such allegations were levelled at President Reagan following the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, at Bill Clinton following his decision to attack terrorist installations in Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998, and at George W. Bush in his conduct of the Iraq war prior to the 2004 election.

The openness of the official system has led to the evolution of an ‘unofficial’ foreign policy system on at least two occasions. Such was the case during 1969–73, when illegal acts were committed in south-east Asia. More dramatic were the events of the Iran-Contra affair, which involved the creation of an alternative foreign policy machinery in the White House under the guidance of NSC Adviser John Poindexter, CIA Chief William Casey and Colonel Oliver North. By agreeing to secure the release of American hostages in the Lebanon by selling arms to the Iranians, the proceeds from which would go to help the Contras fighting for the overthrow of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, these officials were acting contrary to the spirit and to the letter of the law. President Reagan and Secretary of State George Schultz either did not know of these events or were only vaguely aware of them, thus demonstrating the extent to which the president had lost control of this particular policy system during his second term. But the culprits in the Iran–Contra affair were discovered, thus perhaps demonstrating how much more public and press opinion can do to expose the errors of foreign policy compared with the situation in Britain and France.

It was, of course the media (notably the *60 minutes* CBS news magazine programme) that first exposed the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by Americans at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. This and other events associated with the Iraq and Afghan Wars, although often very serious were, however, conducted in an atmosphere where public support for official action was relatively high.

American Foreign Policy in the Post-9/11 World

Until recently, the most striking feature of American foreign policy was the overwhelming influence of the realist, as opposed to idealist, school. In the context of the Cold War, American policy was couched in terms of self-interest; indeed, in terms of national survival. The ideological struggle between East and West centred on territory (in Europe and in the Third World) and on economic interest (was capitalism or Communism to be the model for world development?). During the early and mid-1980s, the Reagan administrations elevated this competitive struggle to the top of the policy agenda. Increased defence spending and military action in the Middle

East, Grenada, Libya and Central America were all justified in terms of the national interest. By the late 1980s, signs that this particular perspective on international relations was becoming obsolete were clearly evident, and by 1991 conditions had changed to the point where presidents were making reference to what was called 'the New World Order'.

The crucial change was, of course, the demise of the Soviet Union and more generally of Communism as a viable alternative to capitalism. Even in China, the last major redoubt of political Communism, a rejection of the centralized resource allocation of economic Communism had occurred. Communism's collapse did not transform the realist focus of American foreign policy. The Gulf War, for example, was fought at least in part to protect the West's oil supplies. But it did greatly complicate the business of identifying where, exactly, America's national interest lay. When there was an identifiable enemy whose economic and political system was so obviously alien to the American, justifying high defence spending and the deployment of US troops abroad was relatively easy. Today, such justification is harder. Instead of appealing to self-interest, the New World Order appeals to humanitarian motives. In Somalia, Bosnia, and most dramatically in Kosovo, no American interests were directly threatened, yet American troops, aircraft and ships were deployed under the auspices of a UN-sponsored humanitarian mission.

Idealism in foreign policy and the idea of a world community of nations was rudely shattered by the events of 9/11. At once, the US returned to a form of realist foreign policy designed to make both the 'Homeland' and American interests abroad safe from terrorist attacks. Part and parcel of the new philosophy was pre-emptive attacks on rogue states such as Afghanistan and Iraq as well as a substantially increased effort devoted to weeding out terrorist activity at home and abroad (see chapter 12). Given that the action in Iraq went ahead in the absence of a UN mandate for invasion (although the US did enjoy the support of the UK and some other countries) this policy represented something quite new in the history of foreign relations. Never in the modern era had the US taken pre-emptive action without the support of a broad alliance of countries usually acting under NATO or the UN. Even the Korean War was officially a UN sanctioned action. And Vietnam was, arguably, a defensive rather than an offensive war.

The wide perception outside of the US that that unilateral action was both immoral and illegal led to a dramatic reduction in respect for America that extended across a wide range of countries. America's reputation in poorer countries, and especially in the Middle East, was particularly badly damaged – although it could be argued that the US was always poorly thought of in these parts of the world. As worrying was the low esteem in which the US was held in the EU, including the expanding 25-member EU. As can be seen from figure 18.1, the US is held in low regard in comparison with the EU as a force for peace in the world. Even in the fight against terrorism in which it is the lead nation and where the EU plays a very minor role, it scores lower than the EU.

Aware of these problems, Democratic candidate John Kerry promised during the 2004 campaign to restore America's reputation abroad by pursuing a more multi-lateral foreign policy through consultation with allies and the United Nations. The new unilateralism of the Bush administration had a further unique characteristic:

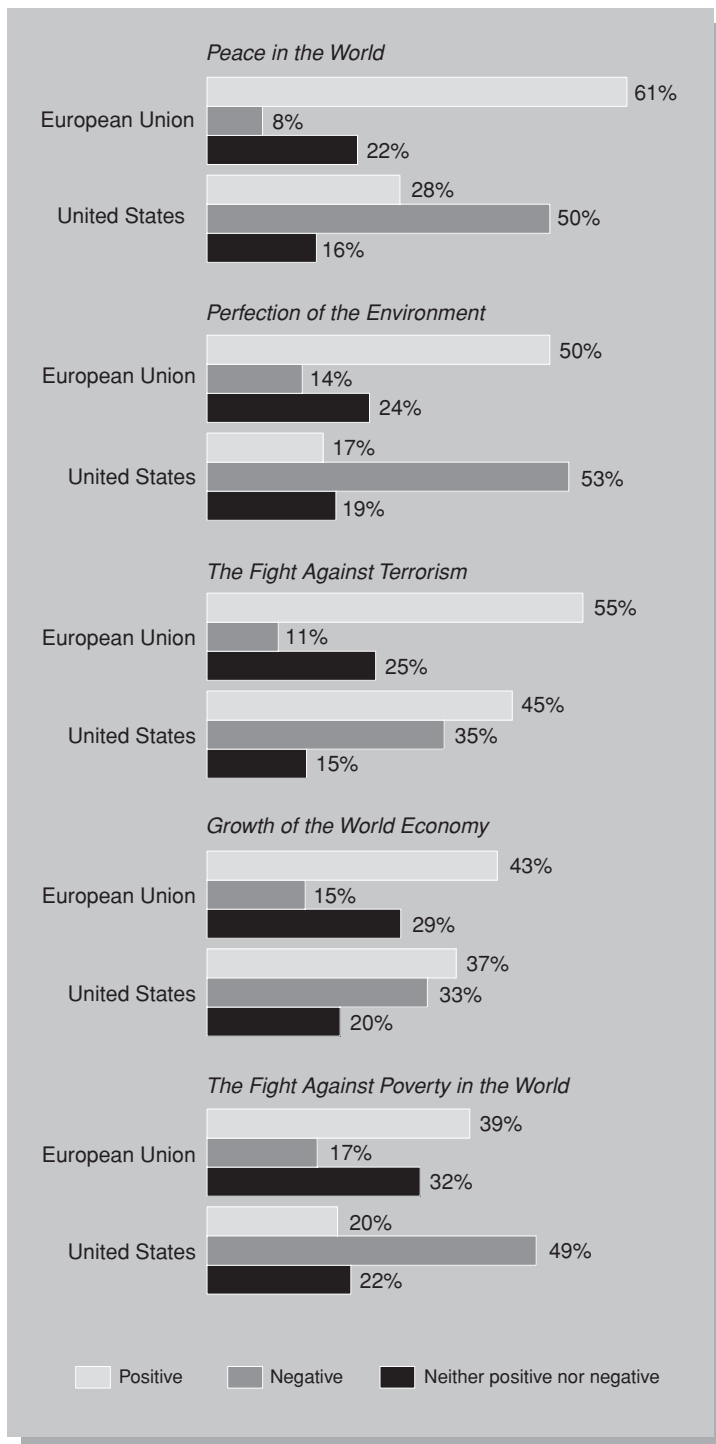


Figure 18.1 What role do Europe and the US play in key global policy areas? 'In your opinion, would you say that the [European Union/United States] tends to play a positive role, a negative role, or neither a positive nor negative role regarding . . .' (Asked of adults in 25 EU countries.)

Source: Eurobarometer; based on an Oct. 2003 poll.

the realist objective of securing America from terrorism was conflated with the idealist objective of imposing 'democracy' and 'freedom' on the invaded states. The dominant neo-conservative thinking in the Department of Defense (although not in the State Department) argued that any society could, with enough coercion, education and aid, become a functioning democracy. Although the progress towards such an ideal in Afghanistan and Iraq was halting, to say the least, the belief that democracy was exportable to almost every part of the world remained the dominant view of the administration.

Interestingly, the CIA and other intelligence sources were less convinced – a fact that contributed towards the resignation of CIA Director George Tenet and his deputy in 2004. On the other hand, it was the CIA that produced highly misleading intelligence on Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction – intelligence that helped precipitate the invasion of 2003.

As can be seen from table 18.1 defence expenditure has risen and fallen in line with changes in world events. When, in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, Communism collapsed in eastern Europe, a steep rise in public regard for the Soviet

Table 18.1 US defence spending, 1940–2005

Year	Annual percentage change ^a		Defence outlays as a percentage of	
	Current dollars	Constant dollars	Federal outlays	Gross domestic product
1940	–	–	17.5	1.7
1941	287.7	207.9	47.1	5.6
1942	298.7	227.9	73.0	17.8
1943	160.0	122.4	84.9	37.1
1944	18.7	17.9	86.7	37.9
1945	4.8	12.1	89.5	37.5
1946	–48.6	–42.6	77.3	19.1
1947	–70.0	–72.2	37.1	5.5
1948	–28.9	–24.8	30.6	3.5
1949	44.4	35.4	33.9	4.8
1950	4.4	2.6	32.2	5.0
1951	71.7	55.2	51.8	7.3
1952	95.6	85.3	68.1	13.2
1953	14.6	7.3	69.4	14.2
1954	–6.7	–8.0	69.5	13.0
1955	–13.3	–14.6	62.4	10.8
1956	–0.5	–6.7	60.2	9.9
1957	6.8	2.1	59.3	10.1
1958	3.0	–1.4	56.8	10.2
1959	4.7	0.1	53.2	10.0
1960	–1.8	0.6	52.2	9.3
1961	3.1	0.7	50.8	9.3
1962	5.5	3.5	49.0	9.2
1963	2.0	–2.0	48.0	8.9

Table 18.1 (cont'd)

Year	Annual percentage change ^a		Defence outlays as a percentage of	
	Current dollars	Constant dollars	Federal outlays	Gross domestic product
1964	2.5	1.4	46.2	8.6
1965	-7.6	-7.6	42.8	7.4
1966	14.8	10.1	43.2	7.7
1967	22.9	18.0	45.4	8.8
1968	14.7	8.9	46.0	9.4
1969	0.7	-4.2	44.9	8.7
1970	-1.0	-6.5	41.8	8.1
1971	-3.5	-9.0	37.5	7.3
1972	0.4	-8.2	34.3	6.7
1973	-3.1	-9.1	31.2	5.9
1974	3.5	-4.7	29.5	5.5
1975	9.0	-1.8	26.0	5.6
1976	3.6	-3.3	24.1	5.2
1977	8.5	-0.2	23.8	4.9
1978	7.5	0.5	22.8	4.7
1979	11.3	2.1	23.1	4.7
1980	15.2	3.4	22.7	4.9
1981	17.6	5.4	23.2	5.2
1982	17.6	9.0	24.8	5.8
1983	13.3	7.7	26.0	6.1
1984	8.3	1.2	26.7	6.0
1985	11.1	6.5	26.7	6.2
1986	8.2	6.1	27.6	6.2
1987	3.2	1.6	28.1	6.1
1988	3.0	1.2	27.3	5.9
1989	4.5	1.3	26.5	5.7
1990	-1.4	-4.0	23.9	5.3
1991	-8.7	-12.7	20.6	4.7
1992	9.2	5.3	21.6	4.9
1993	-2.4	-4.0	20.7	4.5
1994	-3.2	-5.1	19.3	4.1
1995	-3.4	-5.6	17.9	3.8
1996	-2.3	-5.6	17.0	3.5
1997	1.8	-0.5	16.9	3.4
1998	-0.8	-1.9	16.2	3.2
1999	2.4	0.3	16.0	3.2
2000	7.1	3.9	16.5	3.0
2001	3.7	1.8	16.4	3.0
2002	14.1	11.5	17.3	3.4
2005 est.	5.0	3.5	17.5	3.4

Note: – indicates data not available.

^a Change from prior year.

Source: *Vital Statistics on American Politics, 2003–2004*, table 9.8, pp. 346–7.

Union (or Russia) and a sharp decline in the perceived need for defence spending occurred. Defence spending did indeed decrease following these events. Expressed as a percentage of GDP, defence spending fell from well over 6 per cent in the mid-1980s to an estimated 3.2 per cent in 1999. However, the fall was temporary as the demands of the post-9/11 period kicked in. By 2005 defence spending stood at 3.4 per cent – still a relatively low figure by historical standards.

Even so, the United States remains easily the world's most powerful military force. In terms of rapid deployment, the USA has no peer. Only the American forces can be moved rapidly around the world to meet a crisis or emergency. No other country has this capacity. This fact alone puts pressure on American politicians to play the role of global policing and to take on the role of international regulator of relations between countries – a role that became highly controversial in the wake of the actions taken after 9/11.

In spite of recent setbacks to US foreign policy it will almost certainly continue to broker peace, whether it be in Israel, Iraq, the Korean peninsula or the Sudan. The danger comes when the costs of intervention, whether measured in terms of expenditure or of American lives, become too great for public opinion to tolerate. When this happens, there is always the possibility that America will revert to the isolationist stance typical of the pre-1941 period. So far, however, interventionism has prevailed, even if it has been of the unilateralist rather than multilateralist variety. Supporters of genuine isolationism in both the Democratic Party (usually on foreign economic policy issues) and the Republican Party certainly exist, but no president of any party has espoused the cause. Even the post-1994 Republican leadership in Congress, including Speaker Newt Gingrich (later Dennis Hastert) and Majority Leader Trent Lott (later Bill Frist), broadly supported President Clinton's foreign policy positions and later President Bush's interventionist policy of pre-emptive strikes.

Conclusions: Bound to Lead or Bound to Fail?

It should be obvious from this discussion that US foreign policy is now a strange amalgam of realist and idealist values. Militarily, the US is now more privileged than ever before. Twenty years ago, who would have remotely guessed that the United States would, by 1997, be negotiating with Russia over the eastward expansion of NATO? Where the USA is more circumscribed is in terms of defining its new mission and in building domestic support for an active role abroad. This applies to 'traditional' foreign policy and to foreign *economic* policy. As indicated above, the US now lives in a much more interdependent world. It is in relations with the European Union, negotiations in the World Trade Organization (WTO), the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) and American contributions to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that some of the more important foreign policy questions are raised. Clearly, these have a much greater input from domestic politics than do most 'traditional' foreign policy areas.

This interdependence often makes it difficult to distinguish clearly between different policy systems, and there is no doubt that it makes the business of government more burdensome. Given the external constraints imposed by interdependence and

the internal pressures resulting from a fragmented and open political system, it is not surprising that presidents have sought to centralize decision-making in the White House. 9/11 made this imperative even more necessary. As a result, a number of serious policy mistakes were made, including a gross exaggeration of the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the abuse of Iraqi prisoners, the internment without trial of detainees in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and the alienation of most other members of the world community, including many EU countries.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Why are the United States and its policies apparently so vilified in many parts of the World? What might political leaders do to improve America's image abroad?
- 2 'In foreign policy, George W. Bush has more freedom of manoeuvre than any president in history.' Discuss.
- 3 How did 11 September 2001 change the nature of the US presidency? Answer with respect to foreign and domestic policy.
- 4 Is the 'War on Terrorism' winnable?

NOTES

- 1 The classic account of the realist position is by Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York: Knopf, 1951).
- 2 The top 8 arms contractors in terms of Defense contracts in 2002 were Lockheed Martin, Boeing/McDonnell Douglas, Newport News, Raytheon, United Technologies, TRW Incorporated, General Dynamics, and Northrop Grumman.
- 3 Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

FURTHER READING

A textbook treatment of foreign policy is provided by Thomas L. Brewer and Lorne Teitelbaum, *American Foreign Policy: A Contemporary Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997). For an analysis of the problems facing American foreign policy in the post-9/11 era, see Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrow of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic* (London: Verso, 2004); also Ivo Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*, Washington DC: Brookings 2004; John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise Security and the American Experience* (London: Harvard University Press, 2004). See also Joseph S. Nye Jr, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).