The Unipole in Twilight

American Strategy from 9/11 to the Present

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Foreign policy in the United States is like polo: almost entirely an elite sport. The issue rarely figures in national elections. The country is so secure that foreign policy does not affect voters enough to care much. No country is going to annex Hawaii or Maine, so voters are mostly rationally ignorant of the subject. The costs of wars are defrayed through debt, deficits, and the fact that the dying and dismemberment happens in other people's countries. Moreover, the dying and dismemberment of Americans are contained in an all-volunteer force that is powerfully socialized to suffer in silence.[1] Unlike on abortion, the environment, or taxes, elites in both parties mostly agree on national security. Given rational ignorance among the public and general consensus among elites, voters rarely hear serious debates about national-security policy (Friedman and Logan 2016). Their views are mostly incoherent and weakly held.

The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 (9/11) raised the salience of foreign policy. They rocketed President George W. Bush from 51 to 90 percent popularity in the span of fourteen days (*Gallup News* n.d.). Bush used the wave of approval to pursue an expansive war on terrorism. The United States invaded Afghanistan in October and began planning to attack Iraq.

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1. On the effects of an all-volunteer force on support for war, see Erikson and Stoker 2011 as well as Horowitz and Levendusky 2011.

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On Bush's coattails and with national-security activism the central theme, Republicans made sizable gains in the 2002 midterm elections. On March 19, 2003, the United States invaded Iraq.

The Iraq War immediately blossomed into a costly disaster. The mission in Afghanistan crept from killing terrorists and punishing those who harbored them into an ambitious nation-building effort that became the longest war in American history. Thousands of American troops were killed, tens of thousands were gravely wounded, and thousands of American contractors were killed.[2] Hundreds of thousands of innocent foreigners perished. The wars cost more than $6 trillion, and the meter is still running (Crawford 2019).

New bureaucracies sprouted, including the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. The United States set up a global archipelago of "black sites" where it tortured suspected terrorists. The National Security Agency indiscriminately vacuumed up Americans' electronic communications without legal authorization, then tried to hide this invasion of privacy from the public.

The administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump pledged to de-emphasize the Middle East in American foreign policy and pay more attention to China. In 2011, Obama announced a "pivot to Asia," which was quickly rebranded as a "rebalancing" after Middle Eastern countries complained to Washington that they felt marginalized. What wound up happening was something closer to incoherence; the United States kept several fingers stuck in the Middle East pie, while turning toward and puffing up its chest at China. President Obama regime-changed Libya and intervened in the Syrian civil war. Trump kept U.S. troops in Syria, ramped up the drone wars, and ordered the assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, Iran's most prominent military commander, while he was on a visit to Iraq.

Although many observers may think of the twenty years from 2001 until now as a pivot from a costly effort to reengineer the Middle East to a focus on containing China, the truth is more prosaic. In fact, defense planners had had their eyes on China since the 1990s. Throughout the global war on terror, the central defense-procurement decisions were still being made on the basis of assuming security competition with a major power such as China. There was never an effort to expand the ground forces to the size at which they could hope to decisively win the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Pentagon dramatically expanded the base defense budget, adding a new line item called "Overseas Contingency Operations" (OCO), which were funds earmarked for the wars. This helped the government obscure the costs of their policies (Friedman 2016). In this sense, much of the base budget remained dedicated to

2. The ratio of killed to wounded has declined dramatically in recent decades, meaning that battle deaths have declined as a percentage of overall casualties. Although a welcome development, these advances in health care have raised the monetary per troop cost of war. See Fazal 2014.

suppressing major powers. The OCO budget served as a war budget on top of the defense budget. Overall defense spending nearly doubled from 2001 to 2009 (U.S. Congressional Budget Office 2020, 2).

In the absence of major international or domestic constraints, policy can become extravagant. The period from 2001 to the present represents a promiscuous waste of money, lives, and diplomatic attention, for which almost no one in charge of the policy has paid serious consequences. The implications of this waste are even more severe if the worst-case assumptions about China's growing power that enjoy consensus in Washington are correct. Policies whose costs can be avoided, defrayed, or hidden are likely to be oversupplied.

This paper proceeds in four parts. First, it shows the extent to which defense planners were focused on competition with China—not on the Middle East or small wars—in the 1990s through September 11, 2001. Second, it outlines the initial plans that emerged after the 9/11 attacks through the start of the war in Iraq as well as the public mood and the notable disjuncture between budgetary priorities and policy initiatives during the global war on terror. Third, it discusses the derailment of Bush's freedom doctrine in the years from 2003 to 2009. Fourth, it describes the normalization of perpetual war during the Obama and Trump years, coupled with a restored focus on containing China. In conclusion, it highlights the extent to which the decade and a half following the attacks were a costly waste followed by no accountability. By 2021, Washington planners had returned to an emphasis on China, lost the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, contributed to the collapse of Libya and Syria, and held almost no one accountable for the immense costs of their mistakes.[3]

Searching for an Enemy: The Defense Establishment from 1992 through the 9/11 Attacks

Pentagon planners and leading defense intellectuals spent the period from 1992 to late August 2001 narrowing their sights on what they argued was the next significant security challenge for the United States: China. Though the 1990s were punctuated by the Gulf War and an array of humanitarian interventions, these missions never drove defense planning, much less procurement.

Instead, the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) of 1992 announced the U.S. intention to "preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to our interests," including Europe, East Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America in that category (U.S. Department of Defense 1992). In particular, one draft of the

3. Any article discussing a twenty-year period ignores important events, and this one is no exception. NATO expansion, Iranian nuclear diplomacy, the drone wars, and other events during this period matter. This paper centers on the post-9/11 wars and the distraction they posed from the question of what to do about China, so it gives those subjects short shrift. Also, in the case of Afghanistan, as discussed later in the paper, the war aims arguably had been achieved in 2002, before the war drifted into a counterinsurgency/nation-building campaign.

DPG made clear that "we must maintain our status as a military power of the first magnitude" in the Pacific Rim (qtd. in Tyler 1992).

At the same time, internal efforts at transforming the military to compete with China ran into fears among the services about continued budget trimming. According to Defense Secretary Bill Cohen, the army in particular pushed back against efforts at transformation (Boyer 2006). Bill Clinton's first defense secretary, Les Aspin, had argued similarly that justifying Pentagon budgets on the basis of near-term priorities and general disorder and policing was the best way to defend against further cuts (Krepinevich and Watts 2015).

At the highest levels of American politics, China enjoyed broad support. In 2000, Congress approved permanent normal trade relations with China, and in 2001 China achieved permanent "most-favored nation" status. These developments in trade policy helped fuel explosive economic growth in China and along with that growth significant increases in Chinese military power. This combination of economic engagement and military containment posed an important, neglected conundrum for American leaders: if China needed to be contained, why fuel its growth by trading with it (Logan 2013)? But beginning in 2001 China was pushed from the headlines for more than a decade.

"Sweep It All Up": The 9/11 Attacks through the Start of the Iraq War

China was bumped far from the front burner, arguably off the stove, by the terrorist attacks the morning of September 11, 2001. The most immediate effect of the attacks was that all of society came to be filtered through the lens of the new fear of terrorism. Clear Channel, the large radio station corporation, circulated a list of songs it encouraged deejays not to play, including "Cities in Dust" by Siouxsie and the Banshees and Rage against the Machine's entire catalog (Sharp 2018). Cable news stations played video montages of the destruction for weeks after the attack, festooned with slogans such as "America's New War" or "A Nation United."

Every aspect of politics, no matter how mundane, became about terrorism. In a speech to the National Cattlemen's Beef Association in February 2002, George W. Bush memorably explained the importance of the beef industry to national security: "It's in our national security interests that we be able to feed ourselves. Thank goodness we don't have to rely on somebody else's meat to make sure our people are healthy and well fed" (Bush 2002b, 194). Few figures in American politics saw anything amiss.

The president repeatedly used religious imagery to describe international politics. In announcing the war on terror to Congress, Bush declared that "[t]he course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them" (Bush 2001, 1144). Representing freedom and justice, the United States could count God on its side, if not Rage against the Machine.

The speed with which policy moved was striking. One week after the attacks, Congress approved a compact, one-page document authorizing the president to "use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons."[4] Even before that authorization, a variety of officials in the administration were thinking about attacking Iraq. As the Pentagon smoldered on September 11, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld wrote in his notes about the possibility of hitting both Iraq and Afghanistan, adding in shorthand that it would be "[h]ard to get good case. Need to move swiftly. Near term target needs—go massive—sweep it all up, things related and not" (qtd. in Borger 2006).

By September 15, Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz was advocating attacking Iraq, fearing that Afghanistan was too forbidding, and arguing that there was more to shoot at in Iraq (Tyler and Sciolino 2001; Woodward 2004, 25–26). This unhappiness about the shortage of aim points in Afghanistan led policy makers to look elsewhere for targets but did not seem to penetrate thinking about the potential problems this condition could pose to the mission in Afghanistan.[5]

Conclusions about Iraq's chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons capabilities preceded their careful assessment. The National Intelligence Estimate on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) had not even been ordered when Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney were making claims such as Cheney's line to the VFW National Convention in August 2002: "There is no doubt [Saddam Hussein] is amassing [WMD] to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us" (Cheney 2002). When the National Intelligence Estimate was released, the administration kept key dissents classified, such as the State Department's judgment that "Iraq's efforts to acquire aluminum tubes is central to the argument that Baghdad is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program[, but] INR [the Bureau of Intelligence and Research] conclude[s] that the tubes are not intended for [nuclear] use."[6]

The administration's claims of links between al Qaeda and the Iraqi government were similarly forceful and similarly tendentious. One emblematic example is Rumsfeld's claim in September 2002 that he had "bulletproof" evidence of links between Iraq and al Qaeda, but in the same remarks he also equivocated that "if our quest is for proof positive, we probably will be left somewhat unfulfilled" (qtd. in Schmitt 2002). Cheney never relented on the question, telling NPR in January 2004, "I think there's overwhelming evidence that there was a connection between al-Qaeda and the Iraqi

4. Authorization for Use of Military Force of 2001, Pub. L. 107-40, 115 Stat. 224, at https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf.

5. According to Bob Woodward, Rumsfeld in particular "complained regularly at NSC [National Security Council] meetings about the small number of targets" in Afghanistan but offered little analysis for what the implications were for the war in that country (2004, 110).

6. For an almost-contemporaneous debunking of the Bush administration's selective use of intelligence, including the National Intelligence Estimate dissents, see Kaufmann 2004.

government," but retreating, when pressed for evidence, to claims of Saddam Hussein's dalliances with terrorists in the early 1990s (qtd. in Williams 2004).[7]

Regarding the number of troops that would be required to change the Iraqi regime, the Bush administration leadership was certain it would not be very high but also asserted that it was unknowable. After informing the House Budget Committee in February 2003 that the higher-end estimates of forces needed to secure the country were "wildly off the mark," Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz shrugged that, "fundamentally, we have no idea what is needed unless and until we get there on the ground" (Wolfowitz 2003b).

In sum, then, an urgent threat posed by Iraq's WMD and its ties to al Qaeda, both of which the administration allegedly had precise intelligence on, required an invasion that in all likelihood would be cheap and easy but whose cost was ultimately unknowable. The administration's intellectual framework for the invasion was something like the inverse of the precautionary principle.[8]

That scholars are still puzzling over why the Iraq War happened suggests the war was overdetermined (Cramer and Thrall 2012; Butt 2019). The WMD/nonproliferation, counterterrorism, humanitarian, and regional-transformation arguments covered the waterfront of possible justifications, and for the administration they all pointed to war. The central argument for the war involved WMD, but it always looked more like an assumption than a conclusion resulting from careful review of the evidence. The administration did not develop a concern about Iraq or its alleged WMD because administration principals consumed bad intelligence. Their conclusions existed prior to and independent from the intelligence (Butt 2019, 253–58).

It was difficult to disentangle the revolutionary aspects of American policy from the ostensibly realist justifications. President Bush's National Security Strategy in September 2002, for example, described itself as being "based on a distinctly American internationalism," which aimed "to help make the world not just safer but better" (Bush 2002a, 1). In an interview by *Vanity Fair* magazine, Paul Wolfowitz noted that regarding Iraq "there have always been three fundamental concerns. One is weapons of mass destruction, the second is support for terrorism, the third is the criminal treatment of the Iraqi people" (Wolfowitz 2003a). For the principals involved, the justifications were manifold. Even if one argument missed, the others would hit the mark.

There is no indication that principals in the Bush administration grappled seriously with counterarguments, policy alternatives, or even areas in which their own

7. Vice President Cheney was particularly shameless, pointing to Hussein's support for anti-Israel terrorism and to Abdul Rahman Yasin, an American citizen of Iraqi descent who was involved in the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. Yasin was released by the FBI after cooperating with its investigation and fled to Iraq, where he was imprisoned by Hussein beginning in 1994. The Iraqis sporadically attempted to return Yasin to U.S. custody starting in 1994 but were repeatedly rebuffed by the United States (Sims 2002).

8. Ron Suskind characterized Cheney as holding the view that "[e]ven if there's just a one percent chance of the unimaginable coming due, act as if it is a certainty" (2006, 62).

goals conflicted. The most careful effort to isolate a moment when a decision was made to invade Iraq could not pin one down (Prados and Ames 2010).

The run-up to the war was a high point for the influence of think tanks in foreign policy. "Black coffee briefings" at the American Enterprise Institute cultivated groupthink among scholars and journalists. It became such an intellectual hothouse that the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman announced that the Iraq War was really the "war of an elite." According to Friedman, "I could give you the names of 25 people (all of whom are at this moment within a five-block radius of this office) who, if you had exiled them to a desert island a year and a half ago, the Iraq war would not have happened" (qtd. in Shavit 2003).[9]

Like think tanks, television news provided an almost one-sided view of the war, regularly offering titillating details about Hussein's various perfidies but providing almost no independent analysis of the case for war. The case against the war presented on television was carried primarily (40 percent) by Saddam Hussein himself and agents of the Iraqi government, followed far behind by other foreign-government officials, then by Democratic Party opponents of the war, then in man-on-the-street interviews, and only then by independent experts who opposed the war (Hayes and Guardino 2010, 76).

Having worked assiduously for more than six months to make its case, the Bush administration got its war on March 19, 2003. It was a rare opportunity to test social scientific ideas in the real world.

The Freedom Doctrine Explodes on the Launchpad: 2003–2009

The Iraq War was a fire that consumed the Bush presidency. Colin Powell's prewar warning that "it's going to suck the oxygen out of everything, *this will become the first term*" was an understatement (qtd. in Woodward 2004, 150, emphasis in original). After winning reelection in 2004, Bush told reporters, "I earned capital in this campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it" (qtd. in Sandalow 2004). It is doubtful he realized how much he would wind up spending on Iraq.

During this time, as it had been in 2002 and 2003, the war in Afghanistan was largely ignored. The implication from those who raised this point, such as Barack Obama, was that there was much left to do in Afghanistan, which had been shunted to the side by the distraction of the Iraq War. By 2003, however, the Taliban had been deposed, and a significant military blow had been dealt to al Qaeda; by September, the government judged that two-thirds of al Qaeda's leadership had been captured or killed (Bowers 2003). But the Bush administration and after it the Obama

9. Woodward would later note that "[invading Iraq] became the consensus, and you just felt the whole city move toward war" (*Frontline* 2004).

administration seemed to have no vision for producing the conditions that would allow U.S. forces to return home. Instead, with al Qaeda significantly disrupted and the Taliban punished, the mission drifted toward an ambitious state-building campaign in Afghanistan.

In Iraq, as the insurgency grew worse, so did the fates of Republicans in general and of Donald Rumsfeld in particular. To the extent anyone was blamed for the spiral of violence and disorder in Iraq, it was Rumsfeld. Immediately after the "thumping" Republicans suffered in the 2006 midterm elections, Bush accepted Rumsfeld's resignation.

The central act of Robert Gates's tenure as defense secretary was the implementation of the surge strategy in Iraq. Before taking office, Gates had judged that there was a way to achieve his goal: to "stabilize Iraq and to bring it to a place where the United States' eventual departure would not be seen as a strategic defeat with either regional or global consequences" (Gates 2015, 3).

Even by Gates's unmeasurable standard of success, it is unclear why the surge should be seen as worth the cost. At home, by 2014 the public had shifted to believing by a margin of 52 to 37 percent that the United States had "mostly failed" to achieve its goals in the country (Pew Research Center 2014). The war did not have major regional or global consequences, but there is little evidence that the surge prevented those consequences or that the public or elites credit it with having done so.

By 2007, the revolutionary fervor in American elite circles was still riding high, although its support among the population at large was flagging. In a speech to the Economic Club of New York's Centennial Celebration Dinner in June 2007, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice explained that the ideological turn in American policy should have surprised no one: in her telling, "America has always been, and will always be, not a status quo power, but a revolutionary power" (Rice 2007, 6).

In the end, however, the administration's rhetoric outstripped what reality allowed. Under duress, the Bush administration negotiated a status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) with Iraq in 2008. The Iraqis insisted that the SOFA provide terms for the complete removal of US troops, a point of contention with the Americans on which the Iraqis prevailed. The Americans would later argue successfully that tens of thousands of American forces could stay in the country as trainers and advisers to Iraqi forces, but the SOFA itself made clear that the days of America's war in Iraq were numbered.

In his final visit to Iraq, President Bush held a press conference with his Iraqi counterpart. Bush, referring to the SOFA as "a framework for the withdrawal of American forces in Iraq," nonetheless pronounced that the war was ongoing and "there is still more work to be done" (Bush 2008). At the conclusion of his remarks, an Iraqi journalist threw his shoes at the U.S. president, shouting, "This is your farewell kiss, you dog! This is for the widows, the orphans, and those who were killed in Iraq!" (qtd. in France24 2009). Thirty-seven days later, Bush left office.

Normalizing Forever War amid Great-Power Competition: The Obama/Trump Years, 2009–2020

Many observers hoped that the presidency of Barack Obama would extricate the United States from the extravagances of the Bush years. A man who had risen to the presidency partly on his vocal opposition to the Iraq War before it started, Obama mostly followed through on the withdrawal from Iraq.

Over howls of outrage from former Bush officials and hawkish analysts, the Obama team mostly stuck to the terms of the 2008 SOFA that had been negotiated by the Bush team. At the last minute, the Obama administration failed to secure immunity for remaining U.S. forces in the country, which scuttled any chances for an agreement that would allow several thousand troops to stay. Under Obama, the number of troops in Iraq went from roughly 148,500 in January 2009 to roughly 5,000 by January 2017 (Peters 2021, 12).

The centerpiece of the Obama administration's policy in the region, beyond drawing down in Iraq and surging in Afghanistan, lay in Libya and Syria. The administration intervened in Libya in 2011, claiming humanitarian justifications but quickly moving to regime change. The war led to the disintegration of the Libyan state, a total disruption of its oil output, the rise of radical Islamists and terrorist groups in the country, open-air slave markets, warlordism, and, a decade later, multiple governments within the country (Kuperman 2013).

The Obama administration also spent more than a billion dollars attempting to train and equip rebels to overthrow the regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria, later changing the focus of its Syria policy to countering the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) rather than the Assad regime (Friedman and Logan 2019).

To be sure, apart from its wars in the Middle East, the Obama administration gestured at a reorientation of priorities. The administration began marketing a "pivot to Asia" in 2011. Initially, the logic was clearly zero sum and based on the idea that the United States had overinvested in the greater Middle East.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched the idea by noting that in the previous decade the United States had "allocated immense resources" to Iraq and Afghanistan but that it stood at a "pivot point" that called for a much greater emphasis on China (Clinton 2011).

As part of this policy, the administration pledged to commit 60 rather than 50 percent of U.S. naval assets to the Asia-Pacific region. President Obama informed the Australian Parliament in 2011 that although the U.S. defense budget would be trimmed, "reductions in U.S. defense spending will not—I repeat, will not—come at the expense of the Asia Pacific" (Obama 2011, 1442). It was clear that whatever happened in the Middle East, the Obama administration saw the future dawning in the East. But Obama was unable to direct attention away from the Middle East. As one former White House official put it in 2015, "[I]t never felt like we pivoted away

from the Middle East. About 80% of our main meetings at the National Security Council have focused on the Middle East" (qtd. in *Economist* 2015).

Donald Trump's administration took office in January 2016, having rocked both political parties. Trump blasted his way through a crowd of seventeen Republican candidates and then defeated Hillary Clinton. His triumph flipped over the table of American politics.

Trump held back nothing when it came to Republicans' sacred beliefs on national security. In a CNN town hall in military-heavy South Carolina, Trump retreated from his claim that George W. Bush had "lied" the country into the war but nevertheless argued that the war "may have been the worst decision anybody has made, any president has made in the history of this country. That's how bad it is, OK?" (Trump 2016). Foreign-policy mandarins in both parties gasped as Trump pronounced, "We always have to be prepared to walk" away from allies such as Japan, Germany, and Saudi Arabia in order to maintain equity in the relationships (qtd. in Jacobs 2016).

Trump's policies were much more mainstream than his campaign eruptions, however. He appointed establishment figures such as John Bolton, James Mattis, and H. R. McMaster to high positions. He swerved erratically, such as when he announced a "full, rapid" withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria in December 2018 but then declared in 2019 that U.S. troops would be staying to "keep the oil" in that country (qtd. in Crowley 2019).

Trump maintained a "maximum-pressure" campaign against Iran, withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal and imposing an array of sanctions on the country in an effort to prevent a future administration from returning to the deal. He ordered the assassination of the leading Iranian military commander during a visit to Iraq.

Trump's protectionism and his mercenary cast of mind meshed neatly with growing concern about China in many quarters. His administration's National Defense Strategy in 2017 and National Security Strategy in 2018 were candid cases for de-emphasizing small wars and the Middle East and for focusing on China. Amid his own mishandling of the coronavirus outbreak, Trump attempted to use it as a cudgel against China, calling the virus "kung flu" and "the China virus."

But in practice the growing rhetorical and elite focus on China was a reversion to Obama's effort at a "pivot" and to the emphasis of defense planners in the 1990s and the pre-9/11 period. For all of the manias of the 2000s and 2010s—lessons on how to duct-tape ourselves into our homes in the event of a chemical attack, worries about terrorists acquiring nuclear weapons, lectures about the Aum Shinrikyo sarin attack as a harbinger of the future—the global war on terrorism in the end just faded, leaving behind only the exuviae of military deployments, eroded civil liberties, deference to executive authority, and a militarized politics that frequently deferred to power.

Self-Harm in Slow Motion

Immense power can be used wisely or foolishly. The United States entered the third millennium as one of the most powerful states in world history. It faced very few constraints from the international system or from inside its borders. No foreign country or agglomeration of foreign countries possessed the power and unity of effort that would have been required to restrain American power. With a minimum of diplomatic exertion, Washington was regularly able to surmount the obstacles between its political elite and their preferences.[10]

Domestically, abundant resources and permissive mass opinion left the American foreign-policy elite free to roam. Traditional guns-versus-butter trade-offs were almost irrelevant as the United States significantly expanded both domestic welfare spending as well as defense spending. Meanwhile, the American foreign-policy elite sold the public both a nationalistic, America First story about prevention as well as a liberal story that assured Americans that because the United States was a liberal state, the exercise of American power would benefit oppressed peoples across the globe (see Desch 2008; Mearsheimer 2018, 120–216).

Powerful as the United States was, the American foreign-policy elite dreamed up policies extravagant enough to outstrip that power. During the period from 2001 to 2021, the United States destroyed political orders in Iraq and Libya, prolonged civil wars in Afghanistan and Syria, and danced on the brink of war with Iran. During this same period, by its own scorekeeping, its trade policies created a monster in the form of a much more powerful People's Republic of China.

During the Constitutional Convention in 1787, James Madison argued that "the means of defense against foreign danger have always been the instruments of tyranny at home" (qtd. in Ekirch 1956, 25). Not all of the consequences of U.S. foreign policy during the past twenty years remained overseas or contained among members of the military. The wars poisoned America, from its politics to its policing to the ways Americans' government surveils them (Coyne and Hall 2018; Ackerman 2021).

No one was held accountable for the failures of the era. In contexts where the stakes are extremely high and power is concentrated in the hands of a few, accountability is vital. No one lost a think tank sinecure for urging the United States to embark on a costly crusade. To the contrary: possibly the starkest example was the firing of John Hulsman, a moderate critic of the Bush administration's foreign policy, from the Heritage Foundation for his scholarship skeptical of the war with Iraq and of continuing the confrontation with Iran (Ackerman 2006).

10. Coding decisions in the "soft balancing" debate were sometimes curious. For instance, Robert Pape (2005) suggested that French efforts to stop the Iraq War were soft balancing, but the French suspected a costly quagmire, the avoidance of which would have preserved, not diminished, American power (Brooks and Wohlforth 2005).

Skeptical voices did exist and made themselves known to the political elite in Washington. In September 2002, a group of realist international-relations scholars took out an ad in the *New York Times* warning that "[w]ar with Iraq is not in America's national interest" (Mearsheimer et al. 2002, emphasis in the original).

In 2009, a group of scholars wrote a letter to President Obama arguing against the surge in Afghanistan, lamenting that the war was "growing increasingly detached from considerations of length, cost, and consequences" and warning that "engaging in competitive governance with the Taliban is a counterproductive strategy" (qtd. in Smith 2009). These interventions did not make much of an impression on the Washington foreign-policy elite.[11]

As Anatol Lieven wondered,

> If no personal price at all is to be paid in terms of careers for errors on this scale, which contributed to the deaths of thousands of Americans, then the long-term consequences for U.S. government and U.S. democracy could be dire. If being proved obviously, dreadfully wrong brings no long-term consequences, and being proved right brings no long-term rewards, then why in the future should any U.S. analyst, adviser, commentator or public figure ever take a public stand in favor of what he or she believes to be right and correct, if this is going to lead to short-term unpopularity and career damage? (2007)

This question remains unanswered. The "political support system for American primacy" (Betts 2005) remains strong, although it is under more stress than it has been in decades. At this writing, the proposed withdrawal from Afghanistan owes credit both to the current Democratic president and his Republican predecessor and enjoys broad support from the public (*CBS News* 2021). The Biden administration has announced an end to the OCO budget gimmick. That it has taken this long and this much failure to undo these measures suggests that ending the other legacies of the post-9/11 period will be difficult and that many of these legacies may survive as nuts tightened onto the American ship of state by what Robert Higgs (1987) has famously termed the "ratchet effect."

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11. On the insularity of the Washington foreign-policy elite, see Walt 2018.

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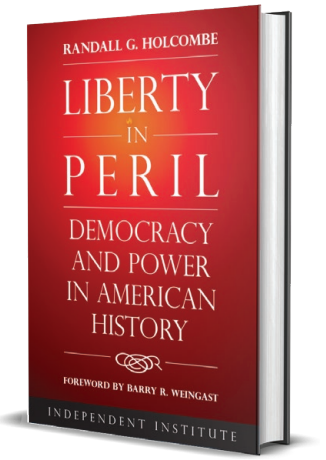

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