American Grand Strategy in a World at Risk

by Walter Russell Mead

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If there is no single long-standing American grand strategy, one nonetheless sees through the course of U.S. history the tracks of a grand strategy. It started with the idea of a U.S. monopoly in the Western Hemisphere, along with balances of power in the chief theaters of the world; with belief in the primacy of sea and air power and the need for an economic system to support these; and the objective of transforming international politics. Since 9/11, even if the strategic hierarchy, intensity, and political basis have changed, the Bush administration has largely been continuing in this same project, with a sensible strategy but poorly considered tactics.

American grand strategy is an interesting thing. Lord Bryce, Britain's ambassador to the U.S. from 1907 to 1913, when writing about foreign policy in the United States, said that "the subject of foreign policy in the United States is like the subject of snakes in Ireland. There are no snakes in Ireland."1 There is no foreign policy in the United States, he claimed, or at least no tradition of thinking seriously about it. To a certain extent he was right, in that we do not make foreign policy the way Europeans and some others have traditionally done—lone geniuses wrapped in their towers who think and play a multidimensional chess game on a scale of decades with their rival geniuses. Metternich advances a pawn here, confident that Talleyrand will then make a mistake and seven moves later Metternich's pawn will take Talleyrand's knight or whatever it may be. In the United States, secretaries of state come and go very rapidly, and any time a leader is ready to launch a grand design, some congressperson comes in and prevents it because one or another aspect of it might discomfit some industry in their state.

President Bush discovered this at a crucial moment in his negotiations with Pakistan regarding Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. The one thing Pakistan wanted, relaxed textile quotas, was the one thing Bush could not give them, because that would have concerned a number of southern congresspersons who simply were not ready to see that happen. American grand strategy is almost a contradiction in terms, in the sense that very few administrations are able to consistently develop a strategy that they can then maintain over a long period of time. And yet, over the decades and even centuries, one does see the tracks of a grand strategy in American history. America has in many ways been doing its own version of what the British used to do. Perhaps the best description of this came from Colonel Edward M. House, who said during World War I: “We may be replacing Britain as the gyroscope of world order,” with all the political, military, and economic costs, benefits, and responsibilities that role will entail. That, to some degree, describes the American project in the world. Its strategy on how to accomplish it comes from Britain.

British Legacy

Colonel House’s view—that America was replacing Britain as the hegemon of world order in the twentieth century—is fundamental to understanding world politics in the last century and even today. There are a few key elements to this strategy America inherited from the British and modified for itself.

First is a U.S. monopoly in the Western Hemisphere, along with balances of power in the chief theaters of the world, so that in Europe, Asia, and especially in the Middle East, the United States can prevent any other power from taking over. The United States has been repeatedly ready, when there was no other alternative, to go to war in order to prevent any single power from taking over any of these theaters. Washington’s foreign policy today has it looking carefully at China, being preoccupied with the Middle East, and even suggesting to France and Germany that the United States would be unhappy were they to succeed in transforming the European Union into a new empire. Washington wants diversity in Europe, a Europe that is not under the dominion of one or even two nation-states.

Second is sea and air power, which enables the United States to exert force in all areas where its interests may be threatened. Beyond this power structure is an economic strategy, which again comes out of the British playbook. America will build an economic system, given this balance-of-power policy, that will make it rich enough to afford the military investments necessary to maintain its power strategy, just as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British made enough money from trade to be able to afford subsidies to their continental allies and to maintain the forces necessary to meet their military objectives.
But America also uses its economic system in other ways. It pacifies other countries; Germany and Japan after World War II were able to become rich by participating in the American system. Today, Washington is trying to keep the Chinese focused on their ability to enrich themselves by participating in the world's economic system, so they aren't tempted to overturn it.

The possibility of losing access to that system also acts as a deterrent. For example, as China industrializes, it becomes more dependent on exports to the United States. That dependence would make China think two or three times before entering into war with America. Imports of oil and food play a critical role, as well. Washington is encouraging the Chinese to be globalized, dependent on commodities they do not have that come from all over the world, where U.S. air and sea power, if necessary, can interdict these supplies. So this economic system both draws them in and then makes it dangerous for them to leave. After World War II, this was a tremendously effective tool with both Germany and Japan.

The third element of U.S. grand strategy is its objective of transforming international politics. Washington is not always clear on what it is trying to do in this regard, but in general it wants the world to be more democratic than it is, since this would make America feel safer. This project can be seen as either a utopian or a pragmatic strategy, but in any event, the transformation of international life and of the countries that participate in it is a very old theme in American life, going back in some ways to the eighteenth and certainly early nineteenth centuries.

Since 9/11, while Washington has continued largely in this same project, the circumstances have changed, and so it is changing its approach. Even before 9/11, a set of economic changes had occurred that contributed to this, as the global economy became more dynamic and less regulated. Old relationships between government and industry have been broken, and the age of autarkic national economies is over. Once there was a French economy that did not have much to do with any other economy except the French itself, and in the United States, there was only one telephone company and three television networks. Everything was very stable. Many people would work for the same company for their entire lives. Now, the globalized world economy is changing the politics within and between states. Globalization has done almost as much to shape the foreign policy of the Bush administration as 9/11 has. And it's a subject to which not enough attention is being paid.

The 9/11 attacks themselves led to three changes in our international situation that set the stage for the foreign policy that we have been following and the challenges with which the Bush administration has been grappling.

Strategic Hierarchy

The United States' Cold War priorities were, in descending order, Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. These were the regions of the world
where Washington was trying to maintain a balance of power. On 9/11, those priorities changed. The Middle East and Europe switched places, so that the Middle East is now number one; East Asia remains number two, at least at present. (It is not yet time for Washington to worry about the Chinese as much as someday it might need to.)

Europe is not necessarily happy about going from number one to number three, and U.S. relations with it have been tumultuous. There is of course also a great deal of upheaval in our relations with the Middle East, a region that is not particularly happy about going from number three to number one. It is Washington's policy in East Asia that has been the least disturbed since 9/11. One could argue that, with the exception of some long-brewing problems in North Korea, the Bush administration has actually been successful in conducting a policy of strengthening existing U.S. alliances and laying a good foundation in East Asia for the future, in a rather quiet, effective way.

Intensity

The next thing that has changed in U.S. foreign policy since 9/11 is intensity. In the 1990s—when history was over, problems had been resolved, and the United States had won—it was very hard to get the American people or their elected representatives to support any kind of an activist foreign policy. President Clinton had as difficult a time getting Congress to vote the money for “do-gooding” projects like foreign aid as he did getting funding for “do-badding” projects such as invasions. It was hard for that administration to get public support for any dramatic initiative in foreign policy.

Since 9/11, that has changed. There may be disagreement with what Bush has done on various elements of foreign policy, but there is very little disagreement that America needs to be doing something and to be doing it quite vigorously. There is little complaining about the size of the military or intelligence budgets. Also, the size of the foreign-aid budget is considerably larger than it was in the 1990s. And despite all the troubles the United States is having with the UN, it has become less problematic for the Bush administration to get the United States’ dues paid. President Bush has far more resources at his command than presidents have had in the past. He was reelected after more than 1,000 military fatalities had occurred in Iraq. If U.S. forces in Bosnia had suffered 1,000 deaths, what would have happened to Bill Clinton’s presidency?

President Clinton was desperately worried lest the soldiers should suffer any minor injury in the occupation of Haiti, thereby causing political support for the whole thing to collapse. Even Ronald Reagan, following the attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut, thought, “You know what? I’ve got to get out of here.” Not “We’ve got to teach these people not to mess with the United States of America,” but “We’ve got to get out of here.” So there’s a new intensity in American foreign policy after 9/11. It will be interesting to see how
long that intensity lasts and how U.S. foreign policy may change as the emotional consequences of 9/11 recede.

**Political Basis**

The third change in American foreign policy is its political basis. Americans through the centuries seem to have had four basic ways of looking at foreign policy, which have contrasted with or sometimes complemented their ways of looking at domestic policy. These approaches appear early in American history, and while they have each evolved in response to changes in the international order and in American society, they have also remained identifiable over the centuries. Thus, our debates as well as our concerns have much in common across generations, and many of the ideas and alternatives present in contemporary discussions would have been familiar to American politicians and thinkers throughout history.

These schools operate on many different levels. They reflect deep-seated regional, economic, social, and class interests; they embody visions for domestic as well as foreign policy; they express moral and political values as well as socioeconomic and political interests.

All four schools are deeply rooted in the American experience. To some degree one can trace their roots to the four folkways that historian David Hasckett Fischer identifies in colonial America, where the cultural, ideological, and political differences among the colonists appear to have arisen from the differences in the regional cultures out of which they emerged in the British Isles.²

The four schools are not blood types, with every individual typed by one and only one label; it is rare for statesmen or ordinary citizens to be wholly wrapped up in the ideas and values of just one of the schools. Most Americans combine different elements of different schools in their makeup. I have named the four schools after four figures in American history.²

First, there is the economically driven Hamiltonian school, which sees the first task of the American government as promoting the health of American enterprise at home and abroad. Hamiltonians regard a strong alliance between the national government and big business as the key both to domestic stability and to effective action abroad, and they have long focused on the nation’s need to be integrated into the global economy on favorable terms: “Let’s have a world trade organization” and “Let’s liberalize the global economy.” A partial list of prominent Hamiltonians would include Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John Hay, and Theodore Roosevelt. This is the foreign policy of former secretary of treasury Robert Rubin or Robert Zoellick, now deputy secretary of state, when he was the U.S. trade representative.

Then there is the Wilsonian, "Let's democratize the universe and do it now" kind of foreign policy. Wilsonians believe that the United States has both a moral obligation and an important national interest in spreading American democratic and social values throughout the world, creating a peaceful international community that accepts the rule of law. I call this school the Wilsonian school for obvious reasons, but there were Wilsonians long before Woodrow Wilson was born. More interested in the legal and moral aspects of world order than in the economic agenda supported by Hamiltonians, Wilsonians typically believe that American interests require that other countries accept basic American values and conduct both their foreign and domestic affairs accordingly.

A third school that has often opposed Hamiltonian policy is a Jeffersonian, "Let's keep our democracy pure at home and avoid these foreign entanglements" foreign policy school. Jeffersonians hold that American foreign policy should be less concerned about spreading democracy abroad than about safeguarding it at home: they have historically been skeptical about Hamiltonian and Wilsonian policies that involve the United States with unsavory allies abroad or that increase the risks of war. This school has consistently looked for the least costly and least dangerous method of defending American independence while counseling against attempts to impose American values on other countries. This school has included some of the most distinguished and elegant strategic thinkers in American history—men like John Quincy Adams and George Kennan—as well as passionate and proud democratic isolationists like the historian Charles Beard and the novelist and political essayist Gore Vidal.

Finally, a large populist school I call Jacksonian believes that the most important goal of the U.S government in both foreign and domestic policy should be the physical security and the economic well-being of the American people. I name this school for him not so much in tribute to the personal views or the foreign policy record of the nation's seventh president as much as in recognition of the enormous populist appeal that enabled him to electrify and transform American politics. "Don't Tread on Me!" warned the rattlesnake on the Revolutionary battle flag; Jacksonians believe that the United States should not seek out foreign quarrels, but when other nations start wars with the United States, Jacksonian opinion agrees with General Douglas MacArthur that "There is no substitute for victory."

In the first Seminole War (1817–18), President Monroe asked Andrew Jackson, who had just led the U.S. forces in the Creek Indian Wars, to put a stop to Seminole Indian attacks on settlers in Georgia. Jackson discovered that these terrorists, as we might now call them, were being supplied with their WMD—rifles, ammunition, and liquor—by two British merchants operating in what was then, legally speaking, Spanish Florida. Jackson knew what to do. He took his forces into Spanish Florida, captured Pensacola, and court-martialed and executed two British citizens for inciting the Indians. One could say this is
everything the EU disdains about American foreign policy to this day. From a failure to fully appreciate the multicultural diversity of indigenous peoples right on up to capital punishment, this incident is emblematic of everything America does wrong, in its eyes. But Andrew Jackson became so popular as a result of this that his election to the presidency was an inevitability.

The Jacksonian school represents a deeply embedded, widespread populist and popular culture of honor, independence, courage, and military pride among the American people. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) appeals to Jacksonian sentiment; so did World War II generals George S. Patton Jr. and MacArthur. The list stretches from Washington, Jackson, and William Henry Harrison (the Old Tippecanoe who defeated Tecumseh and his Indian confederation at the 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe and ran successfully against Martin Van Buren in 1840) through Mexican War heroes Zachary Taylor and Franklin Pierce and Civil War generals Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, and James Garfield. All told, ten former generals have become president of the United States, and several other presidents, including Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and George H. W. Bush, were mightily assisted in their careers by heroic war records. Jacksonian attitudes and ideas have played and still do play an immense role in shaping the American debate over foreign policy.

While the interest groups, regions, and to some degree the economic interests that each school reflects have remained more or less constant through the generations, the policy proposals and priorities of the four schools have developed over time in response to historical, social, and economic changes, both within the United States and beyond its borders. In the early twentieth century, all four schools were severely tested by the problems posed by the decline of the British Empire. Yet within a generation all four had made an adjustment. The commerce- and finance-based Hamiltonians dropped their historic protectionism and supported free trade as a necessary economic policy for a hegemonic power. Jeffersonians modified their historic aversion to great-power politics to provide critical support for the Cold War. Wilsonians linked their vision of a universal moral order on earth to the concrete needs of the American hegemony. Jacksonians provided forty years of broad and unwavering popular support for the bloody and dangerous Cold War.

After 9/11, there was another Pearl Harbor moment when the American people were in a Jacksonian mood. Polls showed that between 30 and 45 percent of Americans favored using nuclear weapons in October 2001, when the war in Afghanistan began. In 1945, without counting Hiroshima and Nagasaki, American incendiary bombs killed 900,000 Japanese civilians in the last five months of World War II. On one night in March 1945, incendiary bombs on civilian areas in Tokyo killed well over 80,000 civilians. Eighty thousand is greater than the total of U.S. combat deaths in the Vietnam and Korean wars combined. The figure of 900,000 civilian deaths is roughly double
the total of all U.S. military deaths in all our foreign wars from the Revolution to the present day.\(^3\)

In this Jacksonian tradition, you want unconditional surrender and total victory. You're not interested in excuses or in understanding the other person's point of view; only in victory. After 9/11, the president correctly realized that America was at a certain Jacksonian moment in its foreign policy, and it now appears that the administration is trying to bring some of the other elements of American foreign policy into its approach in the Middle East. But it was fully and fairly representing and leading the American people in their initial approach.

**Strategy and Tactics**

Overall, the administration has been strategically sensible and tactically challenged. Mary Todd Lincoln once said that when she first met her husband, Abraham Lincoln, at a ball, he approached her and said, “Miss Todd, I want to dance with you in the worst way.” As she recalled, “That’s exactly what he did.” To some degree that is how the Bush administration approached the war in Iraq. They wanted it in the worst way, and that is what they got. The current situation in the Middle East is the consequence both of the ways in which the administration was strategically right and the ways in which its tactics were at times disastrous. America is reaping the rewards, on the one hand, and suffering the consequences, on the other. This makes for a very mixed picture. Bush and his advisers correctly divined that in Iraq there would be public support for a new and different regime even if it was brought in by foreigners. Maybe we aren't receiving as many flowers and kisses as we expected, but the overwhelming majority of Iraqis not only wanted a change from Saddam Hussein's government, they also wanted a change from the Sunni-dominated regime of the past.

The administration was also right that America could no longer deal with the Europeans in the way it did during the Cold War, when Washington would go to any length to persuade Germany, in particular, to support whatever it was doing, because the Cold War essentially was about the future of Germany. German support was crucial to anything Washington wanted to do in Europe. The Bush administration was right to realize that in the new world, the Middle East is actually more important to the United States than

anything going on in Europe. The administration cannot let its European policy trump or limit its Middle Eastern policy.

Finally, the administration understands that international institutions are by and large dysfunctional. The intelligence community proved unable to provide useful information on the issue of the proliferation of WMD. But neither does the international community's system—inspections, endless committee meetings, and decades of talk followed by largely symbolic action—work. U.S. concerns about proliferation in an era of mass terrorism are so great that a way to combat proliferation has to be found, whether that means rebuilding the institutions from the ground up or reforming and improving them. But Washington cannot just sit still and let the limits of institutions constrain its foreign policy options. Again, the administration may not necessarily have gotten the tactics right, but the overall vision is correct.

Where has the administration been wrong? First, the way it got into the Iraq War was a fiasco. It would have done far better had it never gone to the UN at all. Its position could have been, “We are not at peace with Iraq, we have a cease-fire with Iraq that ended the 1991 Gulf War, and the Iraqis are consistently violating the cease-fire. They're shooting at our planes that are trying to enforce it. They've failed to observe their conventional disarmament.” Every once in a while the administration would make speeches about this, and its leaders were well aware that this was true, but they allowed and to some degree encouraged a misperception in the public mind that the only issue between the United States and Saddam was WMD. The actual history of events for the connection between Saddam Hussein and 9/11 had nothing to do with whether or not an Al Qaeda agent had a cappuccino with an Iraqi agent at a coffeehouse in Prague.

Why did Osama bin Laden declare war on the United States and launch the 9/11 attacks in the first place? After the 1991 Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein refused to comply with the disarmament provisions of the cease-fire, the United States had to try instead to contain Iraq through sanctions and similar means. This involved putting troops in Saudi Arabia on a permanent basis. Having foreign, “infidel” troops in the holy land of Saudi Arabia was a shock to the religiosity of people such as Osama bin Laden, who argued that the members of the Saudi royal house were no longer Muslims, having apostatized, and that therefore Al Qaeda had to fight both the House of Saud and the Americans in order to drive the foreigners out of the holy land of Islam. That's the connection. Saddam Hussein's refusal, defiance, and violation of the cease-fire started a chain of historical causality that resulted in 9/11.

All of this is now forgotten. We are left with only the fact that no WMD were found. This is not as important as some people make out. After all, the battleship Maine most likely was not exploded by a Spanish mine, and yet the Spanish-American War was fought. Thereafter, America did not return Cuba to Spain as the credibility of the mine story collapsed. Or, to take the case of the Mexican War, it's rather murky whether that war in fact was started by Mexican
troops on American soil firing on American troops, as President Polk alleged. But even if historians could prove that Polk was lying, American opinion would not support returning California to Mexico. In that sense, a war over WMDs when there are no WMDs would not be all that anomalous in the context of American history.

But that's still beside the real point. The consequence of the tactical shortcomings from which America is suffering today is the dangerous situation in Iran. The administration has been weak at rallying support, whether domestically or internationally, for a policy that might get the Iranians to negotiate seriously over the future of their nuclear program. The Iranians can smell this weakness, which is to some degree self-inflicted, as can the Europeans and other countries in the region.

The administration has made the tactical error of being unnecessarily brusque in certain ways. The doctrine of preemption is the prime example of this. The president announced the doctrine as if it were a new departure. He could have made the same point by stating that, “Like every president of the United States before me, I will protect the people of the United States against any threat. Just as JFK was willing to confront the Soviet Union to prevent WMDs from being introduced in Cuba, I, too, will do what it takes.” He could have anchored his argument where it belonged, in the legal doctrine of sovereignty and the right of self-defense. But by announcing it as a revolutionary idea, he gave our enemies—and some of our friends—an opportunity to engage in years of anti-American, anti-Bush propaganda. The administration created this opportunity. The president’s July 2003 “Bring ‘em on!” declaration, speaking of attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq, was similarly unnecessary.

The United States is reaping the fruits of the administration’s strategic insight—its ability to grasp the big picture and to take courageous and tough decisions. But the country is also paying the price for some of the sub-optimal methods that have been used in the process. Overall, the balance is positive, but we have a long way to go.