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Iraq: Why a Strategic Blunder Looked So Attractive

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Introduction

The war on Iraq, because it so defines the 'new America', is a candidate to be an influential factor shaping the evolution of international relationships over the first half of this century. The signs are that this war will do deep and enduring damage to the interests of the United States and those of all the states that were most comfortable with US leadership and pre-eminence. The direct and indirect costs of this war are already formidable, but it seems likely that it will look more damaging still in historical perspective. A striking phenomenon in the second half of 2004 was the spontaneous desire of ordinary people all over the world—in Asia, Africa, and South America as well as Europe—to vote, not in their own elections but in the US Presidential elections. The sentiments of these individuals were probably captured in a comment offered to an American journalist by a café owner in Berlin: "We want our America back".¹ Opinion polls in a large number of countries suggest clearly that the target of these sentiments—perhaps best described as profound disappointment—was the Bush Administration and most particularly the President himself. But since this President won a second term has proved harder to separate the administration from Americans as a polity. This is not a comforting development. As Americans might say, most people 'don't want to go there' and consider the possibility that the last four years might typify the America we will have to deal with into the indefinite future.

This paper explores the particular question of why, despite mounting domestic political risks and clear evidence of ruinous costs internationally, the Bush Administration remained so fiercely determined to exercise the option of invading Iraq.² More broadly, it considers the question of what has happened to 'our America' in recent times. Is what we see the product of a coincidence of events and trends that is unlikely to be replicated, or should we conclude that today's America is roughly what we will have to come to terms with into the indefinite future. This paper will look at how American thinkers have addressed the question of what to do with the surfeit of power the United States found itself with after the demise of the Soviet Union, at the impact of 11 September 2001 (insofar as a non-American can hope to do so), at the unusual make-up of the Bush Administration as well as the unusual character of the President, and at the longer-term socio-religious trends in the United States. It concludes that while we can be confident that America will recover its poise and remain an indispensable positive force in world affairs, it has lost a lot of ground that may never be made up and that 'our America'—presumably the America in particular of George H. Bush and Bill Clinton—will not reappear any time soon. Finally, the paper considers some recommendations for policy adjustments in Washington and at what this recent experience means for the management of Australia's alliance relationship with the United States.

Planning to be a Superpower

The so-called 'Bush Doctrine' stems from the collection of official statements and Presidential speeches that characterise how the United States looks out upon the world and points to what the United States should, can and will do to ensure that the world is good for America.

The feature of the Bush Doctrine that has attracted the most attention is the contention that the United States will use force pre-emptively against states or sub-state actors that are deemed likely to have the intent to harm US interests and which have, or are suspected of seeking, the capability to do so. The target of the pre-emption message was a number of smaller actors on the world stage suspected of plans to magnify their weight and influence through the adoption of terrorist techniques, the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or, in the worst case, a combination of the two.

The focus on pre-emption is by no means displaced. Pre-emptive war has been a fact of life throughout history. It has always been an option for states and, depending on the circumstances, it can look attractive to either the weaker or the stronger party in an adversarial relationship. There is even some wriggle room in international law to sanction pre-emptive war, namely, if there is strong evidence that the victim was in fact already committed to war but had not yet translated this commitment into action. Still, it was a path-breaking development for the world's most powerful state to elevate this option to official doctrine. This development was made even more arresting by the inference that the doctrine could apply not only to states with an extant capability to harm US interests, but also to states that might acquire such a capability at some point in the future. In other words, the doctrine quite deliberately blurred the distinction between pre-emptive and preventive war, the latter falling unambiguously in the 'thou shalt not' column of international law.

There was another strand to the Bush Doctrine that, while not as immediately striking as pre-emption, was no less bold and consequential. This was the view that the post-Cold War circumstances offered scope for a distinctively new power structure for the preservation of global order. The essence of this view was that, as the United States was markedly more powerful than any other state, the world could move beyond the major powers competing for power and influence and cede the top spot permanently to the United States. The United States would take the interests of others sufficiently into account to preclude any desire to contest US leadership and, as a precaution, retain a sufficiently large margin of military superiority to deflate any competitive instincts that might nonetheless arise.

This was a breathtaking declaration. And that is what it was—a declaration, not a proposal. The sense of drama was heightened further by President Bush's characteristic certainty that the new order he had in mind would more reliably assure global peace and stability than past arrangements or other conceivable alternatives. President Bush spelt out this aspect of his doctrine in a speech on 1 June 2002 and included it in revised form in his *National Security Strategy of the United States* in September of the same year.³

As we defend the peace, we also have an historic opportunity to preserve the peace. We have our best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the 17th century to build a world where the great powers compete in peace instead of prepare for war. The history of the last century, in particular, was dominated by a series of destructive national rivalries that left battlefields and graveyards across the earth. Germany fought France, the axis fought the allies, and then the East fought the West, in proxy wars and tense standoffs, against a backdrop of nuclear Armageddon.

Competition between great nations is inevitable, but armed conflict is not. More and more, civilized nations find themselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos. America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.

The following paragraphs set out the quite remarkable genesis of this philosophy. What is striking here is that all the seminal thinking was done in the Pentagon, and for the distinctly parochial reason of defending the military budget from the budgetary 'peace dividend' that most expected to flow from winning the Cold War.

End of Cold War, but Soviet Union Intact

In 1989, senior officials in the George H. Bush Administration confronted the most novel of challenges. For forty years, the Soviet Union had essentially answered the questions of what the United States should focus its foreign and security policies on and on how strong the US armed forces needed to be. After the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989, advancing the Soviet Union as the answer to these questions no longer worked. The administration's response combined high strategy (trying to discern the essential contours of the post-Cold War world and devising a posture that would ensure the United States prospered in that world) and low-strategy (coming up with arguments that would deflect rising public and Congressional sentiments for a quick and substantial 'peace dividend', of the order of 50 percent in terms of military personnel or of the Pentagon budget). The then Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, saw this course as giving up options long before it was clear that it was safe and smart to do so, particularly in light of the consequences of US demobilisations following the First World War (being unable to galvanise Europe into an earlier response to Nazism) and the Second World War (when, five years after this conflict ended, a very modest power like North Korea almost succeeded in driving the United States off the Korean peninsula).

In fact, agitation for defence cutbacks had started well before the Berlin Wall came down. Mikhail Gorbachev and his programs for *glasnost* and *perestroika*, major breakthroughs on arms control (the elimination of intermediate range nuclear weapons and Moscow's acceptance of significant asymmetric reductions in conventional forces in Europe), and the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, had generated growing confidence that the Cold War was moving into a new, less virulent phase that permitted some relaxation in America's military effort. In addition, the George H. Bush Administration came to office with the US fiscal situation in a rather parlous state. These factors led the administration, in its first weeks, to craft a five year plan for defence expenditure that provided for modest but continuous reductions in real terms—the first time since 1974 that an administration had sought reductions in the Pentagon budget. The Pentagon was therefore confronted with a modest but real 'build down', albeit with no associated changes in force structure, before demands for a peace dividend rose sharply when the Berlin Wall fell (1989) and again when the Soviet Union broke up (1991).⁴

As Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney had two teams working these questions, one led by Colin Powell, who had been appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 1989, the other by Paul Wolfowitz. Powell and Wolfowitz were not soul mates by any means, but they agreed that comfortable US superiority in military power was much to be preferred to going for 'just enough'. As Colin Powell is said to have remarked, the United States had to get into the business of 'planning to be a superpower'. Cheney picked aspects from the work of both teams to provide a package to recommend to the President.

President George H. Bush opted to get on the front foot and offer a peace dividend but use this concession to hold the draw down well short of the 50 percent being talked about, whether in terms of personnel or dollars. Bush proposed that active duty military personnel and military expenditure in real terms would be cut by 25 percent and 30 percent respectively over five years, while stressing that the United States remained a superpower with interests and responsibilities to match. The inescapable role of global leadership, hedging against a revival of Soviet power, the challenge of containing the spread of WMD and other regional

dangers like dictators and terrorism were all arguments deployed to protect the idea that the United States should retain an abundance of military power. Ironically, the President articulated this holding position in a speech in Aspen, Colorado on 2 August 1990, the night that Iraq invaded Kuwait. On that occasion, the President said:⁵

Our new strategy must provide the framework to guide our deliberate reductions to no more than the forces we need to guard our enduring interests – the forces to exercise forward presence in key areas, to respond effectively to crises (and) to retain the national capacity to rebuild our forces should this be needed.

A year later, in August 1991 (after the end of the Cold War but before the breakup of the Soviet Union), President George H. Bush released a *National Security Strategy of the United States*. These are the most authoritative statements on national security. They cover a wider range of issues, seek to address a wider range of audiences and are typically crafted by officials in the White House and the National Security Council (NSC) (headed at the time by Brent Scowcroft). Still, they are concerned with the security of the United States and deal at length with the roles and missions of the Pentagon. There are a couple of passages in the National Security Strategy that were probably read in the Pentagon as ominously soft on the military budget and perhaps, as we shall see below, as wrong-headed, thinking small and squandering an historic opportunity to seize the agenda and directly manage global developments to the advantage of US security interests. It is also interesting that the President's document refers to a new defence strategy when it appears that, in August 1991, the Pentagon had at best just begun developing the Wolfowitz/Powell thinking of 1989-90 into a coherent strategy. The National Security Strategy of August 1991 said:

If the end of the Cold War lives up to its promise and liberates US policy from many of its earlier concerns, we should be able to concentrate more on enhancing security—in the developing world, particularly through means that are more political, social and economic rather than military; and

In the face of competing fiscal demands and a changing but still dangerous world, we have developed a new defence strategy that provides the conceptual framework for our future forces. This new strategy will guide our deliberate reductions *to no more than the forces we need to defend our interests and meet our global responsibilities*.⁶

The italicised words in particular, which echoed those the President used a year earlier on the eve of the first Gulf crisis, suggested a mindset on military forces, just enough, that the policy élite in the Pentagon was beginning to see as ignorant both of the lessons of history and of the dimensions of the opportunity that history had presented to the United States.

The task of liberating Kuwait naturally defused the immediate political pressure for a peace dividend. It would seem, however, that it was regarded as an interruption and that pressures for a markedly smaller military capability would resurface in due course. If the administration was to resist these instincts, it would need to support its case with a more profound and coherent strategy. This judgment was reinforced dramatically by the break-up of the Soviet Union in December 1991. To this point, hedging against a revival of Soviet power and political will had underpinned the case for caution and moderation in downsizing the US military. By that time, too, Iraq had been evicted from Kuwait, its conventional forces had been significantly diminished, and the United Nations (UN) was busy erasing its WMD and ballistic missile capabilities. As anticipated, Congressional calls for a large peace dividend resurfaced with new intensity.

The vehicle for devising a more considered national strategy to support sustaining a significant military effort turned out to be the Defence Planning Guidance (DPG), an internal Pentagon document prepared every two years to assist the many component agencies in determining the capabilities expected of them and the funding they consider necessary to achieve those capabilities. Strictly speaking, this approach reversed the proper order of strategy development. The DPG is supposed to take the national security strategy and the

derived defence strategy and distil operational guidelines for the defence agencies to plan against. The President had put out a National Security Strategy in August 1991 but, as yet, there was no derived Defence Strategy. Bureaucracies, of course, rather frequently fail to do things in the proper sequence and manage to work around such glitches without difficulty. Indeed, such glitches are not always unintended.

Cheney assigned the task of drafting the DPG to his Under Secretary for Policy, Paul Wolfowitz, who in turn delegated it to a senior deputy, Lewis 'Scooter' Libby. Libby tasked a Wolfowitz staffer, Zalmay Khalilzad (who was to become US ambassador to Iraq in 2005) to conduct the necessary consultations within the Pentagon, hold meetings on themes, concepts and so on, and to do the initial drafting.

Khalilzad's draft followed the new convention that, in the absence of a *global* challenge and an associated 'central front', the focus of attention in the future and, indeed, the highest level of strategic analysis, would have to be the stability of particular *regions* important to the United States. The draft called for the United States to be the dominant outside power in the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions to protect access to oil. In Europe and Asia, the United States would seek to prevent any of the resident major powers from dominating the region and perhaps using the consolidated resources of the region as a springboard to global power status. On WMD, the draft noted that that 'the United States could be faced with the question of whether to take military steps to prevent the development or use of weapons of mass destruction', a rather clear indication that pre-emption could emerge as the preferred or necessary option.

The draft went a crucial step further to suggest that the United States should actively discourage the emergence of potentially competitive powers, and pointed to several policy settings that would contribute to this objective. Specifically:

First, the United States must show the leadership necessary to establish and protect a new order that holds the promise of convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests. Second, in the non-defence areas, we must account sufficiently for the interests of the advanced industrial nations to discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order. Finally, we must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role. An effective reconstitution capability is important here, since it implies that a potential rival could not hope to quickly or easily gain a predominant military position in the world.⁷

These thoughts went to the heart of the brief. They mandated a militarily dominant United States, capable of acting independently when collective action could not be orchestrated and visibly positioned to increase its military power faster than any potential competitor. To those experienced in the politics of budget formulation, this strategy looked like a potential winner. Unfortunately, although this strategy committed the United States to a very demanding and costly international role into the indefinite future, no other groups in the foreign and security policy community had yet even been exposed to it, let alone persuaded of its merits. Indeed, as we have already seen, it ran counter to sentiments elsewhere in the administration, and may even have been intended to contest these sentiments. So when a copy of the document was leaked to the *New York Times* in March 1992, its thesis was savaged from all sides. President Bush asked not to be held accountable for a document that he had never seen. This was a plausible defence (although the reference in his own National Security Strategy to a new defence strategy would have been a bit awkward) given that even Wolfowitz claimed (quite reasonably to anyone who has served in a large bureaucracy) that it was a working draft that had been circulated in the Pentagon for wider input, and that he had not yet read what his staff had concocted. A focus of the furore was the implication that the major powers that the United States would seek to keep down included close allies like Japan and Germany along with, presumably, China and Russia.

We might also note that President Bush's endorsement of this thesis a decade later in June 2002 did not refer to the qualitative aspects of leadership that the United States would need to display to make this role acceptable to others that the original DPG made at least passing reference to.

While the President and Wolfowitz publicly distanced themselves from the document, Secretary Cheney privately praised the 'discovery' of a 'new rationale' for America's role in the world.⁸ Still, in view of the criticism and the President's discomfit with the document, the impression had to be conveyed that this was not the policy of the United States (which, indeed, it was not) and the something else would be crafted to replace it. Cheney signalled that the document would be rewritten. The new draft, appropriately softer in tone and giving new prominence to the importance of allies and the United Nations, was also 'leaked' without reviving the controversy.⁹ After this, as the Presidential elections intensified, the issue disappeared. Tracking the 'final' document would in any case be inherently difficult as it was never intended for public release.

It is also important to note that the central thesis of the DPG was not the literal adoption of a particular strand of obscure academic thinking. As Thomas Mann notes in *The Rise of the Vulcans*, the closest thing to an intellectual father figure for the neoconservative movement was Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago. Strauss, however, was not an international relations theorist but a passionate advocate of moral clarity, the need always to distinguish clearly between right and wrong, good and evil, and to resist the appeal of moral tolerance or the position that all points of view have validity. The view that the United States should be uncompromising in confronting evil is manifestly a position that conservative America finds appealing, but it is not a theoretical construct to support a foreign and security policy. It would seem that the foundations for the Pentagon's grand strategy were built up rather pragmatically—'discovered' as Cheney put it—in response to the challenge of defending the Pentagon's budget. According to a former Pentagon official involved in drafting the DPG, the dominant consideration was that the United States had gone through some major scares during the Cold War and should at all costs avoid the emergence of another peer competitor. Given the opportunity to build a new order, the first requirement was to avoid getting back into a glass jar with another scorpion. The obvious precursor to a global rival was the emergence of a regional hegemon where the resources of the hegemon and its immediate region provided the strategic muscle to challenge the United States globally. This, too, had to be prevented. Regions like Africa and Latin America could be ruled out with reasonable confidence as a springboard for global rivalry with the United States. But Europe, the Middle East and East Asia were another matter.¹⁰

Unipolarity, Empire, balances and Concerts: American Options in Theory

It should be noted that it was entirely appropriate and necessary for the United States to re-think its defence posture. By the time the Soviet Union imploded, the United States had spent something like US\$20 trillion developing nuclear and conventional forces and a global network of allies, bases and facilities to deter direct aggression by the Soviet Union and to prevent it from making strategic gains in regions important to the United States. Moreover, notwithstanding the bureaucratic imperatives that contributed to the strategy devised in the Pentagon, the thrust of their thinking was not without merit. With the end of the Cold War, America's effective power had risen dramatically to levels without precedent in modern history. What was America to do? Use that power, try to share it, or break it up and re-join the ranks of the other bigger states? The Pentagon's answer was by no means indefensible, particularly if one recalls the anxieties in the early 1990s in Europe and East Asia generated by Washington's planned diminution of its foreign military presence.

Although the draft DPG did not seem to borrow directly from some well-developed school of academic thinking, there was no shortage of writings on the question of the role the US should aspire to play in the world. Moreover, the end of the Cold War naturally inspired a new surge of debate and writing. The significance of the end of the Cold War was fully appreciated. It was ranked alongside the victory in 1945 and everyone seemed to sense the renewed importance of characterising the challenges ahead reasonably accurately and making intelligent choices about how the world, and the United States, should think about addressing them.

One heavyweight school of thinking—the Realists—contended that the diffusion of economic power to new centres like Japan and Germany (or Europe) and the constraining influence of nuclear weapons made the exercise of dominant power more difficult and dangerous. Realists contended that America's propensity toward idealism and messianism had to be held in check by a rigorous focus on 'national interests'. The policy prescription from this school was to guard against the risk that winning the Cold War would encourage the view that America—the state that was the exception to all other hegemonic powers the world had ever experienced—was now really free to reshape the world to its advantage and that doing so would be recognised by all (or nearly all) as to their benefit as well. Realists favoured the discipline of recognising the limits of American power and confining the nation's foreign policy ambitions to the protection and advancement of rigorously defined national interests.¹¹

As it happened, by the time the Cold War ended, the excesses of the Reagan era had contributed to budget and trade deficits that had reached alarming proportions. Moreover, the trade deficits were, rightly, attributed in large part to the extraordinary strength, dynamism and efficiency of Japanese manufacturers. The United States was being clobbered in domestic and foreign markets even in electronics and automobiles—the areas of its greatest strength. The contention that, as in the political and social fields, the United States had devised the optimal economic 'formula'—an approach to the production, distribution and sale of goods and services that out-performed all other models—no longer had the force it once had. Coincidentally, Paul Kennedy's monumental study, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, appeared in 1987, suggesting that cycles in the relative standing of the major powers could be explained as natural and inevitable. Kennedy's thesis, in a nutshell, was that, in the process of climbing to the top and seeking to preserve the top ranking, nations were driven to adopt policies that almost assured their eventual relegation.¹² Taken together, these several impulses encouraged a certain trimming of America's sails, a graceful acceptance of being no more than the first among a bunch of powers. Stanley Hoffman was by no means alone among prominent academics in suggesting that the end of the Cold War amounted to a discontinuity in international affairs, and that the best way forward for the United States was consciously to redistribute some of its residual power and conduct an experiment in the 'polycentric steering' of global affairs.¹³

As we have just seen, the George H. Bush Administration accepted that America had to lead. While the President contended that there was no one else with the capacity or the global acceptance to do so, his preference was to lead quietly and cheaply. And while he coined the phrase, a 'new world order', he also famously observed that he had little stomach for the 'vision thing', and that US policies remained focused on consolidating an orderly transition out of the Cold War, particularly in Europe.

Ronald Reagan is characterised as having been instinctively opposed to the caution and limits of the Realist thesis. He is seen by conservative admirers as having had 'unwavering confidence in the rightness of the American cause, in the appropriateness of using power in its service' and of investing the struggle with the Soviet Union with the attributes of a crusade, of a struggle between good and evil.¹⁴ Some Realists consider that in doing so, that is, aligning American foreign policy with the ideals of the American people, Reagan recorded spectacular accomplishments, hastening the end of the Cold War and vastly increasing

America's influence worldwide in both strategic and ideological terms. This assessment of the Reagan presidency underpins the alternative thesis on guidelines for America's foreign and security posture—a thesis closely identified with the neoconservatives. This alternative thesis asserts that, whatever else it did, America's rise to primacy suppressed the instability and conflict that was endemic to both Europe and East Asia prior to 1945. It seemed to follow that, if the United States vacated this position or sought to share it with others, the probable outcome would be a revival of the accident-prone balance-of-power system that existed through the first decades of the 20th century, a prospect made more alarming by the development of nuclear weapons since that time.¹⁵

This view of history clearly inspired the authors of the DPG in 1991–1992 and led Cheney to praise the discovery of a 'new rationale' to define America's role in the world. The United States, in other words, had to remain sufficiently strong to go on making any resort to collective leadership and the attendant risks of instability and conflict not only unnecessary but also unfeasible. This view of history also brings with it the primacy of military power. First and foremost, the leader had to have an effective monopoly on the use of force when global or major regional threats arose. The pessimists who worried about strategic 'overreach' had a point on the economic front. America in 1990 was an economic colossus but, at roughly 20 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP), still a pale shadow of its dominance in this dimension in 1945 when it accounted for fully one-half of the global economy. In the military domain, however, the outlook was more promising. If the Soviet/Russian military effort fell away precipitously, as seemed inevitable, the United States could open up a wide gap over all others simply by sustaining its current effort, and move further ahead through serious investment in the technologies of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). Today, of course, despite accounting for less than 4 percent of GDP (when 6–7 percent was the norm during the Cold War), the Pentagon's budget is roughly equivalent to the combined military expenditures of every other state in the world.

There was a further current of thinking, popular in neoconservative circles, propelling this thesis. This thinking held that the debacle in Vietnam had led to an unreasonable loss of faith in US military power on the part of both politicians and the general public. This was deemed unreasonable in that the US armed forces had never been tasked to win that contest and that political half-heartedness had eventually eroded public support for the war. This perception was also deemed to be costly as it weakened what had traditionally been one of America's strongest tools to shape events in its favour. President Reagan had begun the process of restoring faith in the military, but the task remained to erase completely the legacy of Vietnam as a factor constraining the deployment of US military power to advance US interests.

A conservative American scholar, Andrew J. Bacevich, has argued in a recent book that a much deeper phenomenon might be at work here.¹⁶ Bacevich contends that, particularly since the end of the Cold War, no part of the American system of governance—political leaders, the media, and the general public—has seriously contested the valuing of military power for its own sake or considered whether global military superiority might be at odds with American principles. This acceptance, moreover, developed alongside a reinforcing transformation in the image of war away from mass armies lavishly equipped with the industrial implements of war to a more aesthetically respectable abstract activity conducted at a considerable distance from the enemy but still with great precision and effectiveness, and entailing an almost negligible risk of discouraging numbers of US casualties. Unsurprisingly, in Bacevich's view, these developments manifest themselves in an increased propensity to use force and, indeed, to positioning the use of force in the spectrum of

diplomatic tools (coercive diplomacy) rather than, as in the past, beyond that spectrum as evidence that diplomacy has failed.

In Bacevich's view, then, for the Bush Administration, it was less a matter of fully restoring faith in the military, as capitalising on the fact that such faith had been fully restored, and promising to perpetuate the conditions underpinning that faith. Wherever President W. Bush may have stood at the beginning of his term with respect to the Pentagon's grand strategy, the priority he attached to the Pentagon was never in doubt. Barely three weeks after his inauguration, he signalled that he had authorised Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to proceed forcefully to transform the US armed forces to take full advantage of the technologies often described as the RMA, adding that 'the best way to keep the peace is to redefine war on our terms'.¹⁷

Another related theme of discussion, which became quite intensive about a decade into the post-Cold War era, was whether the United States should regard itself as an empire in all but name (or whether the Bush Administration effectively believed this to be the case), what this status might imply for US policy settings, and the potential dangers associated with this status that the United States needed to be alert to.¹⁸

The Defence Planning Guidance (continued)

To return to the saga of the Defense Planning Guidance, we now know that Cheney assigned the rewriting of the leaked draft to Lewis 'Scooter' Libby, Khalilzad's immediate superior.¹⁹ We also know that Libby favoured a further twist of the Khalilzad draft: not only should US military superiority be so stark and overwhelming that no other state would even consider setting out on the long road to challenge it, that superiority should also be extant rather than dependant on a reconstitution capability. In this way, unipolarity, at least in the military dimension, would remain a permanent feature of the international landscape.

The final draft of the DPG might have remained invisible. Journalists learned, however, that in the last days of the administration in January 1993, Cheney took the front half of the new DPG, which set out the overall strategy, and issued it in his name as a public document: *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*.²⁰ It is instructive, therefore, to take a closer look at this statement.

Cheney's defence strategy was an eminently marketable product, presenting a relatively optimistic view of the security outlook and highlighting allies (frequently) as a critical strategic asset for the United States. America's network of alliances constituted a 'zone of peace' and a 'framework for security not through competitive rivalry in arms, but through cooperative approaches and collective security institutions'.²¹

Several interesting themes permeated the document. One was the notion that the end of the Cold War had given the United States greater 'strategic depth'. This outcome, which took as given the fact that the United States was militarily dominant in every region that mattered, resulted from two factors. Firstly, that the Soviet Union was no longer there to boost the military potential of regional actors threatening US interests. Secondly, absent the pervasive ideological contest with the Soviet Union and the Cold War concern that even peripheral Soviet gains could begin to tip the central balance, the United States no longer had to spread its resources to cover every front. It now had greater choice about where it should focus its energy. A third factor might be regarded as implicit in these two but worth drawing out. The demise of the Soviet Union not only greatly enhanced America's relative power, it also made it much safer for the United States to exercise that power. During the Cold War, any clash of US and Soviet armed forces carried an irreducible risk of escalation to strategic nuclear war. This inhibiting risk was now gone. Cheney's document stressed that this relatively luxurious position had been won at great cost, and should therefore not be 'squandered'.

A second theme Cheney stressed was that allied support was most effectively assured if it was clear that the United States had the ability and the will to win by itself if necessary. History, the document argued, 'suggests that effective multilateral action is most likely to come about in response to US leadership, not as an alternative to it'.²² Preserving the ability to act independently was essential insurance, and responded to the lessons of history: 'There is a moment in time when a smaller, ready force can preclude an arms race, a hostile move or a conflict. Once lost, that moment cannot be recaptured by many thousands of soldiers poised on the edge of combat'. Later, and with considerable prescience, the document addresses possible domestic impediments to the role it recommended the United States play. Specifically, Cheney's document argued that the security challenges of the future would not be the major, global, relatively black and white contests that the American public could be relied upon to support. To the contrary, US interests in regional conflicts 'may seem less apparent', and US involvement rather more optional. To counter the risk that future administrations may find it difficult to generate and/or sustain public support for military ventures in distant places, the United States needed the capacity to respond decisively to regional crises, 'to win quickly and with minimum casualties'.

The document did not repeat the proposal that the United States should actively discourage the emergence of rival powers, but it came close. At one point, it made the key observations that bracketed President George W. Bush's objective of absolute, intimidating military superiority, namely:

It is not in our interests or those of the other democracies to return to earlier periods in which multiple military powers balanced against one another in what passed for security structures, while regional, or even global peace hung in the balance; and

Our fundamental belief in democracy and human rights gives other nations confidence that our significant military power threatens no one's aspirations for peaceful democratic progress.

Other language in the document also betrayed a deep appreciation of the political options that flowed from America's emergence from the Cold War as a military colossus. The notion of shaping security environments is a very old one. It refers to activities, including military activities, designed to discourage and deter developments deemed injurious to the national interest. Cheney's document, however, goes a significant step further to suggest, throughout, that the US objective should be to *preclude*, that is, make impossible, regional threats and challenges or hostile non-democratic powers from dominating regions of importance to the United States. This posture, the document states, 'is not simply within our means: it is critical to our future security'. Many analysts would see in this observation evidence of the propensity in hegemonic states toward strategic over-reach, that is, toward the adoption of postures that almost ensure the eventual exhaustion of the capacity or the collapse of the political will needed to sustain them.

The document does not explicitly foreshadow any preference for a pre-emptive military posture (although one could reasonably infer this from the use of language like 'preclude'). It anticipates the further spread of WMD and acknowledges that the introduction of nuclear weapons would 'greatly complicate' future regional crises. The recommended response, however, is focused on the ability to operate against adversaries with WMD/ballistic missiles, particularly through the acquisition of ballistic missile defences. An exception, perhaps, is a reference to the 'need to win even more quickly and decisively' if the use of WMD is threatened.

It is important to note that when the Pentagon team reassembled under George W. Bush in 2001, it began to implement the thinking it had generated a decade earlier from the outset. It was not revived in response to the attacks on 11 September 2001. Specifically, the one major security document prepared by the administration prior to that watershed event, the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), foreshadowed the intent to shape regional security

developments more intensely and on a much bigger canvas than in the past.²³ The QDR 2001 also introduced the distinction between defeating a threat to regional security (meaning the defeat of armed forces of the state concerned) and winning 'decisively', which meant regime change and occupation.

All things considered, Cheney's defence strategy for the 1990s was a skilful exercise in wordsmithing to get the basic ideas of the original DPG out as an official administration statement. It helped, of course, that it appeared within days of Bill Clinton's inauguration when the appetite for a brawl within the outgoing administration would have been very weak.

As noted earlier, the Pentagon was looking to be at the cutting edge of strategy for the post-Cold War era. Apart from selected academics like Roberta Wholstetter, there is no evidence that either the original or later draft of the DPG was the result of a government-wide process of consultation. It would seem, in fact, that the Pentagon was significantly out of step with the rest of the administration or, more realistically perhaps, seeking to correct the strategic assessments and policy instincts that it saw taking shape across the Potomac. One apparent consequence of this pedigree, apart from the starring role assigned to military power, is that scant attention was paid to the crucial dimension of the statesmanship and diplomacy required to sell this strategy to the rest of the world, particularly the other major powers.

This proposed grand strategy appears to have slipped off the radar screen during the Clinton years with neither the new administration nor Republican thinkers in opposition developing the idea or its presentation to other interested parties. The Clinton Administration, it must be said, though fully imbued with American exceptionalism and made progressively more aware of America's stark pre-eminence, displayed no inclination to develop these conditions into a new grand strategy to guide the nation's approach to the world. To the extent the Clinton Administration settled on a broad theme to characterise its posture toward the rest of the world, it was probably the simple notion of 'democratic enlargement' but without any embellishments pointing to an inclination to accelerate the natural expansion of the zone of democratic states. In practical terms, the Clinton Administration's principal initiative was to embrace the idea of offering membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to former members of the Soviet bloc, provided they sustained their commitment to the development of democratic processes.

For Republicans, the rallying cries during the 1990s were urging more vigilance regarding China and, most particularly, saving the ballistic missile defence program. Clinton had moved quickly in his first term to shut down the Strategic Defense Initiative Organisation and to reaffirm the centrality of the ABM Treaty in US thinking about strategic nuclear forces. He accelerated the development of sub-strategic or theatre missile defence (TMD) systems but limited national or strategic missile defences to precautionary research and development consistent with the ABM Treaty. Moreover, Clinton underscored this posture, anathema to most Republicans, by negotiating a new agreement with Russia specifying in some detail the capabilities of TMD systems that would be deemed compatible with the injunction in the ABM Treaty against preparations to develop and deploy strategic missile defences. This 'demarcation' agreement was finalised in November 1997 but, in view of Republican dominance in the Congress, Clinton declined to seek the 'advice and consent' of the Senate necessary for ratification.

Republicans commissioned a succession of expert studies and Congressional reports to undermine this position. This culminated in a Blue Ribbon Commission headed by Donald Rumsfeld which contended that US intelligence was far too sanguine about the imminence of a ballistic missile threat to the United States from new sources like North Korea and Iran. The Rumsfeld Commission report appeared in June 1998 and six weeks later North Korea tested a missile that, while nowhere near what was needed to actually threaten the United States, was ahead of the threat projected by US intelligence. These reinforcing developments

transformed the missile defence debate in Washington and set the stage for President Bush to make the demise of the ABM Treaty the first priority of his administration. Bush announced America's intention to withdraw from the Treaty in December 2001.

While Republicans were ferocious in their opposition to Clinton as an individual and to most of his foreign and security policies, there was an important positive side to his administration. Clinton had presided over the longest continuous economic boom in US history, and the Pentagon budget had not been cut beyond the programmed 30 percent fall in real terms over the period 1990–1995 put in place by President George H. Bush. The Republicans therefore inherited both a robust economy and a military capacity that was formidably large in both absolute and relative terms yet accounted for a modest 3 percent of GDP.

Moreover, the strong and conspicuous unilateralist streak underpinning the grand strategy, and the importance it assigned to military power as the primary instrument of implementation remained an accurate reflection of Republican thinking. If anything, their faith in US military capabilities grew stronger. The 1990s was a period of considerable intellectual ferment in the US security community as people sought to define the essential contours of the post-Cold War world and to consider how the United States could exploit the so-called 'Revolution in Military Affairs' to best advantage. Numerous studies confirmed that taking full advantage of the RMA extended beyond new weaponry into the more hazardous domain of changing basic military formations, chains of command, and linkages to intelligence and the like. The Clinton Administration said honestly in the late 1990s that it was close to, yet not quite ready to launch itself into such a campaign. The Bush Administration, in contrast, was ready. The President gave Donald Rumsfeld carte blanche to, in effect, pull the plug, on RMA and to implement whatever 'transformation' of the US military this required. Moreover, the administration anticipated that the rewards would be decisive and, as the President put it in a speech shortly after his inauguration, nothing less than 'redefining war on our terms'.²⁴ As we shall see below, President Bush believes that the historic significance of Operation *Iraqi Freedom* is that it demonstrated exactly that.

For our present purpose, the key point is that the grand strategy advanced in 1992 did not become a matter of overt debate and development in the period 1993–2000.²⁵ Nor was it a theme of George W. Bush's campaign for the presidency. This was the case despite the fact that several of its authors were among his campaign advisors and remained very attracted to it as a basic setting for America's foreign and security policies. They set out to put its thinking into practice before 11 September through disabusing Russia of any claim to share the stage with the United States (casting off the ABM Treaty and the practice of coordinated reductions in strategic nuclear forces), and through the QDR. To the contrary, as a candidate, Bush found himself speaking of the need to present America as a humble nation. It is not clear when, or even whether, the new President was formally briefed on the grand strategy developed in the Pentagon during his father's administration. What is clear is that when he articulated the essence of this strategy in mid 2002 it came across every bit as stark, declaratory and dominated by coercive military power as the original draft DPG of 1992.

The Conservative Ascendancy

While many Republicans considered the loss of the presidency in 1992 to be almost inexplicable, and some appear to have regarded it as unacceptable, the ensuing eight years of fermentation, coupled with on-going wider trends in the US body politic, may have been necessary for the full flowering of the neoconservative thesis on global order in 2001.

Two British journalists—John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge—have recently chronicled the conservative ascendancy that has progressively tightened its grip on the American

political spectrum over the past four decades. Their 2004 book, *The Right Nation*, has received strong praise from Americans of all political persuasions.²⁶

The Right Nation confirms strongly the authors' core observation that the United States is 'magnificently contradictory', a nation that defies generalisations. Moreover, just as the United States sticks to pounds, yards and gallons, it makes nonsense of conventional political terminology. There is not, and never has been, an organised political 'left' in the United States. The cleavage in America is between liberals and conservatives or, as many would have it, between empiricism, reason and net assessment on the one hand and faith, values and moral clarity on the other.

America's Democratic Party roughly occupies the space that in most other democratic states would be called the *right*, while Republicans would be labelled the *hard right*. Nor is it easy to use the balance of political representation as a guide to how Americans as a whole feel and think. Barely one half of adult Americans ever bother to vote—the norm in presidential elections is closer to 45 percent. It is a fact, however, that in national opinion polls, more than twice as many Americans now describe themselves as conservative rather than liberal (41 percent versus 19 percent). Labelling the opponent as 'liberal' has become a key tactic in political contests. It would seem fair to say, therefore, that America's political centre of gravity is significantly to the right of every other major industrialised country and that this drift has not yet run its course. The long poles in the conservative creed are faith, family and freedom. Conservatives are pro-life (but also pro capital punishment) and accept that the use of military force will sometimes be necessary. They value individual liberty over greater equality because the latter essentially mandates higher taxes and bigger government to effect the redistribution of wealth. Conservatives oppose abortion, gay marriages, big government, gun control and subsuming American freedom of action in multilateral bodies like the United Nations.

The conservative ascendancy is intimately related to religion. America, with its roots in the Pilgrim Fathers escaping Europe for a more tolerant environment in which to practice and propagate their austere faith, has always been a more overtly religious country than its European counterparts. In recent decades, however, this gap has been widening as Europeans have continued to downgrade the centrality of religion while both the intensity of faith and the proportion of Americans that attach great importance to faith has been growing. Many observers, including Micklethwait and Wooldridge, associate this trend with the increasing polarisation of American politics. These observers note the shrinking ranks of the liberal conservatives and the conservative liberals, an emerging tendency to label criticism and opposition as, in reality, a challenge to faith, and a seemingly growing but still selective acceptance of a more prominent role for faith in governance. Some also observe that in the case of both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, a new quality has emerged in the political opposition—a quality of loathing and hatred, of absolute intolerance.

In the United States, debates on abortion, gay marriage, the display of Christian teachings (especially the Ten Commandments) in public buildings and the teaching of creationism (or *intelligent design* as political jargon now has it) rather than evolution in schools have become progressively more intense and consuming. Polls suggest that many more Americans believe in the Bible's version of how it all began rather than in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

The political significance of this hardening cleavage in American society is great. Aspirant politicians, including presidential candidates, must be responsive to these trends. As noted below, an estimated 40 percent of Bush's vote in the disputed election in 2000 came from evangelicals and white Protestant fundamentalists. His more convincing victory in 2004 was attributed to increasing his appeal to black and Hispanic Americans, but most importantly to getting a larger proportion of his natural support base—the religious right—to actually go to the polls.

The extent to which the cleavage on issues like abortion, gay marriage and creationism impacts on foreign and security policy is another question. While the linkages are undoubtedly complex and difficult to anticipate, President Bush has created some powerful precedents for positioning faith more centrally in how the United States relates to the world.

President George W. Bush

George W. Bush and Karl Rove, now the President's political advisor and the acknowledged 'architect' of his election wins in 2000 and 2004, first met in 1973, at Union Station in Washington DC. Rove recalls that he formed the impression on that first day that George W. Bush 'exuded more charisma than any one individual should be allowed to have'. While there is no reason to dispute this impression, and many have indeed commented on the President's charm at close quarters, it is still probably fair to observe that, in Bush's case, this quality does not project particularly well: it has to be experienced up close. As even his greatest admirers acknowledge, in 1973 Bush had accomplished nothing and was going nowhere. Rove, however, saw enough to warrant a long-term investment. He stayed close (even though the next decade or more suggested he was wasting his time), eventually worked with Bush to get into the Governor's mansion in Texas, and nudged him toward a bid for the Presidency even before Bush had exhibited interest.²⁷

In 1985, the Reverend Billy Graham made what must surely now rank as the most consequential conversion of the President's long career. Bush, a 39 year-old near-alcoholic facing the failure of his marriage, became a born-again Christian, a man of profound faith in God and the attendant notions of destiny and fulfilling the purpose that God has assigned. One hears from those that have succeeded in crossing this threshold that achieving absolute faith was their salvation, the one sure defence against whatever demons had been stalking them. The fear of a relapse reinforces the intensity of faith and often results in some trepidation about reasoned debate, critical thought and introspection. Any or all of these may create doubt, uncertainty or a loss of confidence, all of which imperil faith.

People of deep faith are prone to be profoundly certain that the attitude, position or decision they have come to is the best one. Once satisfied that their position is faith-based, whether through their own study and prayer or through the advice of someone they respect deeply, that it is the position that God would wish them to take, doubt and review is out of the question. Some go a step further to the belief that pure faith allows God to shape their view directly and thus to the belief that what they decide is in fact God's will.

Bush has spoken openly of his reliance on 'gut feelings' and 'instinct' in taking decisions, and to praying long and hard on the bigger ones for guidance on which way his instincts should take him. The corollary, of course, is a disinclination to approach issues analytically, to think things through, weigh the pros and cons, and make a reasoned decision. Perhaps the most widely-quoted observation on George W. Bush's 'style' as President is that he lacks curiosity or, less kindly, that he is intellectually lazy. Bush in fact prides himself on a minimalist, big-picture approach to sizing an issue up and taking a decision. He relies on a close circle of immediate staff to reduce issues to this minimalist essence, which naturally gives them great scope to shape the outcome. Observers report that this style had become entrenched in the Bush White House by mid-2001.²⁸

These insights help to explain a curiously persistent flat spot in Bush's performance. For a man who is by no means unintelligent, and who has worked hard to improve some skills vital to his position (especially delivering speeches), he remains strikingly incapable of responding spontaneously to a recent development on a particular ongoing issue, positioning that development sensibly in its context and explaining why the administration has decided to respond in a particular way. After four and a half years in the White House, the President is

still very uncomfortable with spontaneity. He is all too prone to fall back on reciting the objective and insisting that administration policy is on the right track and making headway. Perhaps this is the product of not having reviewed the issue in detail in the first place, and of regarding familiarity with subsequent developments as not the business of the commander-in-chief or suggestive of a lack of confidence in the soundness of the original decision.

Some acquaintances report that George W. Bush's faith extends to the next level, namely that God has given him a mission. He is reported to have said circa 1998 that he believed God wanted him to be President and, in 2004, that God spoke through him.²⁹ The White House has discounted or contested these and other instances including, most recently, the Palestinian Prime Minister claiming that, at the Middle East summit in Jordan in mid-2003, Bush said that God had directed him to invade Afghanistan and Iraq, which he had done, and to create a separate Palestinian state, which he intended to do.³⁰ Bush himself is perfectly comfortable with the public observation that he strives 'to be as good a messenger of [God's] will as possible.'³¹ Similarly, his comfort with biblical analogies and metaphors and the stark biblical language on core issues like good and evil is abundantly apparent in all his speeches.

But profound faith, taken to the level of being in communication with God, imparts, it would seem, boundless confidence. And coupled with being the most powerful man in the world, it is a prescription for arrogance. It is hard to put another interpretation on an intriguing observation Bush volunteered to Bob Woodward: "I'm the commander—see, I don't need to explain—I don't need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the President. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation".³² A comparable degree of arrogance is evident in a quite extraordinary explanation offered to a journalist by a senior adviser to the President in mid-2002 on the obsolescence of reason and empiricism. The aide suggested that the journalist:

was part of what we [in the White House] call the reality-based community in which people believe that solutions emerge from the judicious study of discernible reality. That's not the way the world works anymore. We are an empire now and when we act we create our own reality. And while you are studying that reality, we'll act again creating other new realities which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're histories (sic) actors and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.³³

That anyone capable of sprouting such goobledgook should be anywhere near the White House, let alone advising the President of the United States seems more than a little troubling. This, it seems to me, is the central concern about the new propensity in America to accept and, indeed, to encourage the infusion of religion into governance. The confidence and certainty that attends policy settings achieved in this way makes adaptation and change even harder than we already know to be the case. It is also a characteristic very likely to make the inevitable mistakes even bigger. As the author of a memorandum to British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, observed dryly of the Bush Administration in 2002: 'They may agree that failure is not an option but this does not mean they will necessarily avoid it.'³⁴

Bush's faith may verge on the fundamental, and many observers do indeed describe him as a fundamentalist, but he is far from being incapable of tailoring his message to particular audiences. To an important extent, it is said, his faith is calculated (a contention that, to this author, is a contradiction in terms). He has no difficulty in modulating his philosophy to follow the script for an election campaign, in order to stir the evangelical and white Protestant fundamentalists that constitute as much as 40 percent of his support base yet change the tone and content of his message so as not to drive away groups less comfortable with overt religiosity.³⁵ Still, as we saw earlier, the number of places in contemporary America where Bush has to discipline himself in this way seems to be shrinking.

11 September 2001

As intimated earlier, it may be impossible for a non-American to appreciate fully the impact of the 11 September attacks on the American psyche. The only safe course might be to acknowledge that, however hard one tries to imagine how it would have felt and to recall one's own feelings watching it unfold on television, it probably hit most Americans harder still. An attack of such audacity and depravity, intended to strike simultaneously at the key symbols of US political, economic and military power, and coming literally out of nowhere since America was at peace except for the odd, distant rogue regime, momentarily decked the United States. It was a strike that was at once simply devastating and devastatingly simple. Shock, disbelief and incomprehension competed for supremacy followed, perhaps, by numbness. Sometime later, however, all these emotions would have been swept aside by anger, humiliation and a thirst for revenge. Along the way, perhaps, one of the enemy, whoever they were, would live long enough to answer the question: Why?

The shock and bewilderment engendered by these attacks would have been amplified by the conviction of most Americans that they were a good nation, a nation of migrants from every corner of the globe, a nation defined by values that were essentially universal, and a nation that, in the defence and advancement of these values, had contributed immeasurably to the security and wellbeing of all. What had they done to attract the blind hatred that lay behind these attacks? As we know, an amazingly large and diverse swathe of humanity was just as astonished and instinctively joined Americans in saying, without reservation, that such behaviour was unjustified and unacceptable. *Le Monde's* editorial captured this all but universal sentiment with exquisite elegance: *We are all Americans now.*

For quite some time after 11 September 2001, Americans were prone to say that history had begun anew on that day. With characteristic enthusiasm, the entire suite of US foreign and security policies was put aside as the United States set off to bring the perpetrators to justice (or to bring justice to them). Despite the almost universal sympathy and support, President Bush tellingly (but unwisely) elected to put the whole world in the dock with his test: 'You are either with us, or you are with the terrorists'. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld observed sometime after that the attacks had led the United States to see everything in a new light. Uncertainties and risks that had been seen as inescapable became unacceptable and had to be eliminated, not managed.

There can be no doubt that 11 September 2001 ranks among the handful of days in modern history that 'changed the world as we knew it'. It seems likely, however, that the Bush Administration's instinct to cast this event in apocalyptic terms was nudged along to disguise the fact that it had discounted some rather direct warnings that something of this order was on the cards. In his transition advice, Bill Clinton singled out al Qaeda as likely to become the new administration's foremost foreign policy challenge. Richard Clarke, counter-terrorist adviser in the Clinton White House and retained in this role by President Bush, did the same on an ongoing basis.³⁶ And we know that al Qaeda figured frequently in the President's daily intelligence brief. Instead, the administration elected to give top priority to making missile defence an irreversible reality and confirming to Russia that it was no longer seen as a peer even in the arena of nuclear forces, to signalling China that the United States was alert to (but not yet alarmed by) its growing strength, to signalling to the world (through the QDR 2001) that it intended to shape security developments more comprehensively than in the past, and to breaking off the Clinton-era engagement of North Korea.

However, not everyone in the United States was completely disoriented by the events of 11 September 2001. Some kept their feet on the ground and saw in the attacks both perils of a different order and new opportunities to advance their vision for the United States. The adherents to the grand strategy crafted in 1991–1992 would have viewed the attacks—the advent of mass casualty terrorism—as potentially the ultimate asymmetric threat. In their

view, the United States had an option not available to any other state since the Roman Empire two millennia earlier, that is, to preside absolutely over an indefinite phase of human history with correspondingly pervasive and enduring consequences. That so grand a vision could be undone by an insignificant number of fanatical Muslims milking the features of the modern world that America had been instrumental in creating—especially the transport and communication revolutions—would have been an unbearable irony.

At the same time, the shock of the attacks was so profound that the political landscape in the United States had been transformed. America, so firmly secure behind its flanking oceans and its nuclear deterrent, had suffered a surprise attack on its homeland more central and more deadly than the attack by Imperial Japan in December 1941. For some period, the administration would have virtual *carte blanche* in determining the US response. From the first meeting of the inner cabinet to consider how America would respond, Iraq was listed alongside al Qaeda and the Taliban as the priority targets.³⁷ Did these proponents of Iraq's inclusion act in the sincere belief that Saddam Hussein must have had a hand in the attacks on 11 September 2001? Alternatively, were they seizing the political window of opportunity to also begin to take forward their vision of what America had to do, the capacities and will they felt it had to demonstrate to position itself as the undisputed and undisputable leader? Setting aside a string of very frank memoirs sometime in the future, this question might be considered ultimately unknowable. Still, it is an important part of the question this paper seeks to shed some light on.

Those that may have schemed to slip Iraq in on the coattails of the 'war on terror' may have got more than they bargained for. They were a group of very capable and seasoned practitioners of the art of formulating and implementing strategy as government policy, but they may not have reckoned on their commander-in-chief. Once the president had endorsed the project, added it to his mission, to the purpose for which he had been made president, he was not disposed to take much further counsel on modalities. It became part of his war on terrorism, and the Pentagon was in charge of the war. America's strategic objective in Iraq may have been the creation of a stable, democratic state well disposed toward the United States and reliably cleansed of any interest in WMD, but the President and his inner circle allowed this objective to be distilled into the removal of Saddam Hussein and of the instruments he used to impose his authority.

Later, as a politically viable *casus belli* for war on Iraq proved tiresomely elusive, the President, seemingly without the slightest trepidation, expanded his mission still further to embrace bringing freedom and democracy to the entire community of Arab/Muslim states. This was a master stroke by the grand strategists. It was a bold and far-reaching objective. It was an objective fully commensurate with US power and influence and, by definition, an objective that only the United States could proclaim without derision. It was an objective that would likely lean heavily on America's primary axis of pre-eminent power (the military). And it was an objective anchored firmly in the 'war on terror' as intended to address the ultimate root cause of the jihadist phenomenon.

There is a further dimension to the events of 11 September 2001 that merits comment. The first eight months of Bush's presidency were less than promising. Dealing with the sweep of issues in a steady-state America—issues that were multifaceted, and called for nuanced distinctions, negotiation and compromise—proved not be George W. Bush's forte. The President is a student of leadership and greatness (though perhaps not an avid one) and reportedly tries to factor into his decision-making process what history would expect of him. But nothing came along in the early months that provided any scope to take intimidating decisions with confidence and certainty and to exhibit steely resolve in standing by these decisions—that is, to exhibit the qualities ascribed to 'great leaders' of the past. The attacks on 11 September 2001 swept all this trivia off the agenda and left one thing that seemed as black and white as one could wish—it left winning a war started by an enemy of the United

States that the President recalled, probably with some chagrin, from his daily intelligence briefs, but who most Americans had no idea existed. In all the circumstances, and after a momentary hiccup when Vice-President Cheney appeared to be in charge, President Bush embraced the opportunity to be a wartime leader with genuine zeal and probably considerable relief.

Iraq

It is certainly possible to argue that the simplest explanation for the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 should be accepted as sufficient. In the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001, the American government was in a state of virtual paranoia about the ultimate nightmare of a comparable attack with some form of WMD—an attack that might crush American optimism, provoke a severe economic downturn and perhaps stand as the turning point in America's 100-year ascendancy to global pre-eminence. Iraq stood out as a possible source of this nightmare for a number of reasons: Saddam Hussein had very good reasons to hate America; Iraq knew how to make WMD and had used them (chemical weapons) regularly in its war with Iran during the 1980s; and Saddam Hussein's regime overtly supported terrorist groups operating against Israel and was clearly at home in the quasi-criminal world of terrorist movements (individual al Qaeda operatives had travelled to or spent time in Iraq on various occasions). This was a potent cocktail, and one that, in the post-11 September 2001 environment, the United States could no longer afford to manage: it had to be irreversibly neutered through the removal of the Iraqi regime.

Had the Bush Administration really felt this way and mobilised briskly for a unilateral assault on Iraq, we might now all be saying that America *understandably* included Iraq in its initial response to the attacks on 11 September 2001 even though it transpired that Iraq was no longer a ready source of WMD and that nothing resembling an alliance existed between it and al Qaeda.

In fact, of course, the administration never thought about Iraq as it did about al Qaeda and the Taliban; that is, as part of a minimal defensive response to 11 September 2001 to disrupt its new enemy, to buy time to marshal its forces and begin to take the initiative in combating international terrorism. We know that President Bush commissioned planning for the invasion of Iraq at the same time as he committed the United States to deposing the Taliban in Afghanistan to deny al Qaeda a sanctuary and, hopefully, killing or capturing significant number of al Qaeda leaders and fighters. But he decided—on the advice of a majority of his inner core of advisers (Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, Rice, and Tenet) that Iraq would be deferred, if only until evidence of its involvement in the attacks or its alliance with al Qaeda had been gathered.³⁸

This hesitation (or the differentiation of Iraq and Afghanistan) was picked up by the international coalition. By the time the administration began to speak openly of regime change in Iraq as the next step in the 'war on terror', it had the aura of a political kite, a test of the willingness of the international coalition to embrace an American preference rather than a step mandated by Washington's determination to prevent further attacks and to bring those responsible for the attacks on 11 September 2001 to justice. When members of the international coalition hesitated and expressed reservations about this proposed development in the campaign against terror, not least because it looked like an indulgent diversion from the main game (because Washington seemed to want it for reasons other than responding to the attacks and because it risked fanning the 'clash of civilisations' inherent in the attacks), the issue transformed into a test of Washington's power and authority, namely its capacity to change minds or, as necessary, to compel states to support something they did not agree with. In short, Iraq became a test of Washington's ability to

make the international system work in the manner set out in the Defence Planning Guidelines of 1992.

This tragedy-in-the-making was made more certain by the fact that the attacks on 11 September 2001 had engineered a truce after a bruising eight months in which the style and substance of the Bush Administration's foreign policy had already generated anger and concern about an America with the strength and now the inclination to impose its will: the brusque rejection of the Kyoto Protocol; the rejection of the authority of the International Criminal Court; and the determination to deny Russia any status as the strategic successor to the Soviet Union by abandoning the ABM Treaty and the convention of negotiating treaties on strategic nuclear force levels all spring to mind. In other words, Washington had already strained its relations with most of its major allies and (new) friends. Then, just months after the attacks on 11 September 2001, it seemed to be slipping back to its earlier ways, displaying little sense that the extraordinary international coalition that had formed spontaneously within days of the attacks was something of great value to it or that it really believed its own rhetoric about the 'war on terror' being a different kind of war—a drawn out campaign consisting mostly of relatively invisible programs below the level of operations with conventional military forces.

If the simple explanation is not especially persuasive, what explanation seems to fit better with the facts as we understand them today? The contention here is that, in Washington in 2001–2002, the case for the forcible removal of Saddam Hussein was over-determined. That is to say, it seemed like such a good idea for so many reasons that not doing it looked like a tragic waste, if not a dereliction of duty. This over-determination yielded great enthusiasm and a propensity to belittle sceptics as small thinkers. Those preoccupied with risks and complications were tuned out as threats to a golden opportunity. Even preparations that betrayed an awareness of possible unpleasant outcomes tended to be avoided as risking the premature closure of this political window of opportunity.

Once the Bush Administration's decision to bring about a definitive resolution of the Iraq question was considered to have been promulgated, the issue fell prey to the logic that the dominant power, with global interests and responsibilities, depends heavily on its credibility—the belief that it can and will discipline those that challenge the basic order, to deter any challenges. If all is going well, the dominant power will be able to preserve the mystique of its power and rarely, if ever, threaten disciplinary action overtly. Once an overt threat is made, however, it must be seen to follow through and reinforce for the future that its words carry real weight. The Bush Administration lost no opportunity to criticise its predecessor for being indecisiveness on such issues as Iraq, al Qaeda and North Korea (and squandering America's authority in the process), in order to stress its own determination to do exactly what it said it would do.

Faced with these circumstances, and perhaps for the first time in its history, America's system of checks and balances fell down, by allowing a small leadership group to make its wish to unseat Saddam Hussein by force administration policy, by defending this policy with large dollops of manipulation and deceit against a slow and uneven recovery of these checks and balances, and by implementing that policy in March 2003.

Removing the Iraqi regime by force simply advanced too many agendas important to senior members of the Bush Administration. It is instructive to try and identify the main ones:

1. Signal to the world how seriously the United States viewed the possible intersection of WMD and terrorism in the aftermath of the attacks on 11 September 2001;
2. Reinforce the message that abuse of human rights was not a sovereign right;

3. Use Iraq to unleash the desires for freedom and democracy throughout the Muslim world—both to address the root causes of international terrorism and (as Kennedy and Reagan had done so successfully) to associate the administration with a rekindling of this deep-seated American instinct;
4. Show the world that the 11 September 2001 attacks had in no way demoralised Americans or dented the American spirit;
5. Provide the American public with a more satisfying instance of retaliation for the attacks than ousting the Taliban in Afghanistan turned out to be;
6. Erase the ‘failure’ of American will (or, at least, the error of judgment) to seize the opportunity available in 1991 to remove Saddam Hussein;
7. Restore public faith in the armed forces by committing to a big but eminently attainable military objective;
8. Use it as an ideal vehicle to advance the administration’s new concept for world order centred on unipolarity or undisputed American pre-eminence; and
9. Eliminate one threat to the security of Israel and send a strong deterrent message to two others (Iran and Syria).

Not all of these motives were highly visible: only 1, 2 and 3 can be readily documented. Agendas 4, 5, 6 and 7 can only be inferred from comments to the press by officials that insisted on anonymity. In the author’s judgment, these indications have been sufficiently credible to justify inclusion in the list. For the good and obvious reason that the Arab world was a critical player in this drama, the Israel factor (agenda 9) was a complete sleeper in the campaign for regime change in Iraq. This motive was clearer, however, in what key players in and around the Bush Administration (notably Wolfowitz, Perle and Cheney) were saying and writing during the Clinton years.

Agenda 8 is also included on the author’s judgment. The earlier account of the genesis of the grand strategy for a new world order supports its inclusion here. The case is strengthened further when one recalls the acute political preoccupation with *how* Saddam Hussein was to be removed. An American military victory was never an issue, but whether the larger strategic agenda would be advanced depended heavily on how, and especially how easily and surgically, the US military was seen to prevail. Throughout 2002, the civilian leadership pressed the military relentlessly in the direction of a bolder strategy and a leaner ground force while still ensuring a breathtakingly swift victory and US casualties in the low hundreds. A super abundance of airpower was laid on to cover the small risk of major surprises on the ground. Finally, early in 2004, President Bush told Bob Woodward that he had been willing to be interviewed at length for the book *Plan of Attack*, because the book would have historic significance. That significance, in the President’s view, lay in the fact that the military campaign against Iraq demonstrated that ‘America has changed how you fight and win war, and therefore makes it easier to keep the peace in the long run’.³⁹

More broadly, we have seen that a heavyweight core of senior administration figures remained strongly attracted to the grand strategy developed a decade earlier to define the role the United States could and should aspire to play in the world. The post-11 September 2001 agenda was in effect harnessed to this grand strategy over the twelve months or so after the attacks. The initial focus on ‘international terrorism’ or ‘terrorists of international reach’ quickly gave way to a broader definition of terrorism which, in turn, facilitated ‘the issues of rogue states, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism [being] forged into one homogenous threat to the security of the American people’.⁴⁰

The core of the administration's public case for war (agendas 1, 2 and 3) probably owe a good deal to Karl Rove, the president's domestic political adviser. Rove's preoccupation would have been management of the war so that it supported, or at least did not torpedo, re-election to a second term. His interests presumably favoured more rather than fewer public rationales for the war, just in case. The evidence is very strong that the administration decided early on that only the perception of a clear and present danger would extract the degree of public support needed to provide adequate political security for the presidential elections in November 2004. Only Iraq's possession of WMD, especially nuclear weapons, and the possibility that such weapons could be transferred to al Qaeda, was judged to provide the requisite sense of immediacy to justify war. The outlines of the WMD saga are now well known, as is the political wisdom of having additional rationales to support the war. Since mid-2003 at the latest, in Australia and the United Kingdom as well as the United States, the weight of the case for war shifted from WMD to agendas 2 and 3. Agenda 3, moreover, was a last minute addition to the case for war. President Bush formally embraced this objective, which had been kicking around in Republican think tanks since mid-2002, on 26 February 2003, less than a month before the invasion.

The Oil Factor

Much commentary on the 2003 war on Iraq takes it as given that control over oil supplies was the decisive driver. The absence of this factor from the list above therefore deserves a quick comment. The main reason for its exclusion is that there is neither direct nor indirect evidence that it was an important consideration. It is true that, while US dependence on Middle East oil is modest compared to the other industrial powers, the security of oil supplies is among the most important services the leader is expected to provide. For decades, the United States has based its capacity to fulfil this expectation on a close, special relationship with the ruling elite in Saudi Arabia, the home of about 25 percent of the world's proven oil reserves. It is also true that the 11 September 2001 attacks made Americans suddenly ambivalent about this special relationship. All but three of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi nationals. This, in turn, exposed a known (but little noted) fact that the Saudi élite had a well-established and lavishly-funded program to promote its preferred interpretation of Islam, Wahabism, in the wider Muslim world. And Wahabism is an extremely conservative and intolerant (of infidels) interpretation of the Koran.

It did seem, for a time, that Americans wondered whether the Saudi regime remained a good strategic bet and, indeed, whether the United States should want to remain close to such a regime. In the end, the question was resolved in the affirmative. Agreement was reached to reverse America's major investment (since 1990) in military bases in the Kingdom, thereby eliminating a major source of internal resistance to the ruling family and addressing a specific grievance that motivated al Qaeda. Similarly, the Saudi leadership agreed to wind back and to endeavour to control more carefully its projection of Wahabism. A supporting consideration, undoubtedly, was that no other oil supplier is in the same league as Saudi Arabia. Iraq is an important player with significant reserves (11 percent of the world total), but remains a very poor substitute for Saudi Arabia.

In short, it would appear that security of oil supplies was a consideration that supported the invasion of Iraq passively rather than motivated it in a direct way. In terms of oil, being close to a future Iraqi government could not be an alternative to Saudi Arabia, but being close to both governments would offer valuable additional leverage.

The WMD Saga

The issue of Iraq's WMD is now exposed as a disturbingly pure instance of intelligence following policy. The essentially universal view that Iraq had not complied earnestly with UN resolutions and probably had some residual WMD, particularly chemical warfare agents, was well-founded. This, however, was deemed insufficiently arresting as a threat. Somehow, the US intelligence community found evidence of significant *new* production and stockpiling of both chemical weapons and biological weapons, as well as indications of a reconstituted nuclear weapon program assessed to be capable of bearing fruit before the end of the decade.⁴¹ The several investigations, and leaks of some key documents, have begun to show *how* the US intelligence community managed to get it dead wrong. The contention that the political leadership had played a key role through exaggerating the certainty and immediacy of the intelligence assessments was easier to demonstrate and came out much earlier.

More importantly, because it is a reality that governments must sometimes take irrevocable decisions in the absence of clear or complete information, each new investigation and leak has revealed just how much turmoil and anguish this process engendered in the intelligence communities in the United States, the United Kingdom and, to a limited extent, in Australia. For thirty months, the revelations and exposés on the issue of Iraq's WMD have pointed relentlessly in the direction of an administration fiercely determined to get to the point of using force to depose Saddam Hussein and prepared to do whatever was necessary to get there. The 2004 reports of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (500 pages) and of the President's Commission on Intelligence (600 pages) both show that, as war approached, individual analysts and offices within the US intelligence community were questioning nearly every item of intelligence on Iraq's WMD.

It seems appropriate now to question the political declarations made in Washington and London, and echoed in Canberra, that it had been necessary to act on the available intelligence and that the intelligence was saying that Saddam was back in the WMD business in a serious way. These alleged circumstances also provoked the claim that the risks of doing nothing outweighed those assessed to be associated with taking action. It is now quite hard not to take literally a devastating sentence from a British cabinet document dated 23 July 2002 (but leaked in May 2005) assessing that, in Washington, 'intelligence and data are being fixed around the policy [of war to remove Saddam]'.⁴²

Nuclear weapons were the most distant threat, but nonetheless the one that carried the greatest weight, particularly for members of the US Congress considering a request from the Bush Administration for the authority to use force, if necessary, to remove Saddam Hussein. In the lead-up to the congressional votes in October 2002, the administration came up with what was arguably the signature phrase of the pre-war political campaign. Armed with the new National Intelligence Estimate assembled by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) at the end of September 2002, and playing on the term 'smoking gun', a discovery that would prove conclusively that Iraq was in flagrant breach of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, the administration contended that: 'We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.' Opinion polls at the time found that 79 percent of Americans believed that Iraq had, or was close to getting, nuclear weapons. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate approved the authorisations with strong margins.

We now know, of course, that all three strands of intelligence supporting a revived Iraqi nuclear weapon program were on life-support before the end of 2002. UN inspectors found no evidence whatever that Iraq was rebuilding its nuclear infrastructure (heavily bombed in 1991 and 1998); the suitability of aluminium tubes for use in centrifuges to enrich uranium (rather than casings for military rockets as claimed by Iraq) had been questioned seriously by agencies in the United States and the United Kingdom, and by the International Atomic

Energy Agency (IAEA); and documentary evidence of Iraqi purchases of uranium from Niger had been assessed as crude forgeries.

An 'oversight' in the NSC allowed this last strand of intelligence to be reiterated, and the nuclear threat sustained, as late as the end of January 2003, in the President's State of the Union address. This bureaucratic glitch was not exposed until well after the invasion. In May 2003, a former US ambassador made public that he had visited Niger to assess these reports for the CIA early in 2002, and had concluded that they were without foundation. The IAEA, which had been denied access to these documents for months, said the same in its final report to the UNSC on 7 March 2003. In July 2003, after sparring with the CIA on who was culpable, the NSC acknowledged that it had been warned repeatedly by the CIA that this intelligence was too suspect to be used in any Presidential statement, but had overlooked these warnings. Unfortunately, the wording used by the President in January 2003 attributed this strand of argument to the 'British government', justifiably reinforcing the view that it was not a case of 'oversight', but a means of keeping the issue alive despite CIA warnings. In late 2005, it emerged that British intelligence had relied on the same flawed documents.⁴³

The Iraqi regime's links to international terrorism is another story, but one with a comparable trajectory. The instinctive presumption, immediately after the events of 11 September 2001, that Iraq had some association with the attacks was, in all the circumstances, neither surprising nor unreasonable. Yet, long after an exhaustive intelligence effort discounted both Iraqi involvement in the attacks and close links to al Qaeda, the administration declined to make any clear public acknowledgement of these facts. To the contrary, it sustained these presumptions, but in ways sufficiently discreet to avoid a direct challenge (from, for example, senior intelligence officials speaking anonymously to the press). And it worked. A poll in October 2002, one year after the attacks, indicated that two-thirds of Americans (66 percent) believed Saddam Hussein had a hand in the attacks.⁴⁴ As late as 2004, polls were still showing that a majority of adult Americans thought this to be the case.

All in all, the Iraq saga has been a source of great disappointment in and concern about the United States. It is not that Iraq under Saddam Hussein was the innocent victim of American military power, far from it. It is the sense that the administration knew that it lacked the case for the legitimate use of force against Iraq and resorted to guile, manipulation and deceit, nationally and internationally, to get itself across the line. This was not supposed to happen, not in the United States of America. America's system of checks and balances was meant to ensure that that it would not happen. American governments are no more, or less, decent and incorruptible than most others, but Americans had devised, and attached the highest importance to, a system of governance that would preclude the accumulation of too much power at any one point precisely because they feared the abuse of that power and the diminution of individual freedoms. The high level of international tolerance of and comfort with America's disproportionate power—a phenomenon that has distinguished America from every hegemonic power of the past—rested primarily on this confidence in the American system.

This system appears to have fallen down in 2001–2002, and the history of the decades to come will be very different because it did. America looms so large in the affairs of our world that just its normal functioning, let alone its triumphs, benefits nearly everyone. Equally, however, we all pay for any significant misjudgements. Fifteen years ago, the current president's father tried to persuade Americans to accept the continuing obligations of world leadership because 'there is no one else' and because 'the world trusts us to do what is right'. At that time, far from contesting such language, much of the world endorsed it. One measure of the cost of Iraq is that such endorsement has either been withdrawn or is now softer and more hesitant.

Since the obsession to push the forceful removal of Saddam Hussein under, over and through the checks and balances of the US system succeeded, it is appropriate to ask whether there were extenuating circumstances and whether these were sufficiently unique to preserve confidence in the integrity of the US system. The answer to the first of these two questions, of course, is yes, above all the attacks on 11 September 2001. The answer to the second has to be more qualified: perhaps or maybe. We have tried to characterise the magnitude of the shock felt by Americans as the twin towers collapsed. Americans looked to their President for answers, and for a way back to the security they had enjoyed for so long. Other key players in the US system, notably the Congress and the press, fell away. Bush's approval ratings set new records at over 90 percent. With patriotism and retribution running so strongly, it was risky in the extreme for Representatives and Senators, and even the press, to query or caution or recommend alternative approaches. Several major newspapers in the United States have looked back and acknowledged, to varying degrees, failing to play their proper role. The Congress did not return to the fray until mid-2002, and then only on the back of a swing in public opinion against a direct and unilateral assault on Iraq.⁴⁵

Further, in President Bush, Americans had a leader with extraordinary self-belief born of deep faith, powerfully attracted to casting issues in simple and absolute terms, and keen to qualify as a great leader by displaying the characteristics that scholars and historians had discerned in the very small number of his predecessors considered to fall into this category. In addition, Bush had placed in key positions in his administration some extremely capable, seasoned operators who had worked closely together for decades and who were strongly like-minded on the importance of completing the mission against Saddam Hussein and, at the global level, on the need for the United States to step out and forcefully declare its intention to lead.⁴⁶

There is a final consideration that should not be overlooked. We have noted the polarisation of American politics that has attended the conservative ascendancy. One reflection of the diminishing tolerance of other approaches was the Bush Administration's pronounced tendency to regard erasing the policy settings established under Clinton as an objective in and of itself. A consequence of this approach was the sharp demotion of the State Department as an instrument of US power and influence because it was considered to be a repository of the Democrat way of doing business. This demotion was reinforced and approached marginalisation because Secretary of State Colin Powell was considered a misfit. Powell had been most helpful to the election campaign in 2000 and had to be offered a job, but his adherence to the intellectual mainstream of the administration and preparedness to be a team player was deeply suspect. It did not help that Powell's respect/admiration index in the wider American community was for some time higher than any other member of the administration, including the President. Powell and his President never broke the ice, never engaged easily or very often. (Indeed, as Bob Woodward informs us, Bush felt obliged explicitly to test Powell's loyalty to administration policy on Iraq as late as January 2003.) Nor did Powell and the State Department ever escape from the position of needing to be watched and contained. One consequence was the effective sidelining of a comprehensive study of what regime change in Iraq would involve, prepared under State Department direction between April and July of 2002. Powell's successor, Condoleezza Rice, indirectly acknowledged that the State Department had been marginalised in Bush's first term. The punch line in her confirmation statement before the Senate in January 2005, one that she repeated several times, rather said it all: 'The time for diplomacy is now.' Not one Senator, however, thought to ask why that time had not come earlier.

Taken together, this set of circumstances could be described with some justification as a quite remarkable coincidence highly unlikely ever to be replicated. This means, in turn, that we should view the invasion of Iraq and the manner in which the policy objective was achieved as an aberration; that is, as the result of a unique set of circumstances. Moreover, as the costs of this aberration mount, it can be expected to reinforce the basic principles that

drove the design of America's system of governance, thereby providing further assurance that this immensely powerful state will use its power judiciously.

The experience in Iraq has certainly quashed any serial endeavour to require, if necessary from the turret of an Abrams tank, the community of Islamic states to transition to democratic government. For one thing, America's armed forces are nowhere near numerous enough to take on such a task (and there seems to be a bipartisan consensus that reintroducing conscription would be political suicide). For another, the American public has been saying very clearly that it has no appetite to play the role of the world's democratic policeman. Moreover, President Bush has indicated just as clearly that he has got the message. In his second inaugural address and the State of the Union speech in January 2005, the goal of an end to tyranny in the world was recast as an ideal; he said plainly that making America fully secure once more would be the work of 'generations'; and he acknowledged that this task was beyond the gift of the Pentagon alone.

The larger question is the outlook for the grand strategy—the proposition that the United States could and would make collective leadership in the world unnecessary and unfeasible and thereby avoid the instabilities and risks that had attended this configuration of global governance in the past. This too, one suspects, will (or probably has) become a victim of Iraq. Militarily and economically, the United States will remain in a class of its own for decades to come. However, the margin of its pre-eminence is unlikely to increase further, and Iraq has demonstrated that while the United States can unilaterally defeat the armed forces of any smaller power one cares to name, its armed forces do not have the mass to consolidate such military victories *and* retain the capacity to defeat other challenges to the security order that may arise precisely because Washington is seen as fully preoccupied. In addition of course, the episode with Iraq has severely depleted America's qualitative credentials, or, broadly, its legitimacy to seek to build acceptance of its grand strategy. And finally, all indications suggest that Americans would reject the grand strategy if a party or presidential candidate advanced it as the foundation of US foreign and security policy.

The likely outcome is that, while unipolarity may remain an objective reality for some considerable time, future US administrations will see the wisdom and necessity of making global governance a more democratic affair, to explore the scope for the 'polycentric steering' of global affairs (to use Stanley Hoffman's phrase cited earlier) or to seek to build what international relations theorists call a 'concert of powers' in order to preserve international peace and stability. In other words, the Iraq experience is likely to terminate sooner rather than later the neoconservative ambition to exploit and perpetuate unipolarity.

The possibility must still be acknowledged, however, for the sake of completeness if nothing else, that the earlier conclusion about the reliability of America's system of checks and balances may be too sanguine. It could be argued that the test of a system of governance is not whether it copes with normal circumstances, but whether it functions in the occasional extreme circumstances where the potential to do great harm matches the potential to do great good. One should also consider how far the conservative march in America might go, and especially, in my view, how deeply religion and politics might fuse together. Will the Bush Administration's contention that American interests and American values 'are now one' endure, and will a progressively more conservative America become more inclined to endure the costs of introducing its values to those not yet converted? For that matter, if the political trends of recent decades continue, how different from George W. Bush can future presidential candidates afford to be?

Pointers for Policy

This paper has argued that the explanation for the invasion of Iraq can be found in an extraordinary fusion of circumstances: the attacks on 11 September 2001; the power and conviction of a clique of officials with a grand vision for an era of American dominance; the personality of President Bush; the conservative ascendancy within America, accompanied by rising religiosity; and the achievement of astonishing virtuosity in usable military power. These circumstances combined to allow America's system of checks and balances to be briefly overwhelmed, and for an action to proceed that, because it would be a 'home run' on several fronts, was not critically second-guessed on any of these fronts. The invasion of Iraq was at once an angry giant lashing out in shock at the impudence of the attacks on 11 September 2001 and a giant supremely confident that it could now impose its grand vision more quickly and decisively than 'normal' circumstances might otherwise have allowed.

America's lonely invasion and occupation of Iraq has created imperatives quite distinct from those believed or declared to be in place before that action was taken. Achieving an adequately respectable outcome in Iraq, before US public opinion robs the administration of all room for manoeuvre, will be crucial to the kind of America that we will have to deal with in the future. The United States has already been obliged to shrink quite significantly what 'the job' is that it remains determined to see through to completion in Iraq. However, it has not yet characterised in advance what it will regard as completion of the job and the basis for an expeditious withdrawal of its forces.

The United States now stands diminished, in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of a strong majority of its own citizens. This legacy of Operation *Iraqi Freedom* will not soon be erased. At the same time, the United States remains indispensable to the necessary modicum of order and stability in world affairs. Its shoes are way too big to be filled by any other state or, indeed, any imaginable group of states.

In Washington

Looking to the longer-term future, a future that begins with Iraq standing on its own feet and beginning the long, turbulent process of building a cohesive nation, what should we hope to expect from the United States? For one thing, Washington needs to step away from its extant 'grand strategy' of bullying the major powers into abandoning strategic competition and accepting the permanence of US pre-eminence. Avoiding the conflicts that seemed to be associated with the earlier 'balance of power' phase in the evolution of the modern system of states is obviously a good thing, but the major powers gagged on America's prescription, and America has neither the strength nor Americans the appetite to require that they swallow it. Some other policy settings, skewed toward a lighter and more collegiate governance of international affairs, are needed. While there have certainly been indications that Washington is prepared to deal differently with the other major powers, these fall far short of a thoughtful and deliberate new policy setting. Moreover, as the world of today and tomorrow is so very different from the one over which the 'balance of power' formula held sway, vastly smaller as a consequence of revolutions in communication and transport technologies, speeding towards a single globalised economy, and armed with nuclear weapons, other policy settings are surely available. A modest transformation might be labelled 'unipolarity with democratic characteristics'. If this produced dividends, it might mature into something with more of the flavour of a 'concert of powers'.⁴⁷

Secondly, Washington needs to explore the scope to reposition the terrorist threat in the spectrum of challenges confronting the world and to developing a more widely-supported set of core strategies to address this threat. While most governments speak of terrorism as a global threat, they also know that America and things American are the targets that most

terrorists strongly prefer to strike. Washington has been frustrated that so many governments have seemingly taken comfort in this and not shared its own absolute attitude toward dealing with terrorism to the exclusion of everything else. Washington, equally, seems oblivious to the fact that it has mixed its global 'war on terror' and its grand strategy into a cocktail that many states consider dangerous and ill-conceived, as well as offensively aloof and presumptive. Finally, it remains the case that suffocating known terrorist groups and drying up new recruitment is going to require the closest and sustained collaboration of all states for a very long time. There is room here for a new deal, one that could begin to take us back to that astonishing international coalition that formed after 11 September 2001, but which dissipated so quickly in the early months of 2002 when its purpose was reduced to regime change in Iraq.

We should not expect or require the United States to proclaim these policy shifts loudly or starkly. All that is required is that the shift be clear. Washington can be almost as discreet as it desires because so many states are both eager to see it and can be expected to respond to quite delicate signals. After all, with an America that is off-balance at home as well as abroad, and with a leadership befuddled by its inability to leap over the reality based community in a single bound, the world seems rather at a loss about where to go.

In Canberra

Australia has attached primary importance to our security partnership with the United States for more than sixty years. The stock phrase is that this partnership is 'hardwired' into our thinking and outlook, a source of invaluable reassurance about the security of this country and a vital contributing factor to the stability and good order of the world around us. You can't put a price on benefits of this kind. In fact, one can go back a step further and consider that, as Australia and the United States have similar cultural roots, similar histories, and the same core values and beliefs, this partnership is utterly natural and that using words like 'price' or 'cost' is quite inappropriate.

This attempt to account for the invasion of Iraq is not a happy tale. Indeed, in some respects it is quite alarming. It should be clear, however, that the United States is regaining its poise and that its robust system of democratic checks and balances is once again beginning to function relatively normally. It has investigated its own behaviour with characteristic vigour, and will continue to do so until the majority of Americans are satisfied that it's 'all out there'. It remains the case that, on any issue you care to name, the most trenchant and eloquent and informed criticism of American policy and actions *always* comes from Americans.

Iraq has cost America a great deal in lives, money and international standing as well in terms of things not done, that will haunt them and the rest of us for years to come. Many of these losses cannot be recouped, at least not completely, but one can be confident that America will regain what it can. In my view, therefore, the United States and ANZUS, remain good bets for Australia.

This does not mean, of course, that there are no important lessons to be learned or re-learned from the Iraq experience to help ensure that Australia's special relationship with the United States continues to make its important contribution to Australian interests. Two lessons, in particular, stand out. First, Australia should never suppress or hold back as inappropriate or pointless concerns or reservations that it may have about US policy. Second, Australia needs to become more curious about the United States, to view it genuinely as a foreign country and to continually test the presumption that the two nations are in some basic sense 'natural partners'.

On the first of these lessons, the public record in Australia would seem to suggest that Australia was blissfully unaware of crucial aspects of the Bush Administration's drive to depose Saddam Hussein that gave rise to such profound misgivings throughout the community of US allies and beyond. From the presumption that Iraq was involved or associated with the attacks on 11 September 2001 and therefore a sensible and necessary target rather than a diversion in the military phase of the 'war on terror', through the lengths the administration was prepared to go to present Iraq's WMD as a clear and present danger, to the insistence that a democratic Iraq would literally fall into the coalition's lap (and conspicuously denying that the State Department had any views of value on this score) Australia seemingly had no concerns or reservations and offered no counsel.⁴⁸ If we did have concerns, and raised them in Washington, this fact has been more tightly held than the date of the Prime Minister's retirement. The record, in fact, suggests that throughout the first half of 2002, Australia quietly but unambiguously signalled that it approved of widening the focus of the 'war on terror' to include Iraq, including, if necessary, the use of force to achieve regime change. In other words, Australia was effectively locked in long before the US campaign for regime change entered its more overt stage with the move to the UN arena in September 2002. By the middle of 2002, Washington would have had considerable justification to feel betrayed had Australia begun to equivocate on support for coalition operations if Iraq refused to disarm.

Blissful ignorance of these dimensions of the Bush Administration's domestic management of the Iraq issue, however, is hardly plausible. If anything like this had really transpired, there would surely have been a very thorough and conspicuous review of how the Departments of Foreign Affairs & Trade and Defence, as well as the intelligence agencies, could possibly have been so blind and allowed the government to make momentous decisions on the basis of superficial assessments and misleading information. In fact, of course, Australia is better 'plugged in' in Washington than most other countries. It sends very capable diplomats to the United States and they enjoy the sort of access that only sixty years of working as allies can deliver. Similarly, the Australian and US armed forces and the intelligence agencies are closely entwined with liaison officers, embedded personnel and the like. The operation at Pine Gap in central Australia, where Australia is the joint manager and operator of a sophisticated intelligence gathering facility, symbolises the intimacy of relations with the United States in this most sensitive of fields.

One has to believe that Australia did have a very good feel for what was transpiring in Washington, that the thrust of what has emerged since from the several commissions of enquiry and from leaks like the 'Downing Street Memos', was all broadly familiar to the government in Canberra. If this is a fair conclusion, there are two possible explanations for the public record in Australia. Either the government saw nothing that made it concerned or uneasy, or it decided that, in these special circumstances, it was appropriate that Australia simply support America and the Bush Administration and trust them to get it basically right in the end.

To the extent that the second possibility was the dominant explanation, Australia was not doing the Americans or itself any favours. It is true, of course, that any counsel Australia offered might have made no difference. After all, countries with much more influence than Australia got nowhere. But Australia *might* have made a difference, and even a small difference in the Bush Administration's style, approach, timing, assumptions, expectations and the like on Iraq could have delivered very significant dividends. In addition, it would have made Australians feel much better about themselves and, indeed, about the alliance with the United States. One is not speaking here of loudly and publicly contesting key aspects of Washington's strategy and tactics on Iraq. Close friends try very hard not to operate that way. What was disappointing was the absence even of delicate hints on the public record that Australia was thinking for itself and discussing differences with the Americans. As it happened, from early 2002, Australia was heavily tarred with the reputation of being blind in

its faithfulness as an ally. Indeed, on issues like pre-emption and the weakness of the United Nations, it looked like an imitative ally. This reputation damaged Australia's standing and influence in our immediate region, a standing that is not only a vital interest for Australia but among the most valuable assets that it brings to ANZUS. Finally, Australia's apparent docility on Iraq, this major gap in its track record of offering discreet but frank and sensible advice, will make it less likely that future US administrations will see value in exposing Australia to their innermost deliberations on the crisis de jour.

The lesson to be drawn from the Iraq experience is that Australia should never back away from constructive advice and criticism: Washington is not infallible, it is extremely difficult for Australia to avoid the road the United States elects to take also becoming our road, and our skin is much thinner than theirs.

The second lesson highlighted by this discussion is that Australia needs to play close attention to deeper changes in the character or nature of the United States of America. If Australia's security partnership with the United States is indeed 'hardwired' into its thinking, it needs to have the clearest possible idea of where this partnership could lead. All societies are continually being transformed, but the United States is more dynamic than most. This is an essential part of America's 'secret': its capacity to stay young and vigorous, to re-invent itself and avoid the rigidities of maturity has already confounded more than one forecast that it has passed its peak. America has amassed a uniquely broad portfolio of hard and soft power—raw economic and military power coupled with respect and authority—that aspirants like China will find very hard to match without themselves undergoing deep-seated change (or having an 'extreme makeover' in contemporary jargon).

While Iraq confirmed Washington's military pre-eminence (yet also demonstrated the limits of military power), it has dented its economic capacities and ravaged its soft power. Thinking about how comprehensively the United States can recover these losses, and sorting out whether the why and how of Iraq can be adequately explained by the extreme circumstances of the time, or whether it also reflects deeper and more permanent changes in America—demographic and geographic shifts, the conservative ascendancy, and the surge in religiosity from an already relatively high base—must become issues of profound interest to Australia.

Notes

- ¹ Thomas Friedman, 'Read My Ears', *New York Times*, 27 January 2005.
- ² The author is grateful to a number of colleagues for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, including Robert Ayson, Richard Brabin-Smith, Chris Barrie, Hugh White and Paul Dibb.
- ³ President Bush's Graduation Speech, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, 1 June 2002, available at < <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html> >, accessed March 2006; *National Security Strategy of the United States*, White House, September 2002, available at < <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html> >, accessed March 2006.
- ⁴ Don M. Snider, *Strategy, Forces and Budgets: Dominant Influences in Executive Decision-Making, Post-Cold War, 1989-91*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, February 1993.
- ⁵ Quoted in Lewis Libby, 'Remarks on Shaping US Defence Strategy: Persistent Challenges and Enduring Strengths' in *America's Role in a Changing World, Part II*, Adelphi Paper No. 257, Winter 1990/91.
- ⁶ *National Security Strategy of the United States*, White House, August 1991. The quoted passages appear on pages 8 and 23 respectively.
- ⁷ Draft 'Defence Planning Guidance' quoted in Patrick E. Tyler, 'US Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop: A One-Superpower World', *New York Times*, 8 March 1992.
- ⁸ James Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*, Penguin Books, London, 2004, p. 211.
- ⁹ Patrick E. Tyler, 'Pentagon Drops Goal of Blocking New Superpowers', *New York Times*, 24 May 1992.
- ¹⁰ Author's private discussion with Dr Angel Rabasa in Singapore on 4 June 2005. Dr Rabasa was a policy officer in the Pentagon between 1991 and 1992 and is familiar with the development of the Defence Planning Guidance. He is now an analyst with the RAND Corporation.
- ¹¹ See Robert Kagan, 'A retreat From Power?', *Commentary*, July 1995, pp. 19–25; and Stanley Hoffman, 'America's Heritage' in *America's Role in Changing World, Part I*, Adelphi Paper No. 256, Winter 1990/91, pp.3–22.
- ¹² Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Fontana Press, London, 1989.
- ¹³ Stanley Hoffmann, 'A New World And Its Troubles', *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1990, pp. 115–22. Hoffman's 'polycentric steering' is tantamount to striving toward a concert of powers, an outcome that Coral Bell has argued is both likely and desirable in her elegant study, *A World Out of Balance*, Longueville Books, Alexandria, NSW, 2004.
- ¹⁴ Kagan, 'A Retreat From Power', p. 19.
- ¹⁵ Kagan, 'A Retreat From Power', p. 25.
- ¹⁶ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*, Oxford University Press, London, 2005.
- ¹⁷ 'Remarks by the President to the troops and Personnel', Norfolk Naval Air Station, Norfolk Virginia, 13 February 2001, available at < <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/20010213-1.html> >, accessed August 2005.
- ¹⁸ As an introduction to the literature, see Charles Krauthammer, 'America and the World 1990/91', *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1990/91; Christopher Layne, 'The Illusion of Unipolarity: Why New Great Powers Will Rise', *International Security*, vol. 17, no. 4, Spring 1993; Edward Rhodes, 'The Imperial Logic of Bush's Liberal Agenda', *Survival*, vol. 45, no. 1, Spring 2003; Claes G. Ryn, 'The Ideology of American Empire', *Orbis*, vol. 47, issue 3, pp. 383–97; Eliot A. Cohen, 'History and the Hyperpower', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2004, pp. 49–63.
- ¹⁹ Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans*, p. 211. Libby has been Vice President Cheney's chief of staff throughout George W. Bush's presidency. He was forced to resign in November 2005 after being indicted for revealing the name of an undercover CIA operative.
- ²⁰ Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, Washington, DC, January 1993, available at < http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/pdf/naarpr_Defense.pdf >, accessed March 2006. The document's pedigree is discussed in Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans*, p. 213; and by David Armstrong, 'Dick Cheney's Song of America', *Harper's Magazine*, October 2002.
- ²¹ *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, p. 2.
- ²² *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, p. 4. Cheney practiced what he preached. He made a whirlwind tour of 12 states in the Middle East in March 2002 to gauge attitudes to military action against Iraq. He encountered strong nervousness or outright opposition in the absence of renewed UN inspections in Iraq and of a real effort to defuse the Israeli-Palestinian war. Back in Washington, the 'spin' conveyed to the media was that key regional players were privately supportive and that this support would become overt once the United States made it clear that it was determined to act and to see the task through. See Ron Huisken, *The Road to War on Iraq*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 148, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2003, p. 10.
- ²³ See Ron Huisken, *QDR 2001: America's New Military Roadmap*, SDSC Working Paper No. 366, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2002.
- ²⁴ President George W. Bush, 'Remarks by the President to the Troops and Personnel', Norfolk Naval Air Station, Norfolk, Virginia, 13 February 2001, available at < <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/20010213-1.html> >, accessed March 2006.
- ²⁵ As the Clinton era drew to a close, the wider Republican policy community began to produce reports to shape the agenda of a possible Republican presidency. This included a report by The Project for a New American

- Century, *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century*, issued in September 2000, that explicitly endorsed the Defense Policy Guidance of 1992 as a 'blueprint' for US security policy. In a similar vein, a report by the National Institute for Public Policy, *Rationale and Requirements for US Nuclear Forces and Arms Control*, issued in 2001, effectively served as the Bush Administration's policy brief on the ABM Treaty and provided the guidelines for the Nuclear Posture Review concluded in January 2002.
- ²⁶ John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*, Penguin Press, New York, 2004. For the reader who would like to probe further into these issues, a good start is available in Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004.
- ²⁷ Nicholas Lehman, 'The Controller', *The New Yorker*, 12 May 2003.
- ²⁸ Ron Suskind, 'Without a Doubt', *The New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004, p. 49.
- ²⁹ Alessandra Stanley, 'Understanding the President and His God', *New York Times*, 29 April 2004; Suskind, 'Without a Doubt', p. 51.
- ³⁰ See White House press briefing by Scott McClellan, 6 October 2005, available at < <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/briefings/> >, accessed March 2006.
- ³¹ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, New York, 2004, p. 379.
- ³² Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2002, pp. 145–46.
- ³³ Suskind, 'Without a Doubt', p. 51
- ³⁴ Glenn Frankel, 'From Memos, Insights Into Ally's Doubts on Iraq War', *Washington Post*, 28 June 2005.
- ³⁵ Jack Beatty, 'The Faith-based Presidency', *The Atlantic online*, 25 March 2004.
- ³⁶ Clarke eventually left the administration in 2003 to write his account of the lead up to the attacks of 11 September 2001 and his assessment of America's response. See Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror*, Free Press, New York, 2004.
- ³⁷ See Ron Huisken, *The Road to War on Iraq*.
- ³⁸ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, p. 74–91.
- ³⁹ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 425.
- ⁴⁰ Toby Dodge, *Iraq's Future: The aftermath of regime change*, Adelphi Paper No. 372, March 2005, International Institute of Strategic Studies, London.
- ⁴¹ See, for example, Lawrence Freedman, 'War In Iraq: Selling the Threat', *Survival*, Summer 2004; and Ron Huisken, *We Don't Want the Smoking Gun to be a Mushroom Cloud: Intelligence on Iraq's WMD*, Working Paper No. 390, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, June 2004.
- ⁴² Walter Pincus, 'Memo: US lacked Full Postwar Iraq Plan', *Washington Post*, 12 June 2005.
- ⁴³ See Terry M. Neal, 'Questions Remain About the Arguments for War', *Washington Post* 3 November 2005.
- ⁴⁴ *Survey Reports*, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 10 October 2002, available at < <http://people-press.org/reports/> >, accessed March 2006.
- ⁴⁵ One poll in late August 2002, showed support for war against Iraq without allied support falling as low as 20 percent. See William Pfaff, 'The critics might make Bush hurry', *International Herald Tribune*, 29 August 2002. Even in February 2003, a poll indicated that the 66 percent support for war against Iraq became 38 percent if the question became war without allied support. See *Survey Reports*, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 20 February 2003, available at < <http://people-press.org/reports/> >, accessed March 2006.
- ⁴⁶ The organising theme of James Mann's book, *The Rise of the Vulcans*, is how the careers of the key security officials in Bush's first administration (Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, Wolfowitz, Armitage and Rice) had intersected repeatedly over a 25–30 year period.
- ⁴⁷ For more on the notion of a concert of powers, see Coral Bell, *Living with Giants: Finding Australia's place in a more complex world*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra, April 2005.
- ⁴⁸ The one instance in which the Australian Government claimed to have been influential was in encouraging Bush to announce, in early September 2002, that he would go to the UN for a new resolution on Iraq (as well as to Congress for authorisation to use force additional to the authorisation already granted for action against those who carried out the 11 September 2001 attacks and anyone who harboured and supported them). This claim is hard to reconcile with the facts, which suggest that, on the back of US opinion polls indicating that support for regime change in Iraq was very sensitive to the size of the coalition joining the United States, the administration had concluded several weeks earlier that it had no choice but to give the UN route a try. See Ron Huisken, *The Road to War on Iraq*, especially p. 12. Similarly, on the back of these public hesitations, the US Congress began to make itself heard to the effect that Iraq was not part of the 'war on terror' that it had already authorised, and that new authorisation would be needed.