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Defence  
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Centre

## Whither the United States?

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**August 2006**

**Dr Ron Huisken** joined the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University in 2001, after nearly 20 years working in Australian government departments, such as Foreign Affairs & Trade, Defence, and Prime Minister & Cabinet. His research interests include US security policies, multilateral security processes in East Asia, alliance management and non-proliferation. Dr Huisken has authored numerous works, including a number of working and Canberra papers published by the SDSC. This paper represents the author's views alone. It has been drawn entirely from open sources, and has no official status or endorsement.

**This paper was presented on Tuesday 15 August 2006 at a seminar entitled 'Global strategic issues', held to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the SDSC.**

**Published by the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at The Australian National University, Canberra**

SDSC 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Seminar Series Paper

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## **Strategic and Defence Studies Centre's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Seminar Series**

Established in 1966, the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre is located within the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia. The SDSC specialises in the study of strategic issues—predominantly in the Asia-Pacific region.

To celebrate its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Centre organised a variety of publications, seminars and a dinner. The events were sponsored by Boeing Australia Holdings Pty Ltd.

The seminars explored key questions facing Australian strategic policy today in light of Australia's experience over the 40 years since the SDSC was established.

On the evening of Tuesday 8 August 2006, Professor Wang Gungwu presented a paper on 'The Rise of China' to guests invited to a special dinner. Professor Wang Gungwu is a Director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore. He is a former Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies and Chairman of the SDSC Advisory Committee.

This dinner was followed by a series of three afternoon seminars in August, September and October 2006, which were held at University House at the Australian National University.

The first of these seminars entitled 'Global strategic issues' was held on the afternoon of Tuesday 15 August 2006 and included presentations by Hugh White (Predictions and policy); Coral Bell (The evolution of the international system); Robert O'Neill (Changing concepts of the nature of security and the role of armed force); and Ron Huisken (Whither the United States?).

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## Whither the United States?

*Ron Huisken*

In terms of weight and influence, or power, the United States can be said to have sustained a strong, positive trajectory for well over a century.

Washington has presided over the world's largest economy since around 1900. It demonstrated its capacity to translate this economic weight into decisive military power in its naval build-up at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in 1917–1918, awesomely so in 1941–1945, and more or less continuously since that time.

America's stature, and the broadly positive regard for it across the world, grew continuously alongside its hard power. Washington seemed always to manage to be both unmistakably the dominant power and to convey the impression that it had no instincts to take command and to actually exploit fully the power it possessed. Combining power and popularity was Washington's distinctive trick. The United States came to be admired, respected and considered indispensable. Its dominance was occasionally resented, but it was not feared and certainly never inspired countervailing coalitions.

Washington continued to build this reputation through the tumultuous years of the Cold War. Thus, at the end of the Cold War in 1991, when the United States again stood starkly exposed as the highest form of predator the world had ever seen, its 41<sup>st</sup> and perhaps most understated President in 50 years, George H.W. Bush, could observe unremarkably that 'they (the rest of the world) trust us to do what is right'.

When the Soviet Union abruptly conceded defeat in the Cold War, the United States was nonplussed. Mikhail Gorbachev was being more than usually perceptive when he told Americans that the Soviet Union's final unfriendly act would be to deprive the United States of an enemy. But the first Bush Administration had no discernable appetite to think grandly about what the United States could do with its 'unipolar moment' in the post-Cold War world. Instead, it focused closely on unraveling the central front of the Cold War and reversing Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Similarly, Bill Clinton's focus was the economy and domestic renewal. In the foreign policy arena, the umbrella objective became 'democratic enlargement', but there was no drive to craft a pro-active policy architecture to deliver such an outcome. Broadly speaking, the first two American Presidents of the post-Cold War era managed to sustain the knack of making America's disproportionate power accepted as benign and reassuring, characteristics that added immeasurably to its huge stock of hard and soft power.

Walter Lippmann may have put his finger on America's knack for being ominously powerful but not regarded as an ominous power when he observed, in 1926, that 'our imperialism is more or less unconscious' and that the United States was an 'empire in denial'. But conveying the impression of indifference to pre-eminence of imperial proportions was no accident. It had everything to do with America's system of governance; the powerful attachment to checks and balances on authority at all levels. The way America went about its business internally provided the strongest possible reassurance that this awesome power would always remain pointed roughly in the direction of the ideals enshrined in its Declaration of Independence, that is, of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness albeit, perhaps, in the reverse order.

## **The Neoconservative Thesis**

Behind the scenes, however, a radically different response to the end of the Cold War had been developed in the Pentagon in 1989–1992. The key players included Richard Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Lewis Libby, Ahmed Khalilzad and, initially at least, Colin Powell. It began as a tactical response to the clamour for a major 'peace dividend' (of the order of 50 percent of the Pentagon budget) but developed into a grand design for a new global order under US command based, pre-eminently, on unassailable US military superiority. A first cut in 1990 offered the President a fairly traditional package of arguments—America's international obligations, hedging against a revival of Soviet power, the challenge of containing the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and other regional dangers (like dictators and terrorists)—to counter the pressure for a simplistic 50 percent peace dividend with a proactive plan to cut active duty military personnel and military expenditure by 25 percent and 30 percent respectively over five years.

In 1991, with Iraq defanged and then the break up of the Soviet Union, the clamour for deep cuts at the Pentagon resurfaced and Cheney directed a new effort to devise a coherent strategy to thwart this pressure. The opportunity to craft a new long-term policy setting for the United States became a vehicle for the neoconservative view that America's rise to primacy had suppressed the instability and conflict that was endemic to both Europe and Asia prior to 1945. It seemed to follow that, if the United States vacated this position or sought to share it with others, the probable outcome would be a revival of the accident-prone balance of power system. The neoconservative prescription was that, in these circumstances, the United States had a duty—to itself as well as to others—to protect its preponderance in hard power and to wield that power unashamedly to advance its values and interests because, happily, these were universal. The evidence suggests that the Pentagon elite regarded the mindset they observed in the White House as ignorant of the lessons of history and of the dimensions of the opportunity that history had presented to the United States.

Cheney was converted and, despite Presidential disapproval, privately praised his team for discovering a 'new rationale' to define America's role in the world. He even managed to release a revised and softened version of the strategy as an official document from the Secretary of Defense just days before Bill Clinton was inaugurated in January 1993, placing it on the public record but ensuring its almost complete obscurity.<sup>1</sup>

The Pentagon strategy remained buried until September 2000 when the conservative think-tank *Project for a New American Century* revived its main premises as a possible blueprint for US security policy. When the team that had crafted the strategy reassembled under President George W. Bush, together with the like-minded Donald Rumsfeld, it was to become clear that their attachment to it was undiminished.

Even though the Bush campaign team had avoided seeking a mandate for this new vision of America's role in the world, it was furthered at every opportunity that the relatively normal circumstances of the first half of 2001 provided. The primacy of military power was particularly evident. In a number of policy statements and actions—for example, resolving to 'redefine war on our terms',<sup>2</sup> the positions adopted on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the International Criminal Court, and the qualitatively distinctive worldview underpinning the Quadrennial Defense Review of October 2001—Washington conveyed a strong impression of stepping away from the community of states and divesting itself of constraints on its freedom of action.

Normalcy, of course, came to an abrupt end on the morning of 11 September 2001. This utterly devastating yet devastatingly simple terrorist strike momentarily felled the most powerful state in the world. In the months and years that followed, the Administration would often remark that '9/11 changed everything'. While there is a great deal of truth in this contention, there was at least one constant of importance to this analysis. The neoconservative grand strategy was not put aside until such time as this unfamiliar threat had been dealt with. To the contrary, the new 'war on terror' was leveraged to advance the grand strategy, a combination that was to befuddle political and strategic judgements and cause the United States to stumble badly on both fronts.

The Pentagon strategy, of course, was still under wraps. The world at large had certainly noted, and been concerned about, the newly imperious tone and style of American behaviour, but it had not yet traced the dots back to the Pentagon strategy. President George Bush lifted the veil in mid 2002. In a West Point speech on 1 June 2002, he rehearsed the shortcomings of the balance of power system, and then added that

competition between great nations is inevitable, but armed conflict is not. More and more, civilized nations find themselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos. America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.<sup>3</sup>

This was a declaration of empire, an assertion that America was taking command. It assembled the starkest formulations of the key propositions crafted a decade earlier. The fact that it was in some substantial measure merely codifying reality was beside the point. Most of the world felt that it had not declared a vacancy and instinctively resisted the role Washington seemed to be claiming for itself—not to mention being so summarily relegated to the second division. Resentment and concern about the new thinking in Washington, which had emerged prior to 11 September 2001 and then been swept aside in the aftermath of the attacks, had resurfaced as the Administration insisted that its assessment of the terrorist phenomenon and its prescriptions for dealing with it, including regime change in Iraq, could not be contested. Within six months of 11 September 2001, the most extraordinary 'coalition of the willing' ever seen was little more than a memory.

America's unique aura—those intangible qualities of respect, admiration and trust that added so immeasurably to its hard power, and which had been so painfully but magnificently accumulated over the preceding century—had been ruptured.

America's dilemma was a real one. It was too powerful to easily blend in with the other powers; and the neoconservative prescription, while never tested in a whole-of-government review, was hardly the babbling of madmen. Its most conspicuous flaw, perhaps, is that it sought to discredit a system of global governance that had been overtaken and was no longer a realistic alternative. The neoconservative thesis might have been challenged as a process that arrived first at the preferred solution and then contrived to formulate the problem to make the package as compelling as possible.<sup>4</sup>

Tragically, however, the Bush Administration displayed no interest whatever in the marketing of its proposed solution to this dilemma, let alone re-shaping its solution into a marketable product. There is no evidence that consideration was given to a spot of statesmanship and diplomacy to try to give this sweeping proposition a softer landing. Indeed, a rather strong case can be made that the authors of the solution saw marketing as a sign of weakness—a possible signal to others that the United States lacked the resolve to impose its vision. The President, it would appear, relished the newly 'black and white' world of a United States at 'war' and was more than a little intrigued by what these circumstances did to his authority as commander-in-chief.<sup>5</sup> He was not attracted to subtlety and nuance and took ownership of this second strategy, including the manner in which it should be presented, as readily as he had the global 'war on terror'.

Iraq became the issue that wobbled between the two security strategies in play in Washington in 2001–2003, a state of affairs that contributed very materially to the disastrous lead-up to the invasion (the dissipation of the post-11 September 2001 'coalition of the willing' and then the deep fissures within the Western alliance) and to the even more disastrous aftermath.

Regime change in Iraq had much more to do with the Pentagon strategy than with the 'war on terror'. It was seen as a move that would both look back and erase what was seen as a black mark on America's *curriculum vitae* as a power that finished what it started and, looking forward, provide an enduring illustration of the fact that the United States had both the capacity and the will to impose its vision for international order.

Beyond embracing political isolation as part of the loneliness of leadership, the fact that the Administration had two strategic imperatives in play contributed rather directly to several key judgements on Iraq that, collectively, transformed this venture into a debacle.

First, although the case for action against Iraq was broad, it lacked a concrete link to the attacks on 11 September 2001 and to the political window of opportunity for decisive action that the attacks had opened. Regime change in Iraq therefore had to be positioned as a priority in the 'war on terror'. Expectations and hopes that proof of Iraqi involvement in the attacks and/or of some form of strategic association with al Qaeda had to be abandoned. The Administration then settled on WMD as the remaining rationale that was sufficiently focused and compelling to at least bring Congress and the public along. As we know, confirming this rationale proved surprisingly difficult, and the Administration found itself slipping into the manipulation and hyping of the intelligence at its disposal only to have the most obvious explanation for the difficulty confirmed after the invasion: Iraq had not had WMD for some time, and was not poised to re-acquire them.<sup>6</sup>

Second, using Iraq to herald the Pentagon's grand strategy put a premium on dislodging Saddam Hussein with a spectacularly lean combat force, and to discounting the contrary consideration that an overwhelming military presence might be prudent for the purposes of occupation and stabilisation.

Thirdly, but related to this point, the window of opportunity to deal with Iraq was deemed to be so precious that the Administration elected to minimise the risk that thinking through or planning for possible worst case developments would reach the public or Congress. Almost literally, that meant not doing any such work for the period after the Iraqi armed forces had been defeated.<sup>7</sup> The result was that, after taking Baghdad, US commanders in Iraq had no guidance, a confused chain of command back to Washington, and stood aside for what seemed like an eternity, dissipating the momentum of their military campaign, leaving Iraqis wondering who, if anyone, had replaced Saddam Hussein, and giving those disposed to resist the occupation through insurgent operations a whiff of hope.

Finally, as the awful consequences of these judgements began to loom, getting inside and destroying the emergent insurgency became a matter of the utmost importance, a matter of 'doing whatever it takes'. This contributed rather directly, in my view, to the excesses at Abu Ghraib. The Abu Ghraib saga, along with Camp Delta, the legal gymnastics over 'enemy combatants' and the inevitable relentless stream of accidents and miscalculations involving Iraqi civilians when a top-end combat force is both stretched *and* tasked to lighten its touch for counter-insurgency operations, saw the United States lose all the moral high ground.

Iraq has been a catastrophe for the United States. It has, in all likelihood, intensified and prolonged the era of virulent terrorism; it has foreshortened America's unipolar moment; it has made Washington more of an observer than a player in the wider geopolitical transformations underway; it may have introduced a new inclination toward isolationism within the American public which will narrow the foreign and security policy options for future administrations; and, by generating perceptions of disorder at the top of the international tree, it may have fuelled recklessness and brinkmanship on the part of a number of lesser players.

Looking back, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the abrupt transformation in the style of US engagement with the world—a transformation toward imperious, unilateral leadership—was decisive in triggering a reaction of profound disappointment among so many allies and friends, both old and new. This disappointment matured into concern that the United States had slipped its moorings, that even its system of governance, so profoundly reassuring for so long, could be subverted and allow a clique in the executive branch to pursue a private vision all the way to pre-emptive war.

The perception that the United States has damaged itself rather grievously is heightened if one's starting point is the immediate aftermath of the attacks on 11 September 2001. At that moment, essentially the entire world had put aside concerns that had accumulated over the preceding eight months and assembled spontaneously around Washington to jointly confront the new menace of mass casualty terrorism. It was a stunning signal of solidarity, a reflection of the huge stock of respect and goodwill that America had accumulated over more than a century, and clear evidence that America's centrality to international order and stability was universally appreciated. The Bush Administration, however, seemed scarcely to notice and insisted on driving home the point that the United States was in command.

Notwithstanding the tragic events on 11 September 2001, disappointment in the United States spread swiftly and endures to this day. The frontal challenge to stability and order that attacks like those on 11 September 2001 so clearly represented was now reinforced by resentment and disunity among the world's leading states, compounding perceptions of a 'world out of balance' (the title of Dr Coral Bell's recent book).<sup>8</sup>

## Looking Ahead

The explanation for the 'new' America that appeared in 2001, and particularly for the invasion of Iraq, can be found in an extraordinary fusion of circumstances, including the attacks on 11 September 2001; the power, conviction and experience of a clique of officials with a grand vision for an era of American dominance; the personality of President Bush; and the achievement of astonishing virtuosity in usable military power. These circumstances combined to overwhelm America's system of checks and balances, and for an action to proceed, that because it was seen as a 'home run' on several fronts, was not critically second-guessed on any of them. The invasion of Iraq was at once an angry giant lashing out in shock at the impudence of the attacks on 11 September 2001 and a giant supremely confident that it could now impose its grand vision more quickly and decisively than 'normal' circumstances might have allowed.

In the eyes of the world and of a strong majority of its own citizens, the United States now stands diminished, its legitimacy as the world's pre-eminent state questioned more seriously than ever before. This legacy of Operation *Iraqi Freedom* will not soon be erased.

Looking ahead to the more immediate future, I am inclined to be more optimistic than the analysis attempted in this paper might suggest. The reasons for this optimism are twofold. First, a deeply-ingrained capacity to self-correct and to renew itself ranks amongst the greatest political strengths of the United States. It has a singular capacity to step away from a course of action and take a new path with scarcely a trace of baggage from, or embarrassment about, its past policies. Some recalibration of policy settings is clearly underway. The available pointers might be no more than pragmatic adjustments to a transformed domestic political scene, but the trend is unmistakably positive. Iraq, of course, is the critical exception, with something resembling an honourable outcome to put against the enormous human, material and intangible costs incurred remaining as elusive as ever.

The second reason for optimism is that, even in its diminished and chastened state, America's shoes are way too big to be filled by any other state or, indeed, any imaginable grouping of states. As the prevailing turmoil so strongly suggests, a United States that is confident, engaged and leading remains indispensable to a modicum of order and stability in world affairs. Nor will this state of affairs come into serious question for quite some time. Depending on your projection, and on the type of exchange rate used, the United States will remain the single largest economic entity in the world for another 20 years or so and to retain critical qualitative economic advantages for a good deal longer. America's capacity to bring overwhelming force to bear anywhere in the world, precisely and relentlessly, is likely to remain unmatched for at least as long. The point becomes even more compelling if one asks when another country might arise with a package of attributes competitive with that offered by the United States: economic strength, military prowess, technological vibrancy, an admired political system, a very marketable set of basic values and beliefs, an appealing culture, a magnificent tradition of leadership and so on. That prospect, it seems to me, lies

well into the indefinite future. This suggests that most governments will be only too ready to respond positively to overtures from the United States for a new compact on the governance of world affairs.

The Bush Administration miscued tragically and dissipated a probably unique opportunity to have unipolarity accepted as a reality and endorsed as a durable, if not indefinite, construct for global governance. As Dr Coral Bell has argued so persuasively, Washington should now, and indeed may, begin to look toward arrangements with the flavour of a 'concert of powers'. The primary vehicle for any new accommodation will surely have to be developing a new meeting of minds on the most effective strategies to defuse extremism and prevent nuclear proliferation.

This process will neither be easy nor certain. We cannot return to the *status quo ante*. Equally, however, given America's pronounced and comprehensive edge in strategic weight, no imaginable new construct for relations between the major powers in the decades immediately ahead will be unrecognisably different from the arrangements that have evolved since the end of the Cold War. A stepping-stone in the desired direction could be something that a Chinese leader might be tempted to describe as 'unipolarity with democratic characteristics'. (The impulses that have driven the United States over the past six years will not vanish in January 2009 when the Bush Administration completes its term. A further complication may be that some other powers, notably China but perhaps also Russia and India, probably have a rather different view today as compared to 2000 on how the world should work and on their proper role in the process.) Whether there will be enough statesmanship in the relevant capitals either to forge or to manoeuvre gradually towards a new *modus operandi* is an open question, but I would incline to optimism.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, Department of Defense, Washington DC, January 1993.
- <sup>2</sup> President George W. Bush, 'Remarks by the President to the troops and personnel', Norfolk Naval Air Station, Norfolk, Virginia, 13 February 2001; available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/02/20010213.html>, accessed 15 August 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> President's Graduation Speech, United States Military Academy, West Point New York, 1 June 2002.
- <sup>4</sup> For an insightful analysis of these and related issues, see Robert Jervis, 'The Remaking of a Unipolar World', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 3, Summer 2006, pp. 7–19.
- <sup>5</sup> Bob Woodward reports an illuminating observation that President Bush volunteered during an interview: "I'm the commander—see, I don't need to explain—I don't need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the President. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation." See Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2002, pp. 145–146.
- <sup>6</sup> For two fuller analyses of this issue that come to rather different conclusions, see Lawrence Freedman, 'War In Iraq: Selling the Threat', *Survival*, vol. 6, no. 2, June 2004, pp. 7–49; and Ron Huisken, *We Don't Want the Smoking Gun to be a Mushroom Cloud: Intelligence on Iraq's WMD*, Working Paper No. 390, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, June 2004.
- <sup>7</sup> A particularly good account of this astonishing process can be found in George Packer, *The Assassins Gate*, Faber & Faber, London, 2006, especially pp. 100–148.
- <sup>8</sup> Coral Bell, *A World out of Balance: American Ascendancy & International Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Longueville Books and *The Diplomat*, Woollahra, NSW, 2004.