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The Unipolar Fantasy

America's Dysfunctional World View

This book appears just as the United States has installed a new president, Barack Obama. His victory has triggered a remarkable burst of enthusiasm and good will not only across a wide spectrum of the American public, but around the world. He takes office at a moment of severe crisis in America's policies. The economy is in a shambles that recalls the 1930s. Since World War II, our foreign policy has never been so bereft of foreign support. In effect, the United States, which professes to lead the world, has grown deeply out of tune with it.

It is tempting to see Obama's election as evidence, in itself, of a great turning point – the moment when the United States will begin to regain its geopolitical footing and economic success. But, as the new president has himself said so eloquently, meeting today's challenges calls for bold and doubtless painful rethinking of fashionable shibboleths. Undoubtedly, the new administration has assembled an impressive array of intellectual and administrative talent, but the new may not be as different from the old as we expect. Foreign policies are formulated and conducted by elites whose fundamental ideas often change very little from one administration to the next. What the present situation calls for is not merely a more expert and refined application of familiar ideas, but also accommodation to a different way of looking at the world.

For the past two decades, the American political imagination has been possessed by what has become a hazardous geopolitical vision. In it the United States is defined as the dominant power in a closely

integrated and "unipolar" international system. Several decades of mostly successful history has done much to encourage Americans toward this view. World War II favored seeing the United States as the free world's natural leader. The cold war reinforced this identity and planted it deeply in Americans' view of themselves. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world seemed ready for a new and closely integrated world order. As the surviving superpower, the U.S. was the avatar for the new order. A "bipolar" world had grown "unipolar." To function properly, the new system required a hegemonic leader to take charge. Duty and interest alike seemed to compel the U.S. to play that role. Successive administrations have oriented American policy toward fulfilling it. By now a whole generation of Americans has scarcely known any other view of their country's place in the world.

Americans have had trouble realizing how revolutionary their unipolar vision can appear to others. A world system dominated by one superpower is a bold and radical program. If successful, it would mean for the first time in modern history a world without a general balance of power. Pursuing such a goal implies numerous confrontations with other nations. It antagonizes states that fear decline and states that anticipate improvement. Nevertheless, the American political imagination now finds it difficult to entertain any other view of the world. Americans have been slow to see, let alone accept, what to many others seems a more probable and desirable future – a plural world with several centers of power. Recent experience suggests that America's aggressive geopolitical stance is proving not merely unpopular but also dysfunctional. America's hegemonic pursuits have aroused a swarm of antagonists. Thus, we find ourselves not only at war in the Middle East but also alienating the Russians, the Chinese, and the Europeans. Surveys of public opinion throughout the globe show an alarming popular disaffection from America. Used to thinking of their nation as a friend and benefactor of all humankind, Americans have seen themselves resented and even hated in much of the world.[1]

It is tempting to believe that America's recent misadventures will discredit and suppress our hegemonic longings and that, following the presidential election of 2008, a new administration will abandon them. But so long as our identity as a nation is intimately bound up with seeing ourselves as the world's most powerful country, at the heart of a global system, hegemony is likely to remain the recurring obsession of our official imagination, the *idée fixe* of our foreign policy. America's

hegemonic ambitions have, after all, suffered severe setbacks before. Less than half a century has passed since the "lesson of Vietnam." But that lesson faded without forcing us to abandon the old fantasies of omnipotence. The fantasies merely went into remission, until the fall of the Soviet Union provided an irresistible occasion for their return. Arguably, in its collapse, the Soviet Union proved to be a greater danger to America's own equilibrium than in its heyday.

Dysfunctional imaginations are scarcely a rarity – among individuals or among nations. "Reality" is never a clear picture that imposes itself from without. Imaginations need to collaborate. They synthesize old and new images, concepts, and ideas and fuse language with emotions – all according to the inner grammar of our minds. These synthetic constructions become our reality, our way of depicting the world in which we live. Inevitably, our imaginations present us with only a partial picture. As Walter Lippmann once put it, our imaginations create a "pseudo-environment between ourselves and the world."[2] Every individual, therefore, has his own particular vision of reality, and every nation tends to arrive at a favored collective view that differs from the favored view of other nations. When powerful and interdependent nations hold visions of the world severely at odds with one another, the world grows dangerous.

Periods of fundamental geopolitical change are particularly challenging – charged, as they usually are, with confusing, fanatical, and frightening possibilities. Comprehending and mastering big shifts in historical forces requires creative leaps of national imagination. Today, with the world rapidly growing more plural in its distribution of power and wealth, a lingering unipolar worldview isolates the United States from the reality to which it should be adapting. Accordingly, the United States becomes a danger to the world and to itself. When a nation as powerful as the United States defies – Canute-like – the onrushing historical tide, all the makings of a grand historical tragedy are at hand. Adding the United States to the world's list of failed hegemons would be a depressing outcome for America's long and rich experiment with federal constitutionalism. But avoiding such a fate requires a resolute reshaping of the country's geopolitical imagination. This is a work of genuine national patriotism, requiring a firm turning away from the bombastic chauvinism of recent years. It means a tranquil acceptance of other great nations, a sympathy for their accomplishments and sorrows, along with a lively sensitivity to the original sin that we

all share. Like other great Western democracies, the United States has a healthy tradition of self-criticism that, with luck, rouses itself to spare the nation from egregious folly. This book aspires to provide a modest contribution to a resurgence of that indispensable tradition.

We should start our collective examination of conscience by reflecting on why we have come to commit ourselves so deeply to the unipolar worldview and why we have been so oblivious to its manifest inadequacy.

America's Unipolar Gene

Were the United States a traditional great power of the nineteenth century, its current preoccupation with hegemony, however injudicious, might not be so surprising.[3] But as a constitutional republic, blending democracy and federalism, the United States has traditionally supposed itself to be beyond such temptations. Historically, we have tended to view ourselves as aloof from power politics – with a strong predilection for isolationism. That view is, however, an incomplete reading of our nation's genetic code. Our past is not as innocent of global ambition as we are fond of believing.[4] At the very birth of the Republic, Alexander Hamilton, from today's perspective the most influential of the Founding Fathers, was already promoting the idea of America's global hegemony. At the time of the Civil War, faith in America's global destiny was a critical part of Abraham Lincoln's dedication to preserving the Union. At the start of the twentieth century, Hamilton's vision revived to stimulate the imperial tastes of Theodore Roosevelt and the coterie of geopolitical strategists around him. Woodrow Wilson gave the Hamiltonian vision a liberal gloss and used it to induce America to join World War I.[5] By World War II, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) had melded Wilsonianism and the geopolitical enthusiasms of his cousin, Theodore, into the vision of a global *Pax Americana*.[6] Roosevelt's early vision of today's unipolar vision had wide bipartisan appeal. Wendell Willkie, the Republican presidential candidate in 1940, possessed by an almost chiliastic sense of American omnipotence, conducted his electoral campaign around the theme of "One World" led by the United States.[7] Henry Luce, publisher of *Time, Life*, and *Fortune* magazines, and a major light in the Republican firmament, trumpeted the "American Century" throughout the wartime years.[8]

Not surprisingly, as FDR began to sketch his postwar vision, even America's closest allies grew uneasy. Charles De Gaulle was outraged by the small role left not only for France but also for Europe in general. Roosevelt, he thought, illustrated a familiar phenomenon in history – the "will to power cloaked in idealism."[9] Winston Churchill, compelled as he was to rely on the American alliance, was dismayed at the heavy financial price desperate Britain was being forced to pay. "Lend-Lease," the British soon realized, was a system patently ensuring that postwar Britain would not return to its prewar global preeminence. As soon as the war ended, moreover, Lend-Lease was brutally terminated, despite Britain's devastated finances. The United States, it was clear, had little interest either in preserving Britain's global empire or in assisting the socialist experiments of the new Labour government.[10] Nor was the United States much interested as continental European states tried to finance radically ambitious plans to invigorate their economies and transform their societies.[11]

By 1947, American policy had taken a more generous course. Europeans had mainly Joseph Stalin to thank. The iron-willed Soviet dictator made American expectations of a unipolar world premature. The Soviets rivaled the Americans not only in China, which Americans would soon "lose," but also in Europe itself – the great prize of the Cold War struggle. The Soviet threat gave West European states much more leverage against their anxious transatlantic protector. Given the strong leftist parties in the major continental countries, the United States felt it could ill afford to alienate European governments or publics. Roosevelt's triumphal vision of postwar American policy – unipolar, global, and aloof from Europe – gave way to Harry Truman's defensive vision, which included "containment" of the Soviets, above all, in Europe.[12]

The American political imagination soon transformed containment into a "bipolar" paradigm in which two superpowers contested the world between them. Mindful of European sensitivities, however, Americans emphasized the multilateral character of the West's Cold War alliances. The United States saw itself not as competing with the Soviets to dominate the world but as joining defensively with others to prevent their enslavement. Ultimately mindful of its own vulnerability to nuclear attack, the United States grew wary of radical ambitions that threatened the bipolar status quo. Thus, although there was recurring support for "rolling back" and defeating the Soviets,

the predominant official view favored pursuing peaceful coexistence within a stable bipolar system. Nor was the United States much inclined to vaunt its own strength. In the 1970s and even in Ronald Reagan's jingoish 1980s, American analysts seemed more alive to the long-term weaknesses of the United States than to those of the Soviet Union. The United States was thought to be losing ground geopolitically, with Europeans increasingly inclined toward "Eurocommunism" and "Finlandization." Military strategists were greatly concerned about America's own "window of vulnerability" to Soviet nuclear attacks.[13] Foreign-policy intellectuals were embroiled in a debate over "declinism" – the view that superpower status, with its heavy military and financial burdens, was inexorably leading the American economy to "overstretch" and decay. America's disorderly finances in the Reagan years made the declinist syndrome seem uncomfortably relevant.[14]

In summary, even though we can now see more clearly the great weaknesses of the Soviet Union, the bipolar system was nevertheless balanced. Not only was Soviet power contained but American power toward Europe was contained as well. Part of this was undoubtedly owed to America's own self-restraint as a constitutional republic, as well as to generosity and respect for the cultural homelands of many Americans. But America's better instincts came to the fore in a geopolitical framework in which fear of Soviet power encouraged attentiveness to the European allies.

The Soviet Demise: Back to the Future

With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the unipolar vision of 1945 returned with a vengeance. Public discourse was puffed once more with triumphal assessments of America's military and economic prowess. Within a few years, Americans had changed their self-image from the world's reluctant defender into its "indispensable nation."[15] For the third time in the twentieth century, a sort of Hegelian nationalism arose to convince Americans that all modern history had been incubating America's global leadership.[16] It helped that, just as the Soviet Union was abandoning its European empire, America's military power, recklessly enhanced by Reagan's outsized defense budgets, was being brilliantly displayed in the Gulf War of 1990–1991.[17]

In the succeeding Clinton years, however, the content of America's triumphal self-image was more economic than military. The Soviet economy's demise was read as a definitive validation of American capitalism, whose own traditional problems were temporarily forgotten. Europe's communitarian capitalism and social democracy were bundled with Soviet communism – all seen as tainted ideals in decline.[18] America's triumphalism waxed further with its economy's remarkable run of success. Whereas the later 1980s had been years of financial instability in the United States, followed by a recession in 1991, the mid-1990s saw a boom, built around the most modern technologies of the time and fueled by huge inflows of foreign investment. In short, the triumphal America of the 1990s seemed the very center of rampant globalization.[19]

Given such a run of political, military, and economic success, imaginations habituated to seeing the world as *bipolar* found it only natural to see the new world order as *unipolar*. Previously, two superpowers had divided the world between themselves. The collapse of one was seen as the triumph of the other. Now that only one superpower remained, the struggle for world predominance was over. The United States could take up its true historic role – to lead and integrate the world's nations into a liberal and peaceful world system.[20]

False Metaphors and Bad History

In retrospect, it is easy to see how the transposing of bipolar to unipolar metaphors involved a geopolitical sleight of hand that was treacherously misleading. Why should a unipolar world be expected to follow inevitably from the collapse of a bipolar world? Why not expect a multipolar or nonpolar world instead?[21] After all, the Cold War's bipolar imagery was itself a considerable distortion of reality. The two blocs were internally less unified than the imagery implied. The notion of a single integrated Soviet bloc had long been an egregious mischaracterization of the larger communist world, in which the Soviet Union had come close to an open war with China.[22] And certainly it was never accurate to describe the West merely as a bloc dominated by the Americans. True, the United States had assumed the role of hegemon within the Atlantic Alliance and sometimes attempted to act unilaterally, but Western Europeans had habitually preferred to see the relationship

more as a concert of allies. Throughout the Cold War, Europeans were quite successful in holding their own. They quickly learned to be "free riders," not only on the American troops that contained the Soviets militarily but also on the Soviet troops that balanced the Americans politically. Moreover, Western Europe, organized into the European Economic Community, became an increasingly successful economic competitor. In some respects, therefore, it was more accurate to speak of the Cold War's transatlantic relationship as a "tripolar" rather than a bipolar balance.

Meanwhile, powerful signs indicated that the broader global system was growing more plural as the Cold War proceeded. Major states were rising beyond the Atlantic and Soviet blocs. By the 1970s, Japan, its security assured by the United States, had become a major economic power, with Americans growing increasingly fearful of its competition.[23] Asia's other potential superpowers, China and India, had carefully kept themselves detached from either superpower's bloc. By developing their own political and economic independence first, and thereafter only gradually incorporating themselves into the "world economy," they were ensuring their own enduring self-determination and signaling a plural global system in the future.[24]

Given such trends, the world of the late Cold War was already too pluralistic to make a unipolar outcome the inevitable result of the Soviet demise. The American geopolitical imagination was setting off on the wrong track. The collapse of one bipolar pole did not automatically mean a world dominated by the other. Leaping to such a conclusion suggested a national imagination hankering for hegemony. Different outcomes were clearly possible. One was a certain restructuring of the "West" itself. West Europeans, pursuing their own vision of a "European Europe," could be expected to try both tightening their own integration and extending it to Eastern Europe. An enlarging European Union would naturally cultivate its own ties with the new Russia and a rapidly evolving China. Such trends were all the more likely if the United States, imagining itself in a unipolar world, began to throw its weight around.

In short, the implosion of the Soviet Union should not have been expected to lead automatically to a docile world yearning for American direction. In place of the Cold War's bipolar system, with its carefully tended balances, an unstructured and volatile world, given to random outbursts of violence, was more likely to follow.[25] That is the world

in which we now live and for which our unipolar imagination has left us dangerously unprepared.

Unipolar Strategy and 9/11

Between the Soviet collapse and the atrocities of 9/11, American pretensions to global hegemony emphasized economic predominance more than military prowess. Indeed, maintaining the former depended on limiting the latter. President Clinton's greatest economic accomplishment – the return to fiscal balance – depended at the outset on radical cuts in military spending. It was America's "peace dividend" that started the United States on the road to fiscal balance. Himself a refugee from the Vietnam War, Clinton was at first leery of military adventures that would threaten a return to the chaotic fiscal conditions of the past.

Logically, lower defense spending called for a correspondingly restrained foreign policy. Military interventions were to be limited by the "Powell Doctrine," designed to keep American forces from getting bogged down in other people's local wars.[26] Such a military posture implied cooperative rather than antagonistic relations with Russia and China, together with a serious effort to resolve the Palestinian conflict. It meant encouraging European powers to strengthen and pool their military forces to take primary responsibility for security in their own region. The Clinton administration pursued these aims with varying consistency and success, but, in due course, it found itself increasingly drawn into military commitments. Early in his presidency, Clinton became a fierce partisan of enlarging the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to add former members of the Warsaw Pact, and even former parts of the Soviet Union, enthusiasms that predictably poisoned relations with the new Russia. Nevertheless, enlarging NATO, extending its reach, and maintaining America's leading role within it became major goals of the Clinton administration's foreign policy.[27]

The administration's military proclivities were further encouraged by the European Union's lamentable failure to stop the genocidal killing that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The United States was pressured to take charge – first in Bosnia and then in Kosovo. America's success after Europe's failure led to a wave of military triumphalism in the United States. Weakened by scandal, the administration began adjusting its rhetoric to please neoconservative

sensibilities. By the end, it had started bombing Iraq and was proposing significant increases in military spending.[28]

Ironically, George W. Bush, in his campaign, criticized the Clinton administration for supercilious meddling in other nations' affairs.[29] In practice, the Bush presidency that followed shared none of Clinton's initial diffidence toward the use of military power. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 permitted the growing fancy for exercising military power to be transformed into a compulsion. The pursuit of global hegemony was recast into a War on Terror, a decisive step toward militarizing American diplomacy. Bush's neoconservative prophets presented the nation's political imagination with a new bipolar system – with a terrorist "axis of evil" on one side and a coalition of the virtuous on the other.

Bush's new bipolar paradigm was, however, very different from that of the Cold War. Unlike in the Cold War, there was little real balance within the War on Terror. The Cold War was a heavily armed truce, in which neither the United States nor the Soviets ever directly fought the other. Despite all the recurring alarms of the period, containment and coexistence were the real strategies of each side. Consolidating this coexistence required accepting some effective and stable theory of mutual deterrence. "Mutually assured destruction" provided the necessary strategic doctrine. It made all sides shrink from confrontations that risked escalating into nuclear war. Even though American policymakers tended to interpret the two wars in which the United States was deeply involved – Korea and Vietnam – as bipolar confrontations, the Soviets were, in fact, careful not to be directly involved in either. The Cold War finally ended not because the Americans won but because the Soviets lost.[30] The Soviet system was felled not by an American assault but by its own inner weaknesses and dissatisfactions, exacerbated by the strains of the long but bloodless confrontation with the United States and Europe. Arguably, the Soviets were defeated more than anything else by pluralist national forces arising within their own empire.

Bush's War on Terror presented an entirely different paradigm. Whereas Cold War boundaries were closely drawn and the status quo was respected by both sides, the indeterminate character of "terrorism" precluded any stable doctrine of deterrence. With terror, the United States was presented with an amorphous enemy to be eradicated rather than a precisely located antagonist to be "contained." Without a theory of deterrence to compel mutual self-restraint, the War on Terror