Just over a year ago, in mid-September 2002, the Bush administration released a formal statement of its national security strategy. It ignited a storm of controversy. 'The United States', reported the Guardian, 'will not hesitate to strike pre-emptively against its enemies ... and will never again allow its military supremacy to be threatened by a rival superpower.' In an editorial three days later, the newspaper excoriated the Bush strategy. It 'is arrogant, patronizing, complacent, amazingly presumptuous—but above all aggressive.' Although other influential media outlets like The Economist and the Financial Times gave more nuanced responses, most European newspapers suggested that something new, profound and ominous was being introduced. 'We must face facts,' said Le Monde Diplomatique. 'A new imperial doctrine is taking shape under George Bush.'

In the United States as well as in the UK and Europe, a stream of critical articles poured forth, arguing that the new strategy was the product of a group of neoconservative hawks, including Vice-President Dick Cheney and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who since the early 1990s had been advocating strategies of unilateralism, pre-emption and military hegemony. Their plan, wrote David Armstrong in Harper's Magazine, 'is for the United States to rule the world. The overt theme is unilateralism, but it is ultimately a story of domination.'

Although the initial controversy over Bush’s national security doctrine has now been dwarfed by debate over the war in Iraq, this article makes an attempt...
to step back and ponder more broadly the roots, the meaning and the implications of the national security policies of the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11. What are these policies? To what extent do they constitute something new and bold? Do their divergent threads add up to a coherent strategy? Is the national security policy of the Bush administration likely to last and, if not, how might it be reconfigured?

I shall argue that it is important to take a nuanced approach to the Bush administration’s national security doctrine. We shall see that all the elements of the strategy have antecedents, some of which are old, some of more recent vintage. When it is looked at carefully, moreover, the motives become more understandable and the separate threads of policy appear wiser and more textured than is usually acknowledged. But, notwithstanding continuities in the threads of the strategy and notwithstanding their individual attributes, the overall doctrine does not constitute a bold vision. In fact, the Bush doctrine departs radically from the ways in which American administrations of the twentieth century have conceptualized and articulated appropriate responses to acute dangers. Overall, the Bush strategy is a flawed vision, and, for reasons I will explain, is not likely to endure.

The strategy

The most striking aspect of the 22-page national security document is not the emphases on military power, military superiority and military pre-emption. Those features are there, to be sure, but they do not dominate. In fact, the document emphasizes the quintessential American values of freedom and democracy. It begins: ‘Our nation’s cause has always been larger than the Nation’s defense. We fight, as we always fight, for a just peace—a peace that favors liberty.’

What is interesting about this framework is the scant attention paid to US interests. In the first section of the paper, the authors state that ‘The US national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests.’ But there is no careful elucidation of interests. Instead, attention is focused on America’s ‘core beliefs’—the rule of law; free speech; equal justice; respect for women. Ideals subsume interests. ‘Our principles’, the document emphasizes, ‘will govern our government’s decisions.’

After these prefatory remarks, the authors of the document set out their national security strategy. Many observers believe that the gist of the document is about power, unilateralism and domination, but the titles of each section suggest a more complex and even conflicted agenda. Section III of the paper, the first substantive section, is about strengthening ‘alliances to defeat global

6 Ibid., p. 3.
7 Ibid., p. 4.
terrorism’. The subsequent sections are entitled: ‘work with others to defuse regional conflict’; ‘prevent our enemies from threatening us, our allies, and our friends with weapons of mass destruction’; ‘ignite a new era of global economic growth ... ’; ‘expand the circle of development by ... building the infrastructure of democracy’; ‘develop agendas for cooperative action with other main centers of global power’; and ‘transform America’s national security institutions to meet the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century’.8

As these subtitles illustrate, the authors of the document do not disregard the significance of poverty and injustice. ‘In many regions,’ they emphasize, ‘legitimate grievances prevent the emergence of a lasting peace. Such grievances ... must be addressed.’9 The national security strategy emphasizes that, in order to tackle these grievances, the United States must engage with the world to promote higher productivity and sustained economic growth. Unabashedly, the Bush administration declares: ‘The lessons of history are clear: market economies, not command-and-control economies ... are the best way to promote prosperity and reduce poverty.’10

So far I have said very little about threats and power, and readers may be surprised. But the significance of the document resides in its capacity to link some of the most familiar themes in American history—freedom, democracy and entrepreneurship—to new perceptions of threat and a new inclination to exercise power. There can be no doubt that the men and women of the Bush administration revel in their own realpolitik. They believe that they grasp threats far better than either their predecessors or their contemporaries. They think they know how to exercise power more wisely and, if necessary, unilaterally. In fact, the most striking feature of the national security strategy of the Bush administration is its marriage of democratic idealism with the exercise of pre-emptive power.

**Fears and threats**

Many great debates rage in the literature on international relations. One debate focuses on whether nations act to balance power or whether they act to balance threats.11 Another controversy asks whether power shapes policy or whether the perception of threat determines the accretion of power.12 In the case of the Bush administration, the evidence that we now have suggests the salience of threat perception. Fear has shaped policy.

Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz might have long desired to assert American hegemony, but there is no reason to believe they would have gained the degree of influence that they now possess had it not been for the events of 9/11 and the

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8 For a list of the section headings, see ibid., p. 3.
9 Ibid., p. 5.
10 Ibid., p. 12.
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impact those events have had on all top officials in the administration, including
the president himself, his secretary of state, Colin Powell, and his national
security advisor, Condoleezza Rice. It is not the fascination with power, but fear
for survival, that has shaped the strategic decisions of the Bush administration.¹³

Before 9/11, President Bush and his advisers feared terrorism, but they did
little to deal with it. Upon taking office, they were informed by intelligence
analysts that terrorism was a great threat to national security, that a mass casualty
event in the United States was a possibility, that Al-Qaeda had the intention and
was developing the capability to strike inside the United States.¹⁴ Between 1993
and 1998, fifty-four Americans had been killed in terrorist attacks. Then, in
February 1998, Osama bin Laden issued his instruction to kill Americans: ‘To
kill Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is proclaimed an individual
duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do
it.’¹⁵ In 1998, twelve more Americans were killed in terrorist attacks; in 1999, five
more; in 2000, another nineteen.¹⁶ Inside Afghanistan under the protection of
the Taliban, al-Qaeda was training more than 15,000 terrorists in the late 1990s.¹⁷

Bush, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and their colleagues were altogether aware of
the dangers posed by Al-Qaeda, of the threats to kill Americans, and of the
plethora of terrorist groups operating around the world and in the United States
itself. The CIA knew that these groups were now nurturing one another; that
they were increasingly adept at exploiting new technology and taking advantage
of porous borders; that they sometimes shared intelligence and logistics, trained
together, and collaborated in planning and executing attacks.¹⁸

Yet despite their knowledge, Bush’s advisers were unable to thwart the
impending catastrophe. It was a failure of imagination, a failure to put the dots
of information together, as Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz ruefully acknowledged.¹⁹
The events of 9/11, therefore, did not change everything; ‘most fundamen-
tally,’ explained Condoleezza Rice, ‘9/11 crystallized our vulnerability.’²⁰ ‘A
new reality was born’ on September 11, said Secretary of State Powell, a reality
that linked terrorists, weapons of mass destruction, and rogue or failed states.²¹

¹³ For the views of offensive realists, see John J. Mearsheimer, The tragedy of great power politics (New York:
¹⁴ See the testimony of Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Armitage in Senate Select Committee on Intelligence
and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, ‘Joint inquiry hearing on counterterrorist
¹⁵ For the instruction, see Fred Halliday, Two hours that shook the world (London: Saqi, 2002), pp. 218–19.
¹⁶ For the numbers, see ‘Joint inquiry hearing’, p. 9.
¹⁷ For the importance of Afghanistan as a training ground, see the statements by Ayman Al-Zawahiri and
Osama bin Laden in Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin, Anti-American terrorism and the Middle East
usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/strategy/.
¹⁹ Testimony by Wolfowitz, in ‘Joint inquiry hearing’, pp. 8ff., press conference with Donald Rumsfeld, 29
institute.org/html.
²¹ Testimony by Colin L. Powell, ‘The administration’s position with regard to Iraq’, House Committee
Thereafter, fear shaped strategy, elevating pre-emption to a new degree of importance. When the stakes and consequences appear small, explained former CIA director Robert Gates, policy-makers seek a high degree of assurance before acting. But if one expects another major attack on the United States, the 'risk calculus' changes dramatically.\(^{22}\) The events of 9/11 demonstrated to officials that terrorists who declare their intent to kill Americans and attack the United States would plan for years, stealthily assemble their assets and take action when opportunity allowed. There would be no warnings. 'Where's the evidence of imminent threat?' exclaimed Wolfowitz before a joint congressional inquiry into the events leading up to 9/11.\(^{23}\) After September 11, he stressed, 'we have a visceral understanding of what terrorists can do with commercial aircraft, in a way that seemed remote and hypothetical before. We cannot afford to wait until we have a visceral understanding of what terrorists can do with weapons of mass destruction, before we act to prevent it.'\(^{24}\)

As a result, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz argued the case for pre-emption. 'It is difficult', acknowledged Rumsfeld, 'for all of us who have grown up in this country, and believe in the principle that unless attacked, one does not attack,' to accept the notion of pre-emption. 'The question', he then went on to muse, 'is in the 21st century, with biological weapons ... that could kill hundreds of thousands of people, what does one do? Does one wait until [one is] attacked, or does one look at a pattern of behavior, a ... fact pattern and draw a conclusion?'\(^{25}\)

Pre-emption was the inescapable conclusion, but pre-emption alone did not dictate the new military posture of the Bush administration. Defence officials also wanted new military capabilities to reassure allies and deter enemies. Should deterrence fail, they wanted to be able to wage war swiftly and defeat adversaries decisively. Of course, they preferred not to fight, not even to be challenged. US forces, the strategy statement emphasized, should be 'strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries' from even trying to equal or surpass American power.\(^{26}\)

Power was not an end in itself. Bush's advisers wanted to mobilize power to thwart threats, foster peace and build freedom. 'After 9/11,' Condoleezza Rice stated, 'there is no longer any doubt that today America faces an existential threat to our security—a threat as great as any we faced during the Civil War, World War II, or the Cold War.'\(^{27}\) The threat emanates from the nexus of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and aggressive tyrants in command of rogue states. Faced with this threat, Bush's national security strategy is said by its spokespersons to offer a 'bold vision' that 'captures new realities and new


\(^{23}\) Testimony by Wolfowitz, in 'Joint inquiry hearing', p. 22.


\(^{26}\) 'National Security Strategy', p. 20.

\(^{27}\) Rice, 'A balance of power', p. 2.
opportunities’. American power, they conclude, ‘must be used to promote a balance of power that favors freedom’.28

Historical roots

The Bush administration prides itself on marrying power and values. ‘There is an old argument,’ emphasized Condoleezza Rice, between realists and idealists. ‘To oversimplify, realists downplay the importance of values ... Idealists emphasize the primacy of values ... As a professor,’ she went on to say, ‘I recognize that this debate has won tenure for ... many generations of scholars. As a policymaker, I can tell you that these categories obscure reality.’29

She is quite right. The history of American foreign relations is not about the struggle between power and ideals, as it is so often portrayed, but about their intermingling. America’s ideals have always encapsulated its interests. America’s ideology has always been tailored to correspond with its quest for territory and markets. In short, power, ideology and interests have always had a dynamic and unsettled relationship with one another.30 But these relationships are more nuanced and complex than most people think. Power sometimes has been constrained by legislative-executive battles and the spectre of a garrison state;31 expansion has been circumscribed by the exigencies of domestic politics, racial attitudes and republican ideology;32 unilateralism has been tempered by the realization that alliances and multilateral strategies could be adopted if they advanced American interests.33

28 Ibid., p. 1; ‘National Security Strategy’, p. 3.
31 For constraints on the exercise of power imposed by state capacity, see e.g. Zakaria, From wealth to power. For fear of a garrison state, see Michael J. Hogan, A cross of iron: Harry S. Truman and the origins of the national security state, 1945–1954 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Aaron Friedberg, In the shadow of the garrison state: America’s anti-statism and its Cold War grand strategy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
33 Even Thomas Jefferson, whose first inaugural address recited George Washington’s warning against alliances and entanglements, subsequently talked of marrying the United States to the British fleet should
So today, in many respects, Bush’s national security strategies are more firmly rooted in the past than most people think. They are also more complex and more conflicted than either supporters or critics believe. The quest for military superiority, for example, is hardly new or noteworthy. Throughout its early history, the United States relied on the British navy to ward off European foes while deploying superior power on land against the Spanish, Mexicans and Native Americans.\(^34\) When they had to, American policy-makers mobilized additional force to deal with vexatious foes, as, for example, when Thomas Jefferson and James Madison built a small navy to cope with the attacks of the terrorists of their day, the so-called Barbary pirates.\(^35\) Frightened by the rise of German naval power in the early twentieth century and always chafing at British naval supremacy, the United States built a modern navy of its own and then demanded naval parity in the aftermath of the First World War.\(^36\) After the Second World War, chastened by the lessons learned from America’s failure to build to treaty limits and by the attack on Pearl Harbor, Truman’s intention was to preserve US military superiority.\(^37\) Although he was ready to discuss international control of atomic weapons, he sought to retain America’s nuclear monopoly for as long as possible.\(^38\)

Although many contemporaries and historians defined US Cold War policies in terms of containment and deterrence, America’s real strategy was to pursue a preponderance of power.\(^39\) US Cold War policies were always designed not so much to contain Soviet power and influence as to roll them back, and to


transform the Kremlin’s approach to international politics. Although George Kennan’s long telegram of February 1946 and his Mr X article in *Foreign Affairs* are the most renowned documents of the Cold War, the first national security strategy statement of the United States, written by Kennan and approved by the president in spring 1948, called for more than containment. ‘Our basic objectives’, wrote Kennan, ‘are really only two: a. to reduce the power and influence of Moscow … ; and to bring about a basic change in the theory and practice of international relations observed by the government … in Russia.’ These objectives were inscribed in NSC 68, the most famous strategy document of the Cold War era.

Throughout the Cold War the aim of the United States was to have the capacity to fight more than one war successfully and to be able to seize the offensive when necessary. In NSC 68, the Truman administration emphasized that containment required the United States to ‘possess superior overall power in ourselves or in dependable combination …’. Without such military strength, a policy of ‘containment’, said NSC 68, ‘is no more than a policy of bluff’.

The term ‘containment’ was placed in quotation marks in the document because it was never simply about blocking further Soviet expansion; nor was deterrence simply about thwarting a Soviet attack. Containment, in the words of NSC 68, was a policy of ‘calculated and gradual coercion’. Inherent in its logic was the notion of risk-taking: taking action, often unilaterally, that was designed sometimes to thwart Soviet advances and sometimes to roll back Soviet influence. The intent was ‘to wrest the initiative’ from the Soviet Union; the axiomatic belief, again to use the famous words of NSC 68, was ‘that the cold war is in fact a real war’.

Seeing themselves challenged by growing Soviet military power, by a reckless regime in Beijing and by revolutionary nationalist impulses throughout the Third World, the administrations in Washington from Truman to Reagan calibrated the use of military force to complement and supplement other strategies for waging the Cold War. The Truman Doctrine, the Eisenhower Doctrine and the Carter Doctrine all contemplated the deployment of force to counter Soviet advances. Not all of them prescribed pre-emptive military action. But Eisenhower’s deployment of forces to Lebanon, Johnson’s military intervention in the Dominican Republic and Reagan’s attack on Libya, as well as Kennedy’s blockade of Cuba and Nixon’s bombing of Cambodia and Laos, all possessed unilateral, pre-emptive qualities.

So what, if anything, is new about the Bush administration’s national strategy statement? Critics characterize the allusions to unilateralism, pre-emption and...
military superiority as new, daring and provocative, but only because they now remember the Cold War as a benign struggle between a hapless foe with an antiquated ideology and a crippled economy. That ignores, however, the fact that at the time participants thought they were engaged in a dynamic, dangerous and contingent conflict.

If the quest for military superiority is not so different from what it was during the Cold War, neither is the strategy of pre-emption. ‘Preemption’, stressed Rice, ‘is not a new concept. There has never been a moral or legal requirement that a country must wait to be attacked before it can address existential threats … The United States has long affirmed the right of anticipatory self-defense—from the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 to the crisis on the Korean peninsula in 1994.’

Here again, Rice is quite right in stressing continuities. Pre-emption has a long tradition in American history. In 1904 President Theodore Roosevelt announced a new corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, unilaterally asserting the right of the United States to intervene militarily in the western hemisphere to preserve order. ‘Pre-emptive imperialism’ was designed to thwart prospective European interventions and protect the national security of the United States. The United States intervened repeatedly in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Haiti. In Nicaragua, US troops remained from 1912 to 1933 (with one brief interruption); in Haiti they stayed from 1915 to 1934; in the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924.

Pre-emption, then, is not new; but it has a place of special importance in the thinking of Bush’s defense advisers. It is ‘fundamental’, Wolfowitz told a joint congressional committee. ‘This is not a game we will ever win on defense. We’ll only win it on offense.’

Although this attitude is often portrayed as unique to a group of neoconservative hawks who have infiltrated the Bush administration, the truth of the matter is that the proclivity towards an offensive strategy, towards pre-emption and counterproliferation, had been evolving for a decade and had mustered bipartisan support long before Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz became household names. In a partially declassified presidential directive of 1995, Bill Clinton put his imprimatur on a new United States counterterrorism policy. The policy of the United States, the directive said, is ‘to deter and preempt, apprehend and prosecute … individuals who perpetrate or plan to perpetrate terrorist attacks’. The United States, the directive went on to say, would seek to identify ‘… states that sponsor or support such terrorists, isolate them and extract a heavy price … ’.

In 1999 Clinton’s Department of Defense appointed a bipartisan commission on national security in the twenty-first century. It was chaired not by

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45 Rice, ‘A balance of power’, p. 3.
neoconservative hawks but by Gary Hart, a liberal Democrat, and Warren Rudman, a moderate Republican. Reporting long before 9/11, their commission envisioned a more chaotic world. Some states, the report concluded, would fragment; others would fail. Ethnic and religious violence would increase; suppressed nationalisms would flower; terrorist groups would proliferate; weapons of mass destruction would spread. Consequently, the United States would become ‘increasingly vulnerable to hostile attack on our homeland’. In that environment, the American government would not be able to rely on traditional alliances. Deterrence, the report stressed, ‘will not work as it once did’. The United States, therefore, required military capabilities ‘characterized by stealth, speed, range, unprecedented accuracy, lethality, strategic mobility, superior intelligence, and the overall will and ability to prevail’.49

Such reports and others make it clear that the strategic thinking associated with the Bush administration was emerging in a variety of forms well before 9/11. Almost everyone in the United States who carefully examined national security issues in the 1990s grasped the growing threat of terrorism, the links with failing and rogue states, and the spectre of an attack on the United States with weapons of mass destruction. Many and diverse people called for preventive action. Many struggled, however reluctantly, with pre-emptive scenarios. Many grasped the reality that there were terrorist groups that were not likely to be deterred as states had been deterred. Many accepted the awful reality that technological developments, communications breakthroughs and porous borders made attacks with biological and chemical weapons more likely, indeed very likely. Experts might argue over the mix of policies, but few doubted that innovations in weapons technology and military tactics were needed, as were a vast array of preventive actions and pre-emptive options. The new threat—the nexus of terrorism, failing states, rogue governments, suicide bombers and weapons of mass destruction—made this mode of thinking unavoidable.50

Like many of the experts who wrote these reports, Powell and Rice have stressed that pre-emption ‘must be treated with great caution’. It is one tool, said Colin Powell, in a toolbox filled with tools. The number of cases in which it might be justified, insisted Condoleezza Rice, ‘will always be small … It does not give a green light—to the United States or any other nation—to act first without exhausting other means … The threat must be very grave. And the risks of waiting must far outweigh the risks of action.’51

Nor do Rice and Powell believe that America’s quest for military superiority should prevent allies and friends from mobilizing greater capabilities of their own. The United States, Rice declared, ‘invites—indeed, we exhort—our freedom loving allies, such as those in Europe, to increase their military capabilities’.52

Nor do US officials believe that root causes can be ignored. ‘We [have] got to act preventively,’ Wolfowitz told his congressional inquisitors. ‘And that isn’t only by military means, or even only by intelligence means.’53

Wolfowitz, Rice, Powell and their colleagues embrace the idea of a democratic peace. They seek, by deploying American power to crush terrorists and by mobilizing American economic strength to foster growth, to expand the opportunities for democratic self-government everywhere. Their speeches are infused with a missionary zeal, with a conviction that freedom is good for individuals, for societies and for the international system. Their convictions are supported by research since the 1980s demonstrating that democratic nations do tend to be more peaceful when they deal with one another.54 Freedom, peace, order and self-interest are all intertwined.

Nation-building, of course, was not what Bush, Rumsfeld and Powell wanted to do when they took office, not even after 9/11.55 But the doctrine of pre-emption and the desire to remove Saddam Hussein inescapably pushed them to embrace the promotion of democracy abroad. They know this task is fraught with uncertainty. They know the historical experience of the United States with democracy promotion is a mixed one, with noteworthy failures as well as some spectacular successes.56 As noted above, the United States pre-emptively intervened and kept troops in Haiti, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic for decades—and the democratic legacy bequeathed was utterly disappointing.57

Nor was the US colonial record in the Philippines much more successful.58

58 For illustrative accounts, see Glenn Anthony May, Social engineering in the Philippines: the aims, execution, and impact of American colonial policy, 1900–1913 (London: Greenwood, 1980); Stanley Karnow, In our image: America’s empire in the Philippines (New York: Random House, 1989); H. W. Brands, Bound to
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After the Second World War, however, the performance of the United States in Germany, Japan and Austria won great acclaim.\(^5^9\) Of course, the successes had a lot to do with the domestic social processes in these countries, with their values and institutions, and with external circumstances. Many experts on postwar occupation policies do not think that these successes can be replicated today in Third World countries.\(^6^0\)

Such pessimism, however, may be unwarranted. Several careful studies of US military interventions in the twentieth century shed surprising new light on the relationship between military intervention and democracy. Most US military interventions, as you might expect, have no positive impact on target nations. ‘Military interventions’, concludes the political scientist James Meernik in a study of 27 cases, ‘do not leave behind more democratic regimes.’ But this conclusion gets substantially modified when another variable is added: an explicit US commitment to promote democracy as a defining goal of the intervention. ‘When the United States is purportedly acting on behalf of democratic values,’ Meernik argues, ‘interventions are much more likely to aid the cause of democracy.’\(^6^1\) In a yet more elaborate and refined study of 90 cases, Mark Peceny demonstrates that when the United States is unequivocally committed to democracy promotion, countries ‘that have experienced U.S.-sponsored elections are significantly more likely to be democracies than states that have not shared this experience’.\(^6^2\)

If these research findings withstand scrutiny, Bush’s national security advisers have reason to hope that their policies will produce more good than their critics believe. This, however, assumes that they will focus on the goals of democracy promotion and economic development.\(^6^3\) Condoleezza Rice says they will. The United States will, she insists, fight ‘poverty, disease, and oppression because it is the right thing to do—and the smart thing to do’.\(^6^4\) The explicit goal of the United States, according to the strategy document, is to double the size of the world’s poorest economies within a decade.\(^6^5\)

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\(^5^9\) Smith considers the American role in Germany and Japan especially praiseworthy. See Smith, *America’s mission*. I am indebted to Jay Sexton for an excellent review of the literature on the American role in the Philippines.


\(^6^1\) For a more mixed assessment of the American experience, see the essays in Cox et al., *American democracy promotion*. But a key reason for the mixed results has been the absence of commitment to the goal itself. In this respect, see also Joshua Muravchik, *Exporting democracy: fulfilling America’s destiny* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1991).


\(^6^3\) ‘National Security Strategy’, p. 15.
prescriptions actually comply with the recommendations of the United Nations Development Programme. The president and his advisers acknowledge that these are the essential prerequisites for building a balance of power favouring freedom.

A balance of power or a community of power

If the administration's strategy has deep and diverse historical roots, and if it reflects an awareness of the complex sources of terrorism, why, then, does it merit criticism?

The answer to this question is to be found in its style, rhetoric and priorities, in its proud espousal of 'a balance of power' favouring freedom. My argument is that a balance of power favouring freedom is a confused, even meaningless concept. It is a concept that favours unilateralist thinking and military solutions. It is also contrary to American traditions and incongruent with the challenges that lie ahead.

When faced with existential challenges in the twentieth century, the United States championed not a balance of power, but a community of power. As Woodrow Wilson solemnly pondered American intervention in the First World War, he said, 'peace cannot ... rest upon an armed balance of power.' After the war, he insisted that the balance of power 'should end now and forever'. Lasting peace, he maintained, required 'not a balance of power, but a community of power; not organized rivalries, but an organized common peace'.

Wilson's alternative vision was of a community of power based on self-determination of peoples and the interdependence of nations. The central idea of this treaty, he maintained, is 'that nations do not consist of their governments but consist of their people'. People had the right to determine their own government and to live without fear. They had the right to travel on the seas freely and to trade on equal terms. They had the right to expect their governments to preserve order, govern justly and thwart revolutionary impulses. Governments, in turn, had a responsibility to limit their armaments and work together to preserve the peace. Peace would be made secure by the organized moral force of mankind, mobilized through the vehicle of the League of Nations.

The Wilsonian approach to world affairs was partly apocalyptic and partly redemptive. Wilson saw immense dangers and espoused utopian solutions. His

69 Ibid., p. 3.
reactions to industrialism, imperialism, revolution and global conflict, indeed, his response ‘to modernity’, writes the historian Frank Ninkovich, ‘was double-edged: extraordinarily optimistic and progressive on the one hand, yet afflicted by a sense of extraordinary, perhaps unmanageable crisis on the other’. Imagining unprecedented peril, Wilson bequeathed a singularly American response, disavowing the primacy of interest, affirming the benign influence of democratic governance, and extolling the benefits of arms limitation, open trade, international law and collective security. He did not deny the importance of power, but talked about a community of power. He would have been appalled by the thought that peace and freedom could be coupled with traditional realpolitik.

I say that Wilson imagined unprecedented peril because it is far from certain that such peril really existed. His critics saw no such dangers and repudiated his vision. Yet in 1939 and 1940, and then again in 1946 and 1947, Wilson’s successors resurrected visions of similar dangers and offered similar solutions. In the late 1930s millions of Americans saw no threat to national security.73 Yet Roosevelt imagined a world governed by the Axis powers and concluded that the United States could not survive in it, at least not with its existing institutions intact.74 And then again, in 1947, with the country facing no tangible threat to its immediate military interests, Truman and his advisers envisioned a world dominated by communist governments linked to the Kremlin and concluded that such a world could not accommodate the preservation of freedom inside the United States.75 Both Roosevelt and Truman used language that exaggerated immediate threats to US national security. Yet their imaginative construction of apocalyptic scenarios has endured the verdict of history.76 Wilson, Roosevelt and Truman all envisioned the spectre of a world pulsating with discontented peoples and governed by arbitrary rulers—rulers indifferent to the rule of law, driven by revolutionary fervour, eager to develop new weapons, and inclined to war and domination. In such a world, neither free peoples nor free nations could survive and prosper, not even the United States.

Today, Bush sees his nation facing a similar crisis. ‘We are in a conflict’, he declared, ‘between good and evil … In this way our struggle is similar to the Cold War. Now, as then, our enemies are totalitarians, holding a creed of power with no place for human dignity.’ Like his predecessors, Bush insists he

75 Leffler, Preponderance of power.
76 See Ninkovich, Wilsonian Century, pp. 1–16.
will not ‘gloss over the brutality of tyrants’; his aim, he says, is to rally free nations ‘to a great cause’.\(^7\)

But what is that cause? At times of peril, Bush’s predecessors did not talk about a balance of power. At the height of the Cold War, John F. Kennedy said in his inaugural address, ‘Let every nation know ... that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.’ But then he expressed his hopes for a new era of cooperation. ‘Let both sides’, he exhorted, ‘join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.’\(^8\)

If the nexus of terrorists, rogue regimes and weapons of mass destruction constitutes the next great ‘existential threat’, as Condoleezza Rice termed it, building a ‘balance of power favouring freedom’ is a rather unusual American approach to meeting unprecedented danger. It is also a confused approach. A balance of power envisions equilibrium, while the Bush administration yearns for hegemony. A balance of power assumes a system of competing nation-states, usually sharing similar values, while the United States today faces perils emanating primarily from subnational groups that detest the liberal, democratic, secular and free-market ideology of the United States. A balance of power is linked historically to the evolution of the Westphalian state system, a system defined by the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other states, while American policies now are designed to transform the domestic regimes of other states.\(^9\)

When they invoke the language of power balancing, Bush’s advisers obfuscate more than they clarify. Whose power is to be balanced? Today, no nation or group challenges American power. America’s vulnerability does not stem from inadequate power. In fact, should the balance of power operate in its classical form, it would trigger countermoves by states seeking to pose a counterweight to America’s expressed ambitions. Likewise, pre-emptive actions by the United States will encourage other governments to take unilateral action of their own, making for a less orderly and more dangerous world.\(^10\)

Woodrow Wilson called for a community of power precisely because he foresaw that unilateral efforts to enhance security triggered arms races and

\(^7\) Bush’s speech at West Point, 1 June 2002.


multiplied perceptions of threat. He was not blind to the dangers lurking in a world of nation-states, but he believed they were best dealt with through multilateral institutions embodying notions of collective security. Wilson’s community of power meant limiting armaments, expanding economic interdependence and, most of all, building norms, laws and institutions to modulate the competitive instincts of nations and to avert the security dilemmas that inevitably flow from unilateral actions, whether intended for good or evil.

Nowadays, scholars refer to these efforts in terms of the utility of ‘soft power’.\(^8\) The Bush administration, as we have seen, is not unaware of the utility of soft power. Indeed, it seeks to capitalize on the resonance of American values, disseminate its marketplace principles and utilize its economic prowess to mould a more peaceful world order. But balance of power thinking trumps the administration’s understanding of soft power and inclines it to favour military priorities. Senator Richard Lugar, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, got to the heart of the matter in February 2003 when he politely admonished Secretary Powell for the paltry funds allocated to the non–military aspects of foreign policy. ‘Even after a healthy increase in the last fiscal year,’ Senator Lugar pointed out, ‘the U.S. foreign assistance, in constant dollars, has declined about 44 percent since Ronald Reagan’s presidency in 1985 and about 18 percent since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.’ The United States, Lugar added, ranked last among the 21 major providers of aid to the developing world.\(^8\)

Developmental assistance is not the only site of inconsistency between the Bush administration’s rhetoric and its actions, between its appreciation of the multiple causes of terrorism and its tendency to rely on military solutions. Although the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank urge the elimination of agricultural subsidies, Bush and his advisers have moved only haltingly in this direction.\(^8\) Notwithstanding their commitments to enhance women’s rights and children’s health in the poorest nations, they block most public funding to agencies abroad that counsel abortion;\(^8\) notwithstanding their commitment to tackle poverty in the world’s poorest countries, they actually cut their initial 2003 fiscal year request for development assistance to Africa;\(^8\) notwithstanding their realization of the importance of the Palestinian–Israeli war of attrition, they were reluctant to tackle this matter until the political and diplomatic exigencies of the war in Iraq forced them to do so.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) There is no emphasis on this point in the national security strategy statement, although the administration is reported to be pressuring European nations to reduce their agricultural subsidies.

\(^8\) Kati Morton, ‘Protect women, stop a disease’, International Herald Tribune, 4 March 2003, p. 8.


\(^8\) In the national security strategy statement, the last sentence dealing with the Israeli–Palestinian dispute is illustrative of the tendency towards aloofness: ‘The United States can play a crucial role but, ultimately, lasting peace can only come when Israelis and Palestinians resolve the issues and end the conflict between them.’ Little attention is focused on precisely what the crucial American role might constitute. See ‘National Security Strategy’, p. 7.
At times of existential crisis in the past, at times when dangers seemed to loom very large and very close, Bush’s predecessors sought to tackle root causes and establish lasting institutions. Wilson focused on the League; Franklin Roosevelt helped craft the IMF, the World Bank and the United Nations; Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy sought to fashion the political and economic instruments that nurtured the recovery of Germany and Japan and facilitated their peaceful integration into the international system. In 1947, at the most crucial moment in the origins of the Cold War, when Truman, like Bush today, then decided that the world was divided into good and evil—the president made the crucial decision to focus on European reconstruction rather than American rearmament.\footnote{Leffler, Preponderance of power, esp. pp. 147–51.}


The point of these comparisons is not to glorify the past. Neither Wilson, nor Roosevelt, nor Truman ever renounced the use of power, or relinquished the freedom to act unilaterally, or countenanced serious infringements of US sovereignty. But their apocalyptic fears and messianic zeal prompted a very different matrix of policies. They, too, believed that America had a mission; they, too, stirred that peculiarly American brew of power and ideals. But, ultimately, their thought processes gravitated towards a community of power rather than a balance of power. The difference in mindsets revealed by these contrasting operational codes is fundamental. In seeking a balance of power favouring freedom, in questing for military hegemony, in trumpeting the right to intervene unilaterally, in rejecting the Kyoto Protocol, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and other arms control and human rights conventions, Bush and his advisers display a fundamental disdain for the norms, institutions and rules that bind the community in whose interests they are ostensibly acting.\footnote{See the essays in David M. Malone and Yuen Foong Khong, eds, Unilateralism and US foreign policy (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003).}

But they should not be criticized for highlighting the threats that confront humankind. Their fear of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorists or arbitrary governments is well founded; their belief that advances in technology abet the cause of terrorists is not erroneous; their understanding that porous borders provide opportunities for sabotage is not irrational; their conviction that weak states and rogue governments may provide safe havens for terrorists is grounded in reality. Like Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, like Truman and the cold warriors who succeeded him, Bush rightly sees peril lurking in the international environment.
A solution does not require a choice between a balance of power and a community of power. It is not a question of choosing power or paradise, as Robert Kagan suggests in his recent best-selling book. It is not a question of choosing a Hobbesian world or a Kantian world. A solution begins, first, with the recognition that the community that came into existence after the Second World War is endangered both from within and from without. If it is to survive, its core values must be collectively reaffirmed; if it is to survive, new norms and rules must be designed multilaterally, including those allowing for the collective and pre-emptive use of force; if it is to survive, the hegemonic role of the United States must be re-legitimized. But the United States cannot presume to give voice to the community's values if it ignores its rules; nor can it expect the community to defer to its power if it threatens the interests of its members. At the same time, the community cannot expect America to exercise self-restraint in support of community rules, or to make sacrifices in support of its values, if the community trivializes the risks, costs and dangers that inhere in the US leadership role.

The challenges, therefore, are daunting. But the reason why we remember Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and others is not because they designed perfect solutions to the challenges of their time, but because they envisioned real peril, catalysed creative thought and contemplated new departures. Returning to balance of power thinking hardly seems like the imaginative response required to meet the new dangers. It hardly seems like the way to bring about the reconciliation of values and interests which is the purported goal of the Bush administration.

But there is reason to be hopeful. As we have seen, Bush's policies are rooted in the traditional American matrix of values, interests and power. These variables have a dynamic and unstable relationship to one another and can be configured in different ways, with strikingly different implications. In the background of Bush's strategy lurks a recognition that pre-emption should not be a first option; that root causes cannot be ameliorated by the application of force; that a democratic peace can make for a more peaceful world; that multilateral institutions can multiply the strength of freedom-loving nations. The potential, therefore, exists for a different strategy; but its emergence will depend on the policies of America's friends abroad as well as on domestic politics and legislative-executive relations at home. There are indications, however, that the American people would support a different matrix of policies, a blend that might allow for the integration of balance of power thinking with a community of power approach, a blend that might reconcile hegemony and community.

An elaborate assessment of public opinion in America during summer 2002, almost a year after 9/11, is suggestive. There was a huge upsurge in the American perception of threat. When asked what was the most important lesson learned from 9/11, 61 per cent of Americans said the United States should collaborate...
more closely with other countries to combat terrorism. An astonishing 88 per cent favoured ‘working through the UN to strengthen international laws against terrorism and to make sure UN members enforce them’. Seventy-five per cent desired to use force to overthrow Saddam Hussein, but only 20 per cent wanted the United States to act alone in doing so. Seventy-eight per cent favoured assistance to poor countries. Only 44 per cent wanted an increase in defence spending.¹

The data suggest that a reliance on pre-emptive and unilateralist military power is not inscribed in the DNA of the American people. In the past America’s greatest leaders, when faced with perceptions of existential threats, chose to reconcile principles and power in favour of institutions, regimes, alliances and norms that meshed America’s interests with those of a larger community of democratic allies. Wilson had a peculiar insight when he said the peace must be secured by the organized moral force of mankind. How to translate that moral force into pragmatic responses to the perils awakened by the attack on 9/11 is the challenge before us.

Bush’s national security doctrine is not likely to do the job. While he has alerted us to dangers that cannot be ignored and identified many strands of a solution, he has invoked a balance of power vocabulary that trivializes the very dilemmas he envisions. There is a different vocabulary in the American past from which better answers can be constructed. There is a tradition that recognizes that in the pursuit of national security, the use of American power and the dissemination of American ideals must be reconciled with the needs of friends, the sensibilities of adversaries and the well-being of the international community. Without such a reconciliation, the moral force of humankind will not be organized, and America’s own quest for redemption in the face of apocalyptic threat will not be realized.