The role that the United States has played and should play in the international system is an important and fascinating question. The present situation in world history is unprecedented. “Not since Rome,” say many observers, has any one state so dominated the system of states to which it belongs. The United States has stood apart in power and influence from the rest of the world for many years, but the events of the last year, particularly the stunning use of force in Afghanistan, have accentuated that nation’s unique global military domination. We cannot even speculate on the future of world order without understanding what the United States will do. Its power, for both good and ill, is incalculable.

The disparity in military power between the United States and everybody else was a marked feature of the world before 11 September, but that event has served to widen the gap even further, and we can assure it will continue to do so. It has also given new prominence to the Bush administration to a group centering around Richard Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz who wish to use this power in novel ways. They have crafted a strategic doctrine for the United States that entails large increases in the military budget (nearly $500 billion annually by 2005), American withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, and a new doctrine of preventive war to address the scourge of weapons of mass destruction.

Alongside these substantive changes has come a pronounced emphasis on unilateral behavior in the conduct of American policy. The new outlook sees the United States as possessing a blank check to use at will in addressing the perceived exigencies of the national interest and international security. Even when the Bush administration makes an approach to international institutions, as it did in its September 2002 demands on the U.N. Security Coun-
The emerging strategic doctrine of the Bush administration is clearly inconsistent with the international consensus against the first use of force. Although it is described as a policy of “preemption,” Bush’s approach is actually a doctrine of preventive war. In preemptive war, force is used only when it is apparent that the enemy is on the verge of striking. To qualify as justified preemption, as Secretary of State Daniel Webster observed in 1842, the necessity for force must be “instant” and “overwhelming,” “leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation.” Preventive war is the first use of force to avert a more remote threat, one that is still ostensibly formidable. It has a simple logic, historically sanctioned in the endless wars of the European state system. War, say the advocates of prevention, is inevitable in any case, and so it is better to fight under circumstances of our own choosing. Today we are told that once Iraq or some other “evil” state develops the capability to use weapons of mass destruction, it will use them. We must therefore strike first to avert certain calamity, and sooner rather than later.

A preventive war against Iraq is entirely distinguishable from the war that toppled Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. In that case, the United States was justified in making war in response to an attack on its soil. Since Saddam’s complicity in those attacks has not been alleged by the administration and cannot plausibly be inferred from what evidence is available, the justification for war against Iraq must rest on the logic of prevention. The difference may appear to be negligible, but it is a difference in law between offensive and defensive war, and between aggression and self-defense. Preventive war, indeed, is directly contrary to the principle that so often was the rallying cry of American internationalism in the twentieth century.

Deterrence will not work against a madman such as Saddam, say the advocates of preventive war. They give no persuasive reasons, however, for their verdict. The cruelties and massacres that Saddam has committed and the suffering that he continues to bestow on his own people will not be deterred by the knowledge that the United States is prepared to use force against him. And, of course, the policy of nuclear nonproliferation, the United Nations, and NATO—precepts of the epoch of the world wars, doctrines of preventive war—were closely identified with the German and Japanese strategic traditions, but not the American.
In a narrow sense, it is probably true that America now has sufficient power to defy the world without paying much in the way of an immediate penalty. From a longer-term perspective, however, acting outside international institutions or behaving dictatorially within them cannot fail to seriously undermine the legitimacy of American power. Ultimately, the outsized power of the United States in relation to the rest of international society is tolerable only on condition that it is harnessed to a larger purpose than simply the vindication of Americans national interest. Observance of basic principles of the law of nations, together with keeping its action within the constraints of an international consensus, are two basic modes of conduct by which the United States has acquired such legitimacy as it now enjoys in the international system. Take those factors away, and the legitimacy of American power would be gravely impaired.

Americans should be the last people who need reminding that any situation of unbounded and unchecked power sends off danger signals of incipient political pathology. That idea is central to American diplomacy, both in the early years of the republic and in its twentieth century commitment to internationalism.

When the United States rose to superpower status in the aftermath of World War II, it led in the creation of an international system that both contained the power of the Soviet Union and...opting instead to construct a constitutional partnership of free nations in the struggle against the totalitarian enemy.

The complex web of international institutions that arose after World War II owed a great deal to American leadership. Now the object of profound suspicion among apostles of the new empire, the construction of the great concert among the advanced industrialized democracies that arose after the Second World War.

There is no simple way of articulating the complex bargains that have supported the legitimacy of American power. Some multilateral restraints are substantive, and consist in adherence to treaties and other rules of interna-
Future crises are likely to highlight the wide gulf between American and European formulas for the use of force and the achievement of security.

The Major Relationships

Of all the major relationships of the United States, that with Japan has been the least affected by the events of 11 September and the ensuing war on terrorism. Though it may doubt the wisdom of its war policy, Japan does not want a quarrel with the United States over this issue, and is unlikely to press a dissent. Interestingly, the conviction that force must truly be a last resort runs deepest among the people of the defeated powers of World War II, Japan and Germany. Critics may scoff that such an attitude in the two great civilian powers arises from weakness and irresponsibility. The alternative explanation, and I think the better one, is that it reflects wisdom born of bitter experience.

Whereas the U.S.-Japan relationship is stable, U.S. relations with Europe are deeply troubled. Tony Blair in Britain faces a Labor party in revolt against his compliance with U.S. policy, and it will take much good fortune for him to stay in office another year. France, considering its significant interests in Iraq and fearing isolation after a war, seems inclined to go along with rather than forge a balance against American power, though France shares with Germany a visceral discontent with the militaristic and unilateralist visage of the United States.

As the United States flexes its muscles and seeks to divide the allies from one another—as it has done in pressing its dispute over the International Criminal Court—European opinion begins to consider, if as yet only dimly, the possibility of a separate security identity from the United States. Though a formal break seems still a long way off, the basis of estrangement exists in public opinion and may be considerably reinforced by a war against Iraq.

Internationalism in Recession

During the twentieth century, Americans became accustomed to viewing their problem in foreign policy as a choice between isolationism and intervention, between the historic policy of nonentanglement and the new-found imperative of far reaching involvement. That seems a quaint way of posing the choices today, however. The United States is too big and powerful, and the legacy of past actions too pronounced, for it to avoid entanglement in the world. Given the brute fact of American power, even insularity can be a form of involvement and entanglement.
of involvement and entanglement. The real choice is between internationalism and imperialism, between a model of consensual leadership and a pattern of hegemonic dictatorship. The former model is too deeply ingrained in past American traditions to disappear, and I believe—I certainly hope—that it will come back in force once the inadequacies of the new policy become manifest. Internationalist ideals and methods, however, are now in deep recession in the United States. Their recovery seems as distant a prospect as a durable boom in the financial markets.

About this Article

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