



The End of the Evil Empire- the Age of the American Atlas

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With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War a quarter of a century ago, several US pundits and intellectuals proclaimed the triumph of America's mission to redeem the world. The demise of Soviet Communism and the 'evil empire', as Ronald Reagan put it, represented 'the end of History' (Francis Fukuyama) and the 'unipolar moment' (Charles Krauthammer). Talk of American 'decline' had been rife (think Paul Kennedy's bestselling *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*), but we were told the United States had enormous demonstrated capacity for 'renewal' (Samuel Huntington) and was 'bound to lead' the world in the new era (Joseph Nye).

In terms of American foreign policy, this all meant that the United States, as the sole remaining superpower, should assume an ambitious and interventionist leadership role to create a post-Cold War world peace based on liberal democracy, market economics and national self-determination. The American Atlas would hold up the sky.

But the events of the 9th of November 1989 had also disoriented the American people. During the 40-plus-year East-West standoff, they had faced a life-threatening strategic and ideological



enemy. Suddenly, they had been deprived of the very threat that had demanded and justified a Pax Americana in the post-WWII era. Not surprisingly, many American foreign-policy specialists argued that having won a great victory it was time for the US to embrace a more restricted view of the nation's interests and commitments.

Even Cold Warriors recognised that the dramatically changing circumstances demanded a foreign-policy rethink. Take Jeane Kirkpatrick, Reagan's UN ambassador. 'With a return to "normal" times,' she argued in 1990, 'we can again become a normal nation—and take care of pressing problems' at home. 'It is time to give up the dubious benefits of superpower status and become again an ... open American republic.' Or take the eminent realist statesman Henry Kissinger. The definition of the US national interest in the new era, the former Republican Secretary of State counselled, would be different from the rigid bipolarity of the Cold War: 'more discriminating in its purpose, less cataclysmic in its strategy and, above all, more regional in its design.'

For these prominent thinkers, and indeed many other Americans, the logic was clear enough: if the Cold War had been defined as a Manichaeian battle between democratic virtue and totalitarian evil—a special, aberrant case in the American experience—surely the end of the Cold War required serious changes regarding future US strategy and purpose in the world.

This history is important, because it reminds us that with the fall of the Berlin Wall the US had no grand plan or doctrine in place to exploit its unexpected dominance. Nor did it adopt one during the 1990s. George H.W. Bush, far from maximising American advantage in its moment of triumph, was focused on managing the collapse of the Soviet Empire, lest it unleash the kind of instability and chaos usually associated with the fall of empires. As for Bill Clinton, he showed little interest in foreign affairs, and insisted the economy should be the nation's main preoccupation throughout his two terms in the White House.

True: Washington continued to emphasise the importance of American global leadership at every turn. The armed forces, despite the post-Cold War 'peace dividend', were also maintained at a high level. But US commitments, notwithstanding proposals to enlarge NATO membership to Eastern Europe, were kept limited in time and scope. The US military often seemed more concerned with having effective exit strategies in place than with implementing ambitious, open-ended foreign policy projects—whether that concerned Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, or places entirely avoided, like Rwanda.

By the end of the 1990s, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was able to boast that America was the 'indispensable nation.' As Thomas Friedman, the liberal *New York Times* columnist, declared: 'Today's era is dominated by American power, American culture, the American dollar and the American navy.' Leading neo-conservatives William Kristol and Robert Kagan predicted a long era of 'benign hegemony' in world affairs.

Meanwhile, the US was experiencing a long boom. Everything that should be up—wages, growth, the stock market—was up, while everything that should be down—inflation, unemployment, deficits—was down. In 1999, distinguished economists had predicted the Dow Jones Industrial Average would rise to 36,000 within a few years. Americans were fat and happy.



Those days are over. Today Americans are in a profoundly foul mood. Everywhere they look they see signs of decline. Debt is of Himalayan proportions. Infrastructure is ageing. The economic recovery since the financial crisis, despite the Fed's easy money and record Keynesian 'stimulus' spending, has been the most sluggish since the Great Depression. Average real income levels have declined by more than five per cent in the past two decades. A polarised political system is beholden to special interests. Broad pluralities of Americans consistently think their nation is heading in the wrong direction.

Abroad, the US, not so much an eagle as an elephant, has found itself wrong-footed and outwitted in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. The loss of credibility and prestige has led to a reduced ability to lead and persuade. Washington's demands and requests are increasingly ignored and its influence is fading at global summits. Meanwhile, great power rivals Russia and China are spreading their power and influence in countries near and abroad. The collapse of Soviet Communism, far from leading to a new world order of self-determination, has unleashed new forms of security competition.

True: even at the height of the Cold War the US did not exert total control over events all across the globe. It could not prevent the Chinese, Cuban and Iranian revolutions in 1949, 1959 and 1979, respectively, and it suffered defeat in Vietnam in the mid-1970s, but the US nonetheless exercised enormous influence.

From hindsight, it is clear that September 11, 2001 marked a turning point. American outrage over the terrorist attacks, taken together with American exceptionalism and the mental habits of American global hegemony, suddenly gave US leaders a clear, overriding sense of purpose. Suddenly, the aforementioned neo-conservative and liberal interventionist world view had become the prevailing wisdom in not just Washington but Middle America. The Bush doctrine of democracy promotion, preventive war and aggressive unilateralism was born. And the countdown to Operation Iraqi Freedom had begun.

Thus, 9/11 had shifted the balance in favour of those who saw things in sweeping, even ideological terms—away from the prudence and modesty of the 1989-2001 era toward an ambitious and assertive use of US power and influence to reshape world order. In Iraq—the most obvious case study of the neo-conservative experiment—the evidence is overwhelming: the demise of a Sunni state that led to a Sunni insurgency that has morphed into a plethora of Sunni jihadist groups, most notably the Islamic State terrorists wreaking havoc in the Middle East.

At the same time, many neo-conservatives and liberal interventionists fear that the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran, whose position has strengthened since the invasion of Iraq, is a terror sponsoring power that wants to dominate the region.

The limits of the US capacity and power to transform the Middle East have been made evident. Although the new air-campaign against Islamic State militants has broad public support, there is a strong aversion to the commitment of ground troops once again. And although Americans may be quick to arouse to fight the good fight, they lack the staying power and attention span to defeat



age-old tribal and sectarian thugs in medieval societies. Simply put, a clear majority of Americans are tired of the world and suffering from foreign policy fatigue.

To be sure, the US remains the world's largest economy, the issuer of its reserve currency, its lone military superpower; and many countries around the world want American protection. Even Vietnam, a Cold War foe, is clamouring for US security guarantees in the face of a rising China. The Obama pivot to Asia, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, continues. With higher immigration and fertility rates than other developed nations, the US is also in a relatively good position to deal with an ageing population. The shale-gas 'fracking' revolution also has the potential to make the US energy independent and give the American economy a new lease on life.

All true. It's just that US power and influence has waned since the end of the Cold War, and will continue to wane in what leading American commentator Fareed Zakaria calls 'the post-American world'. At the same time, as Zakaria observes, 'the post-American world' is 'far more peaceful and stable than at any point in decades and, by some measures, centuries.' There is no Soviet Union seeking global hegemony. Sunni jihadists in Iraq and Syria do not, as US intelligence recognises, represent a threat to US core interests.

The United States, far from acting like the kind of almost indiscriminating global policeman that neo-conservatives and liberal interventionists have advocated since the end of the Cold War, is bound to define distinctions between the essential and the desirable, between what is possible and what is beyond its capabilities. It will also place more stress on limits in a complex and ambiguous world that won't conform to American expectations.

Whether a presidential candidate—the libertarian realist Rand Paul on the Republican side, for instance?—is capable of winning an election campaign on such a platform remains to be seen. But times have changed since the end of the Cold War. America is in no mood to go abroad in search of monsters to destroy.