THE AMERICAN ERA

The murderous attacks of September 11, 2001, war and insurgency in Iraq, and the continuing dangers of terrorism have triggered profound concern about America's security and the nature of its role on the world stage. Yet much of the debate on foreign policy falls short because it fails to take into account the lethal realities of the post-9/11 world, and it often exhibits a "blame America first" attitude. Many academics and commentators dwell disproportionately on problems in the exercise of power, rather than the consequences if the United States fails to pursue an assertive foreign policy. Instead, *The American Era* makes a provocative argument in favor of superpower preeminence as both necessary and desirable, and based on three critical premises:

- First, militant Islamic terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) pose a threat of a wholly new magnitude that requires us to alter our thinking about preemptive and even preventive use of force.
- Second, wishful thinking aside, the U.N. and other international bodies are often incapable of acting on the most urgent and deadly problems of our time.
- Third, in an international system with no true central authority, other countries will inevitably look to the United States for leadership. America should seek to collaborate with others, but if it does not take the lead in confronting the most dangerous threats, no one else is likely to have the ability or the will to do so.

Thus in confronting the menace of terrorism and WMD, and when values such as human rights, liberty, and the rule of law cannot be guaranteed by institutions such as the U.N. and the European Union, American intervention becomes a necessity, not something about which to be apologetic. This understanding should inform our thinking not only about security, but about Europe, the Middle East, Asia, globalization, and anti-Americanism as well.

Robert J. Lieber is a professor of government and international affairs at Georgetown University. He is an expert on American foreign policy and U.S. relations with the Middle East and Europe and the author or editor of thirteen books on international relations and U.S. foreign policy. He has held fellowships from the Guggenheim, Rockefeller, and Ford Foundations; the Council on Foreign Relations; and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. His most recently published book is an edited volume, *Eagle Rules? Foreign Policy and American Primacy in the 21st Century* (2002). His numerous authored works include *No Common Power: Understanding International Relations* (4th edition, 2001) and *The Oil Decade* (1986). His articles have appeared in scholarly and policy journals including *Foreign Policy*, *International Security, American Political Science Review*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education, Commentary*, the *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society, International Affairs* (London), *Politique Etrangere* (Paris), and *Internationale Politik* (Berlin). His opeds have been published in the *New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Christian Science Monitor, Harper's, USA Today, Ha'aretz*, and *Asharq Al-Awsat*, and he has appeared on the PBS-TV *NewsHour*, ABC's *Nightline*, NBC network news, CNN's *Crossfire*, the *O'Reilly Factor*, Voice of America, BBC World Service, *Al-Jazeera*, and other radio and TV programs in Europe, the Arab world, and Israel.

"An experienced scholar and writer with more than three decades of exemplary work to his credit, Robert Lieber has written a first-rate book, a 'cool' assessment of topics that normally come in for shrill treatments full of panic and exaggerations. . . . [He] knows the fields of energy and Euro-American relations and the play of things in the Middle East with intimacy and authority. . . . He is theoretically sophisticated, yet quite knowing of Washington ways and policy choices, [and he] . . . draws a realistic balance sheet of America standing in the world. Lieber writes with poise and calm: he has firm views of the world, but they are expressed with grace and appropriate reserve. He wears his learning lightly. . . . Lieber documents American preeminence but his book is free of triumphalism. He knows the weakness of European policies but does not succumb to Euro-bashing. . . . [His] reading of America's role in Asia . . . is subtle, informed by history, and shrewd in its reading of the Asian balance of power. . . . A work of scholarship, yet accessible to a wider readership, a work of judgment, yet anchored in the data and the objective world. . . . a book of quality by a scholar of genuine depth and authority."

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"This may be the best book on American foreign policy written since September 11. Robert Lieber is a scholar with deep insight, broad knowledge, and – what is lacking in most discussions of world affairs today – common sense. Anyone thinking seriously about global affairs today and in the coming years should begin with this smart and sober work."

Robert Kagan, author of *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*

"A powerful book with truly global scope. Lieber is not only a specialist on U.S. foreign policy, he has deep knowledge of Europe, the Middle East, global energy, and security affairs. The result is a book with range and depth, one that combines theoretical insights with practical policy recommendations."

Charles Lipson, *University of Chicago*

"With its powerful thesis and compelling arguments, Robert Lieber's *The American Era* is destined to become a key text in the global debate about American foreign policy."

Michael Mandelbaum, author of *The Ideas That Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy and Free Markets in the Twenty-First Century*

The American Era

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Preface

In recent years a lopsided and often unedifying debate has been taking place. Criticism of America's world role has been characterized by rhetorical excess, partisan acrimony, and ideologically driven assessments that fail to weigh the lethality of the threat we face in the post-9/11 world, the limits of international institutions, and the long-term implications for American strategy and policy. These shortcomings are evident not only in the policy and academic worlds in the United States, but even more so in Europe. Sterile debates about "empire," ad hominem denunciations of the Bush administration, ritual incantations about multilateralism, and an acrimonious climate of blame and counterblame over Iraq are rampant (a veritable *reductio ad Iraqum*). Conversely, on the part of those more favorable toward recent American policy, there has been some keen dissection of opposing arguments but also a substantial amount of stridency, partisanship, and self-satisfaction.

The recent past has demonstrated that problems of policy implementation and flawed diplomacy matter a great deal. It is also clear that American predominance or hegemony in itself can trigger resentment and even hostility. But legitimate expressions of concern about the exercise of American power ought not to make us lose sight of what can happen in the absence of such power. This is something often lost in the volley of charges and countercharges over Iraq, over flaws in American intelligence, and in relation to the dangers or virtues of primacy and preemption.

Some historical perspective is called for too. The 20th century witnessed the heinous crimes of Nazism and Stalinism, two world wars and the Holocaust, and mass murder in Cambodia. The end of the Cold War brought some respite, but even so, in the decade and a half since then we have seen genocide in Rwanda, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, crimes against humanity in the Darfur region of Sudan, and widespread lawlessness and death in the ruins of failed states such as Liberia and the Congo. Now, in today's environment, despite unprecedented globalization, interdependence, and instant communication, we face what the official 9/11 Commission has termed the catastrophic threat of Islamist terrorism. In view of the fact that al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, has called the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction a "duty," and one of his spokesmen has even claimed the right to kill four million Americans, half of them children, this is not the kind of peril that should be taken lightly. The threat is likely to remain with us for a considerable time to come, yet the implications of it often elude critics from both the world of affairs and the world of ideas.

In view of these dangers, and with a few praiseworthy exceptions (cited in chapter 1), what has been lacking is a serious treatment of the case for a grand strategy that both is cognizant of these realities and recognizes American preponderance as both necessary and desirable in coping with such threats. That is what I seek to do in this book. After setting out a general – and unapologetic – argument about American power and grand strategy, I turn to more specific treatments of Europe, globalization and culture, Iraq and the Middle East, Asia, and anti-Americanism. While recognizing that other regions and issues are important in their own right, I have not sought to provide a comprehensive treatment of foreign policy but have instead concentrated on those areas that now matter most. In doing so, I aim to inform and focus debate in the public realm, in the policy arena, and in academia. I hope that in the process, even those who do not share my conclusions or – for that matter – my basic assumptions will at least be challenged to reexamine their own ideas and suppositions.

As I have developed the ideas for this book, some of the material has appeared in articles and essays that I have published elsewhere. Where I have directly drawn on those writings, I have cited the specific references. Among these, I especially would like to take note here of three widely circulated essays written for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. These include "Foreign Policy Realists Are Unrealistic on Iraq," "The Neoconservative Conspiracy Theory: Pure Myth," and "Rethinking America's Grand Strategy."* Portions of chapter 1 were published as "Die amerikanische Ära," in *Internationale Politik* (Berlin), October 2004. Sections of chapter 3 appeared in a paper written for the American Consortium on European Union Studies. Chapter 4 expands on a co-authored article originally published in the *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*.** And chapter 5 elaborates upon my essay, "The Folly of Containment," in the April 2003 issue of *Commentary*.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge those who have provided comments and suggestions on points large and small and from whose advice I have benefited in the writing of this book. Not all of them would agree with my arguments, and some hold points of view with which I have taken issue in this work. All the same, these exchanges of ideas have been without exception cordial and constructive – something that is by no means to be taken for granted in the worlds of policy and ideas. I thus have a real debt of gratitude to (in alphabetical order), Anthony Arend, Harley Balzer, Andrew Bennett, Peter Berkowitz, Steven Biddle, Philipp Bleek, Louise Branson, Michael Brown, Daniel Brumberg, Daniel Byman, Victor Cha, Benjamin J. Cohen, Sally Cowal, Dusko Doder, David Edelstein, Vera Fuchs, Robert Gallucci, Azar Gat, Thomas Helmstorf, Jeffrey Herf, Christopher Joyner, Sarah Kreps, Keir Lieber, Nancy Lieber, Joshua Mitchell, Tom Nichols, Robert Paarlberg, Yossi Shain, George Shambaugh, Raymond Tanter, Leslie Vinjamuri, Ruth Weisberg, and William Wohlforth, as well as two anonymous manuscript reviewers. Special thanks to my

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