

Understanding America

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Foreword

Owen Harries' insightful essay touches a subject very near and dear to me: the task of conveying to others the essence of what America is all about. It's an undertaking that I've been engaged in for most of my professional life, and it continues to challenge me on a daily basis.

America is indeed a very complex animal that defies a simple definition. The very premise of this perceptive paper—that even those who think they know America don't always understand her—underscores the depth of the problem. It is certainly one of the great ironies of the current world situation that the country that receives the most media coverage, whose movies and television programs are seen everywhere, and whose music is heard around the world, is in many ways, one of the most misunderstood.

As Harries rightly points out, America shows itself to the world, warts and all, every hour of every day. We Americans cherish above almost all else our right of free speech, to say almost anything we wish to anyone. But the price for all of that openness is that many unflattering aspects of our country, which might be suppressed in a less open society, are put on display for all to see.

This presents a special challenge for those who are tasked with explaining America to the rest of the world. The picture

that much of the world gets of the U.S. is not a balanced one, and those misperceptions can tilt in almost any direction, depending on who is doing the talking.

For example, America is portrayed by some as an environmental 'rogue state'. Yet it has some of the cleanest air and water in the developed world, which is improving all of the time (it also has more forest cover now than it did at the time of the American Revolution, over 225 years ago).

It is a country known through the images of Hollywood as a violent killing field awash in guns, but its actual rate of murder and other violent crime relative to population has been declining for most of the past 30 years.

It is a country seen by many—again, because of portrayals in movies and television—as lacking in morality, when in reality it is among the most religious of Western nations, with a very high rate of active religious practice. People in other Western countries mock Americans as puritanical, and indeed, the average American would probably be shocked by the strong language and adult content shown on Australian prime time television. And yet, Americans are condemned throughout much of the Islamic world as godless.

The United States is a country that is perceived by many as mainly white and Christian, when in reality its population is 12% Hispanic, 12% black, and it has two million Muslims. The number of mosques in the U.S. has increased by 25% in the past eight years.

So if our kindred spirits in a closely allied country like Australia don't even fully understand us, how can we ever hope that Pakistanis and Saudis will comprehend what we're about?

The answer, of course, lies in education. The world must better understand the U.S., and Americans must better comprehend the rest of the world.

True to Harries' characterisation of a people constantly striving for self-improvement, Americans are now searching for answers to that question, and reflecting on our role in

the world. Sales of books about Islam have skyrocketed. Enrolments in area studies and foreign language courses are up. The U.S. Government has engaged a crash program to recruit many more foreign language specialists in diplomacy, law enforcement and the military. President Bush has pledged to double the size of the Peace Corps and send American volunteers to many new countries, particularly in the Muslim world.

The U.S. will have to commit itself much more seriously to 'public diplomacy', in order to explain itself not just to other governments, but to the publics of other nations. In this age of expanding democracy and instant mass communication, each nation's foreign policy is increasingly determined by its domestic public opinion. We will have to invest far greater resources in activities that bring together Americans and people of other nations: academic and professional exchange programs, university linkages, youth and cultural exchanges.

While Harries questions whether a post-September 11 America will use its vast power wisely, I am confident that Americans instinctively know that they must engage the world in a positive way in order ultimately to win the war on terrorism.

That engagement will be a long and slow process that may take many years to bear fruit, but it must succeed. Only then will we make real progress in helping the world to truly understand America.

Eileen A. Malloy
US Consul-General, Sydney

Understanding America

Owen Harries

We all know America, don't we? While we may confess to ignorance about Japan or Russia, or even France—all those impossibly difficult languages apart from anything else—we are confident that we know America. It is, as they say, everyone's second country.

We have seen perhaps a thousand American movies, from Clark Gable to Gwyneth Paltrow. We have seen hundreds of American sitcoms. We know the words of dozens of American popular songs, most of the better ones written, incidentally, by first or second generation immigrants from Eastern Europe. We have read Hemmingway and Fitzgerald and Steinbeck and Bellow and Updike. We have a common language, more or less, and by now we are even familiar with American idiom and regional accents.

We know the American landscape about as well as we know our own: the prairies, the Manhattan skyline, the white spires and fall colours of New England, those dangerous small towns of the Deep South—to some degree they are all part of our inner landscape. So are episodes from America's recent history: the assassination of John Kennedy, the protest marches and Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech, Clinton solemnly lying to the camera, and now the terrible images of those aircraft flying into the World Trade Center on September 11.

Yes, we all know America. The trouble is that many of the things we know are not true, or are only partly true, or are true only in a very particular sense.

Self-promotion and self-correction

One of the things we know is that, by Australian standards, and by British and European as well, Americans are brashly and complacently self-confident, over addicted to self-promotion and boasting, 'full of themselves' as we would say. Yes, up to a point. Yet it is also true that Americans are the most self-critical people on earth. Everything bad we know about America—its crime and its excessive punishment, its corruption, its graft, its racial tensions, its inane political correctness, its vulgar excesses—we know because Americans have told us about them.

Relentlessly washing its dirty linen in public is an American specialty—though, unlike much Australian self-denigration, it does not usually take the form of simply knocking, nor of a wallowing in guilt, as in the 'I am ashamed to be an Australian' litany that we have been subjected to so much in recent months. It is, in my experience, more discriminating, more measured and better informed. Americans are seriously and pragmatically dedicated to self-correction.

And their optimistic self-confidence is often seriously qualified. In 1988, for example, when the United States was on the verge of winning the Cold War, two books that were at the top of the bestseller list were Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, which predicted American overextension and decline, and Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, a withering critique of the American cultural scene. Four years later, when the United States had actually won the Cold War, and when it was already being widely accused of arrogance and 'triumphalism', the leading New York magazine, *Commentary*, was running a lengthy two-part symposium under the title, 'Is America On The Way Down?'. Many of

the contributors, in the main conservative intellectuals not the alienated Left, thought it was. Not much complacency or arrogance there.

Age and wisdom

Take another thing that we 'know' about America: that it is a 'young country', usually with the connotation that it is immature and naïve in its ways, especially in comparison with an old, more mature and more sophisticated Europe (not to speak of China). To take a typical example, James Callaghan, a one-time British prime minister and not normally a silly man, once loftily declared that 'Europeans have a better understanding of the complexities of the present world difficulties than the United States'. This air of patronising superiority towards America's alleged naïveté and innocence is by no means confined to the political Left; there is a well-established tradition of right-wing anti-Americanism in Europe.

The fact is, though, that the United States is an older country than Germany, Italy, and a dozen other European states, not to speak of Latin America, Africa, and most of Asia. It is the oldest extant democracy on earth, the oldest republic, and the oldest federal system—as well as the largest, most complex, most open and most tested (something that one might not readily have grasped from the facile attempt to ridicule and patronise America during the last disputed presidential election). Consider that during the time that this supposedly young country has existed, France, that epitome of European sophistication, has gone through five different republics, two emperors, two monarchies, and a puppet regime. How sophisticated can you get.

Intellectually, too, the rest of the world is in no position to patronise the United States—though, of course, much of it does. The best American universities—Harvard, Stanford, MIT, Chicago, Princeton—are easily the best in the world. And there is a social club on Massachusetts Avenue in

Washington—the Cosmos Club—whose members, over the years, have won many more Nobel prizes than has the whole of Asia (28 the last time I counted the names on its wall).

Adversity and prosperity

A third thing that we—or some of us—‘know’ about America is that while it is great at handling success and triumph, it is an uncertain quantity—at best untried, at worst very suspect—when it comes to adversity and setbacks. The American temperament as a nation is considered suspect: they have had it easy, have been blessed with so many advantages, that they are not really conditioned, not tempered, to handle bad times well. Their stamina and resilience are questionable. True or false?

Well, it might be worth beginning by observing that American prosperity is comparatively recent. Whatever its merits and demerits, the frontier experience was not a soft one. At the beginning of the last century, Australia’s per capita income was higher than America’s. As late as 1930, 50 million Americans—44% of the total population—still lived rural lives. Almost none of them had electricity and 45 million had no indoor plumbing.

At the same time tens of millions of recent immigrants lived in overcrowded, unsanitary Jewish ghettos, Little Italys, and Little Polands, couldn’t speak English, and worked 12 or more hours a day in sweatshops and on assembly lines. Things were so hard for the migrants that a large proportion of them—nearly a third of the Poles, about half the Italians, more than half the Greeks—returned home. America’s affluence, as a general condition, is quite a recent, post World War II, phenomenon.

As for coping with adversity, one could say of America what was said of the 19th century English statesman, William Ewart Gladstone: that, after a setback, he was tremendously formidable on the rebound. The United States has faced three great crises in the last 150 years: the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the upheaval and turmoil

of the 1960s and 1970s. In each case it came back from adversity rapidly and with tremendous force.

In the Civil War, America suffered over 600,000 deaths—more than it has suffered in all the other wars before and since combined. A large part of the country—particularly the South—was utterly devastated. Yet in less than a decade after the end of the war, America had entered into an age of tremendous growth—the so-called Gilded Age—and in the course of a generation had transformed itself from an overwhelmingly agrarian country into a great industrial state, first challenging and then, around about 1890, surging past Britain and Germany.

In the 1930s the United States, along with the rest of the industrial world, suffered the Great Depression—a depression of such severity that the prevailing wisdom among Western intellectuals was that capitalism and liberal democracy were finished and destined to be replaced soon, either peacefully or violently, by some form of socialism. Yet by the middle of the next decade, the United States had fought and won a great war, had emerged as the leading power on earth, and had entered into a long period of unprecedented prosperity.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States experienced huge turmoil: the Civil Rights movement, the student protest movement, a social and moral revolution, defeat in Vietnam, and a political crisis that unseated a president. Predictions of inevitable decline were widespread. Yet again, within 15 years the United States had emerged victorious from the Cold War, was the sole remaining superpower, and enjoyed a political, economic, and military dominance that in the opinion of most judges is unprecedented in recorded history. Not a bad record for a country whose toughness and ability to handle adversity are regularly questioned.

Materialism and idealism

A last item in this list of things we confidently know about America, and the most important for my purpose in this

lecture, is the belief that it is the most materialistic of countries. The United States virtually invented modern consumerism, and the American people are notorious for their insatiable appetite for the acquisition of material goods and for conspicuous consumption. Again, this is all true as far as it goes. And don't we and other Western people enjoy ridiculing and scolding these American excesses—though it has to be said that, once given the chance, we ourselves have not exactly proved backward as consumers.

But the real point to make here—and in terms of what I shall go on to argue, it is very important—is that as well as being the most materialistic of modern Western countries, the United States is certainly the most idealistic. In the first place, it is the most religious, not only in the sense of believing in God but of actually going to church regularly. While in much of the West religion is dying and churches are neglected and being turned into bingo halls or keep-fit centres, in the United States they thrive.

But religion apart, in the secular sense too, this most materialistic of countries is also the most idealistic. This to the extent that over the last 200 years it has regularly been asserted that America and Americans are to be defined by an idea.

Lincoln at Gettysburg spoke of a nation 'conceived in liberty and dedicated to a proposition'. He spoke of reverence for the laws as 'the political religion of the nation'. As the writer Robert Penn Warren put it, 'To be an American is not . . . a matter of blood; it is a matter of an idea—and [its] history is the image of that idea'.

Another writer, Theodore White: 'Americans are not a people like the French, Germans or Japanese, whose genes have been mixing with kindred genes for thousands of years. Americans are held together only by ideas'.

Many non-Americans have agreed. G. K. Chesterton maintained that 'America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed'. And Margaret Thatcher has contrasted European nations, as the products of history, with the United States, as the product of a philosophy.

The idea of America

Now it would be very easy to dismiss all this as hyperbole, or hypocrisy. It is certainly true that America is many things as well as an idea—a history; a set of customs and traditions; various institutions, political and otherwise; and, as we have become increasingly aware, a complex of power and interests. But ideas are a very important—an exceptionally important—part of the whole, and to the extent that Americans believe that these ideas are central to its identity and acts accordingly, it has important consequences.

I want to say something about two of those consequences, one internal and one external.

Insofar as Americans rejected the belief in a nationalism of blood and soil—the sense in which nationalism was mainly understood in its European heyday, and still is in places like Croatia and Serbia—and instead put ideas centre stage, it made the country very receptive to immigrants. The *Economist* magazine once put it this way:

America is an immigrant's land, open to anyone of any race or culture who accepts the ideas of the European Enlightenment on which it was founded.

Provided the ideas remained intact, an America populated with Martians would still be America.

There has been, in other words, a minimal and accessible qualification to becoming an American: adopt the creed and you are in. This has made it possible for the United States not only to absorb huge numbers of people, but also to alter the composition of its population radically, without major disruption.

There have been three stages. From the Declaration of Independence in 1776 until just before the Civil War in the 1860s, the United States was a country of Anglo-Saxon stock and Protestant religion. The population was overwhelmingly of British origin. By the very end of this period, increasing numbers of Irish and Germans started to come, driven by famine and political upheaval at home, but the Anglo-Protestant character still easily predominated.

Just before the Civil War there began a period of massive immigration, reaching its peak in the period 1890 to 1914, when—as its industrial economy was making gigantic leaps—the United States was absorbing people at the rate of a million a year. Only a small proportion of these was Anglo-Saxon. They were overwhelmingly Irish, Italian, Slav and Jewish. Their religions were Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Jewish. In the course of a few decades America was transformed from an Anglo-American Protestant society into a multid denominational Euro-American society. By 1920 the percentage of Americans of British origin was down to 40% and still falling rapidly.

These were the years of the famous ‘melting pot’ and of the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty, with its eloquent lines, ‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free’. A policy of assimilation was energetically applied, and it was belief in the creed and institutions of liberal democracy that provided the glue to make a nation of these disparate elements.

But there were still very distinct limits to American receptivity at that stage. The invitation on the Statue of Liberty, while now extending beyond Anglo-Saxon Protestants, was still restricted to white Europeans. Others were not welcome. For example, the rapidly modernising and intensely nationalistic Japan was deeply offended when, in 1908, a so-called Gentlemen’s Agreement was forced on it by Washington, to cut off completely what little immigration there had been from Japan.

It was in the 1960s that the next great adaptations were made and a third major phase began. An extension of genuine political rights—access to the political creed—took place to include America’s black population, and immigration was opened up to include people of all races and ethnic composition: Hispanics, Asians, Africans, people from the Caribbean and Arabs. There are now over 32 million Hispanics and over 12 million Asians in the United States.

Something else of great importance happened as this third phase proceeded. The accepted metaphor for American society changed from a ‘melting pot’ to a ‘mosaic’. The old melting pot ideal was now increasingly condemned as authoritarian and conformist, and the theory and practice of multiculturalism began to prevail. Instead of assimilation, diversity and variety represented the ideal.

As this change occurred, the belief in America as representing an Idea was turned around. Previously it had been used to justify assimilation; now it became the basis of the argument that assimilation was unnecessary, and was used to justify cultural pluralism. If American nationalism consisted essentially of a common acceptance of a political creed or faith, the argument went, then it did not require the surrendering of original language, culture, tradition, folkways. Different peoples could retain all these and still be American as long as they accepted the political creed.

[If I may make a diversion here, I’m sure that it has occurred to you that there is an obvious and striking similarity between the United States and Australia in all this. Australia, too, is a country of immigrants. Australia, too, in the first instance, had a ‘white only’ policy for immigration, and in the first instance drew its population from the British Isles. It then extended the policy to Europeans while insisting on assimilation. And later still, Australia, too, finally modified that policy and began to accept people from Asia and the Middle East and elsewhere. And when it did so, Australia, like the United States, opted for multiculturalism, for the conclusion was that as long as everyone accepted the civil/political order they should be free to keep their own cultures. In other words, a common Australian culture, in the full sense of the term, was unnecessary as long as the civic order was agreed on.

Given this similarity, it is worth considering a critique of this multicultural conclusion that has been made in the

United States. It has been well stated by Michael Lind: 'By making political idealism—and *only* political idealism—the thing that connects diverse Americans, cultural pluralists and democratic universalists put a burden on the American political tradition it cannot bear. A constitution is not a country; an idea is not a nation'.

Now if it is true that the *American* political tradition—an extraordinarily rich one, with very powerful symbolic underpinnings, and given substance and resonance by such eloquent utterances as the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address—cannot bear the burden of sustaining national identity, the question arises: can the much thinner and more modest Australian political creed possibly do so? After all, very, very few of us have the faintest idea of who our Founding Fathers were or what is in our constitution, and there is no resonating rhetoric and few compelling symbols available that embody and ennoble that tradition.

Lind argues that the notion of an American nation based solely on an idea or political creed is a gross exaggeration, if not false. It has, he maintains, obscured the truth that the cement has been provided largely by a vernacular culture that is both transracial and defined by a common language, folkways, sports, memories and more—a culture which successive waves of immigrants have adapted to and adopted rather readily. To the extent that this is true, it casts doubt on some of the key arguments of multiculturalists both in America and here. That is the end of my diversion, and it's back to America.]

America and the rest of the world

For the remainder of this talk I am going to focus on America's relationship with the rest of the world. In this respect, too, the belief that the United States represents an idea has been and is very important. But before coming to that, let's start by recognising how successful America has been in its dealings with the outside world.

In the 19th century, its success consisted essentially in minimising those dealings, in successfully avoiding entanglements and conflicts with outside powers and keeping its hands free to get on with its major preoccupation: establishing and consolidating its hold over the vast stretch of territory from the Atlantic to the Pacific, which, of course, it did successfully. In the 20th century, the United States was the only power to emerge from all three of the great conflicts—World Wars I and II and the Cold War—both victorious and with its power greatly enhanced. When one hears people going on about how naïve and simplistic the American approach to foreign policy is, it is worth bearing that record of success in mind.

Certainly the United States has been fortunate in some important respects: in having wide oceans on either side of it; in having pretty harmless neighbours to its north and south; in having, for a long period when it was potentially vulnerable, a non-threatening British navy between it and Europe. It was probably this combination of advantages that Bismarck had in mind when he once remarked that God seemed to have a special place in his heart for drunkards, idiots and Americans. History is replete with examples of countries that were well endowed with advantages but who blew their luck (think of Brazil and Argentina). There should be a strong presumption that Americans did not compile their record of success merely due to a remarkable run of good fortune, that they have been getting some important things right.

Getting things right in foreign policy usually involves, as a necessary if not sufficient condition, being realistic, in the sense of seeing the world as it is. One of the odd and interesting aspects of American intellectual life is that many of its serious and influential thinkers—Norman Podhoretz, longtime editor of the influential journal, *Commentary*, comes to mind—insist that foreign policy realism is alien to Americans, that they don't think, in the traditional European way, in terms of national interests, power, and balance.

They maintain this in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary, for in fact the United States has a long and healthy realist tradition. It was George Washington, no less, who said that 'no nation is to be trusted farther than it is bound by its interest'; and that 'there can be no greater error than to expect or calculate on real favours from nation to nation'; and that, 'permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments to others, should be excluded'. These are all classical realist precepts and Washington was not a man who used words idly.

Consider again the case of Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and the most high falutin' idealist among the Founding Fathers. As President in 1803, Jefferson found himself faced with a dilemma: he could buy a vast tract of territory from Napoleon, one that would double the area of the United States, for a mere \$15 million; but doing so would involve violating the constitution, which gave him no right to perform such an act. The historian Bradford Perkins laconically describes what followed: 'Jefferson wrestled with his conscience, a bout he easily won, before deciding to accept the glorious gift'. The Louisiana Purchase went ahead. As he finalised it, Jefferson advised his Secretary of State, Madison, 'the less we say about constitutional principle . . . the better'.

Realism, then, is bred in the American bone—for further evidence, ask the American Indians, ask the Mexicans who lost Texas and California to the United States, ask Spain who lost the Philippines. And yet this truth is often indignantly resisted in America by serious people. Why is this?

To answer that question, I believe we have to go back to the deep-set, central belief in America as the embodiment of an idea—the idea of liberty and the embodiment of God's will—and consider what this translates into when it comes to defining the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world.

What it translates into is the doctrine of American Exceptionalism: the belief that America is exceptional, in the double sense that it is superior and that it is different, not only in degree but in kind. This has been and is a powerful force in the country.

Its origins go back to the Protestant beginnings of the colonies. As early as 1630, when the Americans-to-be numbered only a few thousand, Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop, borrowing from the Gospel according to Matthew, famously said, 'Consider that we shall be as a City [sic] upon a Hill, the eyes [sic] of all people are upon us'. This image was to have great durability. Three and a half centuries later it was an essential part of Ronald Reagan's rhetoric, used repeatedly by him to denote the special, the unique, nature of his country and people, and to restore their beliefs in themselves after the setbacks of the 1970s.

From the belief in American exceptionalism, it followed—psychologically, if not logically—that the United States had a mission, a manifest destiny, to change the world in its image. This conviction echoes down through American history. 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again', wrote Tom Paine in his pro-independence pamphlet, *Common Sense*. The author of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville, put it in more extravagant terms: 'God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race . . . We are pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path'. Again, Woodrow Wilson going into World War I: 'I believe that God planted in us the vision of liberty . . . I cannot be deprived of the hope that we are chosen, and prominently chosen, to show the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty'.

One could multiply such examples over and over. Now it is true, of course, that other countries—France, Britain, Russia—have from time to time in their history felt a sense of mission, of carrying their civilisation to other peoples and territories. But in their cases it has been episodic and

not deeply rooted—usually limited to when their power was at its zenith and usually clearly recognisable as a rationalisation for what they were doing for other reasons. In the case of the United States, it has been constant and central.

Realism and idealism

As far as American foreign policy is concerned, then, there have been, and still are, two very different traditions co-existing alongside each other: realism and American exceptionalism. I would maintain that the foreign policy of the United States can only be understood in terms of a complicated and fluctuating interaction between these two traditions.

Post World War I

A striking example of the clash between the two traditions occurred as soon as the United States emerged as a fully fledged great power at the end of World War I. Woodrow Wilson, initially reluctant to intervene in the war, had, once in, come to see it as a crusade to make the world safe for democracy. The League of Nations was to be the instrument for realising the universal ideas of liberty, democracy and peace. To make it work, Wilson was prepared to sign a blank cheque committing the United States to the use of collective force to resist any violation of the borders or sovereignty of any country at any time. His readiness to do so was based largely on the conviction that the actual use of collective force would be unnecessary, because something called 'world public opinion' would preserve the peace.

He was opposed by a powerful group of senators led by Henry Cabot Lodge. Liberal historians have been largely successful in representing them as ignorant, backwoods isolationists. In reality they were prudent realists and traditional nationalists who did not share Wilson's faith in world public opinion, were unprepared to sign a blank cheque for collective security, and believed that the United

States should not undertake commitments that it might not be prepared to honour when push came to shove. They believed that the United States should promote democracy by its example, not by its power. The position of the senators had been articulated almost a century earlier by John Quincy Adams when he famously proclaimed:

America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher of the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.

Post World War II

If, after World War I, American idealism and American realism had been in head-on confrontation, after World War II they complemented and reinforced each other extremely well. Insofar as the coming Cold War struggle was a conflict between two great powers—the United States and the Soviet Union—realism came into its own. In office as Secretary of State was that urbane realist, Dean Acheson, and this was the age of influential realists like Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, and Walter Lippmann. But insofar as the Cold War was a struggle between two ideologies, and insofar as it was necessary to remotivate an America that had rapidly demobilised after victory in World War II, American idealism was an essential counterweight to communism.

When, in March 1947, President Truman outlined what was to become known as the Truman Doctrine, he was responding to a specific crisis in Greece. But he chose to speak in the sweeping, universalist terms of American idealism:

At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life . . . I believe 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 . . . The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world.

This was Wilsonian language. But while Wilson had called for American commitment at a time when there was no enemy in sight, and had thus alienated realists, Truman did so when there was a very real and powerful adversary. So while realists had opposed Wilson they supported Truman, even if some of them complained that his rhetoric was too extravagant.

Throughout the Cold War, realism and idealism essentially continued to complement each other, with the weight shifting from one leg to the other as circumstances varied. American leaders might have used the rhetoric of 'liberation' and 'roll-back', but the reality of Soviet power kept their feet firmly on the ground. When a crisis like the Hungarian Rising of 1956 occurred, prudence prevailed and America refrained from intervening.

The Cold War

So the relationship between American idealism and realism after World War I and World War II differed greatly. What, then, about the aftermath of the third great struggle of the 20th century, the Cold War? The sudden and unexpected collapse of its rival, the Soviet Union, left the United States as the sole remaining superpower in a unipolar world. What, in this entirely changed circumstance, should the United States do?

One answer to that question was given by Jeanne Kirkpatrick as early as 1990. A tough-minded realist, a heroine of conservatives and anything but an isolationist, Kirkpatrick wrote in the magazine I edited:

The time when Americans should bear such unusual burdens is past. With a return to 'normal' times, we can again become a normal nation—and take care of pressing problems of education, family, industry, and technology. We can be an independent nation in a world of independent nations.

As we now know, that view did not prevail. Indeed, it was soon being denounced as neo-isolationist. It did not prevail,

for one thing, because during the long decades of the Cold War the United States had developed deep-set habits of activism on a global scale. Habits are powerful things in politics, and while Americans liked to complain about the burdens of leadership, they grew to expect and enjoy leadership more than they realised or acknowledged.

A second powerful reason why being a 'normal' nation did not appeal was that in the preceding four and a half decades a huge foreign policy and security establishment had come into being which had a vested interest in an activist policy and whose continuing existence could only be justified by it. That establishment was not to shrink but to grow in the post-Cold War period.

And third, having, in the highly charged ideological atmosphere of the Cold War, put so much stress on the defence and promotion of liberty and democracy, it seemed to many to be only proper and consistent to advance these causes to the utmost—to conduct what some referred to as a 'democratic crusade', now that the anti-democratic forces had been defeated.

After World War I, American idealism and realism clashed head on; after World War II, they were in balance; after the third conflict, the Cold War, they have to every considerable extent merged to produce a kind of oxymoron: a crusading realism, Wilsonianism with muscle.

It began with George Bush senior who, even before the Cold War was properly finished, was proclaiming a 'New World Order'. Described in utopian terms as one in which 'the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle . . . in which nations recognise the shared responsibility for freedom and justice . . . where the strong respect the rights of the weak'.

In other words, the end of power politics. This vision, remember, was advanced not by a liberal but by a conservative president, and was ardently supported by many American conservatives. American power—hard and soft—was to make it a reality.

During the eight years of Clinton's presidency, this vision largely receded. As far as foreign policy was concerned, these were years of ineptitude and opportunism and what Michael Mandelbaum derisively dismissed as 'global social work'. Clinton's foreign policy team was, in my opinion, the weakest since the 1930s. During the Clinton years the emphasis was not on changing the world by the exertion of political will, but on the alleged capacity of the forces of globalisation to do the job more or less automatically.

The September 11 terrorist attacks

Then came George Bush junior, and quickly afterwards the events of September 11. In terms of the conceptual framework I am offering, how do these events fit in?

- Well, first they have re-energised America's sense of mission very, very powerfully. It is expressed in universal, unlimited terms, not just as destroying the perpetrators of the acts of September 11, but as destroying all terrorist groups: 'It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated'. The world is conceptualised in Manichean terms as a global conflict between good and evil, in which there is no room for neutrality or prevarication: 'Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists'.
- Second, they have changed the emphasis of that mission from a positive one to a negative one: from promoting good to crushing evil. Pace John Quincy Adams, America is now precisely going abroad 'in search of monsters to destroy'.
- Third, and following from this, the emphasis has shifted from changing the world by example and influence to changing it by force. The key governmental institution in America's dealings with the rest of the world is now not the State Department but the Department of Defense. And there have been statements at the

presidential level indirectly hinting at the possibility of intervention in countries considered 'timid in the face of terror': and the possibility of first use of nuclear weapons, even against countries that do not possess those weapons.

- Fourth, for a nation that considered itself 'a city on a hill', the sense of violation and outrage now prevailing in Washington should not be underestimated. Many other countries—Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, Italy—have suffered much, much greater damage in living memory, but the sense of violation—of an upsetting of the natural order of things—in the United States is almost certainly greater than it was in any of those.
- Fifth, bearing that in mind, one should also bear in mind the American capacity for ruthless action against those it regards as its violators. (In the last five months of World War II alone, the United States bombing raids killed over 900,000 Japanese civilians—and that was before the dropping of the two atom bombs).
- Sixth, the monsters that the United States is committed to destroy—the monsters of terrorism—are particularly elusive and amorphous ones who hide behind facades either manufactured by themselves or provided by others. This makes things more complicated and increases greatly the likelihood that the United States will make mistakes, probably serious mistakes, in its war against terrorism, particularly if it becomes frustrated by lack of success.
- And last, the tendency for the United States to set aside the restraints of multilateralism and to act unilaterally—a tendency already present—has been increased significantly. Asked by the television interviewer, Larry King, 'Is it important that the coalition hold?' (that is, the coalition to fight Al Qaeda) Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld serenely replied 'No', going on to say 'the worst thing you can do is allow a coalition to determine what your mission is'.

The resurgence of anti-Americanism

Let me draw this talk to a close on a personal note. During the 1990s I spent a lot of time arguing with a lot of conservative American friends that the United States should use its position of dominance, its vast power, with restraint, discrimination and prudence. I argued that anything resembling a 'democratic crusade' or the imposition of a 'New World Order' was a bad idea—first because democracy is not an export commodity but a do-it-yourself enterprise that requires very special conditions; and secondly because an assertive, interventionist policy was bound to generate widespread hostility, suspicion, and if historical precedence meant anything, concerted opposition to the United States. On one occasion I was even moved to suggest that Clintonian ineptitude might, inadvertently, be a good thing because it served to dampen American enthusiasm for activism and to encourage a sense of limits.

And I regularly quoted the warning that Edmund Burke had once given his fellow countrymen when Britain had been the world's dominant power:

Among precautions against ambition, it may not be amiss to take precaution against our own. I must fairly say, I dread our own power and our own ambition: I dread our being too much dreaded . . . We may say that we shall not abuse this astonishing and hitherto unheard of power. But every other nation will think we shall abuse it. It is impossible but that, sooner or later, this state of things must produce a combination against us which may end in our ruin.

I, and others who argued along these lines, did not have much success. We were met with assertions—either conscious or unconscious—of American exceptionalism. If other dominant powers that had thrown their weight around—the Spain of Philip II; the France of Louis XIV and of Napoleon; the Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm II and of Hitler—had been met by hostile coalitions, the United States would not, because its nature and motives were

different—because the American people were different—and others would realise that they were.

Incidentally, American exceptionalism was evident in other respects too—in, for example, its tendency to excuse itself from standards of behaviour that it expected others to observe. As, for example, when there was tremendous indignation and anger when it was discovered that the Chinese had spied on American scientific secrets and had an interest in the American electoral process—activities which the US has regularly indulged in with respect to other governments. Incidentally, no-one accused me of being anti-American for making these points.

If my warnings had any force five or ten years ago, it seems to me that they have much more force today. The great sympathy felt for America immediately after September 11 has quickly evaporated and been replaced by suspicion and hostility. Rosemary Righter, chief leader writer of the London *Times*, has observed recently that 'America-bashing is in fashion as it has not been since Vietnam'—and she is talking, not of Asia and the Middle East, but of London and Paris and Berlin. Moreover, she asserts that it is not just a case of the usual suspects on the Left, but that a 'resurgent anti-Americanism' exists across the political spectrum. As she says, 'America is never less loved in Europe than when . . . it is angry, determined, and certain that it is in the right'.

The danger in all this is not of a hostile military response. The United States is much too strong for that. It is rather of a gathering political hostility which leaves America both dominant and increasingly disliked and isolated—which would be an extremely unhealthy state of affairs, not just for the United States but for the world.

Let me be clear: After the outrage of September 11, I do not believe that the United States could have reacted in any way other than as she did. But doing so will carry a cost. The long-term significance of what happened some months ago may be that it forced America decisively along a course

of action that—by emphasising her military dominance, by requiring her to use her vast power conspicuously, by making restraint and moderation virtually impossible, and by making unilateralism an increasing feature of American behaviour—is bound to generate widespread and increased criticism and hostility towards her. That may turn out to be the real tragedy of September 11.