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# America and the world: (still) a work in progress?

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Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
Charles Kupchan, *The End of the American Era* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2002).
Ivo H. Daadler and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2003).

## Introduction

Did 11 September 2001 change everything about the United States including its foreign policy? Have the subsequent US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq altered the scholarly calculus of what should be studied and how? Must authors determined to assert the continuing importance of history, geopolitics or domestic factors as explanatory variables recast or abandon their existing conclusions to highlight the newer realities after the terrorist attacks and their aftermath? If so, how? These questions lead to others. Is there a usable American past that helps illuminate the dilemmas of the present? If so, where is it found?[1] Is there a sustainable future role for the US in the world, beyond ideology or improvisation? If so,what are its contours? Is the Bush administration truly 'radical' or even 'revolutionary' in its imperial thrusts? After Afghanistan and Iraq, is American foreign policy still largely a success story? Or is the United States *en route* to becoming an ordinary country, albeit one with extraordinary resources in both hard and soft power?[2]

As a first step, revisiting the recurrent gap between ends and means in US foreign policy is essential for both scholars and policymakers because managing America's disproportionate power has become a major problem for the twenty-first century, in ways reminiscent of the difficulties experienced in managing (or mismanaging) Germany's power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The three books under review are an excellent starting point for both comprehending and transcending the limitations of 9/11 and the renewed emphasis on force as the key instrument of US foreign policy.

[1] This theme is explored at length in Warren Zimmerman, *The First Great Triumph* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002); see also, Colin McIness, 'A Different Kind of War?' *Review of International Studies*, 29:2 (2003), pp. 165–84.
[2] For additional analysis of differences between hard and soft power in US foreign policy, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Paradox of American Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); see also the still trenchant arguments in Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver's Troubles* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).



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In general, for authors who began their work well before the terrorist attacks, an epilogue at least is expected, if not a final chapter, if it proves impossible to integrate such material into their larger analyses. To be sure, authors should deal with the impact of 9/11, at least superficially, if any of their general conclusions are to have staying power intellectually. Yet it is equally important that writers present their findings as they emerge from their deeper study of US military prowess, transatlantic tensions, democratic institutions, or political leadership as part of a continuum since the founding of the Republic. Fortunately, Andrew Bacevich, Charles Kupchan and Ivo Daadler and James Lindsay are quite comfortable with this challenge. Collectively, they acknowledge the serious impact of 9/11 on their subject matter. Individually, they do not distort their conclusions to make them appear more relevant. As a group, the authors raise vital questions about US foreign policy in a turbulent era in which terrorism and the responses to it are part of a much larger context. If their answers are necessarily provisional, they are nonetheless vital.

**What's in a name?**

With training in both military affairs and international relations, Andrew Bacevich is well positioned to argue that the United States is indeed an 'empire', albeit a term that runs counter to the American self-image . In a frankly polemic style, he argues that the notion of incoherence and inconsistency in the foreign policies of the two Bush administrations and the Clinton administration is incorrect. He asserts that the US has had a 'grand strategy', one based on 'openness', which it pursues in order to preserve its pre-eminence. This approach has the advantage of clarifying that America is often far from a reluctant superpower or 'hyperpower', especially as seen from abroad. Bacevich also writes that the economic side of openness produces a form of globalisation that is, inevitably, Americanisation. It must operate in tandem with a national security approach that insists on regional as well as global dominance. Tracing the roots of this replacement for containment and deterrence as bedrocks of US foreign policy takes the author back to the writings of Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams, both of whom were once widely cited, but are now relatively obscure historical figures. His research also demonstrates the similarities between the world views of Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, often described antithetically as competing iconic figures in the development of realism and liberal internationalism respectively.

Although it is by no means clear that 'openness' is a viable concept prospectively, it does have a certain resonance retrospectively, at least in terms of America's nineteenth century continental expansionism. But to suggest that the US needed openness abroad then in order to achieve its prosperity is misleading because it downgrades the importance of US domestic markets.[3] Similarly, in arguing that US political leaders' explanations of what they envisaged as suitable goals after the Cold War contained 'coded messages deeply rooted in American history and as such

[3] Author's conversation with David L. Lindauer, Professor of Economics, Wellesley College, USA, 1 March 2002. See also Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

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freighted with meaning' (p.viii), Bacevich chooses to de-emphasise the evident improvisation, muddle, arrogance, hypocrisy and posturing other critics of US foreign policy find in ample abundance. More telling is his relative lack of concern for the shifting demographic base of US domestic politics that, over time, could erode both common purpose as well an understanding of such 'coded messages'.

Nevertheless, Bacevich's review of the search for a Big Idea in US foreign policy since 1989 yields some important insights, notably that the American conception of 'empire' remains less territorial than that of Rome or Great Britain, that trade still is or should be the preferred mechanism for the attainment of peace, and that containment was less about the Soviet Union than about enshrining an American world order based on commercial values. Moreover, his interpretation does allow for the fits and starts, the stumbles and carelessness of America's tendentious relationships with Europe, China, Russia, Japan and the United Nations throughout the 1990s. It also permits an understanding of persistent US domestic ambivalence about resurgent militarism and efforts to remake the world in America's image. He is also keenly aware of the reasons why the 'revolution in military affairs' lagged behind as privatisation of once governmental military tasks has proceeded.[4] Facts on the ground receive the attention they deserve, especially as a brake on 'full spectrum dominance'.

In citing 2001 as the 'pivotal moment that fixed the azimuth of US policy in the emerging global era' (p.199), Bacevich correctly highlights the 'consensus underlying US strategy' (p. 199). This assertion is all the more important in the light of the Bush administration's initial avowed promises to do nothing reminiscent of the Clinton administration's conduct, especially in the Middle East, only to find itself embroiled in the vagaries of Israel–Palestinian peacemaking after the second Iraq war. What Bacevich helps us understand is that American policymakers, regardless of political party, actually envisage their choices along a fairly narrow range, regardless of the rhetoric they use to justify or legitimate those choices domestically or internationally. Prior to that pre-emptive or preventive war, the second Bush administration looked like it represented a departure, not only in its determination to go it alone, if necessary, but also in its willingness to use 'imperial' rhetoric to insist on why what critics deemed a war of choice could and should be sold as a war of necessity.

The subsequent shambolic aftermath of the Iraq war produced toned-down official language, as postwar burdens grew in the wake of false expectations about the possibilities of remaking Iraq as a liberal democracy rapidly, if it all. The evident faulty or hyped intelligence about alleged weapons of mass destruction as the rationale for America's recent imperial adventure increased the sense of the emperor as wearing ill-fitting clothes, if any at all. Before, during and after the war, the administration's alternating focus on 'regime change' revealed a comparable lack of nuance *vis-à-vis* Iraq's complex ethnic and tribal heritage, as well toward the legacy of Saddam Hussein's brutality in which the US itself was implicated during the 1980s. His capture did little to change this picture.

[4] See Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), Afterword, pp. 225–40.

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Whether 'empire', formal or informal, does or does not accurately describe the American role in the early twenty-first century is probably less important than whether the United States is the only country, regardless of which leaders are in power, currently attempting to conduct its foreign policy according to its self-described exceptionalism. If that is indeed the case, Bacevich's warnings about the traditional self-delusion that the United States enjoys, while denying its long standing ambitions, will attract a much wider audience, despite the book's controversial title.

**Atlanticism in retreat?**

Self-delusion is a persistent and crucial theme in American–European relations, according to Charles Kupchan, although it is not limited to one side of the Atlantic. Unlike Bacevich, Kupchan finds the contemporary empire discourse to be too overt, perhaps too widespread rather than too hidden in 'coded messages'. Unlike Bacevich, Kupchan's main worry is that adherence to the idea of an American grand strategy will prevent US policymakers from realising that American hegemony will have a natural lifespan whose end may already be in sight. While Bacevich argues that world politics is less hierarchical and more network-based than during the tenure of previous territorial empires, Kupchan is more convinced that older, familiar geopolitical roadmaps for comprehending individual national foreign polices are still persuasive. He is equally sceptical of Big Ideas like globalisation, the end of history or the clash of civilisations, ideas that attracted many proponents in the 1990s but are now seen as less pertinent in a stubbornly recalcitrant world. Although Kupchan's potted history reviewing these concepts contains nothing new, it serves as a useful springboard for his own more penetrating analysis of what has gone wrong and could continue to go wrong in transatlantic relations.

As a prelude, Kupchan carefully outlines the changing demographics of the US, especially the surging population growth of Latin American and Asian immigrants. Kupchan believes that this demographic shift is already affecting domestic politics and, in time, could affect foreign policy emphases as well, because the newer immigrants' reproduction rate outstrips that of European-Americans. Unlike Bacevich, Kupchan does not think that deeper engagement in the world economy will generate political support at home for sustained US foreign policy goals, especially those that require deployment of military resources in far-flung regions abroad. This judgment, written after the war in Afghanistan, but before Iraq, looks prescient in the light of the Bush administration's intensive and only partially successful search for legitimacy at the UN in the lead-up to the war and afterward in conditions of occupation.

Kupchan's account of US responses to terrorism since 9/11 is carefully presented to underscore the evident ambiguities: 'As for the claim that terrorism will serve as a welcome antidote to America's isolationist instincts, the opposite is the more likely outcome' (p. 223). At the same time, perhaps for different reasons, the 'battle against terrorism, rather than consolidating the strategic partnership between America and Europe, may well subject it to new strains' (p. 223). This view, once contrarian, is now the conventional wisdom. What Kupchan accurately sensed, well before other

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scholars, is that 'the challenge is to find a new equilibrium, a level of US engagement abroad that is in keeping with the new politics at home' (p. 223).

This task by definition requires policymakers to eschew dogmas or doctrines that favour the selection of foreign policy instruments like uses of force or other coercive techniques that shaped initial reactions to the shared vulnerability of Americans after 9/11. Governments, including that of the US, could find it difficult to maintain order because terrorism does not promote foreign policy goals for attainment by traditional instruments. Moreover, the insistence on unilateral reactions when multilateral responses are needed is bound to be self-defeating. It for this reason that American–European relations have taken on renewed importance. Here both style and substance are involved, on both sides of the Atlantic. For many Europeans, the American use of terms like 'axis of evil' is problematic, to say the least. For many Americans, resistance to US leadership is equally irritating. For many Europeans, America's religiosity is naïve or vulgar. For many Americans, European cynicism is intolerable and self-serving.

Wisely, Kupchan does not gloss over the US domestic sources of tension that could affect American–European relations in the years ahead. He cites entrenched US regional divides over trade and strategic commitments. Yet his overall finding that the European Union will rise to the occasion of America's inevitable retreat from its present unipolar position in world politics, perhaps even in the next decade, seems exaggerated. Exhortation is not evidence, in other words. To be sure, an enlarged Europe, with or without Turkey, is significant geopolitically, but it remains the case that an EU of 25 or more still confronts at least one challenge derived from its founding: how to convert potential power into usable power, how to forge 'a centralized decision-making body having the authority to act on behalf of Europe in matters of foreign policy, (which) would, of course, mean the surrender by the separate states of control over foreign policy'.[5]

This caveat in no way detracts from the importance of Kupchan's assertion that the end of American primacy is coinciding with the 'end of the era of industrial capitalism' (p. 333). Of course, such major transitions are often better appreciated once they are completed historically, as the author himself acknowledges. For this reason, it is difficult to assess exactly where we are in the midst of what Kupchan terms 'epochal change'. It is fair to question now the validity of some awkward comparisons, for example, the idea that liberal international institutions are to world politics as constitutions are to democracies. Similarly, the assumption that the democratic peace may be universal rather than particular, or the equally widespread notion that there is a permanent or quasi-permanent improvement in great-power relations including China and Japan as well as Russia and the Europeans, seem overly broad. Such sweeping generalisations could suffer the fate of the previously ascendant, now archaic, 'democratic enlargement' or 'aggressive multilateralism' that purported to shape Clinton's foreign policy thrusts in the 1990s. Nevertheless, as an interim verdict on the often rocky course of American–European relations, Kupchan's analysis is freer of cant or unwarranted speculation than several other comparable studies that overreach in attempts at novelty or catchy phrases.

[5] Robert Tucker, 'Europe Challenged', *The National Interest,* 72 (Summer 2003), p. 145. See also David Calleo, 'Power, Wealth and Wisdom', in the same issue, pp. 5–15.

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**After empire?**

Much of the conventional wisdom about the Bush administration stresses the influence on the President of 'neo-conservatives' like the Vice President Richard Cheney and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, both of whom decided as early as 1992 that Saddam Hussein must go, that the Middle East could be remade to emphasise democratic leaders and institutions that would have the useful by-product of continued cheap oil supplies for the West. Equally conventional is the interpretation that the terrorist attacks provided the pretext for putting this preferred scenario into action.[6] In a refreshing analysis that tries to refute the implication that President George W. Bush functions at the direction of these presumably more experienced and sophisticated individuals, Ivo Daadler and James Lindsay write that this conventional wisdom is untrue, a more serious charge than that it is malicious. By insisting that Bush's personal beliefs and Manichean world view are the true source of the revived recent doctrines of pre-emption and regime change, the authors find or impose an inner logic and coherence to the US predilection for damaging relations with allies or deriding international constraints generally in pursuit of a threat-based foreign policy. More persuasively, they argue that Bush's recreation of Wilsonian precepts of universal democracy have capitalised upon, if not exploited cynically, America's new found vulnerability after 9/11.

The authors are on surer ground when they trace Bush's visceral rejection of external constraints on US behaviour to the 2000 election campaign where they also find Bush's assertion that America must seek to change the *status quo* abroad to protect US sovereignty. This 'assertive nationalism' emerged as Bush's slogan during this campaign, they argue. Then it looked like moderate Republicanism only in comparison with the more hard line 'Vulcans' who were obsessing about the dangers of the WTO and the UN before 9/11. Only after the attacks and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq could Bush's rhetoric and actions be termed truly 'radical', in their view.

What rings true in this account is the assertion that Bush's beliefs developed without recourse to 'facts' (Chapters 2 and 3). What surprises the reader is their delayed introduction of Bush's religious convictions. Here the impact of 9/11 is clear. To view the attacks in apocalyptic terms, as Bush did, is fully consistent with religiously based world views that stress good and evil as polar opposites in world history, though, by definition, such views fail to suggest pragmatic responses. Indeed, in Bush's world view, US responses had to be quick, devastating and violent if they were to prevent future attacks. Paradoxically, this new form of deterrence, against those individuals thought to be impervious to such postures, most closely resembled Cold War compellence, as its contours were filled in during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. More to the point, Bush and his entourage were prepared, perhaps even eager, for any predictable and avoidable diplomatic failures to bring along recalcitrant allies in NATO and the UN as a way of emphasising both America's willingness and capacity to go it alone in the new post-9/11 world. In other words, rectitude would

[6] See, for example, the assertions in John Newhouse, *Imperial America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2003), and the broader attack in Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004). See also similar charges in Clyde Prestowitz, *Rogue Nation* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

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be its own reward for Washington. Intuition and instinct would take precedence over information, perhaps even intelligence.

No clearer evidence of the dangers of such a posture will be found than in the lack of planning for postwar Iraq. The persistent lack of security and basic services months after the overwhelming US military victory, the insistence on keeping both other countries and the UN at arms length, the downgrading of peacekeeping lessons from the Balkans and elsewhere, all these postwar reactions revealed the limits of intuition and instinct and the importance of information and intelligence, broadly construed. In such circumstances, improvisation ruled, a quagmire loomed. Not surprisingly, the 2004 electoral imperatives took over. Decisions on whether to increase troop levels or to announce the transfer of sovereignty back to Iraqi citizens would be made with reference to dates on the US political calendar, not facts on the ground. The American propensity to behave in an *ad hoc* fashion resurfaced. Yet in relations with both North Korea, Libya and Iran, other seats of 'evil' in the Bush pantheon, diplomacy gained ground as the difficulties of using military force without proper attention to negotiation and bargaining mounted.

Daadler and Lindsay, both with experience in government, trace this path in clear and convincing prose, emphasising missed opportunities to turn the Iraq victory into lasting gains for the US in the Middle East and beyond. Alert to structural problems in foreign policy,they spare few official players in their chronological account. If anything, they are too generous in their appraisal of President Bush, too forgiving of his failure to resolve infighting in his administration, as it lurched from crisis to crisis with no evident game plan, no obvious long term strategy for even the short-term future in world politics that the US was supposed to control, according to Bush's core beliefs.

The authors explain that the rest of the world has found the US war on terror a mixed blessing at best. For countries sunk in poverty, grappling with environmental degradation, or unable to resolve historical conflicts on their own, America's preoccupations seem self-indulgent, America's priorities narrow and self-serving.

The authors do not suggest that America will voluntarily rebind itself, even with regime change at home. They realise that at some fundamental level, President Bush's beliefs, even the inchoate ones, have tapped into deep wells in America's politics. Yet whether Bush will be termed a 'revolutionary' decades from now, as they seem to indicate on the basis of three years in office, is an open question.

## Conclusion

9/11 did not change everything about the US including its foreign policy. To be sure, for scholars, newer agendas need to be studied, but so, too, does the perennial, shifting calculus of ends and means, and the never-ending story of domestic influences on the external world. Well-established explanatory variables like history, economics or geopolitics still operate at both the theoretical and practitioner levels of foreign policy analysis. The search for a usable past and a sustainable future still characterises the turbulent present. Even an arguably radical administration still has to co-ordinate hard and soft power, still has to legitimate its policy stances to audiences at home and abroad, and still has to cope with the apparent downside of

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globalisation. Demographics still matter, so do executive-legislative tensions, especially in times when Congress is perceived as too deferential, too compliant *vis-à-vis* the President, as has been the case after the terrorist attacks.

Thus, the substantive limits of 9/11 are asserting themselves as authors struggle to keep up with purported changes. The authors of the three books under review deserve praise for realising sooner and better than many other critics that there is no *tabula rasa* when analysing US foreign policy, only the patient recreation of choices and constraints that shape conduct over time from one administration to another. Equally, they are most persuasive when accepting that the range of choice is only slightly wider than it was during the Cold War, in part due to the self-imposed constraints of American political leaders whose formative experiences during that protracted struggle still shape their world views in the twenty-first century.

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