

American Grand Strategy from the Cold War's End to 9/11

by Jeremi Suri

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***Abstract:** Grand strategy is about making sense of complexity; it is the wisdom to make power serve useful purposes. After the end of the Cold War, American policymakers sought to create a new grand strategy for the United States, but they failed in this endeavor. They failed because of difficult domestic and international circumstances. They also failed because of conceptual limitations. This article traces the efforts at strategy formulation in the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, and it analyzes their shortcomings. Bush had process without purpose; Clinton had purpose without process. The article encourages readers to think about how future strategists might improve upon this legacy with clearer and more disciplined attention to priorities, capabilities, and trade-offs. Making grand strategy in a democracy is not easy, but it is necessary. The absence of effective grand strategy in the 1990s contributed to the crises of the early twenty-first century.*

Like so many things, it began and ended in New York. In December 1988, the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union flew into the city amidst great fanfare and anticipation. President Ronald Reagan, President-elect George H. W. Bush, and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev met on Governors Island, off the southern tip of Manhattan, to celebrate how they had, through unprecedented arms reduction agreements and credible personal commitments to cooperation, built what Reagan called “a strong foundation for the future.” Conversing casually and strolling “as friends,” in Gorbachev’s words, almost no one could deny that the international system had entered a new, post-Cold War era.¹ The fall of the Berlin Wall less than a year later—and the collapse of the Soviet Union two years after that—were surely not

¹ Memorandum of Conversation between President Reagan, Vice President Bush, Soviet Chairman Mikhail Gorbachev, et al., Governors Island, New York, Dec. 7, 1988, in National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 261, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB261/index.htm> (“NSAEBB 261”).

inevitable, but they were no longer unthinkable. The *New York Times* echoed popular sentiments, evidenced by the enthusiastic crowds on the streets of Manhattan (soon Budapest, Prague, Beijing, and Berlin, too), when it looked forward in late 1988 to the “basic restructuring of international politics—for the rule of law, not force; for multilateralism, not unilateralism; and for economic as well as political freedoms.”²

By September 2001 virtually everyone recognized that the terrain of international politics had changed fundamentally. The hopes embodied by the December 1988 superpower summit in New York, however, turned to unmistakable horror as a new group of actors left their indelible mark on the city. The two hijacked aircraft that destroyed the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and killed more than 2,500 civilians announced a new era of fear, violence, and extended conflict. A global “War on Terror”—including U.S.-led military attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as fundamental transformations in the treatment of prisoners and domestic law enforcement—was not inevitable, but it became almost irresistible as Americans grappled with the damage inflicted by a small gang of well-organized Islamic extremists. “On a gorgeous blue fall day,” Maureen Dowd wrote in the *New York Times*, “terrorism had turned into war. The city that leads the world took on a weird neutron-bomb quality.”³ As in previous instances of attack on American soil, the U.S. government responded with a determined, if incomplete, strategy of force projection in areas of perceived threat and disorder.⁴

Scholars have begun to write about the years bracketed by these two New York moments as an “interwar” period—a time when Americans became convinced of their “exceptional” ability to transcend the hard choices of international politics and pursue an expansive agenda at low domestic cost. Apparent safety and freedom encouraged indiscipline and wishful thinking. Even self-identified hardliners in the early 1990s adopted this point of view. Richard Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, and Lewis “Scooter” Libby described an abstract and self-reinforcing “democratic ‘zone of peace’” in the post-Cold War Defense Planning Guideline, released to the public in January 1993. They claimed that: “This zone of peace offers a framework for security not through competitive rivalries in arms, but through cooperative approaches and collective security institutions. The combination of these trends has given our nation and our alliances great depth for our strategic position.”⁵

In a context of perceived “strategic depth,” the rapid policy transformations of the late 1980s surrounding big issues like the nature of the Soviet

² “Gambler, Showman, Statesman,” *New York Times*, Dec. 8, 1988.

³ Maureen Dowd, “A Grave Silence,” *New York Times*, Sept. 12, 2001.

⁴ On this point, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Melvyn P. Leffler, “9/11 and the Past and Future of American Foreign Policy,” *International Affairs*, Oct. 2003, pp. 1045–63.

⁵ “Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy,” Jan. 1993, available at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb245>.

threat and the prospects of German unification gave way to slow, tentative, and agonizing decisionmaking about U.S. interventions in strategically less significant places: Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Rwanda. This was the “regional defense strategy” of Cheney, Wolfowitz, Libby, and their Democratic successors in action.⁶ The 1990s did not witness a return of classic great power politics (“back to the future”), as political scientist John Mearsheimer famously predicted.⁷ Instead, the decade was dominated by small policy decisions, misguided political controversies, and half measures. Where were the courageous and enduring strategic decisionmakers? Where had all the strategists gone?⁸

Sophisticated strategic thinkers like George Kennan, Dean Acheson, and Henry Kissinger gave way to the more technocratic inclinations of James Baker, Brent Scowcroft, Anthony Lake, and even Colin Powell. The “wise men” of the Cold War had defined clear national interests, identified pressing threats (foreign and domestic), and devised policies that promised to secure interests from threats at manageable cost. Their successors did not do any of these things consistently. What were U.S. national interests after the Cold War? What were the key threats? Which policies promised the greatest security and prosperity to the nation? None of the leading figures in the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton answered these questions coherently. None of the strategic documents they produced articulated a political-military architecture beyond vague claims about democracy, markets, stability, and American primacy.

The Cold War “wise men” made many mistaken judgments, particularly in Vietnam, but at least they offered more thoughtful, consistent, and substantive strategic guidance to those around them. They identified clear threats, defined countries and resources of priority, and emphasized—at their best moments—a careful combination of military, diplomatic, and economic tools to pursue their ends. Containment was more than a label; it was a flexible but rigorous guideline for making policy. Strategic coherence contributed to financial solvency, public consensus, and, ultimately, international stability. It ensured prudential behavior amidst unthinkable dangers.⁹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security* (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56; idem., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

⁸ See Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008); Hal Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); Donald Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today* (New York: St. Martins, 2000).

⁹ See Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

The erratic nature of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War decade multiplied the uncertainties and dangers confronting the nation. Unwilling to make difficult decisions about priorities and purposes, Washington became largely reactive to events and media images of those events. In Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo observers often wondered who was driving policy—the White House or CNN? In the case of NATO expansion, a few committed individuals within government managed to hijack deliberations because of the absence of coherent high-level strategic leadership. American policy toward post-Cold War Russia, perhaps the most egregious case, threw all its weight behind a single volatile figure—Boris Yeltsin—rather than a closely calibrated process of strategic management through arms control, diplomatic negotiation, economic integration, and institution building. To the astonishment of anyone watching Reagan and Gorbachev stroll on Governors Island in December 1988, the most significant strategic advances in U.S.-Russian relations were already behind these two countries. The next decade was filled with promising rhetoric but little to show for it, largely because American policymakers failed to focus consistently on enduring bilateral initiatives. Atmospherics replaced real arms control. The rhetoric of democracy—easily deflated by Vladimir Putin, Yeltsin's successor—replaced substantive diplomacy.¹⁰

The 1990s were “lost years” for strategy not because of a conscious decision to avoid strategy articulation. In fact, both Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton had ambitions to announce a replacement to the Cold War doctrine of containment. Their advisors—and countless academics—competed to become the next George Kennan, giving the post-Cold War era its guiding policy framework. Journalists pressed both administrations for a sound bite to explain the international system and U.S. actions. George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton never managed to produce one; they never could explain coherently and effectively what they meant by phrases like: “Beyond Containment,” “New World Order,” and “Enlargement.” These mottos became testaments to ambiguity, uncertainty, and confusion. Why couldn't these administrations articulate what they were doing? Why couldn't they craft a replacement to containment?

Circumstances at the end of the Cold War made strategy articulation particularly difficult. The United States no longer confronted a clear adversary (the Soviet Union) or a rival ideology (communism). These threats had disciplined American strategic thinking. They had also become comfortable loadstars. Suddenly removed, they left policymakers adrift. The new threats to

¹⁰ See James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy Toward Russia after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); James Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999); Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999); Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001).

American interests were both more diffuse and more numerous. They were difficult to think about in systematic terms, ranging from rogue states to anarchical societies, with warlords and terrorists in-between. Strategists had to make a cake from crumbs—to find some coherent unity in a fragmented, incoherent post-Cold War world. As one author shows, the Clinton administration eventually gave up and satisfied itself eating crumbs.¹¹

Resources were also more constrained after the Cold War. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and first Persian Gulf War, Americans demanded a “peace dividend.” With sluggish economic growth, increased international economic competition, and deferred domestic needs, citizens wanted to limit the nation’s commitments abroad. In response to public pressures, Congress cut the manpower for the standing American military, limited spending for most international arms of government (including the State Department and the Agency for International Development), and curtailed efforts at globalizing American society through participation in international organizations. Republican Senator Jesse Helms and his counterparts in the House of Representatives even prevented the United States from paying its dues to the United Nations. Some in Congress began to brag that they did not own a passport, and did not desire to travel abroad. In this setting, ambitious and sophisticated foreign policy thinkers had to wrestle with a stubborn domestic neo-isolationism.

Despite American wealth and power, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton governed at a moment—like the interwar 1920s—when the nation turned primarily within. These circumstances, however, made a coherent and sophisticated foreign policy strategy more important than ever before. With diffuse threats and limited resources, the nation needed discerning leadership. A post-Cold War grand strategy could not rely on the obvious; instead, it had to define priority interests carefully, identify a hierarchy of threats, and nurture means for protecting interests and thwarting threats. A post-Cold War grand strategy had to guide and persuade, rather than simply react.

The Bush and Clinton administrations were not merely victims of circumstances in the 1990s. Their strategic failures were conceptual. Neither administration made the effort to define the kind of international system it hoped to create. Neither administration thought seriously about how it wanted to manage state-to-state relations in anything beyond *ad hoc* arrangements and vague ideas about democratization, development, and regional defense. Effective strategy requires much more. It demands clear thinking about how to exert leverage over distant societies, how to build effective allies and institutions, and how to co-opt and deter potential adversaries. Eloquent ideals and smooth diplomacy are only a start.

Strategy is the cultivated art of managing self-interested change across a broad international terrain. It does not come easily, especially for a powerful and cumbersome society with many contradictory commitments. The functioning of

¹¹ Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad*, p. 196.

democracy in the United States often distracts from the opportunities for consistent hard policy choices, especially when they challenge the short-term interests of organized groups. The 1990s witnessed a proliferation of domestic and international claims on American resources, and an inability of leaders in Washington to manage—or even categorize—these claims for national purposes. George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton sailed in shifting international winds. They kept the ship of state safely above water, but they lost sight of their destination and they never figured out how to catch the wind in their sails.

“Beyond Containment”

Speaking with Gorbachev on Governors Island in December 1988, President-elect Bush explained that he “would need a little time to review the issues, but what had been accomplished could not be reversed” and that he “wished to build on what President Reagan had accomplished, working with Gorbachev.” Later in the same conversation, Bush returned to this point: “He naturally wanted to formulate prudent national security policies, but he intended to go forward. He had no intention of setting the clock back; we wanted to move it forward.”¹²

Gorbachev politely acknowledged Bush’s need to organize his own foreign policy team. The Soviet leader “agreed with what Mr. Bush had said about moving forward, and building on what had been achieved.” Gorbachev, however, was not satisfied to pause and then resume the process begun with Reagan. He wanted more than just step-by-step improvements in Soviet-American relations. In one of the most startling strategic moves of the post-1945 era, Gorbachev had announced at the United Nations, just hours before his meeting with Reagan and Bush, that the Soviet Union would unilaterally cut 500,000 soldiers from its armed forces, including 50,000 troops and 5,000 tanks in Eastern Europe. The Soviet leader designed these initiatives to extend beyond bilateral arms reductions and contribute to the rapid “demilitarization of international relations.”¹³

On Governors Island, and in subsequent meetings, Gorbachev and his ambassadors pushed for boldness and breadth in building a new approach to weapons proliferation, regional conflicts, and the promotion of human interests (including human rights) in the post-Cold War world. This was Gorbachev’s effort to redefine international relations around ideas of cooperation and interdependence (“new thinking”) that would restore Russia to the family of “civilized” nations, and civilize the world around Russia. “Further world progress,” Gorbachev announced at the United Nations, “is now

¹² Memorandum of Conversation between President Reagan, Vice President Bush, Soviet Chairman Mikhail Gorbachev, et al., Governors Island, New York, Dec. 7, 1988, in NSAEBB 261.

¹³ Ibid.; Gorbachev’s Speech to the United Nations, Dec. 7, 1988, excerpted at: http://isc.temple.edu/hist249/course/Documents/gorbachev_speech_to_UN.htm.

possible only through the search for a consensus of all mankind, in movement toward a new world order.”

We have arrived at a frontier at which controlled spontaneity leads to a dead end. The world community must learn to shape and direct the process in such a way as to preserve civilization, to make it safe for all and more pleasant for normal life. It is a question of cooperation that could be more accurately called “co-creation” and “co-development.” The formula of development “at another’s expense” is becoming outdated.¹⁴

Bush and his closest advisors had good reason to question the practicality of Gorbachev’s vision, but they were too stubborn in their skepticism of the Soviet leader’s sincerity. Gorbachev’s actions since 1986, capped by the huge unilateral cuts in Moscow’s military strength announced at the United Nations, should have convinced astute strategic thinkers to take this man seriously. Through most of 1989, however, the Bush administration failed to formulate a grand strategy for the new international environment. The White House failed to match Gorbachev’s boldness and energy, to contemplate a fundamental shift in threats to the United States, and most significantly, to reassess how it might use its own capabilities—military and diplomatic—to encourage Gorbachev’s reformist ideas. Instead the CIA echoed Brent Scowcroft, Bush’s National Security Advisor, predicting in April 1989 that for “the foreseeable future, the Soviet Union will remain the West’s principal adversary.” Business continued as usual in Washington, despite all the obvious changes in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and other regions during 1989.¹⁵

Bush’s commencement address at Texas A&M University in May 1989 revealed the limitations of his strategic vision. The president spoke effectively about moving “beyond containment to a new policy for the 1990s”:

In sum, the United States now has as its goal much more than simply containing Soviet expansionism. We seek the integration of the Soviet Union into the community of nations. And as the Soviet Union itself moves toward greater openness and democratization, as they meet the challenge of responsible international behavior, we will match their steps with steps of our own. Ultimately, our objective is to welcome the Soviet Union back into the world order.¹⁶

Bush wisely rejected advice from Henry Kissinger to accept a permanent East-West division of Europe in return for other Soviet concessions.

¹⁴ Gorbachev’s Speech to UN, Dec. 7, 1988. See also Memorandum of Conversation between Gorbachev advisor, Aleksandr Yakovlev and U.S. Ambassador Jack Matlock, Dec. 26, 1988, in NSAEBB 261. For the best historical assessments of Gorbachev’s “new thinking” about international relations, see Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Robert English, *Russia and the Idea of the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ National Intelligence Estimate, 11-4-89, April 1989, “Soviet Policy Toward the West: The Gorbachev Challenge,” in NSAEBB 261. See also George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998), p. 46.

¹⁶ George H. W. Bush, Commencement Address at Texas A&M University, May 12, 1989, <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3421> (accessed Dec. 21, 2008).

Instead, the president paraphrased Reagan when he called on Gorbachev to “support self-determination for all the nations of Eastern Europe and central Europe. . . In short, tear down the Iron Curtain.” Bush also demanded “lasting political pluralism and respect for human rights” from the Soviet Union, as well as a general commitment to “openness”—“open emigration, open debate, open airwaves.”¹⁷

The problem with Bush’s speech, and the strategy it outlined, was that it placed the entire onus for action on the Soviet Union. The speech said nothing about U.S. priorities, leverage, and, most important, long-term actions to ensure favorable outcomes in foreign behavior. The speech also failed to identify the core U.S. interests that future relations with the Soviet Union and other great powers would serve. Bush’s words gave little guidance to policy-makers beyond a hopeful wait-and-see attitude, and a readiness for crisis reaction. George Kennan’s writings on containment described the key changes in the international system, what they meant for the United States, and how the nation could mobilize its resources for a favorable outcome. Bush’s effort to rewrite Kennan for the post-Cold War world did none of these things. Instead of a strategy in 1989, the Bush administration had a wish list.

Giving appropriate credit to the president, Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice—two national security veterans of the Bush administrations (both of them!)—show that the White House pushed its wish list on Gorbachev, pressing him to allow the reunification of Germany (within NATO) in 1990. Despite anxieties voiced by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, French Prime Minister Francois Mitterand, and Gorbachev himself, Bush worked closely with West German leader Helmut Kohl to reassure, cajole, and, when necessary, buy off opposition. The Soviet Union received Deutsche Marks from Kohl (including a 15 billion Deutsche Mark assistance package) and security assurances from the United States in return for acquiescence. Bush moved fast, his diplomacy was adroit, and he refused to accept half measures on such a crucial strategic issue.¹⁸

German unification, however, did not require a sophisticated U.S. strategy in 1990. It was an easy case for American policymakers. The citizens of East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and other Soviet satellite states had taken politics into their own hands. Emboldened by Gorbachev’s pledges to create a more open political system, they had challenged communist authorities in 1989, calling for more national independence and representative government. Workers, intellectuals, and military veterans also demanded a fundamental restructuring of their anemic socialist economies.

¹⁷ Ibid. On Kissinger’s proposal for a permanent East-West division of Europe in 1989, see Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), pp. 13–17. Beschloss and Talbott argue that Bush and Baker initially took this proposal very seriously, before ultimately rejecting it.

¹⁸ Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 256–352.

Gorbachev's reforms had unleashed this process, Reagan had encouraged it, and the brave citizens of Eastern Europe had seized control of the circumstances. Bush and his advisors were in the envious position of watching events play out. Their main task was to support indirectly what was already happening on the ground.

By November 1989 these public pressures threatened the sustenance of the regime in East Berlin. East German citizens, conscious of how much better their West German family members lived, openly revolted as they had in 1953. This time, however, the Soviet leadership could not afford to support a brutal military crackdown that would jeopardize openings to the West and efforts at political economic reform within the Soviet Union itself. As a consequence, the East German regime quickly collapsed in early November 1989—symbolized by the public breaching of the hated Berlin Wall on November 9—and attention quickly turned to a promised reunification of the two postwar Germanys. Despite Bush's urgings for calm, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl began to advocate publicly for rapid reunification. German domestic politics were now dictating the pace of international politics.¹⁹

Bush and his advisors were astute in recognizing this German dynamic. Their only real choice was to embrace the events in Germany, support their key ally, Chancellor Kohl, and push Gorbachev to accept the inevitable. The alternative was increased conflict in Central Europe, discord in the Western alliance, and a turn of resurgent German public opinion against the United States. The White House used its influence skillfully to encourage popular German unification on Western terms. This was wise policy, but it was not sophisticated strategic thinking. If anything, Bush, Baker, Scowcroft and others relied on established Cold War practices—supporting the claims of “captive nations,” espousing German unification within NATO, and demanding a Soviet renunciation of force. Although Bush carefully avoided humiliating Gorbachev, he required the Soviet leader to make all the difficult concessions. Historian Melvyn Leffler has captured it very well: “The affection that characterized Gorbachev's relations with Bush, and even more, the warmth that developed between Baker and Shevardnadze were conditioned by the weakness of the Soviets' position domestically and internationally. They were supplicants. . . . At the outset of the Cold War, Truman had said that there could be cooperation between Moscow and Washington if the United States got its way 85 percent of the time. Now that was happening.”²⁰

It would not happen elsewhere for the United States, however. Despite its enormous wealth and power, Washington could not expect other allies and adversaries to give-in so easily. After the unification of Germany, U.S. citizens

¹⁹ See Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (New York: Random House, 1993); Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 559–633.

²⁰ Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind*, p. 450.

and leaders came to believe that they would, in fact, get their way with little cost or sacrifice. Liberal democracy appeared to be on the march. The widespread popularity of Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" essay at the time captured this sentiment.²¹ A quixotic belief that the tides of global change inevitably brought societies to embrace U.S. ideas and interests discouraged serious strategic thought, and the accompanying emphasis on priorities, sacrifices, and hard choices. If the end of the Cold War revealed a messianic new age of American achievement, why should we even think about accepting compromises and lesser evils? With all its power why couldn't the United States serve the world by simply serving itself? These unilateral and anti-strategic impulses appealed to a long-standing chord of American exceptionalist thought. A providential nation was apparently above serious strategy.²²

In the subsequent U.S.-led war to turn back Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait, and its efforts to intervene in Panama and Somalia, the Bush administration had trouble articulating a strategy beyond defeating bad dictators. The post-Cold War Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) emphasized "common defense against aggression" and actions to "preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to our interests." Like the president, leaders of the defense department sought to assure the United States' leverage against new challengers, but without any clear purpose beyond just that. "Today, a great challenge has passed," Cheney, Wolfowitz, and Libby wrote in 1993; "other threats endure, and new ones will arise." That statement was true. It was also strategically banal.²³

The Bush administration lacked a clear framework for explaining its small and often unsatisfactory wars. When the United States chose not to intervene—in China after the Tiananmen Square crackdown in June 1989 and in the Yugoslav civil war—it also could not articulate a strategy that explained the tolerance for these atrocities. Time and again, policy decisions appeared reactive and uncertain in their broader purposes. How did the Bush administration seek to re-shape the Middle East by forcing Saddam Hussein's retreat? How did the White House envision a post-Cold War East Asia, and China's role in this region?

Despite its advocacy for a "regional defense strategy," the 1993 DPG said almost nothing about Iraq and China. The section on the Middle East spoke only of guarding against a "rejuvenated Iraq." The pages on East Asia

²¹ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *National Interest* (Summer 1989). See also Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Chollet and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars*, pp. 21–23.

²² See Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

²³ "Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy," Jan. 1993, available at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb245>.

were equally vacuous in their words about Beijing: “We should continue to advance our relations with China on a realistic basis. . . . We should work to curtail proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and to advance democracy, freedom, and human rights in the countries of the region that lack them.” This was boilerplate, not profound thought about key regional challenges and opportunities.²⁴

Easy success in Germany and the battlefields of Kuwait encouraged the very tentativeness and emphasis on process over purpose that characterized the Bush administration’s earliest days, going back to the Governors Island meeting with Gorbachev. The president and his closest advisors were skilled and pragmatic policymakers, but dazzled by their enormous power advantages at the end of the Cold War, they were unwilling to think systematically about sacrifices and trade-offs because they felt they did not need to. U.S. public opinion at the time encouraged precisely this complaisance.

Perhaps the Bush administration experience helps explain why moments of rich “victory” are poor times for serious strategy debate. The optimism and self-confidence of grand achievements make it very difficult for policymakers, especially in democratic societies, to limit expectations. Claims on national resources quickly multiply, calls for sacrifice lose their appeal, and citizens (including leaders) come to think that they can get more for less.

G. John Ikenberry has argued that powerful states often benefit from the self-restraint that emerges from their numerous commitments to institutions and agreements “after victory.” This outcome—debatable in its empirical and causal rigor—is circumstantial, at best, in the experience of the United States during the last decade of the twentieth century.²⁵ President Bush and his closest advisors did not articulate a strategy for binding the United States to international institutions or agreements that would re-shape global power. Although they consulted bodies like the United Nations, U.S. leaders flagrantly reserved the right to act unilaterally if they could not get their way—if a collective response did not “gel.”²⁶ In practice, members of the Bush administration exercised power to secure *ad hoc* U.S. interests, falsely confident that doing this would organically shape a safer and more stable international system. They were worldly in their diplomacy, but provincial in their strategy.

Enlargement

The makers of foreign policy in the Clinton administration were both less worldly and less provincial than their predecessors. Figures like Anthony

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. pp. 50–79, 215–56.

²⁶ “Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy,” Jan. 1993, available at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb245>.

Lake, Warren Christopher, Strobe Talbott, Sandy Berger, Madeleine Albright, and the president himself were highly educated and professorial in outlook. They had traveled widely and thought instinctively about the diversity of international experiences. Like most academics, they were uncomfortable with the exercise of concentrated power by a small group of decisionmakers, even in America. They were all marked by a belief that just such a concentration of power had brought the United States to tragedy in Vietnam. Instead of power politics, as practiced by the Bush administration, Clinton and his advisors sought a more open system of international relations, where the United States led through consensus (“world opinion”), markets, and institutions. This was a liberal internationalist approach to strategy, always popular among intellectuals. The United States would be less imposing militarily, but it would also exert greater political, economic, and cultural influence abroad. The popularity of Joseph Nye’s phrase, “soft power,” captured Clintonian hopes.²⁷

Warren Christopher, Clinton’s first secretary of state, called upon the new administration to devise a coherent and compelling grand strategy, something the Bush White House had failed to do. “We cannot,” Christopher explained, “afford to careen from crisis to crisis.” The president and his advisors needed “an entirely new foreign policy for a world that’s fundamentally changed.” An aging but still active George Kennan seconded this advice, counseling the new president to avoid “oversimplification” and instead develop a “thoughtful paragraph or more” that explains American interests, aims, and challenges.²⁸

Strobe Talbott conveyed Kennan’s thoughts to the president. Clinton commented that effective policy required an ability to “crystallize complexity in a way people get right away.” The president understood that a sophisticated strategy had to be parsimonious—simply explained to guide action, persuade people, and organize resources. The “problem of the moment,” Clinton insightfully observed, “is that a bunch of smart people haven’t been able to come up with a new slogan, and saying that there aren’t any good slogans isn’t a slogan either.” Just as a good book requires a good title, an effective strategy can only exist within an effective label.²⁹

Anthony Lake, a former Kissinger aide who had renounced the ways of his former boss and now served as Clinton’s first national security advisor, took up the challenge of authoring a foreign policy strategy. He recognized that unlike the Nixon administration, the new White House was pulled in many directions and it lacked a clear definition of priorities. Lake could not get everyone on the same page in the rambling meetings that characterized

²⁷ See Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); idem., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

²⁸ Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad*, pp. 108–10.

²⁹ Ibid.

cabinet deliberations. He relied on the preparation of a major public address to explain what he thought the administration was doing, and organize everyone accordingly. Kennan's famous "long telegram" in 1946 had played a similar role, especially as Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal circulated it around government. Lake hoped to write a speech that would focus and organize strategy after the Cold War.³⁰

Speaking to a large crowd at Johns Hopkins University on September 21, 1993, Lake described how the United States would transform its grand strategy "from containment to enlargement." "Throughout the Cold War," Lake explained, "we contained a global threat to market democracies; now we should seek to enlarge their reach, particularly in places of special significance to us. The successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement—enlargement of the world's free community of market democracies."³¹

How would this "strategy of enlargement" work? Lake emphasized four kinds of action:

1. "We should strengthen the community of major market democracies—including our own—which constitutes the core from which enlargement is proceeding."

2. "We should help foster and consolidate new democracies and market economies, where possible in states of special significance and opportunity."

3. "We must counter the aggression—and support the liberalization—of states hostile to democracy and markets."

4. "We need to pursue our humanitarian agenda not only by providing aid, but also by working to help democracy and market economics take root in regions of greatest humanitarian concern."³²

Markets and democracies were Lake's solution to all foreign policy problems. Enlarging what he called the "blue areas" of these regimes would assure peace and prosperity:

The expansion of market-based economics abroad helps expand our exports and create American jobs, while it also improves living conditions and fuels demands for political liberalization abroad. The addition of new democracies makes us more secure because democracies tend not to wage war on each other or sponsor terrorism. They are more trustworthy in diplomacy and do a better job of respecting the human rights of their people.

³⁰ Chollet and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars*, pp. 65–66; Douglas Brinkley, "Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1997, pp. 110–27.

³¹ Anthony Lake, "From Containment to Enlargement," speech at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C., Sept. 21, 1993, available at: www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/lakedoc.html (accessed Dec. 21, 2008).

³² Ibid.

Supporting markets and democracies, therefore, was both self-interest and the common good; it was high principle and basic pragmatism.³³

Lake's speech succeeded in framing the administration's foreign policy. It was immediately echoed by the president and other cabinet officials. Despite the many inconsistencies in policy over the next seven years, the speech roughly characterized the aims of Clinton's international activities. From Bosnia to Russia to Haiti to China to Kosovo, the president emphasized opening access to trade and preventing egregious—and obvious—examples of violence against human communities. The administration attempted to use economic incentives and promises of public respectability to encourage democratic reforms overseas. When that did not work, Clinton only very hesitantly considered the use of force. At almost all costs, he avoided the commitment of U.S. troops on foreign territory.

This was fatefully true in the most significant military action of Clinton's eight years in office. On March 24, 1999—after more than seven years of civil war and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia—Clinton invoked Lake's rhetoric of enlargement to justify an American-led NATO bombing campaign over Serbia: “we need a Europe that is prosperous, secure, undivided, and free,” the president announced. Slobodan Milošević, the leader of Serbia, threatened this market-democratic vision through his consistent efforts to separate peoples, close markets, and rule through dictatorship. After denying the obvious for years—that Milošević would not accept a diplomatic agreement for a multiethnic Yugoslavia—the Clinton administration resorted to force from a distance. For eleven weeks, NATO aircraft and missiles attacked Serbian military and civilian positions. Milošević finally agreed to withdraw his forces from Kosovo on June 11, 1999, and he eventually stood trial for war crimes in the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. At the same time, the NATO bombing inspired wide international opposition for its damage to civilian and diplomatic targets (including the Chinese embassy in Belgrade), its questionable strategic purposes in a war fought largely by paramilitary units, and, above all, its half-hearted quality. Clinton committed to an ambitious agenda of protecting Kosovo while also promising: “I do not intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war.”³⁴ This was a war for enlargement fought with diminished means.³⁵

America's stumbling actions in the former Yugoslavia throughout the Clinton presidency capture the shortcomings of the administration's approach to strategy. Enlargement, as defined by Lake and his successors, articulated preferences for markets and democracies that were widely shared in the United States and elsewhere. It did not, however, identify the key priorities in

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Bill Clinton's Address to the Nation, Mar. 24, 1999, in *Public Papers of President William J. Clinton*, 1999, vol. I, pp. 451–54.

³⁵ See Chollet and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars*, pp. 222–26; Clark, *Waging Modern War*, esp. pp. 193–323.

pursuing these ends. Were the Balkans more important to U.S. interests than North Korea or Iraq? Was stopping genocide, as Samantha Power passionately claims,³⁶ more important than nurturing productive and stable relations with regional leaders? Enlargement promised everything—an “end to history”—without giving any guidance about trade-offs and necessary sacrifices. For this reason the Clinton administration wavered inconsistently on almost every major foreign policy issue, unsure whether to commit its military and political capital to a particular purpose or watch events from afar. This strategic uncertainty encouraged the same kind of triangulation Clinton practiced with domestic policy—half measures like bombing without ground troops that satisfied no one and provoked many.

Indiscipline when it came to choosing preferences and cowardice when it came to making commitments were not the only problems. The Clinton administration never thought systematically about the “hard power” capabilities that it would need to pursue its ends. The White House did have a very sophisticated understanding of international economy and cultural influence, but its obsession with these “softer” forms of leverage distracted it from thinking seriously about when, where, and how it would deploy the largest military in the world. The professorial thinkers in the White House always seemed intimidated by the armed services, especially after the political controversy surrounding Clinton’s efforts to reform the military’s policies on gay soldiers during his first months in office.³⁷ The president and his advisors had matured in academic and professional settings that were hyper-critical of the post-Vietnam U.S. military. They had advanced their careers by working to substitute brains for brawn. This did not make the members of the Clinton administration weak, but it hindered their ability to think deeply about how they would deploy force and contend with the unavoidable casualties.

How would the United States integrate military capabilities into plans for enlargement? Under which conditions would the nation send U.S. forces abroad? Which threats would leaders emphasize in military procurement and planning? These were all central topics of debate during the Cold War. These issues dropped off the map of policy—and academic study—in the post-Cold War world. Negating Clausewitz, Clinton often seemed intent on making war the antithesis of great power politics.

Of course, Clausewitz was wiser on this point. The military-aversion of Clinton’s foreign policy simultaneously raised U.S. expectations and diminished capabilities. According to the rhetoric of enlargement, citizens came to expect an end to genocide in the Balkans with the loss of little American treasure. In Rwanda, angry observers could not understand why the United States did not step in to stop the killing, as if this were a simple matter of

³⁶ See Samantha Power, *‘A Problem from Hell’: American in the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), esp. pp. 247–473.

³⁷ Chollet and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars*, pp. 59–63.

pointing the finger of market democracy at dictators and unwashed masses.³⁸ In the Balkans, self-righteous critics claimed the United States had become a “hypocrite” nation because it killed civilians when confronting a series of brutal regimes. Since Lake’s 1993 speech, the Clinton administration had encouraged human rights advocates to believe that the United States could enlarge the landscape of democracy without hard military choices. When the bombs began to fall, the White House had little defense because it never made a strategic argument for this kind of action in pursuit of the national interest.

During his last weeks in office, Clinton came full circle to the early days of his first term. He traveled around Europe and the United States trying to address every global issue in the tightly interdependent world that he frequently described. The president recognized that the future of market democracy was fraught with many diverse challenges—ethnic conflict, weapons of mass destruction, environmental degradation, and terrorism, to name a few—and he seemed intent on acting everywhere through a wide-range of non-military (or very limited military) means. Clinton’s words were smart, persuasive, and also “hyperactive,” according to Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier. He consistently over-reached and under-performed because his administration lacked an effective strategy for matching available means to clearly defined priorities. For all the brains in his administration, Clinton never found his Kennan, Acheson, or Kissinger for the post-Cold War world.³⁹

Conclusions

If George H. W. Bush was unable to master the post-Cold War landscape because he had process without purpose, Clinton had purpose without process. Both combinations were fatal for articulating and implementing grand strategy. Both combinations prohibited the United States from defining clear priorities and accepting necessary sacrifices in the pursuit of national interests. Both combinations constrained American foreign policy performance, encouraging inconsistency, uncertainty, and half measures.

Formulating a grand strategy for a country as large and powerful as the United States is not easy. The shortcomings of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton—two enormously capable people—should humble anyone who thinks about these issues. The United States has a stake in so many foreign and domestic issues, and therefore it is very difficult to prioritize. The country also has a wide margin of error—its survival is rarely jeopardized—and consequently can afford to formulate policy without sufficient concentration or commitment. Most of all, the United States is a pluralistic society. Grand

³⁸ See Power, ‘*A Problem from Hell*,’ pp. 329–89.

³⁹ Chollet and Goldgeier, *American Between the Wars*, pp. 286–89.

strategy requires consensus which is very difficult to build and sustain amidst the competition of interests and ideas that define American democracy.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 did not eliminate these problems. In fact, they contributed to a rapid expansion in American activities around the globe. Uncovering terrorist cells, eliminating sanctuaries, and rebuilding “failed states”—the United States quickly found itself conducting serious military, political, and cultural operations virtually everywhere. The “War on Terror” had no clear territorial or temporal limits. President George W. Bush’s commitment “to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world” was the most universalistic foreign policy mission in the nation’s long history of universalistic endeavors.⁴⁰ George W. Bush surpassed the hyperactivity of Woodrow Wilson and Bill Clinton combined.

Despite the suffering in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C.—and the popular rhetoric of global mission and impending doom—the country continued to benefit from a wide margin of error. The destruction was limited and the nation’s survival was not in jeopardy. (The same could not be said for American allies in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and other regions.) The patriotic consensus born of the terrorist attacks was very strong throughout the United States, but it did not foreclose immediate debate about basic issues like whether the country should go to war and how it should reconcile civil rights with national security. Patriotism does not prevent vibrant political pluralism. That is a great virtue of the American system.

What ended in New York City on that terrible day was not the ongoing and still unresolved debate about post-Cold War grand strategy, begun more than a decade earlier on Governors Island. Instead, the terrorist attacks shattered the false belief that the United States no longer faced grave threats. The clear skies over the Hudson River shined a bright light on how vulnerable Americans were to the worst forms of violence, and how inadequate present policy had become. The efforts by George W. Bush and his advisors to formulate a grand strategy in this context—with very controversial results—should only reinforce how difficult and important this endeavor is. Like urban politics, international politics requires leadership, resources, and the discipline to put those to their most effective use amidst a proliferation of pressures. Grand strategy is about making sense of complexity. Grand strategy is the wisdom to make power serve useful purposes.



⁴⁰ President George W. Bush’s Second Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 2005, available at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4460172> (accessed May 26, 2009).