Imperial by Design

By John J. Mearsheimer

In the first years after the Cold War ended, many Americans had a profound sense of optimism about the future of international politics. President Bill Clinton captured that mood when he told the UN General Assembly in September 1993:

> It is clear that we live at a turning point in human history. Immense and promising changes seem to wash over us every day. The Cold War is over. The world is no longer divided into two armed and angry camps. Dozens of new democracies have been born. It is a moment of miracles.

The basis of all this good feeling was laid out at the time in two famous articles by prominent neoconservatives. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama argued in "The End of History?" that Western liberal democracy had won a decisive victory over communism and fascism and should be seen as the "final form of human government."[1] One consequence of this "ideological evolution," he argued, was that large-scale conflict between the great powers was "passing from the scene," although "the vast bulk of the Third World remains very much mired in history, and will be a terrain of conflict for many years to come." Nevertheless, liberal democracy and peace would eventually come to the Third World as well, because the sands of time were pushing inexorably in that direction.

One year later, Charles Krauthammer emphasized in "The Unipolar Moment" that the United States had emerged from the Cold War as by far the most powerful country on the planet.[2] He urged American leaders not to be reticent about using that power "to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them." Krauthammer's advice fit neatly with Fukuyama's vision of the future: the United States should take the lead in bringing democracy to less developed countries the world over. After all, that shouldn't be an especially difficult task given that America had awesome power and the cunning of history on its side.

U.S. grand strategy has followed this basic prescription for the past twenty years, mainly because most policy makers inside the Beltway have agreed with the thrust of Fukuyama's and Krauthammer's early analyses.

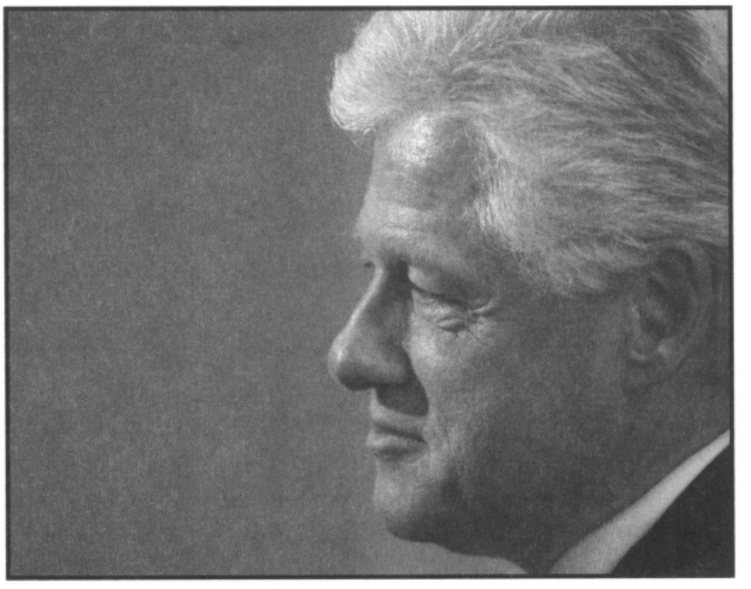
The results, however, have been disastrous. The United States has been at war for

John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. He is on the Advisory Council of *The National Interest*, and his most recent book, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth About Lying in International Politics*, was published in January 2011 by Oxford University Press.

[1] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* (Summer 1989).

[2] Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990/1991).

a startling two out of every three years since 1989, and there is no end in sight. As anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of world events knows, countries that continuously fight wars invariably build powerful national-security bureaucracies that undermine civil liberties and make it difficult to hold leaders accountable for their behavior; and they invariably end up adopting ruthless policies normally associated with brutal dictators. The Founding Fathers understood this problem, as is clear from James Madison's observation that "no nation can preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare." Washington's pursuit of policies like assassination, rendition and torture over the past decade, not to mention the weakening of the rule of law at home, shows that their fears were justified.



To make matters worse, the United States is now engaged in protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that have so far cost well over a trillion dollars and resulted in around forty-seven thousand American casualties. The pain and suffering inflicted on Iraq has been enormous. Since the war began in March 2003, more than one hundred thousand Iraqi civilians have been killed, roughly 2 million Iraqis have left the country and 1.7 million more have been internally displaced. Moreover, the American military is not going to win either one of these conflicts, despite all the phony talk about how the "surge" has worked in Iraq and how a similar strategy can produce another miracle in Afghanistan. We may well be stuck in both quagmires for years to come, in fruitless pursuit of victory.

The United States has also been unable to solve three other major foreign-policy problems. Washington has worked overtime—with no success—to shut down Iran's uranium-enrichment capability for fear that it might lead to Tehran acquiring nuclear weapons. And the United States, unable to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons in the first place, now seems incapable of compelling Pyongyang to give them up. Finally, every post–Cold War administration has tried and failed to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; all indicators are that this problem will deteriorate further as the West Bank and Gaza are incorporated into a Greater Israel.

The unpleasant truth is that the United States is in a world of trouble today on the foreign-policy front, and this state of affairs is only likely to get worse in the next few years, as Afghanistan and Iraq unravel and the blame game escalates to poisonous levels. Thus, it is hardly surprising that a recent Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey found that "looking forward 50 years, only 33 percent of Americans think

the United States will continue to be the world's leading power." Clearly, the heady days of the early 1990s have given way to a pronounced pessimism.

This regrettable situation raises the obvious questions of what went wrong? And can America right its course?

The downward spiral the United States has taken was anything but inevitable. Washington has always had a choice in how to approach grand strategy. One popular option among some libertarians is *isolationism.* This approach is based on the assumption that there is no region outside the Western Hemisphere that is strategically important enough to justify expending American blood and treasure. Isolationists believe that the United States is remarkably secure because it is separated from all of the world's great powers by two giant moats—the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans—and on top of that it has had nuclear weapons—the ultimate deterrent—since 1945. But in truth, there is really no chance that Washington will adopt this policy, though the United States had strong isolationist tendencies until World War II. For since then, an internationalist activism, fostered by the likes of the Rockefeller Foundation, has thoroughly delegitimized this approach. American policy makers have come to believe the country should be militarily involved on the world stage. Yet though no mainstream politician would dare advocate isolationism at this point, the rationale for this grand strategy shows just how safe the United States is. This means, among other things, that it will always be a challenge to motivate the U.S. public to want to run the world and especially to fight wars of choice in distant places.

Offshore balancing, which was America's traditional grand strategy for most of its history, is but another option. Predicated on the belief that there are three regions of the world that are strategically important to the United States—Europe, Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf—it sees the United States' principle goal as making sure no country dominates any of these areas as it dominates the Western Hemisphere. This is to ensure that dangerous rivals in other regions are forced to concentrate their attention on great powers in their own backyards rather than be free to interfere in America's. The best way to achieve that end is to rely on local powers to counter aspiring regional hegemons and otherwise keep U.S. military forces over the horizon. But if that proves impossible, American troops come from offshore to help do the job, and then leave once the potential hegemon is checked.

Selective engagement also assumes that Europe, Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf are the only areas of the world where the United States should be willing to deploy its military might. It is a more ambitious strategy than offshore balancing in that it calls for permanently stationing U.S. troops in those regions to help maintain peace. For selective engagers, it is not enough just to thwart aspiring hegemons. It is also necessary to prevent war in those key regions, either because upheaval will damage our economy or because we will eventually get dragged into the fight in any case. An American presence is also said to be valuable for limiting nuclear proliferation. But none of these strategies call for Washington to spread democracy around the globe—especially through war.

The root cause of America's troubles is that it adopted a flawed grand strategy after the Cold War. From the Clinton administration on, the United States rejected all these other avenues, instead pursuing *global dominance*, or what might alternatively be called global hegemony, which was not just doomed to fail, but likely to backfire in dangerous ways if it relied too

The United States has been at war for a startling two out of every three years since 1989, and there is no end in sight.

heavily on military force to achieve its ambitious agenda.

Global dominance has two broad objectives: maintaining American primacy, which means making sure that the United States remains the most powerful state in the international system; and spreading democracy across the globe, in effect, making the world over in America's image. The underlying belief is that new liberal democracies will be peacefully inclined and pro-American, so the more the better. Of course, this means that Washington must care a lot about every country's politics. With global dominance, no serious attempt is made to prioritize U.S. interests, because they are virtually limitless.

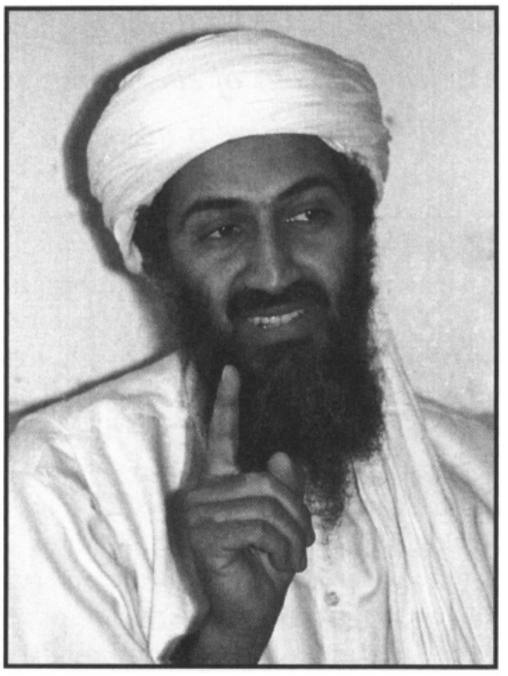
This grand strategy is "imperial" at its core; its proponents believe that the United States has the right as well as the responsibility to interfere in the politics of other countries. One would think that such arrogance might alienate other states, but most American policy makers of the early nineties and beyond were confident that would not happen, instead believing that other countries—save for so-called rogue states like Iran and North Korea—would see the United States as a benign hegemon serving their own interests.

There is, however, an important disagreement among global dominators about how best to achieve their strategy's goals. On one side are the neoconservatives, who believe that the United States can rely heavily on armed force to dominate and transform the globe, and that it can usually act unilaterally because American power is so great. Indeed, they tend to be openly contemptuous of Washington's traditional allies as well as international institutions, which they view as forums where the Lilliputians tie down Gulliver. Neoconservatives see spreading democracy as a relatively easy task. For them, the key to success is removing the reigning tyrant; once that is done, there is little need to engage in protracted nation building.

On the other side are the liberal imperialists, who are certainly willing to use the American military to do social engineering. But they are less confident than the neoconservatives about what can be achieved with force alone. Therefore, liberal imperialists believe that running the world requires the United States to work closely with allies and international institutions. Although they think that democracy has widespread appeal, liberal imperialists are usually less sanguine than the neoconservatives about the ease of exporting it to other states. As we set off to remake the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall, these principles of global dominance set the agenda.

Bill Clinton was the first president to govern exclusively in the post–Cold War world, and his administration pursued global dominance from start to finish. Yet Clinton's foreign-policy team was comprised of liberal imperialists; so, although the president and his lieutenants made clear that they were bent on ruling the world—blatantly reflected in former–Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's well-known comment that "if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future"—they employed

military force reluctantly and prudently. They may have been gung ho about pushing the unipolar moment onward and upward, but for all their enthusiasm, even these democracy promoters soon saw that nation building was no easy task.



During his first year in office, Clinton carelessly allowed the United States to get involved in nation building in Somalia. But when eighteen American soldiers were killed in a firefight in Mogadishu in October 1993 (famously rendered in *Black Hawk Down*), he immediately pulled U.S. troops out of the country. In fact, the administration was so spooked by the fiasco that it refused to intervene during the Rwandan genocide in the spring of 1994, even though the cost of doing so would have been small. Yes, Clinton did commit American forces to Haiti in September 1994 to help remove a brutal military regime, but he had to overcome significant congressional opposition and he went to great lengths to get a UN resolution supporting a multinational intervention force. Most of the American troops were out of Haiti by March 1996, and at no time was there a serious attempt at nation building.

Clinton did talk tough during the 1992 presidential campaign about using American power against Serbia to halt the fighting in Bosnia, but after taking office, he dragged his feet and only used airpower in 1995 to end the fighting. He went to war against Serbia for a second time in 1999—this time over Kosovo—and once again would only rely on airpower, despite pressure to deploy ground forces from his NATO commander, General Wesley Clark, and then–British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

By early 1998, the neoconservatives were pressuring Clinton to use military force to remove Saddam Hussein. The president endorsed the long-term goal of ousting the Iraqi leader, but he refused to go to war to make that happen. The United States under Bill Clinton was, as Richard Haass put it, a "reluctant sheriff."

Although the Clinton administration made little progress toward achieving global hegemony during its eight-year reign, it at least managed to avoid any major foreign-policy disasters. It seemed to understand the inherent difficulties of nation building and devoted neither much blood nor much treasure in its pursuit.

Nevertheless, given the American public's natural reluctance to engage in foreign adventures, by the 2000 presidential campaign, many were unhappy with even this cautious liberal imperialism. George W. Bush tried to capitalize on this sentiment by criticizing Clinton's foreign policy as overzealous—and as it turns out, ironically, especially for doing too much nation building. The Republican candidate called for the United States to scale back its goals and concentrate on reinvigorating its traditional Cold War alliances. The main threat facing the United States, he argued, was a rising China; terrorism was

paid little attention. In effect, Bush was calling for a grand strategy of selective engagement. Not surprisingly, his opponent, Vice President Al Gore, called for pursuing global dominance, albeit in a multilateral guise.

When Bush won, it appeared that the United States was about to adopt a less ambitious grand strategy. But that did not happen because the new Bush administration drastically altered its approach to the world after 9/11.

There was never any question that Washington would treat terrorism as its main threat after that horrific day. But it was not clear at first how the administration would deal with the problem. Over the course of the next year, Bush turned away from selective engagement and embraced global dominance. Unlike his predecessor in the White House, however, he adopted the neoconservative formula for ruling the world. And that meant relying primarily on the unilateral use of American military force. From the early days of Afghanistan onward, America was to enter the age of the "Bush Doctrine," which was all about using the U.S. military to bring about regime change across the Muslim and Arab world. It is easy to forget now, but Iraq was supposed to be a step in the remarkably far-reaching plan to sow democracy in an area of the world where it was largely absent, thereby creating peace. President Bush put the point succinctly in early 2003 when he said, "By the resolve and purpose of America, and of our friends and allies, we will make this an age of progress and liberty. Free people will set the course of history, and free people will keep the peace of the world."

By pursuing this extraordinary scheme to transform an entire region at the point of a gun, President Bush adopted a radical grand strategy that has no parallel in American history. It was also a dismal failure.

The Bush administration's quest for global dominance was based on a profound misunderstanding of the threat environment facing the United States after 9/11. And the president and his advisers overestimated what military force could achieve in the modern world, in turn greatly underestimating how difficult it would be to spread democracy in the Middle East. This triumvirate of errors doomed Washington's effort to dominate the globe, undermined American values and institutions on the home front, and threatened its position in the world.

With the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Bush administration all of a sudden was forced to think seriously about terrorism. Unfortunately, the president—and most Americans for that matter—misread what the country was dealing with in two important ways: greatly exaggerating the threat's severity, and failing to understand why al-Qaeda was so enraged at the United States. These mistakes led the administration to adopt policies that made the problem worse, not better.

In the aftermath of 9/11, terrorism was described as an existential threat. President Bush emphasized that virtually every terrorist group on the planet—including those that had no beef with Washington—was our enemy and had to be eliminated if we hoped to win what became known as the global war on terror (GWOT). The administration also maintained that states like Iran, Iraq and Syria were not only actively supporting terrorist organizations but were also likely to provide terrorists with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Thus, it was imperative for the United States to target these rogue states if it hoped to win the GWOT—or what some neoconservatives like Norman Podhoretz called World War IV. Indeed, Bush said that any country which "continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded

by the United States as a hostile regime." Finally, the administration claimed that it was relatively easy for groups like al-Qaeda to infiltrate and strike the homeland, and that we should expect more disasters like 9/11 in the near future. The greatest danger for sure would be a WMD attack against a major American city.

This assessment of America's terrorism problem was flawed on every count. It was threat inflation of the highest order. It made no sense to declare war against groups that were not trying to harm the United States. They were not our enemies; and going after all terrorist organizations would greatly complicate the daunting task of eliminating those groups that did have us in their crosshairs. In addition, there was no alliance between the so-called rogue states and al-Qaeda. In fact, Iran and Syria cooperated with Washington after 9/11 to help quash Osama bin Laden and his cohorts. Although the Bush administration and the neoconservatives repeatedly asserted that there was a genuine connection between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, they never produced evidence to back up their claim for the simple reason that it did not exist.

The fact is that states have strong incentives to distrust terrorist groups, in part because they might turn on them someday, but also because countries cannot control what terrorist organizations do, and they may do something that gets their patrons into serious trouble. This is why there is hardly any chance that a rogue state will give a nuclear weapon to terrorists. That regime's leaders could never be sure that they would not be blamed and punished for a terrorist group's actions. Nor could they be certain that the United States or Israel would not incinerate them if either country merely suspected that they had provided terrorists with the ability to carry out a WMD attack. A nuclear handoff, therefore, is not a serious threat.

When you get down to it, there is only a remote possibility that terrorists will get hold of an atomic bomb. The most likely way it would happen is if there were political chaos in a nuclear-armed state, and terrorists or their friends were able to take advantage of the ensuing confusion to snatch a loose nuclear weapon. But even then, there are additional obstacles to overcome: some countries keep their weapons disassembled, detonating one is not easy and it would be difficult to transport the device without being detected. Moreover, other countries would have powerful incentives to work with Washington to find the weapon before it could be used. The obvious implication is that we should work with other states to improve nuclear security, so as to make this slim possibility even more unlikely.

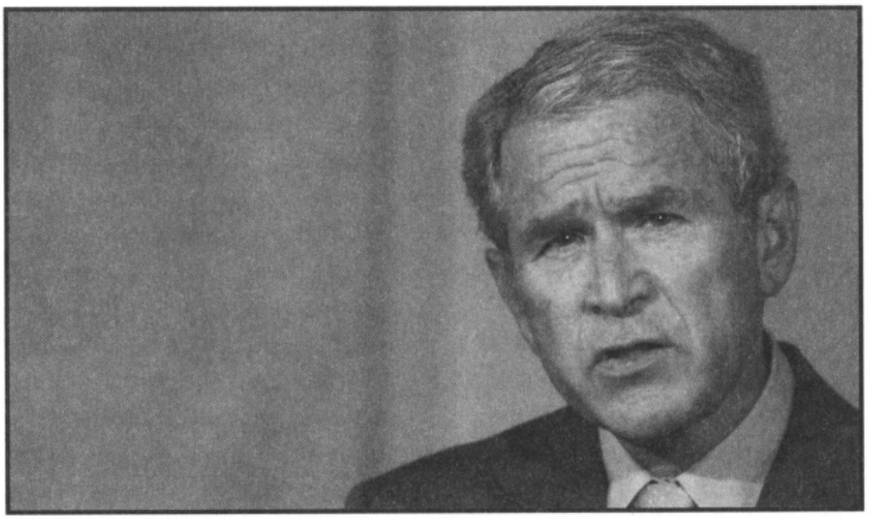
Finally, the ability of terrorists to strike the American homeland has been blown out of all proportion. In the nine years since 9/11, government officials and terrorist experts have issued countless warnings that another major attack on American soil is probable—even imminent. But this is simply not the case.[3] The only attempts we have seen are a few failed solo attacks by individuals with links to al-Qaeda like the "shoe bomber," who attempted to blow up an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami in December 2001, and the "underwear bomber," who tried to blow up a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit in December 2009. So, we do have a terrorism problem, but it is hardly an existential threat. In fact, it is a minor threat. Perhaps the scope of the challenge is best captured by Ohio State political scientist John Mueller's telling comment that "the number of Americans killed by

[3] Ian S. Lustick, *Our Own Strength Against Us: The War on Terror as a Self-Inflicted Disaster* (Oakland, CA: The Independent Institute, 2008).

international terrorism since the late 1960s . . . is about the same as the number killed over the same period by lightning, or by accident-causing deer, or by severe allergic reactions to peanuts."

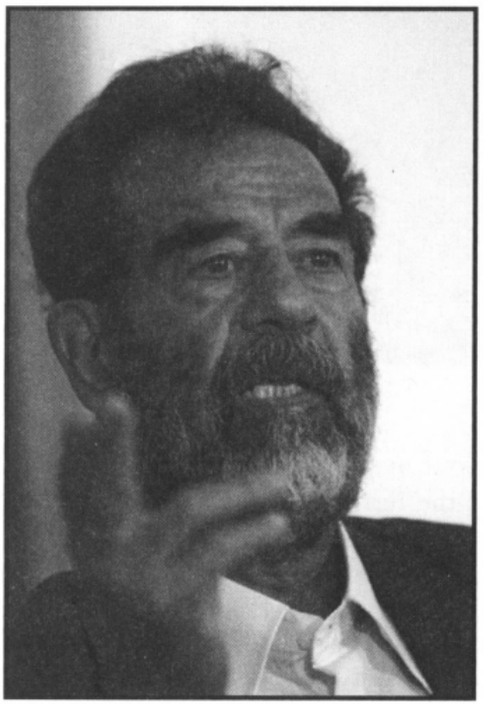
One might argue that there has been no attack on American soil since 9/11 because the GWOT has been a great success. But that claim is undermined by the fact that al-Qaeda was trying hard to strike the United States in the decade before 9/11, when there was no GWOT, and it succeeded only once. In February 1993, al-Qaeda exploded a truck bomb in a garage below the World Trade Center, killing six people. More than eight years passed before the group struck that same building complex for the second time. None of this is to deny that 9/11 was a spectacular success for the terrorists, but it was no Pearl Harbor, which launched the United States into battles against Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany, two truly dangerous adversaries. Roughly 50 million people—the majority of them civilians—died in that conflict. It is absurd to compare al-Qaeda with Germany and Japan, or to liken the GWOT to a world war.

This conspicuous threat inflation has hurt the American effort to neutralize al-Qaeda. By foolishly widening the scope of the terrorism problem, Washington has ended up picking fights with terrorist groups and countries that otherwise had no interest in attacking the United States, and in some cases were willing to help us thwart al-Qaeda. Enlarging the target set has also led American policy makers to take their eyes off our main adversary. Furthermore, defining the terrorist threat so broadly, coupled with the constant warnings about looming attacks that might be even more deadly than 9/11, has led U.S. leaders to wage war all around the globe and to think of this struggle as lasting for generations. This is exactly the wrong formula for dealing with our terrorism problem. We should instead focus our attention wholly on al-Qaeda and any other group that targets the United States, and we should treat the threat as a law-enforcement problem rather than a military one that requires us to engage in large-scale wars the world over. Specifically, we should rely mainly on intelligence, police work, carefully selected covert operations and close cooperation with allies to neutralize the likes of al-Qaeda.



To deal effectively with terrorism, it is imperative to understand what motivates al-Qaeda to target the United States in the first place. One also wants to know why large numbers of people in the Arab and Muslim world are so angry with America that they support, or at least sympathize with, these types of terrorist groups. Simply put, why do they hate us?

There are two possible answers to this question. One possibility is that al-Qaeda and its supporters loathe us because of who we are; in other words, this is a clash of



civilizations that has arisen because these extremists hate Western values in general and liberal democracy in particular. Alternatively, these groups may hate us because they are furious with our Middle East policies. There is an abundance of survey data and anecdotal evidence that shows the second answer is the right one. Anger and hatred toward the United States among Arabs and Muslims is largely driven by Washington's policies, not by any deep-seated antipathy toward the West.[4] The policies that have generated the most anti-Americanism include Washington's support for Israel's treatment of the Palestinians; the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia after the 1991 Gulf War; U.S. support for repressive regimes in countries like Egypt; American sanctions on Baghdad after the First Gulf War, which are estimated to have caused the deaths of about five hundred thousand Iraqi civilians; and the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq.

None of this is to say that the hard-core members of al-Qaeda like or respect American values and institutions because surely most of them do not. But there is little evidence that they dislike them so much that they would be motivated to declare war on the United States. The case of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed—who the 9/11 Commission described as "the principal architect of the 9/11 attacks"—tells us a great deal. The Palestinian issue, not hatred of the American way of life, motivated him. In the commission's words, "By his own account, KSM's animus toward the United States stemmed not from his experiences there as a student, but rather from his violent disagreement with U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel." The commission also confirmed that bin Laden was motivated in good part by America's support for Israel's behavior toward the Palestinians.

Not surprisingly, President Bush and his advisers rejected this explanation of 9/11,

[4] Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, September 2004); John Zogby and James Zogby, "Impressions of America 2004: How Arabs View America; How Arabs Learn about America" (Washington, DC: Zogby International, 2004).

because accepting it would effectively have been an admission that the United States bore considerable responsibility for the events of that tragic day. We would be acknowledging that it was our Middle East policies that were at the heart of it all. Instead, right after 9/11 happened the president stated, "They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other." Despite all the evidence to the contrary, this argument sold well in America—at least for a few years. But what were the policy implications of portraying the fight with al-Qaeda as a clash between two different ways of life?

There was no chance that the United States was going to change its basic character to solve its terrorism problem. Instead, the Bush administration decided to carry out social engineering on a grand scale. No lessons learned from the dismal record of nation building in the Clinton years. Yes! We would bring liberal democracy and Western values to the Arabs and the Iranians, and our troubles with terrorism would go away. "The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values," the president said, "because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder."

Given American military might and the belief that democracy was sweeping the globe, the Bush administration and its supporters reasoned that it would be relatively easy to remake the Arab and Muslim world in America's image. They were wrong, of course, for the Bush administration failed to understand the limits of what American military power could do to transform the Middle East.

The faulty assumption that America could perform social engineering through its indomitable military might—beyond the lofty theorizing of the neoconservatives—found its roots in Afghanistan. By December 2001, it appeared that the U.S. military had won a quick and stunning victory against the Taliban and installed a friendly regime in Kabul that would be able to govern the country effectively for the foreseeable future. Very importantly, the war was won with a combination of American airpower, local allies and small Special Forces units. How easy it seemed to deliver that country its freedom. There was no need for a large-scale invasion, so when the fighting ended, the United States did not look like an occupier. Nor did it seem likely to become one, because Hamid Karzai was expected to keep order in Afghanistan without much U.S. help.

The perception of a stunning triumph in Afghanistan was significant because leaders rarely initiate wars unless they think that they can win quick and decisive victories. The prospect of fighting a protracted conflict makes policy makers gun-shy, not just because the costs are invariably high, but also because it is hard to tell how long wars will come to an end. But by early 2002, it seemed that the United States had found a blueprint for winning wars in the developing world quickly and decisively, thus eliminating the need for a protracted occupation. It appeared that the American military could exit a country soon after toppling its regime and installing a new leader, and move on to the next target. It looked like the neoconservatives had been vindicated. This interpretation convinced many people in the foreign-policy establishment that the road was now open for using the U.S. military to transform the Middle East and dominate the globe.

And with this hubris firmly in place, America attacked Iraq on March 19, 2003. Within a few months, it looked like the "Afghan model" had proved its worth again. Saddam was in hiding and President Bush landed on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* with a big banner in the background that an-

nounced: "Mission Accomplished." It seemed at the time that it would not be long before the next war began, maybe against Iran or Syria, and then the other states in the region might be so scared of America that merely threatening them with an attack would be enough to cause regime change.

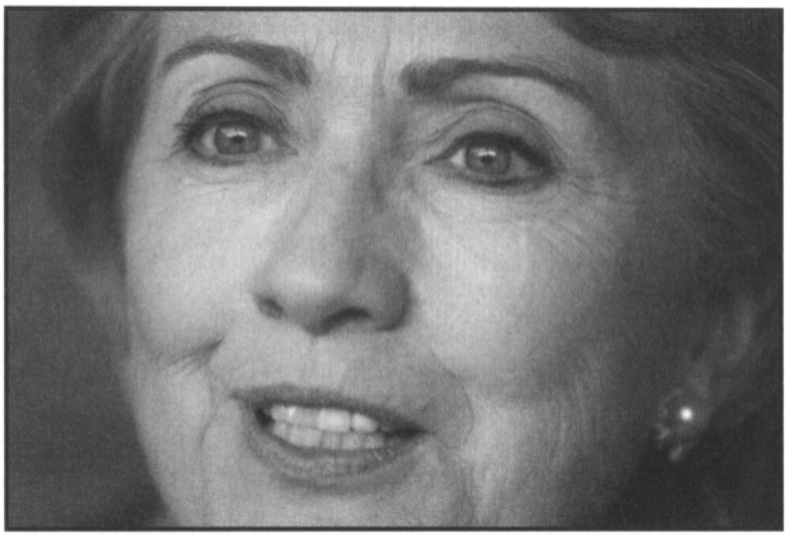
It all turned out to be a mirage, of course, as Iraq quickly became a deadly quagmire with Afghanistan following suit a few years later.

Indeed, what initially appeared to be a dazzling victory in Afghanistan was not. There was little chance that the United States would avoid a protracted occupation, since we faced two insurmountable problems. While it was relatively easy to topple the Taliban from power, it was not possible for the American military and its allies to decisively defeat that foe. When cornered and facing imminent destruction, Taliban fighters melted away into the countryside or across the border into Pakistan, where they could regroup and eventually come back to fight another day. This is why insurgencies with external sanctuaries have been especially difficult to stamp out in the past.

Furthermore, the Karzai government was doomed to fail, not just because its leader was put in power by Washington, and not just because Afghanistan has always had a weak central government, but also because Karzai and his associates are incompetent and corrupt. This meant that there would be no central authority to govern the country and check the Taliban when it came back to life. And that meant the United States would have to do the heavy lifting. American troops would have to occupy the country and fight the Taliban, and they would have to do so in support of a fragile government with little legitimacy outside of Kabul. As anyone familiar with the Vietnam War knows, this is a prescription for defeat.

If more evidence is needed that the "Afghan model" does not work as advertised, Iraq provides it. Contrary to what the neoconservatives claimed before the invasion, the United States could not topple Saddam and avoid a long occupation, unless it was willing to put another dictator in charge. Not only did Baghdad have few well-established political institutions and a weak civil society, the removal of Saddam was certain to unleash powerful centrifugal forces that would lead to a bloody civil war in the absence of a large American presence. In particular, the politically strong Sunnis were sure to resist losing power to the more numerous Shia, who would benefit the most from the U.S. invasion. There were also profound differences among various Shia groups, and the Kurds did not even want to be ruled by Baghdad. On top of all that, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia eventually emerged on the scene. (Of course, the United States did not face a terrorist threat from Iraq before the invasion.) All of this meant that a protracted American occupation would be necessary to keep the country from tearing itself apart.

And long, messy occupations were always inevitable. For though one might argue that the United States would have succeeded in Afghanistan had it not invaded Iraq and instead concentrated on building a competent government in Kabul that could keep the Taliban at bay, even if this were true (and I have my doubts), it still would have taken a decade or more to do the job. During this time the U.S. military would have been pinned down in Afghanistan and thus unavailable to invade Iraq and other countries in the Middle East. The Bush Doctrine, however, was dependent on winning quick and decisive victories, which means that even a drawn-out success in Afghanistan would have doomed the strategy.



Alternatively, one might argue that the main problem in Afghanistan and Iraq was that the U.S. military had a flawed counterinsurgency doctrine during the early stages of those conflicts. According to this story, the United States eventually found the right formula with the December 2006 edition of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps *Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24* (FM 3-24). Indeed, the purported success of the Iraq surge is often ascribed to the implementation of the new rules of engagement. Some even claim that it has helped us achieve victory in Iraq. The problem with this argument is that President Bush made clear when the surge was launched in January 2007 that tamping down the violence was a necessary but not sufficient condition for success. He wisely emphasized that it was also essential that rival Iraqi groups ameliorate their differences and find a workable system for sharing political power. But to this day there has been little progress in fixing Iraq's fractured society and building an effective political system, as evidenced by the difficulty Iraqi politicians have had forming a government in the wake of the March 7, 2010, parliamentary elections. Hence, the surge has not been a success. This failure is not for lack of trying; nation building is a daunting task. The scope of the challenge is still greater in Afghanistan. So even if one believes that the American military now has a smart counterinsurgency doctrine, the fact is that it has yet to succeed.

There is no question that it is possible to defeat an insurgency, but it is almost never quick or easy, and there is no single formula for success. As FM 3-24 warns, "Political and military leaders and planners should never underestimate its scale and complexity." Even in a best-case scenario like the Malayan Emergency, where the British faced a numerically weak and unpopular Communist guerrilla force based in the small Chinese minority, pacification still took roughly a dozen years. What makes the enterprise so difficult is that victory usually requires more than just defeating the insurgents in firefights. It usually demands nation building as well because it is essential to fix the political and social problems that caused the insurgency in the first place; otherwise, it is likely to spring back to life. So even if it was a sure bet that the United States could succeed at counterinsurgency with the right people and doctrine, it would still

By pursuing this extraordinary scheme to transform an entire region at the point of a gun, President Bush adopted a radical grand strategy that has no parallel in American history.

take many years to achieve decisive results. "Insurgencies," as FM 3-24 notes, "are protracted by nature." This means that when the American military engages in this kind of war fighting, it will end up pinned down in a lengthy occupation. And when that happens, the Bush Doctrine cannot work.

But the Bush administration and its neoconservative supporters badly miscalculated how easy it would be to create free, stable societies in the Middle East. They thought that beheading regimes was essentially all that was needed for democracy to take hold.

It is hard to believe that any policy maker or student of international affairs could have believed that democracy would spring forth quickly and easily once tyrants like Saddam Hussein were toppled. After all, it is clear from the historical record that imposing democracy on another country is an especially difficult task that usually fails.[5] Jeffrey Pickering and Mark Peceny, who investigated the democratizing consequences of interventions by liberal states from 1946 to 1996, conclude that "liberal intervention . . . has only very rarely played a role in democratization since 1945."[6]

The United States in particular has a rich history of trying and failing to impose democracy on other countries. New York University professors Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George Downs report in the *Los Angeles Times* that:

> Between World War II and the present, the United States intervened more than 35 times in developing countries around the world. . . . In only one case—Colombia after the American decision in 1989 to engage in the war on drugs—did a full-fledged, stable democracy . . . emerge within 10 years. That's a success rate of less than 3%.

Pickering and Peceny similarly find only a single case—Panama after the removal of Manuel Noriega—in which American intervention clearly resulted in the emergence of a consolidated democracy. Furthermore, William Easterly and his colleagues at NYU looked at how U.S. and Soviet interventions during the Cold War affected the prospects for a democratic form of government. They found that "superpower interventions are followed by significant declines in democracy, and that the substantive effects are large."

None of this is to say that it is impossible for the United States to impose democracy abroad. But successes are the exception rather than the rule, and as is the case with democratization in general, externally led attempts to implant such a governing structure usually occur in countries with a particular set of internal characteristics.

[5] Andrew Enterline and J. Michael Greig, "The History of Imposed Democracy and the Future of Iraq and Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 4, no. 4 (October 2008). In an examination of forty-three cases of imposed democratic regimes between 1800 and 1994, it was found that 63 percent failed.

[6] Jeffrey Pickering and Mark Peceny, "Forging Democracy at Gunpoint," *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (September 2006).

It helps greatly if the target state has high levels of ethnic and religious homogeneity, a strong central government, reasonably high levels of prosperity and some experience with democracy. The cases of post–World War II Germany and Japan, which are often held up as evidence that the United States can export democracy to the Middle East, fit these criteria. But those examples are highly unusual, which is why the United States has failed so often in its freedom-spreading quest.

Even Eastern Europe circa 1989 does not provide a useful precedent. Democracy quickly sprouted there when communism collapsed and the autocrats who ruled in the region fell from power. These cases, however, have little in common with what the United States has been trying to do in the Muslim world. Democracy was not imposed on the countries of Eastern Europe; it was homegrown in every instance, and most of these countries possessed many of the necessary preconditions for democratization. There is no question that the United States has tried to help nurture these nascent democracies, but these are not cases where Washington successfully exported popular rule to foreign lands, which is what the Bush Doctrine was all about.

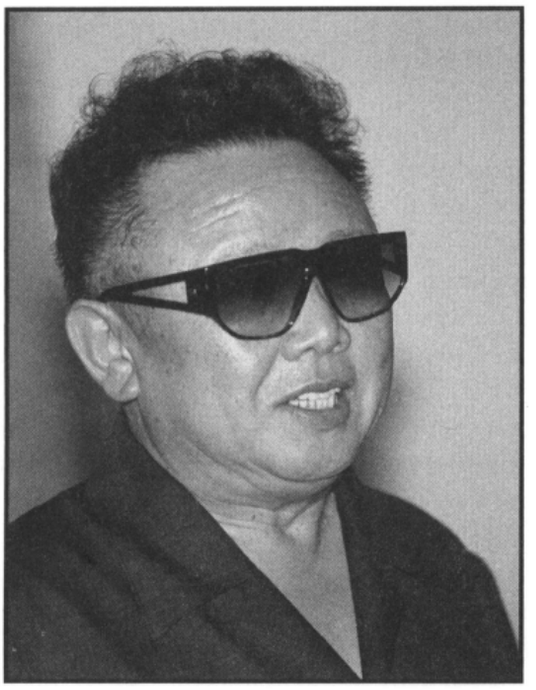
A good indicator of just how imprudent the Bush administration and the neoconservatives were to think that the United States could impose democracy with relative ease is that Francis Fukuyama did not believe it could be done and therefore did not support the Iraq War. Indeed, by 2006 he had publicly abandoned neoconservatism and adopted the mantle of liberal imperialism.[7] Fukuyama did not ditch his core belief that democracy was ineluctably spreading across the globe. What he rejected was his former compatriots' belief that the process could be accelerated by invading countries like Iraq. America, he maintained, could best pursue its interests "not through the exercise of military power," but through its ability "to shape international institutions."

Moreover, it is worth noting that even if the United States was magically able to spread democracy in the Middle East, it is not clear that the new regimes would always act in ways that met with Washington's approval. The leaders of those new democratic governments, after all, would have to pay attention to the views of their people rather than take orders from the Americans. In other words, democracies tend to have minds of their own. This is one reason why the United States, when it has toppled democratically elected regimes that it did not like—as in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954) and Chile (1973)—helped install dictators rather than democrats, and why Washington helps to thwart democracy in countries where it fears the outcome of elections, as in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

If all of this were not enough, global dominance, especially the Bush administration's penchant for big-stick diplomacy, negatively affects nuclear proliferation as well. The United States is deeply committed to making sure that Iran does not acquire a nuclear arsenal and that North Korea gives up its atomic weapons, but the strategy we have employed is likely to have the opposite effect.

The main reason that a country acquires nuclear weapons is that they are the ultimate deterrent. It is extremely unlikely that any state would attack the homeland of a nuclear-armed adversary because of the fear that it would prompt nuclear retaliation. Therefore, any country that feels threatened by a dangerous rival has good reason to want a survivable nuclear deterrent. This basic logic explains why the United States and the Soviet Union built formidable

[7] Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).



stockpiles during the Cold War. It also explains why Israel acquired atomic weapons and refuses to give them up.

All of this tells you that when the United States places Iran, Iraq and North Korea on the "axis of evil" and threatens them with military force, it gives those countries a powerful incentive to acquire a nuclear deterrent. The Bush administration, for example, would not have invaded Iraq in March 2003 if Saddam had an atomic arsenal because the Iraqi leader probably would have used it, since he almost certainly was going to die anyway. It is not clear whether Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons today, but given that the United States and Israel frequently hint that they might attack it nevertheless, the regime has good reason to want a deterrent to protect itself. Similarly, Pyongyang would be foolish to give up its nuclear capability in the absence of some sort of rapprochement with Washington.

And there is no good reason to think that spreading democracy would counter proliferation either. After all, five of the nine nuclear-armed states are democracies (Britain, France, India, Israel and the United States), and two others (Pakistan and Russia) are borderline democracies that retain significant authoritarian features.

In short, the Bush administration's fondness for threatening to attack adversaries (oftentimes with the additional agenda of forced democratization) encouraged nuclear proliferation. The best way for the United States to maximize the prospects of halting or at least slowing down the spread of nuclear weapons would be to stop threatening other countries because that gives them a compelling reason to acquire the ultimate deterrent. But as long as America's leaders remain committed to global dominance, they are likely to resist this advice and keep threatening states that will not follow Washington's orders.

The United States needs a new grand strategy. Global dominance is a prescription for endless trouble—especially in its neoconservative variant. Unfortunately, the Obama administration is populated from top to bottom with liberal imperialists who remain committed to trying to govern the world, albeit with less emphasis on big-stick diplomacy and more emphasis on working with allies and international institutions. In effect, they want to bring back Bill Clinton's grand strategy.

The Obama team's thinking was clearly laid out in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech to the Council on Foreign Relations this past September. Sounding very much like Madeleine Albright, Clinton said:

> I think the world is counting on us today as it has in the past. When old adversaries need an honest broker or fundamental freedoms need a champion, people turn to us. When the earth shakes or rivers overflow their banks, when

> pandemics rage or simmering tensions burst into violence, the world looks to us.

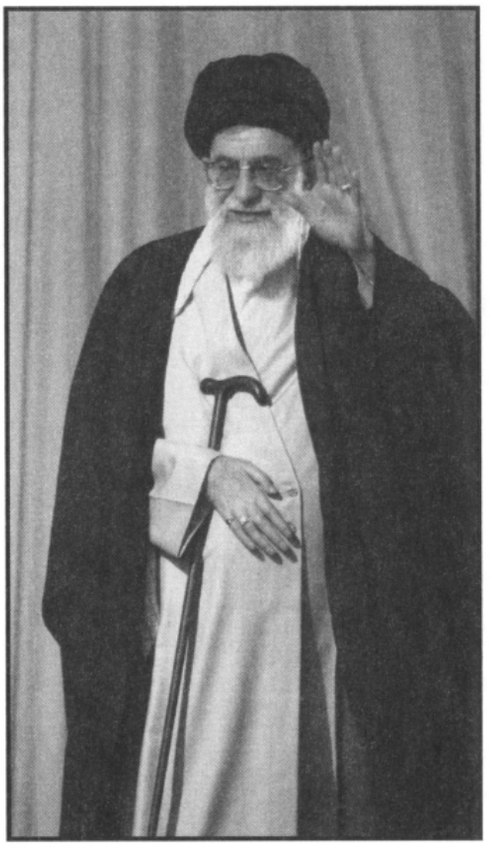
Recognizing that many Americans are in dire straits these days and not enthusiastic about trying to run the world, Clinton reminded them that:

> Americans have always risen to the challenges we have faced. . . . It is in our DNA. We do believe there are no limits on what is possible or what can be achieved. . . . For the United States, global leadership is both a responsibility and an unparalleled opportunity.

President Obama is making a serious mistake heading down this road. He should instead return to the grand strategy of offshore balancing, which has served this country well for most of its history and offers the best formula for dealing with the threats facing America—whether it be terrorism, nuclear proliferation or a traditional great-power rival.

In general terms, the United States should concentrate on making sure that no state dominates Northeast Asia, Europe or the Persian Gulf, and that it remains the world's only regional hegemon. This is the best way to ensure American primacy. We should build a robust military to intervene in those areas, but it should be stationed offshore or back in the United States. In the event a potential hegemon comes on the scene in one of those regions, Washington should rely on local forces to counter it and only come onshore to join the fight when it appears that they cannot do the job themselves. Once the potential hegemon is checked, American troops should go back over the horizon.

Offshore balancing does not mean that the United States should ignore the rest of the world. But it should maintain a substantially lower profile outside of Northeast Asia, Europe and the Gulf, and it should rely on diplomacy and economic statecraft, not military force, to protect its interests in areas of little strategic importance. Washington should also get out of the business of trying to spread democracy around the globe, and more generally acting as if we have the right and the responsibility to interfere in the domestic politics of other countries. This behavior, which violates the all-important principle of self-determination, not only generates resentment toward the United States, but also gets us involved in nation building, which invariably leads to no end of trouble.



Specifically, offshore balancing is the best grand strategy for ameliorating our terrorism problem. Placing American troops in the Arab and Muslim world is a major cause of terrorist attacks against the United States,

as University of Chicago professor Robert Pape's research shows. Remember what happened after President Ronald Reagan sent marines into Beirut in 1982? A suicide bomber blew up their barracks the following year, killing 241 service members. Reagan had the good sense to quickly pull the remaining marines out of Lebanon and keep them offshore. And it is worth noting that the perpetrators of this act did not pursue us after we withdrew.

Reagan's decision was neither surprising nor controversial, because the United States had an offshore-balancing strategy in the Middle East during this period. Washington relied on Iraq to contain Iran during the 1980s, and kept the rapid-deployment force—which was built to intervene in the Gulf if the local balance of power collapsed—at the ready should it be needed. This was smart policy.

After Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the United States, once again acting as an offshore balancer, moved large numbers of troops into Saudi Arabia to liberate Kuwait. After the war was won and victory was consolidated, those troops should have been pulled out of the region. But that did not happen. Rather, Bill Clinton adopted a policy of dual containment—checking both Iran and Iraq instead of letting them check one another. And lest we forget, the resulting presence of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia was one of the main reasons that Osama bin Laden declared war on the United States. The Bush administration simply made a bad situation even worse.

Sending the U.S. military into countries in the Arab and Muslim world is helping to cause our terrorism problem, not solve it. The best way to fix this situation is to follow Ronald Reagan's example and pull all American troops out of Afghanistan and Iraq, then deploy them over the horizon as part of an offshore-balancing strategy. To be sure, the terrorist challenge would not completely disappear if the United States went back to offshore balancing, but it would be an important step forward.

Next is to address the other causes, like Washington's unyielding support for Israel's policies in the occupied territories. Indeed, Bill Clinton recently speculated that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is responsible for about half of the terrorism we face. Of course, this is why the Obama administration says it wants to achieve a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians. But given the lack of progress in solving that problem, and the fact that it is going to take at least a few years to get all of the American troops out of Afghanistan and Iraq, we will be dealing with al-Qaeda for the foreseeable future.

Offshore balancing is also a better policy than global dominance for combating nuclear proliferation. It has two main virtues. It calls for using military force in only three regions of the world, and even then, only as a matter of last resort. America would still carry a big stick with offshore balancing but would wield it much more discreetly than it does now. As a result, the United States would be less threatening to other countries, which would lessen their need to acquire atomic weapons to protect themselves from a U.S. attack.

Furthermore, because offshore balancing calls for Washington to help local powers contain aspiring regional hegemons in Northeast Asia, Europe and the Gulf, there is no reason that it cannot extend its nuclear umbrella over its allies in those areas, thus diminishing their need to have their own deterrents. Certainly, the strategy is not perfect: some allies will want their own nuclear weapons out of fear that the United States might not be there for them in a future crisis; and some of America's adversaries will still have powerful incentives to acquire a nuclear arsenal. But all things considered, offshore balancing is still better than

The Obama administration is populated from top to bottom with liberal imperialists who remain committed to trying to govern the world.

global dominance for keeping proliferation in check.

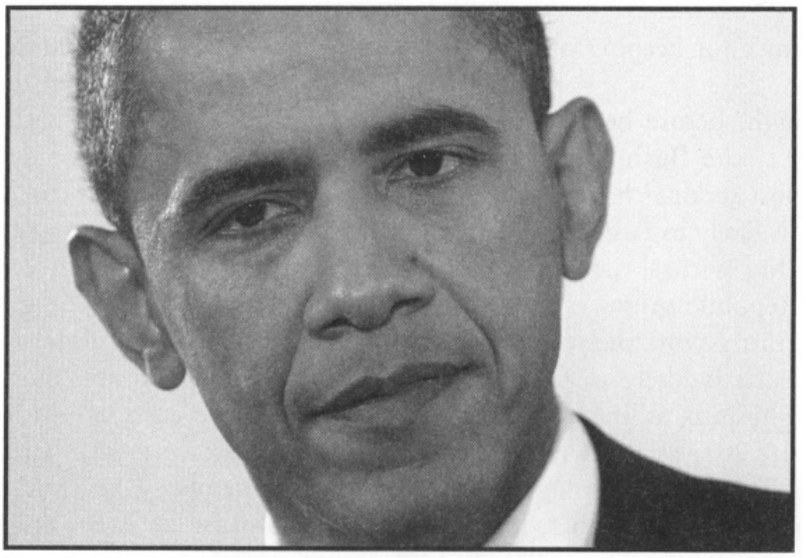
Oddly enough, before being blown off course by 9/11, the Bush administration realized the most serious challenge that the United States is likely to face in the decades ahead is dealing with a rising China. If the People's Republic grows economically over the next thirty years the way it has in recent decades, it is likely to translate its economic might into military power and try to dominate Asia as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. But no American leader will accept that outcome, which means that Washington will seek to contain Beijing and prevent it from achieving regional hegemony. We can expect the United States to lead a balancing coalition against China that includes India, Japan, Russia, Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam, among others.

Of course, America would check China's rise even if it were pursuing global dominance. Offshore balancing, however, is better suited to the task. For starters, attempting to dominate the globe encourages the United States to fight wars all around the world, which not only wears down its military in peripheral conflicts, but also makes it difficult to concentrate its forces against China. This is why Beijing should hope that the American military remains heavily involved in Afghanistan and Iraq for many years to come. Offshore balancing, on the other hand, is committed to staying out of fights in the periphery and concentrating instead on truly serious threats.

Another virtue of offshore balancing is its emphasis on getting other countries to assume the burden of containing an aspiring regional hegemon. Global dominators, in contrast, see the United States as the indispensable nation that must do almost all of the heavy lifting to make containment work. But this is not a smart strategy because the human and economic price of checking a powerful adversary can be great, especially if war breaks out. It almost always makes good sense to get other countries to pay as many of those costs as possible while preserving one's own power. The United States will have to play a key role in countering China, because its Asian neighbors are not strong enough to do it by themselves, but an America no longer weakened by unnecessary foreign intervention will be far more capable of checking Beijing's ambitions.

Offshore balancing costs considerably less money than does global dominance, allowing America to better prepare for the true threats it faces. This is in good part because this strategy avoids occupying and governing countries in the developing world and therefore does not require large armies trained for counterinsurgency. Global dominators naturally think that the United States is destined to fight more wars like Afghanistan and Iraq, making it essential that we do counterinsurgency right the next time. This is foolish thinking, as both of those undertakings were unnecessary and unwinnable. Washington should go to great lengths to avoid similar future conflicts, which would allow for sharp reductions in the size of the army and marine corps. Instead, future budgets should privilege the air force and especially the navy, because they are the key services

for dealing with a rising China. The overarching goal, however, should be to take a big slice out of the defense budget to help reduce our soaring deficit and pay for



important domestic programs. Offshore balancing is simply the best grand strategy for dealing with al-Qaeda, nuclear proliferators like North Korea and the potential threat from China.

Perhaps most importantly, moving toward a strategy of offshore balancing would help us tame our fearsome national-security state, which has grown alarmingly powerful since 9/11. Core civil liberties are now under threat on the home front and the United States routinely engages in unlawful behavior abroad. Civilian control of the military is becoming increasingly problematic as well. These worrisome trends should not surprise us; they are precisely what one expects when a country engages in a broadly defined and endless global war against terror and more generally commits itself to worldwide hegemony. Never-ending militarization invariably leads to militarism and the demise of cherished liberal values. It is time for the United States to show greater restraint and deal with the threats it faces in smarter and more discerning ways. That means putting an end to America's pursuit of global dominance and going back to the time-honored strategy of offshore balancing. □