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**Multilateralism in the Age of Empire**

**(Check Against Delivery)**

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## **Multilateralism in the Age of Empire**

This evening I will make a four point argument:

1. that the US is not an empire, nor even really a hegemon, but is undoubtedly the most powerful country ever seen and will remain so for any reasonably foreseeable future;
2. that while there has been extraordinary sympathy with the United States after 9/11, the unilateralist impulses of US foreign policy have progressively estranged the United States from others;
3. that multilateral cooperation will continue because it has to, in order to provide security and to encourage economic and social development; and
4. that the multilateral system needs both renovation and innovation, a job that is as important as it is difficult, and that is best done with US leadership and cooperation.

### America: Empire, Hegemon or What?

A fundamental question in the wake of 9/11 and the US attack on Iraq, is whether the US will be with the rest of us or against us, whether other countries will be able to work with the United States in the larger interest or have to work around the United States, will the United States be the subject of multilateral cooperation or the object of it, not in the sense of facing coalitions that will seek to balance American power, although that, too, is imaginable if the United States were further to ignore international law and to show no “decent respect to the opinions of mankind<sup>1</sup>”, but because we live in an increasingly globalized, integrated, interdependent world that requires cooperative management to function effectively. No single country, not even the United States, can run this world alone even if it wants to. Happily, notwithstanding the aspirations of a few hard-headed, soft-handed Washington consultants, commentators and vicarious academic imperialists, there is scant evidence that most Americans want to.

While the empire debate is back, mostly among academics, it is difficult to make the argument persuasively that the US is an empire in any conventional meaning of the word, i.e., “a large state or group of states under a single sovereign” (Webster). Since the UN Charter proscribed “the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state”, and since the last vestiges of colonialism largely disappeared in the Fifties and Sixties, few countries have even contemplated the conquest of others and still fewer have attempted it, although some might argue that that is what happened in Iraq. Nor are the more contemporary conceptions of an empire run indirectly from Washington entirely apt. That is why we read of “Empire Lite”, “Incoherent Empire”, “Inadvertent Empire”, “Sorrow’s Empire”, “Fear’s Empire”, “After the Empire”, “Colossus” “Rogue Nation” and “The Unconquerable World” to cite only some of the titles in current circulation. It seems to be implicit in the virtual empire models that the region over which the US presides is the world itself. But if America is imperial, who are its subjects, and why are they not obeying? The extent of cooperation with the US in the war in Iraq is hardly consistent with imperial power.

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<sup>1</sup> See the U.S. Declaration of Independence

Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt and the past 50 years of cooperative international institution-building, treaty-making and network developing have changed the way the world thinks about managing international relations. The combination of integrating economies and of burgeoning technology, shrinking distance and time, has changed how the world runs its affairs. The concomitant, progressive integration of consciousness and conscience into foreign policy and the advance of democracy have only more fully integrated the world.

The world has become too complex and the United States has become too dependent, not least financially, on others (as others are on the US), to transcend the system or to determine, itself, outcomes. Moreover, the US is the world's greatest debtor, going progressively and quickly deeper into debt. The historical evidence on the long term viability of debtor-empires is not encouraging. More fundamentally, the reality is that the American people are not interested in empire, direct or indirect. In fact, notwithstanding some of the attitudes on display at the 2004 Republican Party convention, in polls taken post-Iraq invasion, a majority of Americans even say they support the United Nations, the presumed rival of the United States for world leadership.

In any case, the imperatives of empire conflict with the myths of freedom, and the myths trump all. The U.S. was born anti-imperial, and remains anti-imperial in its soul, its late-nineteenth century experimentation with colonialism and its all too frequent interference in Latin America notwithstanding. As British historian Niall Ferguson has observed, apparently in regret, most Americans are not very taken with the idea or the duties of empire. According to the 9/11 commission, only six Americans graduated last year with a degree in Arabic from an American university. Not many young Americans are evidently preparing themselves for lifetimes of administering distant lands.

Beyond Cuba, how much popular pressure is there to interfere direct in the affairs of other countries? In addition, whatever the outcome of the on-going contest of the neo-cons and the conservatives/realists, over American policy, the power of American liberal values and the scope and speed of modern communications preclude the kind of brutal tactics to subdue resistance used in the past to build empires. There was no CNN or BBC World Report or Al Jazeera in the Twenties. Consider the global, not least American, outrage over Abu Ghraib or the American decision not to destroy Fallujah and Najaf. Nor would the British objectives in Mesopotamia be acceptable these days by a much more aware and integrated wider international community.

All of this is not to say that the US does not think it has, or does not, in fact, have a proselytizing role on behalf of democracy. It is to say that democracy is learned best by emulation not imposition. Finally, and perhaps most important in this limited context of the debate on empire, which is a proxy for how the US should behave towards others, military power, even vast military power, is not the solution to all security problems, particularly terrorism.

The attacks carried out by Al Qaeda and the Iraq occupation, particularly its aftermath, have revealed the limits of military power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even its counterproductive potential. To fight terrorism requires widespread intelligence and

police cooperation. To prevent terrorism requires policies that produce international equity and respect human dignity.

There is no English word that adequately captures the extraordinary character of American standing in the world. Perhaps searching for a term to explain America's place vis-à-vis the rest of us is not so much an aid to understanding as it is a blind alley. The simple truth is that the US is the most powerful country in history. Militarily, the US can match the rest of the world, together; economically, it is the single biggest entity; and, culturally, its influence is pervasive. The US is too strong to be challenged by any rival country or combination of rival countries militarily for the reasonably foreseeable future, (if any wanted to, for which there is no evidence). At the same time, the US is not so strong that it can, itself, determine the course of world events. In short, the US is too powerful to be coerced but not powerful enough to coerce everyone else. Hence cooperation is unavoidable, often but not always on US terms.

### American Foreign Policy

In the recent documentary, "The Fog of War", the Kennedy-Johnson administrations' Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, asks "Have we a record of omniscience? I do not believe we should ever apply [our] economic, political or military power unilaterally... If we cannot persuade nations with comparable values of the merit of our cause, we'd better re-examine our reasoning." In the current circumstances, that stands as particularly good advice. One of the hallmarks of recent American policy, and a parallel with Vietnam, has been an apparent unwillingness even to hear dissent let alone consider it, or "re-examine... reasoning". By the summer of 2002, the Beltway (Washington) and the East River (the United Nations) had become two solitudes, a phenomenon that was also evident in NATO, in APEC, at the OAS, in the G-8, and even in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (albeit less so). It was difficult to reason together; Washington was mainly "on send", not receive.

After 9/11, many influential Americans had persuaded themselves that U.S. security could be best, in fact, only assured by American military power. Neither treaties nor international law nor institutions, including the United Nations and NATO, were deemed to be relevant to protecting US interests or necessary to convey legitimacy to U.S. action. It did not have to be that way. There was little in the reaction of the international community to 9/11 to warrant such unilateralism, nor to justify the US's jeopardizing 60 years of development of international law, most of which previous US Administrations had promoted, (and all of which was significant to Canadian interests). In fact, after the al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington, the UN General Assembly and the Security Council had acted sympathetically to the United States, and with dispatch.

On September 12, 2001, the General Assembly, which is not a decision-making body, issued a unanimous declaration of solidarity with the American people. Within days of September 11, the UN Security Council, whose decisions are legally binding in international law, proscribed cooperation with terrorists, ordering member states to deny them both safe haven and the use of national banking systems to finance their operations.

The Council also established an oversight committee to monitor member states' compliance and to promote capacity-building in the poorer states. This was on top of the 12 counter-terrorism treaties that the UN had negotiated previously, on aircraft hi-jacking, hostage-taking, chemical explosives-marking, etc. Many governments sent troops to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban and al Qaeda alongside American forces. The only hesitation about cooperation came not from allied governments but from the Pentagon, who did not want to repeat the Kosovo experience of war by international committee. After the war, many countries committed substantial sums of money to lift Afghanistan out of its failed state status, so that it would not again become a rear operating base for terrorists. The Canadian Government, sent troops into combat Afghanistan for the first time since Korea, and made Afghanistan the largest recipient of Canadian development assistance funding.

Nonetheless, 9/11 shocked Americans and Washington responded with the 2002 US National Security Strategy. Much of the strategy is readily acceptable to most governments, especially to most democratic governments; much of it could have been written in other capitals. The problem lies, of course, in its unilateralist, preventive posture and the intent it expresses to dominate others. The national security strategy talked of preemption, which is permitted by Article 51 of the UN Charter and under customary international law, but in terms that amounted to prevention, which is not. The difference is not just legalistic hair splitting. Pre-emption requires much more rigorous tests than prevention does as regards urgency and the capability and intent to do harm of an adversary. In addition, the intent to dominate and to deter all challengers, first seen in draft NSC guidance in 1992 in the George H.W. Bush administration, and rejected then, but included in the 2002 National Security Strategy would, if carried to its logical conclusions, eventually generate major wars. In the meantime, Iraq is seen, correctly, as the first exercise of the policy of prevention.

The war in Iraq actually was preventive -- to bring down a tyrant with potentially malignant intentions and possible, suspected capabilities. It was presented, however, as pre-emptive -- to stop a tyrant possessing weapons of mass destruction and prepared to use them imminently. The argument has been recast and nuanced more recently, particularly at the 2004 Republican Party convention, to highlight the dangers that Saddam Hussein, the tyrant, posed, in order to try to connect the Iraq invasion more convincingly to the war on terror.

Under the national security strategy, the US Administration reserves the right to act to defend America, which in itself is unobjectionable. The U.S., as is the case of all other countries, has an inherent right of self-defence, a reality that is recognized in the UN Charter. Sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, however, the argument is made by Washington that this right can and, indeed, should be exercised without reference to its impact on others and to international law. The proponents of unilateral decision-making seem to be little persuaded anymore by the lessons drawn from World War II about the importance of collective security. Some academics talk a little breathlessly, and admiringly, of a new grand strategy. But what happens if others claim the same right of prevention as the United States does? The most glaring problem with the National Security Strategy and with the impulses of contemporary US foreign policy is the

unrealistic assessment that the US can go it alone effectively. Further, it is difficult to see how indifference to the unilateral precedents being set is consonant with the not very long-term interest of others and of the US in a world of cooperation rather than competition. Would anyone be happy conceding the same *carte blanche* to China in 40 years time?

While some strategic studies scholars presume a state of chaos as the default position of civilization, wrongly in my view, as if the world were incapable of progress, is it really in American interests to seek that state, to risk returning to the law of the jungle, to live in opposition “to the opinions of mankind”? In a world that US power cannot control, this is not a trivial question. In any case, “the opinion of mankind” is not currently positive about the United States. The Atlantic, already politically wide at the end of the Cold War, is getting wider. Common values, notably with respect to human and civil rights, which were once simply assumed to unite America and Europe (and Canada) in both aspiration and practice, can no longer be so taken for granted. More worrisome, in the Arab world, to paraphrase a recent US commission on public diplomacy headed by Edward Djerejian of Rice University, a former US ambassador to Israel and Syria, the bottom has fallen out of support for the US. The attitudes towards the US in most Islamic countries more generally are likewise very negative. In Latin America, the US-engineered regime change in Iraq evoked memories of the Monroe Doctrine and 150 years of US intervention. Africans are at once dismayed that the Iraq occupation is “sucking the oxygen” away from their preoccupations and concerned that the UN Charter might not afford them the protection against outside interference that they hoped it would.

Globally, with respect to security, there is little common threat-perception. Outside the United States, few perceive terrorism in terms of an urgent, existential danger that would warrant the kind of general mobilization that Soviet Communism did. Most others seem to see that threat more in terms of economic disruption and individual safety, of clogged borders and personal inconvenience, of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, rather than of a war and a danger to national security. There is, on the one hand, an understandable anxiety about apparently growing Islamic fundamentalism and extremism, and on the other, a considerable apprehension about the direction of American foreign policy, whose only check or balance is an evidently divided and often distracted US electorate.

U.S. foreign policy has had enormous successes: World War II, the creation of the U.N., the development of international law, including trade law, the defeat of the Soviet Union and the containment of communism, the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait, the preservation of stability in northeast Asia. But it’s also had its errors: Iran in the ‘50’s, when Mossadeq, the democratically elected leader of Iran was overthrown, an act still being paid for today; the overthrow of Allende, the democratically elected leader of Chile; the overthrow of Patrice Lumumba, the democratically elected leader of the Congo; Viet Nam; support for Saddam in the Iran-Iraq war and the Mujahiddeen in Afghanistan against Russia.

There is, thus, a significant gap between the U.S. self-perception and the perception of others of the U.S. In his nomination acceptance speech, John Kerry said: “The USA never goes to war because it wants to. We only go to war because we have to.” President Bush said at a Memorial Day ceremony: “it is not in our nature to seek out wars and conflicts. We only get involved when adversaries have left us no alternative.” But, history does not carry the weight of these arguments. There were the Barbary Wars, the Mexican Wars, Nicaragua (several times), the Spanish American War, the Philippine War, Cuba, Panama (several times), Haiti, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Cambodia, Grenada, Iraq. The gap between how Americans see themselves and how others see the Americans is not trivial. Most of these actions are scarcely remembered in the USA. In the affected countries, they are part of the national narratives, and not positive parts.

At the Republican convention, Senator Libby Dole proclaimed at the Republican convention that America was great because its people are good. For others, though, the issue is not whether Americans are innately good people, believing in values of tolerance and respect for others and guided by religious faith (Slaughter), so much as that they are human, and capable of error and self-serving judgements.

When Washington declared war on terrorism, essentially on a heinous tactic but a tactic nonetheless, not on a tangible, defeatable enemy such as the Al Qaeda network, it gave itself mission impossible. When Washington attacked Iraq with only the sketchiest of evidence of links between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime and despite having no hard evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, and over the objections of undoubtedly the great majority of the international community, including many allies and “nations with comparable values”, to quote MacNamara, the US both estranged itself in world public opinion and generated volunteers for the cause of resistance to US policies, including terrorism. In conflating Iraq with the Palestinian-Israeli issue, US foreign policy itself came to be seen by many as part of the problem. That is not to exculpate the Islamic radicals for the atrocities they have perpetrated in the cause of some delusional theory of competition with the West, nor to condone the complicity of those governments that have made it possible for the extremists to survive and flourish. It is to observe that we are transiting an especially dangerous period of history. The US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, together with domestically driven, undemanding US support for Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians, will not necessarily morph into a conflict of the West versus Islam. A religious war in an age of asymmetric weaponry is a danger that wise people, on all sides, know that they must do all they reasonably can to circumscribe. If only a minute fraction of the world’s 1.2 billion Moslems were radicalized, there could be no outcome in this war that any rational being would consider victory. It is a singular danger, and one that it would be foolish to ignore, let alone court. Against this background, it is not surprising that there is little or no agreement in the world on how to respond to “terrorism”, beyond sharing intelligence where interests do coincide sufficiently, tightening up travel regulations insofar as governments can agree to do so and denying the use of the international financial system by known terrorists to the extent feasible.

There is a risk, albeit still a manageable one that the US “crusade” in the Middle East will morph into a prolonged conflict between the West and Islam. Much is likely to

depend on the American people and the outcome of the Iraq war. If the war is judged by Americans ultimately as worth the cost, there will be little to stop this or a future administration from carrying on down the list of “countries of interest”. Except intractable reality. Iraq demonstrates the enormous costs of unilateralism.

### Multilateral Cooperation

Whatever happens in Iraq, and whatever the United States does there and elsewhere, multilateral cooperation will continue because it has to, not just because political theory abhors a vacuum and supposes the restoration of balance—we are not living in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century—but because there is a whole range of international problems, including security problems, that simply will not yield to national action alone or even to coalitions of the willing. For international security, for trade and finance, for health and environmental protection, for human rights and human development, in sum, for the totality of modern life, the complex of treaties, conventions, norms and institutions and networks that the world community has created, and continues to create, are indispensable. Global problems can only be solved through global cooperation. Multilateral cooperation, not multilateralism as an ideology or end in itself, is essential. And the United Nations is integral to that cooperation.

Most fundamentally, the U.N. Charter is at the heart of international law. The United States took the lead in building this complex of institutions, treaties and networks, of rules, laws and norms of international behaviour, which the world believes is better than the old dog-eat-dog politics. Others believed, and continue to hope, that the US shares this perception, not because in creating the new way of thinking that the US was merely waiting for the day when its power would permit it to transcend the multilateral system, but because it was really a better way to run international affairs. It was an improvement on the bloody old way of doing things.

The leadership role of this multilateral cooperation remains open to the United States to fill as it has since Roosevelt. Or the United States can go its own way. The decision is for the US to make. But whatever the decision, the world will muddle through, one way or the other. Consider the experience of the International Criminal Court and the anti-personnel land mines treaty. US opposition to the ICC was and is more rooted in the ideology of exceptionalism than it is in the very few shortcomings of the Court. It is a court intended to end immunity for the world’s monsters from prosecution for the worst crimes, i.e., genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. It is not intended to prosecute ordinary US G.I.’s. There are ample protections against frivolous prosecution, not the least of which is the provision that the ICC cannot prosecute an alleged perpetrator if a domestic court is doing so. Hence, in the case of Abu Ghraib, for example, the ICC would have no jurisdiction over those the US prosecuted.

Still the US prefers not to cooperate, as is its right to do. Nonetheless, 139 other countries have signed the treaty and 94 have ratified it. Likewise for anti-personnel landmines. The US has not acceded to the landmines statute but 152 other countries have signed it, of which 143 have ratified it. In fact, the US has not signed or ratified numerous treaties that others have, notably the Kyoto climate change protocol, the Law of the Sea



and several of the core human rights treaties. In most cases, US signature is beneficial but not critical to the success of the treaty per se. That is the case with respect to the Treaty on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women; US non-accession does not affect the rights of non-US citizens. The US's refusal to sign the Kyoto protocol, however, is a problem because the US is the single largest polluter, because that pollution accumulates in the atmosphere and, given the global nature of the issue, because the efforts of others to combat it will be undermined if the US does not cooperate.

In such relatively rare cases where US participation is indispensable to the success of the initiative, and the US is balking, there is not much to be done but to keep working the issue until US concerns are met or the US changes its mind or both. While the U.N. is often the butt of criticism, and in some cases justifiably so as anyone who has spent an afternoon in the General Assembly can attest, a distressingly small amount of that criticism is well-informed on the particulars of given issues, and a depressingly large amount of it is just plain ideology and ignorance of the facts.

For example, although some have reflexively deprecated the UN's counter-terrorism capacity, the UN has passed a dozen counter-terrorism treaties. As those treaties have been progressively absorbed into domestic legislation, they have facilitated the establishment of norms and standards of international behaviour. What is true for terrorism is similarly true for human rights, where the U.N. has passed six core treaties including on the protection of women's rights; for arms control and disarmament, where the U.N. is at the heart of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, including its weapons inspection capability; for health, on which the World Health Organization is integral to the effort to control and eradicate infectious and other diseases such as HIV-AIDS, malaria, and SARS; for the environment where the U.N. has fostered 76 treaties, for international development, trade and investment, where the World Bank and the IMF have also contributed. Beyond rules, norms and laws, there is an alphabet of U.N. acronyms, e.g., ICAO, IPU, ITU, WMO, WIPO, among many others, that stand for organizations that help the world to manage one aspect or another of international interchange.

The U.N. is indispensable to international humanitarian objectives. For example, UNICEF has inoculated 575 million children against childhood diseases, the World Food Program has fed 100 million people (last year alone), the UNHCR has housed 22 million refugees and internally displaced people, the U.N. Mine Action Service has destroyed 30.5 million landmines, saving countless limbs and lives in the process. This work has been belittled by some as mere international social work but it is social work with very real human and very real security benefits. Shortcomings and all, warts and all, and there is no doubt they are real and in some cases significant, the cliché remains true that if the UN did not exist it would have to be created. Nor, as Secretary General Annan has said, is it safe to assume the world will find a more effective instrument.

### Renovation and Innovation

If the U.N. is not as bad as its bashers allege, it is not as sound as its apologists claim, either. The U.N. suffers from an acute case of inertia at a time when it is facing decidedly

new challenges. Much of its membership is devoted to an absolutist concept of sovereignty that dates from the Treaty of Westphalia, the 17th century treaty on which subsequent state norms and practice have been built. The governments of former colonies, which gained their independence in the living memories of their peoples, see sovereignty as a crucial bulwark against once and future colonial masters. They are determined not to create new pretexts for others to dominate them again, given the suffering mainly European colonists and slave traders inflicted on them in the name of progress and civilization.

However understandable their worries are, they are not, nevertheless, a sufficient basis on which to protect the interests of their citizens or others in a changing world. The UN faces three fundamental challenges deriving from the sovereignty issue.

- when to intervene in the internal affairs of a state out of humanitarian necessity,
- when to intervene to combat international terrorism and international criminality, and
- when to intervene to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

These are not the only mega-issue the UN faces; how to alleviate poverty and how to combat communicable diseases are also major issues for the UN and the international, multilateral community more generally. But, as Darfur illustrates tragically, on no issue is new practice more needed than on the determinants of military intervention for humanitarian purposes, that is, to prevent or stop genocide. Regrettably, the Iraq war, and its ex-post-facto rationalization by Washington as a humanitarian war, has likely made such reformation and innovation more difficult to achieve. It may, also, have postponed the day when a consensus will develop on what to do about the nexus of terrorism and mass destruction.

In any case, reform of the United Nations will not be enough; innovation is, also, going to be needed, inside and outside the UN framework. Canadian Prime Minister Martin's proposal for the creation of a new, north-south group (a new L-20, an expansion of the G-8 and built on the G-20 finance ministers group) is one such possible innovation. The prospects of progress on HIV-AIDS and other communicable diseases, on trade and agricultural subsidies, on terrorism and WMD, on international financial reform, on the Millennium Development Goals and, not least, on the reform of the UN itself, would likely be enhanced if the heads of the world's leading countries met together periodically to reach agreements to commend to the larger community. Such a group would complement rather than compete with the UN. The UN would retain its unique legitimacy by virtue of its universal membership and its indispensable security role as framed in the Charter and international law. There is also room for a caucus of democratic countries, inside or outside the UN. While not a panacea, and not a substitute for the UN either, such a caucus could forge general understandings on contemporary issues among the world's growing number of democracies and, by virtue of the attractiveness of membership, induce reform in some non-democratic countries.

## Conclusion

I have argued today that

1. That the US is not an empire, nor even really a hegemon, but is undoubtedly the most powerful country ever seen and will remain so for any reasonably foreseeable future,
2. That while there has been extraordinary sympathy with the United States after 9/11, the unilateralist impulses of US foreign policy have progressively estranged the United States from others,
3. That multilateral cooperation will continue because it has to in order to provide security and to bring economic and social progress, and
4. That the multilateral system needs both renovation and innovation, a job that is as important as it is difficult, and that is best done with US leadership and cooperation.