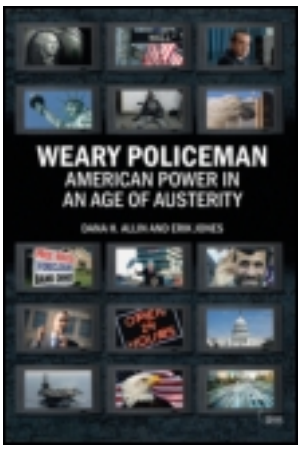

Adelphi Series
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tadl20

Chapter One: Power and restraint in American history

Dana H. Allin & Erik Jones

Version of record first published: 22 Jun 2012.

To cite this article: Dana H. Allin & Erik Jones (2012): Chapter One: Power and restraint in American history, Adelphi Series, 52:430-431, 31-70

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19445571.2012.701968

CHAPTER ONE

Power and restraint in American history

On 13 December 1847, from Washington, the first-term Congressman Abraham Lincoln wrote to his law partner back in Illinois: 'As you are all so anxious for me to distinguish myself, I have concluded to do so, before long.' The young Lincoln fulfilled this undertaking by introducing in the House of Representatives a resolution demanding of President James Polk some confirmation that the clash between American and Mexican troops that started the Mexican–American war had indeed taken place, as the President claimed, on American soil. Lincoln soon backed another resolution declaring that the war had been 'unnecessarily and unconstitutionally' started by the United States. The following spring Lincoln wrote: '[i]t is a fact that the United States Army, in marching to the Rio Grande, marched into a peaceful Mexican settlement, and frightened the inhabitants away from their homes and their growing crops.'[1]

The challenges from Lincoln and a few fellow Whigs against America's Mexican adventure were doubly quixotic:

firstly, because the fighting was already over by the time they were issued; and secondly, because the war and its fruit, a vast expansion of American territory, were extremely popular among aroused American patriots. For historian John L. Harper, the Mexican–American war (1846–48) was the archetypal case of a now all-too-familiar event: one of 'America's unnecessary wars.'[2] For Robert Kagan, however, the conflict with Mexico can be identified as a key moment of demonstration that this 'dangerous nation', the United States, meant business.[3] Kagan does not sugar-coat the nature of the war – he recognises that an important consequence and principle motive for it was to expand Southern 'slave power' in its continuing political struggle with the 'Free States' of the North. But neither does Kagan believe that the impulse that gave rise to it can be isolated from the wellsprings of American greatness or its mission in the wider world. Kagan's broader argument is that America, a nation-state pursuing national interests in a similar fashion as other nation states, has nonetheless conceived those interests in terms that served human liberty more often than they harmed it. Although undeniably accompanied by its share of humbug and cant, it was this 'universalistic nationalism', in Kagan's words, that put America in a position to play the necessary role of world's policeman.[4]

Other prerequisites included the consolidation of the American federal construction around a central authority, and a settlement of the slavery question. Both projects were accomplished, of course, by the same Abraham Lincoln, who thereby proved – to put it in the vernacular of a later age – that he did not oppose all wars, just stupid ones. The Civil War

erupted because the Northern strategy of containing – rather than destroying – the evil of slavery proved unsustainable. Lincoln famously maintained that he would have accepted a compromise that left the Union, and therefore also slavery, intact, so long as slavery's geographical limits could likewise be maintained. But Lincoln's war, as it dragged on for five bloody years, transmuted into something more unforgiving and absolute: a crusade against slavery, with the profound nobility and sustained cruelty that crusades so often carry This crusading conviction – which drew on the beliefs set out in Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and was radically reinterpreted in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in 1863[5] – was to infuse the American global imperialism that gained momentum in the twentieth century (following the continental imperialism of the nineteenth century). One could not say of twentieth-century America, as John Quincy Adams had said of his country in 1821, that it would 'go not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy'.[6]

Kagan's might be labelled the 'warts and all' argument. Global liberty and global security need a powerful champion, but one cannot expect that champion to be anything better than an imperfect political animal, with feet of clay. The argument can be explored by way of an historical counter-factual. What if Lincoln's America had purified itself not through civil war, but by allowing the Confederate South to secede? Benefits are not hard to imagine. Most obviously, the bloodiest war (for Americans) in American history might have been avoided. Southern slavery, presumably, would have withered away within a decade or two in any event, as it had withered elsewhere. The Northern, Midwestern and

Western United States might have emerged in the twentieth century as a more coherent political entity more comfortably allied with European social democracies. Though one cannot assume there would have been effortless racial harmony in the North, it is fair to say that the millstone of segregation would not have so damaged the American effort to promote Western values during the early Cold War. Today's bitter cultural, political and constitutional antagonisms would be far less salient without the continued North–South polarisation to drive them

And yet, a smaller United States would have been, in important respects, a weaker United States. It is hard to see America without the Southern states having had the military and productive capacity to rise to the occasion of the Second World War.[7] That 'necessary war' constituted the moment when American industrial and military power arrived as the decisive factor for allied victory and for shaping the post-war order. Others, notably the Soviet Union, suffered far greater losses, without which Nazi Germany would not have been defeated, but it was America that tipped the balance. Hence, following Kagan's logic, the war to re-conquer the South eight decades earlier was necessary to make America a great world power. So too, in fact, were the acquisitions of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah and California.[8] The Mexican War and the American Civil War – a 'bad war' and a 'good' one in Lincoln's terms – were both unavoidable steps on the way to American global hegemony. And that hegemony was indispensable, for a global power was needed to replace the exhausted British Empire. Kagan has argued:

> It is too easily forgotten that the plans for world order devised by American policy-makers in the early 1940s were not aimed at containing the Soviet Union, which many of them still viewed as a potential partner. Rather, those policy-makers were looking backward to the circumstances that had led to the catastrophe of global war. Their purpose was to construct a more stable international order than the one that collapsed in the 1930s: an economic system that furthered the aim of international stability by promoting growth and free trade; and a framework for international security that, although it placed some faith in the ability of the great powers to work together, rested ultimately on the keystone of American power.[9]

The interwar crises, and then the cataclysm of the Second World War itself, shaped the imperialist-cum-idealist convictions of a generation of American strategists. The collapse of world order had coincided with the decline of pax Britannica, and so its replacement by a new pax Americana was considered the only viable alternative to international anarchy.

This idea developed over time. John Harper narrated the early-twentieth-century debate about America's world role as an argument between Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt (TR), with Theodore's distant cousin Franklin oscillating – both socially and ideologically – between the two camps.[10] Today's debates carry faint echoes of the arguments between Wilson and TR a century ago. Woodrow Wilson certainly handed down a legacy of idealism to both

modern liberals and neoconservatives. But his actual presidency was constrained by events. Germany's blunder of unrestricted submarine warfare brought the US into the First World War, yet Wilson was reasonably consistent in imagining that the United States would fight not to vindicate French and British aims, but to replace their system of power with something better and more durable: peace without victory. In practice, of course, America joined in an allied victory that contained the humiliations, impoverishment and embitterment of Germany's people against which Wilson had warned.

Theodore Roosevelt derided Wilson's ideas of supplanting and transcending a balance of power as foolish and naive. A devotee of naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, TR believed that the United States should support British naval power as the first line of America's own defence. In this, Teddy Roosevelt could be considered a realist, but he also insisted, in terms that resonate for today's neoconservatives, that a big problem with Wilson's vision was its moral murkiness and failure to discern the civilisational superiority of imperial Britain over the Kaiser's Germany. Both Wilson and TR were progressives at home (though only Roosevelt acknowledged the evils of segregation). But Roosevelt, unlike Wilson, seemed not to worry that military deployments abroad would threaten social and political progress at home.[11] (In the event, of course, it was Wilson who presided over a wartime administration that implemented draconian curbs on Americans' civil liberties.)

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) consciously emulated his cousin, the national hero TR, and served as assistant

secretary of the navy in the administration of Teddy's bitter rival Wilson. Like TR, FDR nurtured a hearty dislike for modern Germany (though, with many Americans of his class and generation, he had a nostalgic affection for the dying vestiges of a pre-Bismarkian, Gothic and pastoral Germany that he had visited in his youth). Like Wilson, however, FDR was at best ambivalent about British power and society. He obviously worked intimately and well with Winston Churchill to manage the Second World War. To Churchill's huge dismay, however, FDR made no secret of his hope and expectation that the war would bring about the demise of the British Empire. This was in keeping with FDR's generally disdainful view of the old European powers and their future. As Harper has put it:

> The one truly profound conviction that linked Roosevelt to Wilson was that Europe constituted the overriding problem of the twentieth century and that the United States had little choice but to try to solve it ... Both Wilson and FDR were inclined to believe – and the World War tended to confirm – that the New World was morally superior to the Old World and that the future belonged to the dynamic, healthy elements of civilisation led by the United States. What linked FDR to Wilson was the notion that the rest of humanity must be saved from Europe, and Europe from itself.[12]

The way in which FDR melded the perspectives of Wilson and TR is captured in John Lewis Gaddis's assess-

ment of the 'four policemen' directorate, an arguably eccentric FDR concept – comprising the United States, Russia, Britain and China. This became, with the addition of France, the core permanent membership of the UN Security Council. The four policemen would work by power politics and alliance machination as much as by consensus: America, Russia and China sometimes against Imperial Britain; America, Britain and China sometimes against Russia. 'The picture is hardly one of anticipating harmony,' Gaddis has written.[13]

For thinking about America's twenty-first century role, what is perhaps most interesting about FDR's vision was its limits. An American policeman was to be required – but FDR saw the United States as only one of four, implying a degree of regional pluralism or, at least, realist wariness of foreign entanglements. Roosevelt was a great politician and a successful wartime leader, but his post-war vision when he died was, at best, half-formed. Still, we can infer a world in which Russia and China enjoyed considerable sway over Eurasia, Britain maintained at least shared naval supremacy with the United States, and the US would withdraw its troops from Europe, reverting to a posture of off-shore balancer: a global power ready to defend its interests in many places while becoming entangled in as few as possible. In current American discourse, the posture would probably be labelled 'isolationist'. And Harper describes the worldview of one important faction in Roosevelt's administration as 'Europhobic hemispherism'[14] under which America could continue to enjoy some tangible benefit from its geographical position. 'Isolationism', along with 'appeasement',

have become such careless epithets as to lose most of their analytical value. That the man who led America through the Second World War could be considered, in today's terminology, both an isolationist and an appeaser does indicate, however, how expectations of American power have grown.

* * *

FDR's vision of the post-war order did not come to pass. Stalin's brutality in Eastern Europe demolished American hopes for serious post-war cooperation with the Soviet ally. Washington then had to reappraise its world role. The sudden death of Roosevelt served to punctuate, if not precipitate, this reappraisal. Men like Harry Truman and Dean Acheson emerged as champions of the idea that world order required America to be the keystone.

Since Acheson stands out as America's archetypal liberal hawk, it is worth remembering that his hardline views were shaped gradually. A first-generation Anglo-American, he was, before and during the war, essentially Victorian in outlook, committed to the restoration of a nineteenth-century system that had sustained the halcyon world into which he came of age. As Britain weakened, the New Englander Acheson did not so much imagine America replacing it as joining in permanent partnership with it. He was a free-trader who nonetheless accepted the need for Britain to maintain some of its imperial trading arrangements, and he became a partial convert to Keynesianism (from his initial austere, sound-money rectitude), partly because of

circumstances, but also because of a necessary working relationship and ensuing friendship with Keynes himself. This was before Keynes's fatal heart attack, when he was struggling beyond exhaustion against Washington's inclination to treat Britain's debt and the flow of funds across the Atlantic in ways that rendered the UK practically bankrupt. Acheson was not congenitally anti-Soviet either. He worked well with the Russians during and for some time after the war, not easily giving up hopes for reconciling the growing differences between Washington and Moscow.[15]

Acheson's anti-Soviet epiphany coincided with the realisation that a full British partnership was not available. In the freezing penury of February 1947, London's announcement that it would have to terminate aid to Turkey and Greece thrust a new crisis upon the crisis-weary Truman administration. Acheson and his colleagues pushed for the United States to take on Britain's role in the eastern Mediterranean.[16] President Truman's aid request to a joint session of Congress on 12 March 1947 emphasised economic rather than military support, and in theory the requested $450 million could be seen as a down-payment on the $13 billion Marshall Plan for Europe that was to be initiated four months later. An economic programme to restore European commerce and confidence could be seen, in turn, as a plan for America to help restore a European and global balance of power, allowing it to then substantially withdraw. Such was certainly the intention of a principle Marshall Plan architect, George F. Kennan, who was then the State Department's Director of Policy Planning. Yet Truman's initial aid request for Greece and Turkey was wrapped in what became a much grander

Truman Doctrine. 'I believe,' he told Congress, 'that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.'[17] This, an alarmed Kennan would later write, 'placed our aid to Greece in the framework of a universal policy rather than in that of a specific decision addressed to a specific set of circumstances.'[18] Such universalism, in Kennan's view, became an American habit with baleful consequences:

> Throughout the ensuing two decades the conduct of our foreign policy would continue to be bedevilled by people in our own government as well as in other governments who could not free themselves from the belief that all another country had to do, in order to qualify for American aid, was to demonstrate the existence of a Communist threat. Since almost no country was without a communist minority, this assumption carried very far.[19]

Two years after Truman's speech, Washington made the clear choice not just to restore a European and global balance of power, but to assume responsibility for managing it. The Truman administration established NATO in April 1949 as a standing, peacetime military alliance, and a year after that it promulgated, in a Report to the National Security Council (NSC68), a plan for American rearmament and aggressive containment of Soviet power. A few months later, when North Korean troops moved south across the 38th parallel, the American policeman went to work.

The conservative anxiety

There is room for debate on how the eighteenth-century founders of the American republic conceived its future world role – not least because the founders debated it among themselves. Washington vowed to 'steer clear of permanent alliance' and Jefferson said much the same about the dangers of 'entangling alliances'. Yet the same Jefferson took the opportunity in 1803 to realise his vision of an American 'empire of liberty' as soon as he had the chance, by purchasing the territory of Louisiana (more than 820,000 square miles) from Napoleon.[20] And, for all the American pretentions of isolation from Europe's conflicts, the Napoleonic wars (1799–1815) were a deeply polarising current in American politics, so the question was not whether to align but rather, with whom? This was one of the many disagreements, for example between Alexander Hamilton and his bitter rival Jefferson (the Francophile and French Revolution enthusiast). Hamilton sought a tacit alliance with Great Britain, as a stepping stone to world power.[21]

What is more certain, however, is that the drafters of the US constitution worried that wartime concentrations of power in an American executive could pose a threat to republican liberty. James Madison gave voice to this worry at the Constitutional Convention of 1787:

> In time of actual war, great discretionary powers are constantly given to the Executive Magistrate. Constant apprehension of war has the same tendency to render the head too large for the body. A standing military force, with an overgrown Executive

> will not long be safe companions to liberty. The means of defence against foreign danger, have been always the instruments of tyranny at home. Among the Romans it was a standing maxim to excite a war, whenever a revolt was apprehended. Throughout all Europe, the armies kept up under the pretext of defending, have enslaved the people.[22]

Similar concern for the proper constitutional limits to a president's powers fed much of the domestic anxiety about Cold War over-reach. Republican Senator Robert Taft, who had opposed with equal vigour Roosevelt's New Deal and pre-Pearl Harbour efforts to involve America in the war against Adolf Hitler, was also worried that post-war mobilising against Stalin would lead to a growth in the United States government and threaten American liberty far more than Stalin himself. (Taft went so far in his constitutional scruples as to embark on a Quixotic argument against the Nuremburg war-crimes tribunal: calling it victors' justice and a violation of the 'fundamental principle of American law that a man cannot be tried under an *ex post facto* statute'.)[23]

The most articulate and influential worrier about American overstretch was Kennan – though it bears emphasis that Kennan ultimately influenced debate and historiography more than US policy. It says something about their overlapping worldviews that Kennan, like Taft, considered Nuremburg a travesty. Kennan was appalled by the spectacle of American jurists sitting in judgment together with the man who had been chief Soviet prosecutor at the Moscow show trials in 1936 and 1937. While serving as a diplomat

in Russia, a young Kennan had been required to sit through those trials, which had added to his own 'liberal education in the horrors of Stalinism', as he put it.[24] Reposted, late in the war, to the US embassy in Moscow, Kennan in February 1946 composed the 'Long Telegram' that made him famous – an 5,500-word manifesto against a Russian 'political force committed fanatically to the belief that with the US there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure.'[25]

Yet, although this manifesto would be remembered as a founding document in the American decision to wage Cold War, Kennan was always clear that America's commitment to this war should be limited. His vision of containment was mainly political and economic rather than military. He was opposed to the idea of NATO as an elaborate, standing alliance. He certainly felt that any North Atlantic Treaty should be restricted in purpose to a simple American security guarantee and restricted in geography to states that actually bordered the North Atlantic. Extending it to such decidedly un-Atlantic countries as Italy, Greece and Turkey risked appearing 'to the Soviet leaders as an aggressive encirclement of their country'.[26] Turning it into a standing military organisation risked militarising the confrontation and thereby pushing it onto a plane that favoured the Soviets. Moreover, manning and arming a central European front was going to create a permanent division of Europe, while insisting on a NATO-allied West Germany would foreclose the option of

negotiating towards a unified and neutral Germany, thus preventing a broader European settlement as well.

Though not driven by the same anti-New Deal ideology as Taft's conservatism, Kennan, like Taft, also worried that a quasi-imperial role would strain the American economy and dangerously distort the US body politic. Kennan was also concerned that Western Europe's strategic dependency on American protection would sap the Europeans' resolve and capacity to manage their own affairs. In this anxiety, he would later write, 'I was a Gaullist before de Gaulle',[27] and it is indeed instructive to compare the two men's ideas about the symbiosis between American and European power. [28]

Charles de Gaulle's essential view was that America had more power than was good for it or good for the world, more than it sometimes understood and yet less than it often imagined. Such subtleties were not *always* lost on his American interlocutors – along with Kennan, Henry Kissinger was another US official who professed to appreciate and admire de Gaulle's philosophy of power, even if its expression was gratuitously 'wounding' to American sensibilities.[29] Of course, de Gaulle challenged America's power and global leadership during the 1960s, when its limits were becoming painfully obvious to everyone. Four decades later, French President Jacques Chirac criticised American pretensions to unipolar omnipotence at a time when Washington groupthink was fairly well sealed against the possibility that the United States was heading for a fall. Chirac's bad faith was simply assumed, just as de Gaulle's supposedly 'anti-American' animus proved convenient for discounting his warnings about Vietnam. Yet, given that Chirac's warnings

on Iraq, like de Gaulle's on Vietnam, turned out to be not just prescient, but also objectively in the service of US interests, it is worth looking back to their roots in a general's vision.

The Gaullist challenge was confounding to American pretensions, not least because it too was an essentially conservative rebuke at a time when the United States was waging cold war on a left–right axis. Such ideological distinctions did not always have strategic salience: America was pretty successful in promoting and aligning with European leftists in the form of anti-communist social democrats who, as often as not, were likely to castigate Washington for taking an insufficiently hard line against Soviet encroachments and intimidation.[30] Still, it looked like a genuine left–right ideological struggle in much of Africa, Asia and Latin America, where post-colonial, nationalist resistance to American hegemony and the American model of modernisation was either explicitly aligned with Soviet interests or susceptible to Maoist, Trotskyite or Castro-style ideologies to a degree that led Washington to discount any supposed independence from Moscow. Washington's embrace of a wide array of right-wing thugs and dictators was one unfortunate consequence of this discounting. In any event, the Americans could be forgiven for assuming that they had their right flank covered.

Yet, in de Gaulle there was a coherent conservative critique of American power and hegemony. The Gaullist critique was not, moreover, *sui generis*: it echoed the conservative anxieties of de Gaulle's American contemporaries such as Kennan and Taft. De Gaulle, naturally, was not as much preoccupied as these Americans with the American domestic political and constitutional damage that they

feared would result from an American imperial mission. But like Kennan, he favoured a multi-polar balance of power – a system, in David P. Calleo's words, akin to 'continental Europe's post-Napoleonic balance' instead of recreating 'the worldwide *Pax Brittanica* that enchanted so many American analysts.'[31] Like Kennan, de Gaulle was both appalled by the prospect of a world divided into Soviet and American spheres, and reasonably confident that the enduring force of fissiparous nationalism would render those blocs unsustainable. As president of France, the general did what he could to make the American bloc less manageable.

De Gaulle's at times adversarial relationship with the United States had a lasting impact and American frustration with the Gaullist challenge reached crisis dimensions some three decades later with the transatlantic argument over the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. Three months after the start of that campaign, convinced – prematurely – of vindication, the administration set out one of its most elaborate critiques of the Gaullist idea in a speech by National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice at the London headquarters of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. French concepts of multi-polarity were not only misguided, Rice insisted, but profoundly dangerous:

> Some have spoken admiringly – almost nostalgically – of 'multi-polarity', as if it were a good thing, to be desired for its own sake. The reality is that 'multi-polarity' was never a unifying idea, or a vision. It was a necessary evil that sustained the absence of war but it did not promote the triumph

> of peace. Multi-polarity is a theory of rivalry; of competing interests – and at its worst – competing values. We have tried this before. It led to the Great War – which cascaded into the Good War, which gave way to the Cold War. Today this theory of rivalry threatens to divert us from meeting the great tasks before us. Why would anyone who shares the values of freedom seek to put a check on those values? Democratic institutions themselves are a check on the excesses of power. Why should we seek to divide our capacities for good, when they can be so much more effective united? Only the enemies of freedom would cheer this division.[32]

Rice's statement expressed a radical idealism, as recognised by writers such as Calleo and William Pfaff, who have long argued that American power, however benign it might appear, needed to be restrained, which is to say, balanced or contained by a friendly or even opposing force. ('Unwittingly, no doubt,' Calleo wrote after Rice's speech: 'this is the language and mindset of tyranny.')[33] Yet it was at the same time a cogent expression of an enduring American assumption. With important exceptions such as Kennan and Kissinger, Americans have traditionally opposed 'balance-of-power' diplomacy as something anachronistically and even wickedly European. Another way of putting it is that American leaders have generally lacked any notion of power itself as possessing an independent moral dimension. Power has been seen as good or bad depending only on whether good or bad people or states wielded it.

De Gaulle, like Kennan, took a more classically tragic view. Balance of power was a moral imperative in itself, because the possessor of excessive power almost inevitably falls victim to hubris, losing touch with the reality of limits. Such was the downfall of dictators, de Gaulle wrote, it being 'the destiny of all dictators to go too far in what they undertake'.[34] It was the same for unbridled nations. Hence, recalling the Second World War, his famous account of the

> messianic impulse [that] now swelled the American spirit and oriented it toward vast undertakings. The United States, delighting in her resources, feeling that she no longer had in herself sufficient scope for her energies, wishing to help those who were in misery or bondage the world over, yielded in her turn to that taste for interventions in which the instinct for domination cloaked itself.[35]

De Gaulle truly believed that his warnings to US leaders about the hubris of power were friendly warnings.[36] He privately told John F. Kennedy in 1961 that America was repeating France's mistake in Vietnam, and he issued the same warning publicly in 1964. By this time, however, Americans were starting to realise that their house was on fire, and they were highly allergic to any suggestion that it might be, even partly, their own fault.

Cycles of ambition

De Gaulle and Kennan were, in the categories of this book, pluralists. Their warnings about the dangers of imperial

over-extension did not bear up perfectly as predictions, something Kennan himself would later admit: contrary to his early fears, the Western allies' position in Berlin turned out to be defensible; US troops in West Germany, though massively present through most of the remaining century, were more welcomed than resented. Still, Kennan and de Gaulle both proved prescient as the Vietnam war turned into a quagmire. The Vietnam disaster was the prelude to the first cycle of managed retrenchment under President Richard Nixon, with the conceptual tutelage of Henry Kissinger. The 'Nixon Doctrine' gave notice that communist insurgencies in other Third World nations would have to be battled by those nations themselves. The United States might give aid, but it would not supply ground forces. In the future, Nixon announced, US interests 'must shape our commitments, rather than the other way around'.[37] Part of the retrenchment involved a phased withdrawal from Vietnam, though of course the war continued another four excruciating years without any better result. Detente with the Soviets relaxed tensions, but was attacked from the right as a strategy born of weakness. Nixon's political self-destruction in Watergate, meanwhile, hardly helped to burnish US credibility.

This cycle of managed retrenchment was reversed, in any event, by two developments. One was the demise of the Soviet Union: whatever credit one chooses to give to more assertive US policies early in the administration of Ronald Reagan, the peaceful conclusion of the Cold War certainly fed into American triumphalism and convictions that the United States was 'the indispensable nation'. The other, earlier development – more fateful than it may have

appeared at the time – was the Carter administration's response to the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In his 1980 State of the Union Address, President Jimmy Carter declared that 'an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.' This 'Carter Doctrine' laid the conceptual basis for an American strategic engagement that has encompassed two wars against Iraq, another war in Afghanistan, and a build-up of strategic assets that may yet be used in a war with Iran. In Carter's time, of course, the idea of 150,000 troops in any Middle Eastern state would have seemed preposterous. Yet the gradual increase of American deployments followed in the course of 30 years after Carter administration's creation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, which became Central Command (Centcom).[38]

Under Carter, there also began an American emotional engagement in the Middle East that developed into a difficult entanglement. Americans' moral and emotional ties with Israel were long-standing, though it was only after Carter's stubborn brokering of a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt that those countries came to so dominate the American foreign-aid budget. A darker engagement was the enduring grudge match that developed between the United States and revolutionary Iran following the storming of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979. The ensuing 444-day hostage crisis implanted the image of Iranian brutality deep into the American national psyche. (Similar dark images

were planted in the Iranian psyche by American support during Reagan's administration for Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's war against Iran, with Washington's merely perfunctory protest against Iraq's strategically significant use of banned chemical weapons.)

The psychological damage of the Iran hostage crisis was not the only legacy to survive Carter's replacement by Reagan. Carter's elevation of human rights as an important portfolio of foreign policy was carried forward by Reagan as well. It is true that, compared to Carter, Reagan's human-rights rhetoric was directed more selectively against communist abuses, but after Carter and Reagan, the idea that championing human rights around the globe was a central purpose of American power now became firmly lodged in the political discourse and the foreign-policy bureaucracy. Reagan also extended the defence-spending increases that Carter initiated after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan – and, of course, Reagan expanded Carter's programme of military aid for the anti-Soviet mujahadeen. Crucially, the 'supply-side' theory, under which reduced marginal tax rates would generate so much economic growth as to increase tax revenues, had the effect of permanently detaching Republican fiscal policy from Republican defence policy. In the world of real arithmetic, the supply-side theory was refuted almost immediately, as increased defence spending and decreased tax revenue produced large structural fiscal deficits.[39] However, the Keynesian effects of Reagan's deficits, following Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul Volker's tight monetary policy to squeeze inflation out of the system, contributed to a reasonably robust recovery

from the recession of 1980–82: therefore, as Vice President Dick Cheney would later observe, deficits lacked political salience.[40]

With this recovery came the end of the Cold War. Much myth-making has been dedicated to the proposition that Reagan's moral clarity, military aid to Nicaraguan Contras and Afghan mujahadeen, defence build-up and 'Star Wars' ambitions for ballistic-missile defence were the decisive factors convincing the Soviet leadership to undertake radical reform at home and a campaign of diplomatic appeasement abroad. This is a correlation that should not be carelessly confused with causation; in any event, the more obvious correlation was the death by old age of three Soviet party general secretaries in as many years. The younger Mikhail Gorbachev came to power with reformist ambitions that he had nurtured since the Khrushchev thaw (a partial and short-lived relaxation of repression that followed the death of Stalin) of a quarter century earlier.[41] It is arguable, to be sure, that Reagan's rhetoric, together with the evident will and capability of the United States to sustain an protracted arms race, reinforced the framework of containment in which Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders made their crucial choices. Certainly the Soviet decision to liquidate an unwinnable war in Afghanistan was important. Just as certainly, Reagan's personal readiness to trust Gorbachev's sincerity and to engage in some radical diplomatic departures – such as when the two men discussed the abolition of nuclear weapons – provided important reassurance that made Gorbachev more ready and able to settle the Cold War.

Gorbachev's contribution to that settlement was paramount, notably his December 1988 promise, in a speech before the UN General Assembly, to withdraw six tank divisions from Central Europe, and Soviet non-interference the following year when Hungary allowed vacationing East Germans to travel west across the Austrian border. Gorbachev made these decisions under conditions that were partly set by America's four-decades-long strategy of containment. More intriguing than the question of Reagan's particular contribution is the question of whether Kennan's pluralist and less militarised version of the strategy would have yielded the same results – perhaps even years sooner, as Kennan himself argued – compared to the heavily militarised version promoted by Acheson and continued into the Reagan administration.

This counter-factual question may need to wait for a historiography less encumbered by current polemics. What is clear enough today is that the actual American project of Cold War containment produced a military superpower whose strategic hegemony, following the Soviet collapse, was unprecedented. The American superpower proved capable of stupendous feats of power projection, as when the George H.W. Bush administration, leading a broad coalition of forces, was able to drive Iraqi troops out of Kuwait with a one-month air assault and mere 100-hour ground campaign. The now unrivalled superpower proved willing, as well, to fill strategic vacuums, such as when the Clinton administration – having watched while the major European states seemed helpless – finally weighed in with air power and coercive diplomacy to end carnage and genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo.

In both the Persian Gulf and the Balkans, the United States could plausibly be seen to be acting on behalf of the norms and purposes of an 'international community', however nebulously that community might be defined. However, there were also indications of strategic overreach. In Europe, the Clinton administration's policy of NATO enlargement saddled the United States with very considerable new strategic commitments – even if the commitments were undertaken mainly because hardly anyone in the US Congress or administration really believed that they would ever have to be honoured.[42] In the Persian Gulf, American strategic commitments were more tangible and more dangerous. Having defeated Iraqi troops in Kuwait, and hobbled the Saddam regime through fiercely enforced no-fly zones and punitive sanctions, the Reagan strategy of balancing Iraq's Ba'athist dictatorship against revolutionary Iran was now decidedly over. In its stead, the Clinton administration spoke of a policy of 'dual containment', a far more ambitious project.[43]

The cost became evident on 11 September 2001. The proper stipulation that nothing can justify such terrorist crimes should not muddle our historical understanding of the structural connection to America's troop deployments in Saudi Arabia, its enforcement of impoverishing sanctions against Iraq, its decades of support for Arab authoritarians and – of arguably lesser but non-negligible importance – its backing for an Israeli state that maintained an effectively permanent occupation regime over Palestinians. This is not to argue that President George W. Bush's claim that they attacked us because they 'hate our freedoms'[44] was entirely

unfounded. Certainly, in the mass murders of 11 September, there was a medievalist and – Bush was right to say – evil rage against secular, Western, cosmopolitan society. But al-Qaeda did not attack Switzerland.

America was deeply entangled and exposed in the Middle East, and the al-Qaeda attacks had the perhaps inevitable consequence of drawing her in further. Still, historians may wonder at how the George W. Bush administration seemed to cast away virtually all the ballast of strategic prudence. Dislodging the Taliban was probably the minimum to expect of any American president under the circumstances, though there was somewhat muddled thinking and discourse about the extent to which America should take responsibility for building and protecting a new Afghan state. The more radical departure was the invasion of Iraq. As Francis Fukuyama wrote in 2005:

> Neither American political culture nor any underlying domestic pressures or constraints have determined the key decisions in American foreign policy since Sept. 11. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Americans would have allowed President Bush to lead them in any of several directions, and the nation was prepared to accept substantial risks and sacrifices. The Bush administration asked for no sacrifices from the average American, but after the quick fall of the Taliban it rolled the dice in a big way by moving to solve a longstanding problem only tangentially related to the threat from Al Qaeda – Iraq. In the process, it

> squandered the overwhelming public mandate it had received after Sept. 11. At the same time, it alienated most of its close allies, many of whom have since engaged in 'soft balancing' against American influence, and stirred up anti-Americanism in the Middle East.[45]

As Iraq spiralled into civil war and the costs of America's project there became more evident, Americans grew weary of it. Bush narrowly won re-election, but his second term was weighed down by the increasingly unpopular war, among other problems. Barack Obama rose to improbably capture the Democratic nomination for president partly on the basis of his early opposition to the war. Campaigning against the Republican John McCain, Obama promised to end the war 'responsibly', and in more general terms he offered a rebalancing – if not a retrenchment – of what he portrayed as an over-extended foreign policy. Obama won the popular vote decisively, and the electoral college by a landslide.[46]

Moments of restraint

One can therefore trace two broad cycles of post-war American foreign policy. In the first, a steady expansion of military power and hegemonic ambitions started roughly with the Truman Doctrine and continued through repeated escalations of the war in Vietnam. This expansive phase was reversed by the Nixon administration, which withdrew (albeit slowly) from Vietnam and promulgated a Nixon Doctrine whereby such costly engagements were to be avoided in the future, sought détente and arms control with

the Soviets and a semi-explicit arrangement of anti-Soviet balancing with China. It seems credible that a genuinely cyclical dynamic was driving these policies, because the popular reaction against the quagmire in Vietnam had slowly but surely reached majority proportions, accompanied by a more elite-driven reaction against the National Security State writ large (as in Senator Frank Church's 1975 committee hearings into past CIA abuses). Nixon won re-election easily against the anti-war Democrat, George McGovern. This was partly because Nixon made skillful appeal to a 'silent majority's' anxiety and resentment about an anarchic counter-culture and anti-war movement. (Nor should we forget the president's 'Southern Strategy' of appealing to white voters who were disaffected by both civil-rights advances and urban disorder.)[47] However, Nixon beat McGovern in 1972 also because he succeeded in co-opting the anti-war weariness of the same middle class: by the summer of that year, when McGovern accepted the Democratic presidential nomination with the refrain, 'Come Home America', most American troops had in fact returned from Vietnam to the United States.[48]

The second cycle in this narrative starts with a Carter–Reagan defence build-up, continues past the Cold War with police action against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Clinton's Balkan interventions and then the Bush ground wars in the greater Middle East under the banner of a war on terrorism. Obama then comes to power, as Nixon did, at a time of popular war-weariness and economic stress; and like Nixon, he seeks to narrow American commitments while continuing to defend its core interests.

There is a problem, however, with this cyclical explanation. The Nixon retrenchment was short-lived, and it is far from obvious that the Obama effort will be more enduring – indeed, it could be reversed by the 2012 election. Despite the absence of anything like a peer strategic competitor, America's strategic reach under Obama is comparable to the era when the United States faced the Soviet adversary. Its defense budget, in inflation-adjusted terms, is higher than the Cold War average.[49] Thus, although the cycles appear real enough, the end of the first one did very little to arrest the upward trajectory of American power and responsibility, and it is hard to predict the long-term consequences of a similar Obama strategy.

Analytically, it might be more fruitful to observe that most presidents post-Second World War have had important moments of restraint: episodes in which they made the realist determination to recognise the limits of American power and to avoid over-commitment and unintended consequences. Understanding the reasons for success or failure of their realism could offer insight into the prospects for Obama and his successors.

One could start with Truman's successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower. As a Republican war hero, Eisenhower was comparatively immune to McCarthyite accusations of appeasement and fellow travelling with America's communist adversaries. He flew to Korea as president-elect, fulfilling a campaign promise to figure out how to end an increasingly pointless war there. Upon assuming office, Eisenhower accepted armistice terms. Although his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles promulgated a

doctrine of 'Rollback' to replace the too passive containment, there is no evidence that Eisenhower took this seriously. Whatever the role of American rhetoric and Radio Free Europe broadcasts in encouraging the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the US never seriously considered intervening to help Hungary against the Soviets. Eisenhower was mainly furious about another invasion, the ill-conceived Suez plot between France, Israel and the UK. In response, Washington engineered a run on the pound, forcing Britain and its co-conspirators into humiliating retreat. That the Suez fiasco occurred almost concurrently with the Soviet repression in Hungary handed Moscow an extremely helpful propaganda alibi, as far as Washington was concerned. Eisenhower was angry also for a related reason: like Obama half a century later, he believed that the United States and the West had a plausible case to make in the post-colonial Arab world, but the pitch was significantly undermined by the post-colonial shenanigans of Suez. (Though of course Eisenhower was not so allergic to covert action: he approved a CIA-backed coup against the prime minister of Iran in 1953, along with covert actions in Guatemala, Indonesia and Cuba.)

President Eisenhower's more fundamental conservatism related to domestic political economy: he was highly attentive to the economic sources of national power, another theme that Obama would pick up five decades later. Unlike the rising right wing of his own party, Eisenhower was content to accept the basic New Deal welfare state handed down by his Democratic predecessors. Rhetorically, at least, he expressed more anxiety about the distorting effects of

military mobilisation, most famously in a farewell warning against a growing 'military industrial complex'.[50] After massive rearmament under Truman, defence spending under Eisenhower flattened out and then fell in real terms.[51] Aside from settling the war in Korea, the most important way that the administration constrained defence spending was by not really preparing to fight a conventional war against the Soviets in Central Europe. Yet, at the same time, the United States was now treaty-obligated to defend its allies in Western Europe. Squaring this dilemma was possible because of nuclear weapons, and the Eisenhower administration's doctrine of 'massive retaliation' for their use: an apocalyptic but relatively cheap promise to unleash full-scale nuclear war if Moscow sent its tank divisions west.

Whether this vow was credible became a matter of debate. During his campaign to replace Eisenhower, Senator John F. Kennedy deployed claims of a 'missile gap' favouring the Soviets as

> the shield from behind which they will slowly, but surely advance – through Sputnik diplomacy, limited brushfire wars, indirect non-overt aggression, intimidation and subversion, internal revolution, increased prestige or influence, and the vicious blackmail of our allies. The periphery of the Free World will slowly be nibbled away … Each such Soviet move will weaken the West; but none will seem sufficiently significant by itself to justify a nuclear war which might destroy us.[52]

The missile gap turned out to be bogus – the real imbalance strongly favoured the United States. Nevertheless, once in office, the Kennedy administration appeared in various ways to be more activist and more energetic than its cautious predecessor, viewing such energy as the necessary strategic antidote to Soviet encroachment. In theory, at least, this Kennedy worldview entailed a maximally demanding definition of US interests and responsibilities. Hence, in nuclear policy, the administration developed a doctrine of 'flexible response' – envisioning a graduated use of nuclear weapons in the event of war. The doctrine was meant to be less apocalyptic, and therefore more credible and more effective as the basis of deterrence. If fully resourced, it was also more expensive. In retrospect, moreover, critics have argued that it reflected the administration's technocratic hubris, and was a precursor to the Reagan administration's later flirtation with nuclear 'war-fighting' doctrine.[53] How, the critics demanded, could Kennedy or Reagan or any president imagine that, amidst the fog of war, nuclear escalation would be rational and controlled? Such hubris, it has been argued, was close cousin to the folly of the administration's 'best and brightest' who designed the staircase of America's gradual escalation in Vietnam.[54]

There was, however, another side of Kennedy, more cautious and generally wary of military adventurism. Recent scholarship supports the contention that Kennedy was determined to avoid an all-out war in Vietnam, and in fact rejected at least five separate appeals from his military and strategic advisers for a major deployment of American troops there. Kennedy had been a junior naval officer and a

minor war hero in the Second World War, during which he had developed an arguably healthy contempt for the senior generals who were calling on him to escalate.[55]

Kennedy's distrust of the generals also played a role in his careful navigation of the Cuban Missile Crisis. He refused to be goaded into an obsession with 'credibility', he was sensitive to Khruschev's fears of humiliation and encirclement, and he was willing in the end to trade away some missiles in Turkey despite some advisers' pleas that this act of 'appeasement' would demoralise American allies. Despite his well-known anxiety about appearing tough enough, JFK instinctively understood the 'security dilemma'.[56] His views on war and peace focused as much on the First World War's chain of mutual miscalculation as on the West's failure to face down Hitler on the eve of the Second World War. His text on the former was Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, which he insisted should be read by 'every officer in the Army'.[57] He read Tuchman's book as a blueprint for how crises could spin out of control.

How a completed Kennedy presidency might have balanced these instincts for activism and instincts of restraint is hard to say. But after Cuba, JFK delivered, in his American University commencement speech of 10 June 1963, one of history's great humanist statements of mutual restraint and moral imagination: 'For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's futures. And we are all mortal.'[58] Five months later, Kennedy was killed. His successor Lyndon B. Johnson, with the counsel of advisers who had been appointed by his predeces-

sor, expanded Vietnam into one of the ranking disasters of American history. But the Johnson administration also carried forth at least part of the worldview expressed by JFK at American University. Robert McNamara, the defense secretary to both presidents, codified the concepts of nuclear sufficiency and mutual vulnerability as the only viable alternative to a destabilising nuclear arms race. Neoconservative critics attacked these concepts in the 1970s as tantamount to nuclear surrender. Their chief targets by this time were in the Nixon administration, including especially Henry Kissinger, whose realist ideas and attitudes were deemed the antithesis to the traditions of American idealism.[59]

Praise for the Nixon administration requires, firstly, acknowledgment of the huge shadow that Nixon's morose and often vindictive personality cast over American politics and society. Together with the polarising politics of Vietnam, that personality drove the United States into the fateful and utterly unnecessary crisis of Watergate, one consequence of which was that Nixon's national security adviser and later secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, took on an outsized role in making and managing foreign policy for much of Nixon's abbreviated second term.

Nixon and Kissinger were hardly pluralists. The administration that treated the democratic election of Salvador Allende in Chile as so utterly antithetical to American interests, that extended the Vietnam War for another four devastating years, and that expanded that war catastrophically into Cambodia, cannot be described as sanguine or relaxed about the consequences of a more plural distribution of global power. On another level, however, both men

seemed aware that an increasingly plural distribution of power was inevitable, and they did work successfully to align that trend with American interests. In this regard, their greatest success was the exploitation of Sino-Soviet rivalry, which Kennan identified as 'the greatest measure of containment that could be conceived'.[60] (Kennan was writing about the rivalry itself, rather than any particular US diplomatic approach to it, but he would also later say of Kissinger: 'Henry understands my views better than anyone at [the] State [Department] ever has.')[61]

Another conspicuous Nixon administration success came in the detachment of Egypt from the Soviet orbit, and its realignment with the United States. (It should be emphasised that this realignment was truly locked in a few years later with President Carter's tireless brokering of the Camp David peace accords between Egypt and Israel, just as Carter had presided over the real normalisation of US relations with post-Mao China.) The Nixon role was interesting, not least because it revealed several layers of administration paradoxes. Firstly, Nixon's role was really, in this instance, Kissinger's: the key crisis of the October 1973 Arab–Israeli war took place during a dramatic episode of the Watergate scandal , the so-called Saturday Night Massacre, in which Nixon fired Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox and then accepted the resignations of Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William Ruckleshaus. Nixon was definitely distracted. Secondly, Kissinger's management of the crisis revealed his great internal tension between a conceptual readiness to accept the independence of allies and a practical unwillingness to

accept the consequences of that independence. Thus, at the outset of Nixon's first term, Kissinger urged an agreeable president to dissociate himself from the prevailing Kennedy/Johnson prickliness about de Gaulle's behaviour; before even entering the White House, Kissinger had insisted that the United States 'could not expect to perpetuate the accident of Europe's post-war exhaustion into a permanent pattern of international relations'.[62] Yet when Europeans, led by French Foreign Minister Michel Jobert, tried to assert their independence with a somewhat more pro-Arab approach to the October War and its oil-shock aftermath, Kissinger reacted with fury: the European policies, he would later write, demonstrated the 'demoralisation – verging on abdication – of the democracies' and a choice 'among varieties of appeasement'.[63]

This reaction brings us to a most striking paradox, which is that Kissinger's actual view of the conflict was not far from the Europeans'. The US airlift to Israel and general diplomacy in the crisis constituted a further important step in America's ever-tighter alliance with the Israelis. And yet, in his memoirs, Kissinger praises Anwar Sadat's decision to launch the October War as a strategically enlightened act of statesmanship. The idea, as Kissinger related it, was to create a psychological shock that would enable both Israelis and Arabs to make peace. Israelis needed to be shocked out of their military complacency, while the Egyptians needed liberation from their paralysing national humiliation. Sadat, in Kissinger's view, constituted the rare case of a leader who waged war 'to lay the basis for moderation in its aftermath'.[64]

It was also in the Middle East that Ronald Reagan's administration exercised its own instincts of restraint, and indeed formulated a doctrine to codify that restraint. Again, one should not celebrate realist attitudes without acknowledging moral consequences. Fearing the threat from revolutionary Iran, the Reagan administration engaged in a de facto alliance with Saddam Hussein's Iraq.[65] This tacit US–Iraq alliance may have provoked Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps to instigate the 1983 Hizbullah truck bombing of US Marine Corps and French paratrooper barracks in Beirut, which killed at least 300. In response, President Reagan did something counter-intuitive and, probably, wise – he withdrew the marines from Lebanon. Some critics, including Reagan's Secretary of State George Shultz, have labelled this withdrawal as the original sin of US appeasement of Islamic terrorism.[66] Though Shultz fought it at the time, he lost to the Pentagon and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who articulated the eponymous doctrine of strict limits on where and why the United States should go to war. Weinberger spoke for military officers burdened by the legacy of a pointless quagmire in Vietnam, which he did not want to see repeated in the Middle East. Ironically, as John Harper has observed, this made Reagan's the 'first (arguably, the only) administration to adopt a clear and coherent position' on avoiding future Vietnams.[67]

After Reagan's presidency, the Weinberger Doctrine was carried forward as the Powell Doctrine. Its strictures were generally observed in the Gulf War: a time-limited police action using overwhelming military force to achieve clear, finite goals, and then to be withdrawn. Powell himself, still

chairman of the Joint Chiefs, used these strictures to try to prevent, and then to criticise, Clinton's forays into the Balkans.[68] In fact, the Balkan interventions did not turn out to be the quagmires that Powell feared, though he might well have worried that their success would foster some insidious assumptions about the American responsibility for wars of humanitarian protection.[69] The Clinton administration was at the same time able to achieve a substantial peace dividend of reductions in real defence spending.

Realist restraint was abandoned during the George W. Bush administration – largely in reaction to the shock of 11 September. Powell, having returned to government service as secretary of state, tried to push his doctrine on the new president in a final formulation: the 'Pottery Barn Rule', whereby if you break it you own it. (Though it was journalist Thomas Friedman, not Powell, who actually named the 'rule'. Moreover, it turned out, to the merriment of some commentators, that Pottery Barn, a chain of American furniture stores, has no such rule.) The president, in any event, was not to be dissuaded from invading Iraq.

There was nothing inevitable about the decision to wage war in Iraq in spring 2003 and, indeed, the war was counter-strategic and damaging to American interests. This is not to say, however, that the decision was entirely *sui generis* in the context of post-Second World War and post-Cold War American foreign policy. The 'Realist' war launched by Bush's father to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait did not, after all, solve the strategic problem posed by Saddam Hussein's cruelty and defiance. And the US military force for that war was not, in fact, entirely removed: a sizeable contin-

gent remained in Saudi Arabia. A reasonable case could be made that, given American commitments and deployments, the war of regime change in Iraq, even if unwise and badly managed at the time, was likely to come eventually. And if this case is at least arguable, then an overarching question remains open: is the prudence of Realist restraint adequate to avoid creeping and unsustainable US global commitments?