

Choosing Primacy: U.S. Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post- Cold War Era



Hal Brands

Texas National Security Review: Volume 1, Issue 2 (March 2018)

Print: ISSN 2576-1021 Online: ISSN 2576-1153

Newly declassified U.S. government records shed some light onto U.S. strategic thinking about the post-Cold War era and the infamous Defense Planning Guidance.

In early 1992, the Pentagon's primary policy office — the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy — prepared a draft classified document known as the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG).¹ In late February and early March, that document was leaked to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, both of which published extensive excerpts. Those excerpts, which highlighted the most striking language and themes of the document, detailed a blueprint for American strategy in the post-Cold War era. The United States would not retrench dramatically now that its superpower rival had been vanquished. Instead, it would maintain and extend the unchallenged supremacy it had gained when the Soviet empire collapsed. Washington would cultivate an open, democratic order in which it remained firmly atop the international hierarchy. It would discourage any competitor from challenging for global leadership. It would prevent emerging or resurgent threats from disrupting a broadly favorable environment. And to protect this advantageous global order, America would retain unrivaled military power. In essence, the DPG outlined an unabashed program for perpetuating U.S. primacy.²

For this reason, and also because it immediately became caught up in election-year politics, the DPG ignited controversy when it was leaked, drawing harsh appraisals from critics on both the left and right. Democratic Sen. Joseph Biden condemned

the document as a radical assertion of American hegemony — “literally a Pax Americana.”³ Patrick Buchanan, a prominent conservative pundit and Republican presidential candidate, alleged that the DPG represented “a formula for endless American intervention in quarrels and war when no vital interest of the United States is remotely engaged.”⁴

More than a decade later, the episode still smoldered. Writing after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, journalist Craig Unger described the DPG as the product “of a radical political movement led by a right-wing intellectual vanguard.” Another assessment labeled the DPG a “disturbing” manifestation of a “Plan...for the United States to rule the world.”⁵ More recently, the DPG has received less breathless treatment from insightful academic observers and former U.S. officials.⁶ But even from some scholars, the DPG has continued to draw sharp invective. One leading diplomatic historian has critiqued the DPG as a radical rejection of multilateralism and a plan for Washington to serve as the world's policeman.⁷ Another has termed it a program to “remake the world,” “exterminate the evil-doers,” and forge “the Second American Empire.”⁸ As former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman observes, “Probably no defense planning document since the end of World War II, with the possible exception of NSC-68...has received as much attention and discussion.”⁹

Yet if the DPG has long been a fount of

1 This article significantly expands on arguments first made in the author's recent book. See Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

2 See Draft of FY 94-99 Defense Planning Guidance (DPG), in Vesser to Secretaries of Military Departments, CJCS, et al., Feb. 18, 1992, Electronic Briefing Book (EBB) 245, National Security Archive (NSA).

3 Barton Gellman, “Keeping the U.S. First,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 1992.

4 Quoted in Joshua Muravchik, *The Imperative of American Leadership: A Challenge to Neo-Isolationism* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute Press, 1996), 136.

5 Craig Unger, *The Fall of the House of Bush: The Untold Story of How a Band of True Believers Seized the Executive Branch, Started the Iraq War, and Still Imperils America's Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 148; David Armstrong, “Dick Cheney's Song of America: Drafting a Plan for Global Dominance,” *Harper's*, October 2002, 76, <https://harpers.org/archive/2002/10/dick-cheney-s-song-of-america/>.

6 See Melvyn P. Leffler, “Dreams of Freedom, Temptations of Power,” in *The Fall of the Berlin Wall: The Revolutionary Legacy of 1989*, ed. Jeffrey A. Engel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 132-69; Eric S. Edelman, “The Strange Career of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance,” in *In Uncertain Times: American Policy After the Berlin Wall and 9/11*, edited by Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Paul Wolfowitz, “Shaping the Future: Planning at the Pentagon, 1989-1993,” in *In Uncertain Times*, edited by Leffler and Legro, 44-62; Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House, My Journey Through a Turbulent World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), Chapter 7; James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 198-215.

7 Lloyd Gardner, *The Long Road to Baghdad: A History of U.S. Foreign Policy From the 1970s to the Present* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 98-100.

8 Richard Immerman, *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism From Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 218-20.

9 Edelman, “Strange Career,” 63. There is also a smaller body of literature arguing that the DPG was not as important as all this attention might make it seem. See, for instance, Ionut Popescu, *Emergent Strategy and Grand Strategy: How American Presidents Succeed in Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 123-25.

controversy, only now is declassification of relevant U.S. government records making it possible to fully understand the document's role in the development of U.S. strategic thinking about the post-Cold War era during the administration of George H.W. Bush. That development actually began before the Cold War ended, as the administration pondered the requirements of U.S. security and global order in a remarkably fluid environment. It subsequently continued amid profound international crises in Europe and the Persian Gulf, which led the administration to refine key aspects of its geopolitical thinking. That thinking was brought into more comprehensive form with the DPG, which outlined a holistic approach to post-Cold War strategy and which was — despite the public furor sparked by its disclosure — broadly affirmed by the administration during its final months. The DPG, then, did not stand alone. It was one important piece of the larger process by which the Bush administration crafted a strategy of American primacy.

This essay re-creates that process, examining the evolution of Bush-era strategic thinking. It explores the more formal planning and strategy processes the administration undertook, as well as the ways that key crises, long-standing beliefs, and other influences shaped official views of America's place in the post-Cold War world. It does so primarily by examining newly declassified documents that illuminate the administration's strategic outlook and offer a more detailed portrait of how America selected a unipolar strategy for a unipolar order.

This is an important subject for historians. Although political scientists widely agree that the United States pursued a strategy meant to sustain its geopolitical preeminence after the Cold War, and historians have begun to analyze how key initiatives such as German reunification served this objective, there has yet to be a comprehensive examination, based on the archival record, of how that strategy emerged.¹⁰ This essay not only puts the DPG in its proper context; it also traces the origins of America's approach to the post-Cold War world.

Three arguments emerge from this analysis. First, the DPG was not, as is commonly believed, a radical document or an outlier from Bush administration strategic thinking. It was, in many

ways, the logical culmination of that thinking. From the outset, Bush and his advisers had believed that America should not pull back geopolitically as the Cold War ended. Rather, they insisted that America should lean forward to advance its interests and

The DPG was not, as is commonly believed, a radical document or an outlier from Bush administration strategic thinking.

values and ward off new or resurgent dangers. In their view, the United States should double down on the globalist endeavors of the post-World War II era in the favorable but uncertain climate of the post-Cold War world. These core themes were reinforced by two major international crises — the collapse of the Berlin Wall and reunification of Germany, and the Persian Gulf crisis and war — which underscored the logic of American primacy. In this context, the DPG served primarily to weave together the various intellectual threads of U.S. strategic thinking. The document's sharp language and undisguised ambition provoked concern and criticism (including from some within the administration), but its basic content represented merely the most unvarnished and coherent articulation of an assertive approach to post-Cold War geopolitics.

Second, this primacist strategy flowed from a potent mix of influences. It had its deepest roots in ingrained beliefs about the imperative of promoting American values abroad and the long-standing U.S. role in upholding the liberal international order that had emerged after World War II. As Bush's presidency unfolded, these firmly held ideas were reinforced by strong perceptions of both opportunity and danger. Events of the Bush years made clear that America had tantalizing

10 Political scientists differ considerably on whether that strategy has been wise. See, variously, Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); John Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," *National Interest* 111 (January/February 2011): 16-34; Peter Feaver, "American Grand Strategy at the Crossroads: Leading From the Front, Leading From Behind, or Not Leading at All," in *America's Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration*, eds. Richard Fontaine and Kristin Lord (Washington: Center for a New American Security, 2012), 59-70. On German reunification and NATO expansion, see Mary Elise Sarotte, "Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence: The 1990 Deals to 'Bribe the Soviets Out' and Move NATO In," *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 110-37; Joshua Shiffrin, "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 7-44.

opportunities to lock in its Cold War victory and shape a uniquely favorable international environment, but they also raised the specter of upheaval and instability. In these circumstances, the administration concluded that a grand strategy based on consensual and preeminent American leadership offered the best — indeed the only — approach for grabbing hold of great possibilities, while also ensuring that one period of great danger did not simply lead to another.

Third, the choice of a primacist strategy was, on the whole, a reasonable one. That choice was based on a plausible and intellectually defensible reading of what the end of the Cold War meant for the world and for U.S. policy. Moreover, the problems of American primacy over the past 25 years should not obscure the fact that some key premises of the strategy devised by the Bush administration held up relatively well over time. Whether American primacy and the international system it supports will continue to endure amid the growing challenges the United States confronts today remains to be seen. But with a quarter-century of hindsight, the Bush administration's strategic thinking — with the DPG as its most candid articulation — seems fairly incisive.

Early Thinking About Post-Cold War Strategy

In retrospect, the choice of a primacist grand strategy can seem overdetermined or even inevitable, given the many influences that ultimately pushed the Bush administration in that direction. But as the Cold War ended, there was a wide-ranging public debate over what international role America should play. Paul Kennedy's 1987 best-seller, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, had popularized the notion that America risked succumbing to "imperial overstretch" brought on by excessive global commitments.¹¹ These arguments were often reinforced by the rise of economic competitors such as Japan, which had —

many critics alleged — exploited America's postwar largesse and was poised to displace Washington as global economic leader. "The Cold War is over," one common saying went. "Japan and Germany won."¹² Moreover, given that many features of America's globalism had emerged in the context of the superpower contest with Moscow, the winding down of that competition produced calls for a reassessment of Washington's global role.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, commentators as varied as Jeane Kirkpatrick and Patrick Buchanan on the right, and Bill Clinton and Al Gore on the left, argued for greater strategic restraint, based on the idea that America lacked the ability or the need to carry on such an ambitious global project after the Cold War. There was "a widespread awareness that we have come to the end of the postwar era," Clinton said in 1988. "We don't dominate as we once did."¹³ Likewise, Kirkpatrick argued in a prominent article in 1990 that "it is time to give up the dubious benefits of superpower status" and again become "a normal country in a normal time."¹⁴

As the 1980s ended, calls for retrenchment were often accompanied by demands for dramatic reductions in America's alliance commitments, overseas presence, and military spending. Analysts with respected think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, and even former secretaries of defense such as Harold Brown, suggested that the United States could reduce defense spending by as much as half if the Soviet threat continued to fade.¹⁵ Democrat Charles Schumer, then a U.S. representative from New York, talked about "deep reductions in the defense budget."¹⁶ Other respected congressional observers, such as Sen. Sam Nunn and Rep. Les Aspin, called for lesser but still significant cuts.¹⁷ These arguments were contested by defense hawks and analysts, such as the neoconservative pundit Charles Krauthammer, who argued for a more muscular approach to the post-Cold War world.¹⁸ But throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, demands would persist for a substantial "peace dividend" and a more circumscribed U.S. foreign policy.

11 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage, 1987); Peter Schmeisser, "Taking Stock: Is America in Decline?" *New York Times*, April 17, 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/04/17/magazine/taking-stock-is-america-in-decline.html?pagewanted=all>.

12 Quoted in Homer A. Neal, Tobin Smith, and Jennifer McCormick, *Beyond Sputnik: U.S. Science Policy in the Twenty-First Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 81.

13 Schmeisser, "Taking Stock: Is America in Decline?"; Patrick Buchanan, "America First — and Second, and Third," *National Interest* 19 (Spring 1990): 77-82.

14 Jeane Kirkpatrick, "A Normal Country in a Normal Time," *National Interest* 21 (Fall 1990): 40-44.

15 See Patrick Tyler, "Halving Defense Budget in Decade Suggested," *Washington Post*, Nov. 21, 1989.

16 Alan Murray and Jeffrey Birnbaum, "Post-Cold War Budget Is Here, So Where Is the Peace Dividend?" *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 29, 1990.

17 Patrick Tyler and Molly Moore, "Soviet Defense Spending Cut As Promised, CIA Reports," *Washington Post*, Nov. 15, 1989; Helen Dewar, "Nunn Warns Pentagon to Fill Blanks in Budget," *Washington Post*, March 23, 1990.

18 Charles Krauthammer, "Universal Dominion: Toward a Unipolar World," *National Interest* 18 (Winter 1989-1990): 46-49.

This was not, however, the approach that the Bush administration chose. Amid the erosion and eventual collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, Bush and his top aides were consumed with superpower relations and crisis management almost from the outset of his presidency, and key officials — Bush included — sometimes seemed wary of declaring the bipolar competition over during much of 1989.¹⁹ Even so, during the first 18 months of Bush's presidency U.S. officials frequently discussed — in forums both public and private, in ways both systematic and not — what sort of international environment might follow the Cold War and what strategic approach Washington should take in that environment. And even when the outlines of the post-Cold War world were but dimly apparent, these discussions converged around an unmistakable theme: that the United States should not retrench geopolitically, but should lean forward to exploit advantageous change, repress incipient dangers, and mold the new international order.

From the start, the sources of this idea were ideological as well as geopolitical. Like countless U.S. officials before him, Bush believed that America had a distinctive moral calling to advance human freedom and well-being and that this responsibility required a self-confident, assertive foreign policy. "We just must not lose sight...of our own *raison d'être* as a nation," he had written in his diary in 1975. "We must be Americans. We must be what we are."²⁰ Indeed, while Bush was generally not considered a highly ideological figure, he was certainly part of a long-standing ideological consensus on the moral necessity of U.S. power. America had been the "dominant force for good in the world," Bush declared during his 1988 campaign, and would remain so in the future.²¹

The administration's early thinking was equally framed by another enduring idea: that American power was indispensable to the preservation of a stable, prosperous, democratic world order. Bush and key aides such as Brent Scowcroft and James Baker were products of World War II and the Cold

War. They believed that U.S. engagement had been essential to defeating Nazism and communism, to reconciling former enemies and taming historical antagonisms in Europe and Asia after 1945, and to providing the climate of security and prosperity in which the West had thrived.²² And just as the drafters of NSC-68 had written that U.S. leadership would be needed "even if there were no Soviet threat," the Bush administration believed that the imperative of maintaining and advancing a stable, liberal world environment would outlast the Cold War. "America has set in motion the major changes under way in the world today," Bush asserted in 1988. "No other nation, or group of nations, will step forward to assume leadership."²³ Or, as a senior National Security Council staffer put it in early 1990, "it's not as though somehow our postwar responsibilities have ended and our mission is at a conclusion" even though the Soviet threat was waning.²⁴

From the time Bush took office, these ingrained ideas were reinforced by perceptions of prevailing international trends. In some ways, these changes seemed all to the good. The ebbing of superpower tensions was removing long-standing threats to American interests and raising the possibility that the Cold War would soon end decisively, on U.S. terms. "Containment is being vindicated," an early classified directive signed by Bush stated, "as the peoples of the world reject the outmoded dogma of Marxism-Leninism in a search for prosperity and freedom."²⁵ Looking beyond superpower relations, the rapid spread of democracy and free markets over the previous decade had rendered the international environment more reflective of U.S. values and created openings to advance American security and influence. In the coming years, Robert Zoellick, then State Department counselor, wrote in 1989, "we must concentrate on building a new age of peace, democracy, and economic liberty."²⁶ Bush himself asked in a major speech in May of that year:

19 Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993).

20 Bush Diary, Feb. 15, 1975, in George H.W. Bush, *All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings* (New York, 1999), 215.

21 "Bush: 'Our Work Is Not Done; Our Force Is Not Spent,'" *Washington Post*, Aug. 19, 1988.

22 Jeffrey A. Engel, "A Better World...but Don't Get Carried Away: The Foreign Policy of George H.W. Bush Twenty Years On," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 1 (2010): 25-46.

23 Andrew Rosenthal, "Differing Views of America's Global Role," *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1988; "A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretariat on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," April 14, 1950, https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf.

24 "Foreign Press Center Background Briefing," March 20, 1990, CF00209, Peter Rodman Files, George H.W. Bush Library (GHWBL).

25 National Security Review-3, "Comprehensive Review of U.S.-Soviet Relations," Feb. 15, 1989, NSR File, GHWBL.

26 RBZ (Robert B. Zoellick) Draft, "Points for Consultations with European Leaders," Nov. 27, 1989, Box 108, James A. Baker III Papers, Mudd Library, Princeton University.

Bush believed that America had a distinctive moral calling to advance human freedom and well-being and that this responsibility required a self-confident, assertive foreign policy.

What is it we want to see? It is a growing community of democracies anchoring international peace and stability, and a dynamic free-market system generating prosperity and progress on a global scale.²⁷

At the same time, administration officials also argued that Washington must remain vigilant. In early 1989, Bush and his national security adviser, Scowcroft, were particularly concerned that positive changes in Soviet policy under Mikhail Gorbachev might ultimately be reversed, confronting Washington with a revived challenge. Bush wrote in an early study directive on U.S. defense policy:

It would be reckless to dismantle our military strength and the policies that have helped to make the world less dangerous and foolish to assume that all dangers have disappeared or that any apparent diminution is irreversible.²⁸

Looking beyond the Soviet Union, there were other potential threats. “Security threats were not invented by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union,” Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney said, “and threats will remain long after that party’s gone out of business.”²⁹ Studies commissioned by the Defense Department in the late 1980s emphasized the potential proliferation of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the eruption of crises and wars in the Middle East or South Asia, the growth of international terrorism and drug trafficking, and even resurgent economic or political frictions in Europe and East Asia.³⁰ If anything, the breakdown of bipolarity might encourage such disorder by removing the geopolitical constraints that had long structured world politics. As Peter Rodman, counselor to the National Security Council, put it in a background briefing for reporters in early 1990, “We see a new era of uncertainties, new possible sources of instability, new concerns.”³¹ If allowed to fester,

these concerns might eventually grow into first-order security challenges in their own right.

From the earliest months of the Bush administration, there was thus a consensus that reduced Cold War tensions did not imply a dramatic U.S. retrenchment. In January 1989, Secretary of State James Baker reminded a Cabinet meeting that the “U.S. is both an Atlantic and Pacific power with allies in both regions.”³² In July, Bush privately reassured the South Korean defense minister that “the U.S. will continue to be a Pacific power with many friends in the region.”³³ Similarly, he made clear that whatever changes occurred in Europe, the United States would remain strategically and militarily engaged so as to discourage a resurgence of historical tensions. “West European countries see the U.S. presence as stabilizing,” Bush explained in a conversation with Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia. “Our view...is that we shouldn’t withdraw and declare peace.”³⁴ The end of the Cold War might mark a radical break with the past, U.S. officials believed, but it should not usher in radical change in U.S. grand strategy. Rather, Washington should essentially double down on its successful postwar initiatives — the maintenance of alliances and favorable geopolitical balances in key regions, the commitment to playing a leadership role in key international institutions, the efforts to shape a global environment ideologically and economically congenial to the United States — in the more favorable climate that was emerging.

These themes were ubiquitous as the administration initiated more systematic planning for post-Cold War strategy. Bush’s first *National Security Strategy* was drafted by Scowcroft’s staff in late 1989 and early 1990. It represented the administration’s first opportunity to offer a comprehensive assessment of America’s role in a rapidly evolving world, and it was written as the administration grappled with momentous changes in the Soviet bloc. Unsurprisingly, then, the report dealt at length with those changes, arguing that they vindicated the containment strategy pursued since the late 1940s. Yet the *National Security*

27 Remarks at U.S. Coast Guard Academy, May 24, 1989.

28 NSR-12, “Review of National Defense Strategy,” March 3, 1989, NSR File, GHWBL.

29 Cheney Remarks to American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 4, 1990, Federal News Service transcript.

30 See *The Future Security Environment: Report of the Future Security Environment Working Group, submitted to the Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy* (Washington: Government Printing Office, October 1988).

31 “Background Briefing by Senior Administration Official,” March 20, 1990, CF00209, Peter Rodman Files, GHWBL; also Michael Hayden to Scowcroft, March 15, 1990, CF00209, Peter Rodman Files, GHWBL.

32 “Talking Points: Cabinet Meeting — January 23, 1989,” Box 108, Baker Papers, Princeton.

33 Memorandum of Conversation (MemCon) between Bush and Lee Sang Hoon, July 20, 1989, OA/AD 91107, Presidential MemCon Files, Brent Scowcroft Collection, GHBWL.

34 MemCon between Bush and Vaclav Havel, Feb. 20, 1990, OA/AD 91107, Presidential MemCon Files, Brent Scowcroft Collection, GHBWL.

Strategy also looked past the Cold War, arguing that America must “help shape a new era, one that moves beyond containment and that will take us into the next century.” Change — “breath-taking in its character, dimension, and pace” — was certain and the United States was likely to confront a range of emerging or resurgent threats. But U.S. global interests were enduring and so Washington would sustain its core alliances and forward military deployments in Europe and East Asia, and it would encourage the further spread of democracy and markets, while also taking the lead in addressing new sources of international tension. “The pivotal responsibility for ensuring the stability of the international balance remains ours,” the *National Security Strategy* affirmed, “even as its requirements change in a new era.”³⁵

The counterpart to the *National Security Strategy* was a major defense review carried out from 1989 to 1990, largely under the leadership of Gen. Colin Powell, the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The need for such an exercise was obvious as the easing of superpower tensions exerted downward pressure on the defense budget. “We know it will get smaller,” said Powell. “That is inevitable.”³⁶ Bush himself argued to resist efforts to “naively cut the muscle out of our defense posture,” but as early as by late 1989 Cheney was conceding that the administration might have to cut as much as \$180 billion (out of a total defense budget of roughly \$300 billion) over a period of six years.³⁷ The task, then, was to fashion a new defense concept that could reconcile the realities of coming budget cuts with the enduring requirements of global stability and American influence. “Our challenges,” the 1990 *National Security Strategy* explained, were to adapt America’s military strength “to a grand strategy that looks beyond containment, and to ensure that our military power, and that of our allies and friends, is appropriate to the new and more complex opportunities and challenges before us.”³⁸

The result of this process — which emerged after significant bureaucratic and inter-service wrangling — was the “Base Force” concept for sizing the U.S. military. The Base Force accepted non-trivial reductions in U.S. military power,

envisioning eventual cuts of approximately 25 percent in personnel levels, reductions in carrier battle groups and other power-projection tools, and withdrawal of portions of the American contingent in Europe. Yet as Pentagon officials stressed, unchallenged U.S. military power underwrote global security commitments,

From the earliest months of the Bush administration, there was thus a consensus that reduced Cold War tensions did not imply a dramatic U.S. retrenchment.

dampened long-standing rivalries in key regions, and gave Washington immense diplomatic leverage. Moreover, while there was now less chance of war with Moscow, the potential for conflict remained in the Korean Peninsula; the Persian Gulf; and even Central America, where U.S. forces had recently toppled Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega. The Base Force thus preserved large-scale overseas deployments in Europe and East Asia; maintained the critical air, naval, and logistical capabilities necessary to dominate the global commons and project power overseas; and preserved intensive research and development efforts to sustain America’s military-technological edge, particularly at the higher ends of the conventional spectrum.³⁹ “America must possess forces able to respond to threats in whatever corner of the globe they may occur,” Bush said in unveiling the Base Force concept in 1990; it must “protect the gains that 40 years of peace through strength have earned us.”⁴⁰

The logic of the Base Force prefigured a great deal of post-Cold War strategic thinking. Its key architects — Powell, Lt. Gen. Lee Butler, and others — rooted their recommendations in the idea that the declining Soviet danger might simply be replaced by the “rise of new hegemonic powers” in regions of strategic importance. They believed that “the United States was the only power with the

35 The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, March 1990, <http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-1990/>.

36 Powell Remarks to National Press Club, June 22, 1990, Federal News Service transcript.

37 Alan Murray and David Wessel, “Bush Is Likely to Seek Defense Increase For ‘91, Despite Reduction in Tensions,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 28, 1989; David Hoffman, “Bush Cautions Against Big Defense Cuts,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 13, 1990.

38 *National Security Strategy*, 1990, 23.

39 Lorna S. Jaffe, *The Development of the Base Force, 1989-1992* (Washington: Joint History Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1993); Wolfowitz, “Shaping the Future,” 48-54; Michael Gordon, “Pentagon Drafts Strategy for Post-Cold War World,” *New York Times*, Aug. 2, 1990.

40 Remarks in Aspen, Colorado, Aug. 2, 1990. Coincidentally, this speech was delivered less than 24 hours after Saddam Hussein’s forces had invaded Kuwait.

capacity to manage the major forces at work in the world.” And so they concluded that a high degree of military dominance was critical to preserving the international stability and geopolitical gains offered by the end of the Cold War. In fact, the “Base Force” label was meant to make clear that there was a minimum level of military primacy below which America “dare not go” (as Powell put it) if it were to maintain and expand the stable, liberalizing international order that Washington had built in the West after World War II. “What we plan for,” Powell subsequently explained of the strategy, “is that we’re a superpower. We are the major player on the world stage with responsibilities around the world, with interests around the world.” All of these ideas would figure prominently in subsequent Pentagon planning efforts under Bush and later.⁴¹

Early in Bush’s presidency, then, there was broad internal agreement that America would continue to act as guarantor and stabilizer of the international system. It would encourage favorable trends, hold back threatening ones, and keep the unequaled hard power necessary to do so effectively. This mind-set would influence how the administration approached key crises in 1989–1990. Those crises, in turn, would sharpen official views on America’s global role.

The Collapse of the Bloc and German Reunification

The first such crisis involved the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe and the redrawing of the region’s political map. This crisis began in mid-1989, with the accelerating breakdown of

the Communist regimes, and intensified with the opening of the Berlin Wall in November. That event raised the prospect of German reunification, which then proceeded via an internal track made up of rapidly increasing ties between the two German states, and an external track of multilateral diplomacy primarily involving the United States, France, Britain, and the Soviet Union. By the fall of 1990, Germany was reunified within NATO, and the Warsaw Pact was disintegrating as countries throughout Eastern Europe initiated democratic and free-market reforms and requested withdrawal of Soviet troops. In roughly a year, the bipolar order in Europe had been transformed.⁴²

U.S. policy played little role in initiating those transformations. Bush admitted to Gorbachev in December 1989, “We were shocked by the swiftness of the changes that unfolded.”⁴³ As events raced ahead, however, the administration became deeply engaged, endorsing and actively pushing for German reunification under Western auspices. “No approach on our part toward Germany is without risk,” Scowcroft wrote in a memo to Bush, “but at this point the most dangerous course of all for the United States may be to allow others to set the shape and character of a united Germany and or the future structure of European security.”⁴⁴ By mid-1990 and after, the administration was even considering eventual expansion of NATO further into the former Warsaw Pact area to discourage post-Cold War instability and foster political and economic reform.⁴⁵

Existing scholarship has explored the contours of U.S. policy on these issues.⁴⁶ More salient here is that events in Europe in 1989 and 1990 powerfully interacted with the main currents in American

41 Don Oberdorfer, “Strategy for Solo Superpower: Pentagon Looks to ‘Regional Contingencies,’” *Washington Post*, May 19, 1991; Jaffe, *Development of the Base Force*, 7–8, 29. For a similar assessment, see Joint Chiefs of Staff, *National Military Strategy of the United States* (January 1992), <http://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nms/nms1992.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-123420-723>.

42 See State Department Bureau of Public Affairs, “Movement Toward German Unification, March 1989–July 1990,” Box 2, Zelikow–Rice Files, Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

43 Excerpts from Soviet Transcript of Malta Summit, Dec. 2–3, 1989, EBB 296, NSA.

44 Scowcroft to Bush, undated, CF00182, Robert Blackwill Files, GHWBL.

45 The debate over what, precisely, the Bush administration promised Moscow regarding future NATO enlargement during 1989 to 1990 has generated a substantial literature of its own. What can briefly be said here is that Washington never provided the Soviets with a formal pledge that NATO would not expand further into Eastern Europe, and U.S. policymakers certainly did not believe that they were constrained from doing so. During negotiations with Gorbachev in February 1990, Baker did float — as a trial balloon — the idea that Moscow might accept reunification of Germany within NATO in exchange for NATO not expanding its military structures into the former East Germany. But even that more limited assurance was overtaken within days as it quickly became clear that a reunified Germany could not sit half inside and half outside of NATO. The argument that the United States subsequently violated an agreement not to expand NATO is, therefore, inaccurate. Some Russian observers, however, may have *believed* that there was some type of informal understanding on NATO expansion (in part because, in early 1990, West German officials sometimes floated this idea publicly), and the *perception* that such an assurance had existed played some role in the subsequent souring of U.S.–Russian relations. Moreover, in the early 1990s, the Clinton administration appears to have told Russian officials that expansion was not being contemplated, which led to increased Russian annoyance once expansion unfolded. See Mark Kramer, “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,” *Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2009): 39–61; Mary Elise Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward? Bush, Baker, Kohl, Genscher, Gorbachev, and the Origin of Russian Resentment Toward NATO Enlargement in February 1990,” *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 1 (2010): 119–40; James Goldgeier, “Promises Made, Promises Broken? What Yeltsin Was Told About NATO in 1993 and Why It Matters,” *War on the Rocks*, July 12, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/promises-made-promises-broken-what-yeltsin-was-told-about-nato-in-1993-and-why-it-matters/>.

46 See Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

thinking about the post-Cold War world. In one sense, the breakdown of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe provided a breathtaking demonstration of just how immense the possibilities might be in this emerging era. “We were witnessing the sorts of changes usually only imposed by victors at the end of a major war,” Scowcroft later wrote in his memoir. Reunification on Western terms, he had observed contemporaneously, in November 1989, would “rip the heart out of the Soviet security system” in Eastern Europe and mark a “fundamental shift in the strategic balance.”⁴⁷ Moreover, the transitions underway in Eastern Europe were underscoring the possibility for further advances by free markets and free political systems. “We are witnessing the transformation of almost every state in Eastern Europe into more democratic societies, dominated by pluralistic political systems matched to decentralized economies,” Scowcroft wrote in a memo to the president.⁴⁸

This prospect was a principal driver of U.S. policy in 1989 and 1990. U.S. officials studiously engaged Moscow in the multilateral diplomacy surrounding reunification, and they carefully avoided humiliating Gorbachev over the catastrophic retreat of Soviet influence. Privately, however, Bush

that. We prevailed and they didn’t.”⁴⁹ Accordingly, the administration encouraged Kohl to move briskly toward reunification, while also pressing Moscow to accept reunification within NATO and decisively rejecting Soviet proposed alternatives such as a neutralized Germany. As they did so, American officials treated Gorbachev with great respect in their bilateral dealings, and Bush and Kohl arranged for concessions — especially German financial assistance to Moscow — to ensure Soviet acquiescence. Yet the guiding assumption remained that Washington and its allies must move decisively to lock in epochal changes. “There is so much change in Eastern Europe,” Bush said in January 1990. “We should seize the opportunity to make things better for the world.”⁵⁰

The process of German reunification thus offered tantalizing opportunities to ensure American dominance in post-Cold War Europe. At the same time, that process also reinforced the idea that such strategic assertiveness was necessary to manage emerging dangers. Reunification was deeply worrying to Poland, France, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union, which feared that a united Germany might once again dominate Europe. As NATO Secretary General Manfred

Wörner privately warned Bush as the diplomacy surrounding reunification heated up, “The Old Pandora’s box of competition and rivalry in Europe” might be reopened.⁵¹ More broadly, there were widespread fears that the collapse of Soviet authority in Eastern Europe could unleash ethnic violence or resurgent nationalist rivalries within that region. “The outlines of ancient European antagonisms are already beginning to emerge,” Scowcroft wrote in late 1989. A “power vacuum is

developing” as Soviet influence receded.⁵²

For the Bush administration, these concerns powerfully underscored the need not to retract U.S. influence but to maintain and expand it. By this logic, keeping a reunified Germany within NATO would preclude resurgent instability by tying

There were widespread fears that the collapse of Soviet authority in Eastern Europe could unleash ethnic violence or resurgent nationalist rivalries within that region.

and Scowcroft intended to exploit U.S. strength and Soviet weakness to remake the European order on American terms. “The Soviets are not in a position to dictate Germany’s relationship with NATO,” Bush said at a meeting with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in early 1990. “To hell with

47 Scowcroft to Bush, Nov. 29, 1989, OA/ID 91116, Chron Files, Brent Scowcroft Collection, GHWBL; George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 230.

48 Scowcroft to Bush, undated (late 1989), OA/ID 91116, Chron Files, Brent Scowcroft Collection, GHWBL; also Bush to Kohl, undated, CF00717, Condoleezza Rice Files, GHWBL.

49 Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 253.

50 MemCon between Bush and Douglas Hurd, Jan. 29, 1990, OA/ID 91107, Presidential MemCon Files, Brent Scowcroft Collection, GHWBL. See also Sarotte, “Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence”; Joshua Shiffrin, “Deal or No Deal?”

51 MemCon between Bush and Wörner, Feb. 24, 1990, OA/ID 91107, Presidential MemCon Files, Brent Scowcroft Collection, GHWBL; also Gorbachev-Mitterrand TelCon, Nov. 14, 1989, EBB 293, NSA; Thatcher-Gorbachev Conversation, Sept. 23, 1989, EBB 293, NSA; Meeting between Kohl and Walesa, Nov. 10, 1989, Cold War International History Project.

52 Scowcroft to Bush, Dec. 22, 1989, OA/ID 91116, Chron Files, Brent Scowcroft Collection, GHWBL.

the new German state to the West and thereby eliminating the competitive security dynamics that might otherwise emerge. As Baker warned, “Unless we find a way to truly anchor Germany in European institutions we will sow the seeds for history to repeat itself.”⁵³ Moreover, integrating a reunified Germany into NATO would ensure that the alliance remained relevant after the Cold War, thereby also ensuring a continued role for U.S. power in Europe. The alternatives, Scowcroft warned Bush in a key memorandum, were dangerous: “Twentieth century history gives no encouragement to those who believe the Europeans can achieve and sustain this balance of power and keep the peace without the United States.”⁵⁴

From late 1989 onward, this perspective propelled efforts not simply to bring a reunified Germany into NATO but also to adapt that alliance to preserve its utility after the Cold War. Amid German reunification, the Bush administration secured alliance reforms meant to make a strong and vibrant NATO more acceptable to a retreating Soviet Union. The alliance adjusted its force posture to take account of the decreasing Soviet threat, deemphasized the role of nuclear weapons, and stressed NATO’s political (as opposed to strictly military) functions. Likewise, the administration took steps to accommodate European desires for greater influence over their own security affairs in the post-Cold War era, while reaffirming NATO’s primacy on European defense. “Our essential goal,” noted one administration strategy memo from 1990, was “a viable NATO that is the foundation for Atlantic cooperation on political and security concerns and maintains the position of the United States as a European power.”⁵⁵

What made this goal achievable was that there was widespread European support for a strong and perhaps expanded U.S. role. Although the French did seek a more independent European security identity as the Cold War ended, neither they nor any other ally sought the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Europe. As British Foreign Secretary Douglas

Hurd would say in 1990, “European security without the United States simply does not make sense.”⁵⁶ Even the Soviets and their erstwhile allies agreed. Although he initially resisted German reunification within NATO (and Moscow would later object to NATO expansion during the 1990s and after), Gorbachev ultimately concluded that a united Germany tied to Washington was preferable to an independent, neutral Germany. “The presence of American troops can play a containing role,” Gorbachev acknowledged in a conversation with Baker.⁵⁷ And as early as the spring of 1990, Warsaw Pact countries such as Poland and Hungary were inquiring about eventual NATO membership as a guarantee of their own security.⁵⁸

The United States did not immediately undertake NATO expansion in the early 1990s, largely for fear of antagonizing Moscow at a time when Soviet troops had yet to be fully withdrawn from Eastern Europe, and because U.S. officials had yet to study or debate the issue in sufficient detail to reach internal consensus.⁵⁹ But even in 1990 and 1991, the Bush administration was tentatively taking exploratory steps, such as extending NATO military liaison relationships to the bloc countries, and the basic geopolitical logic of expansion was starting to take hold. The Office of the Secretary of Defense and the State Department Policy Planning Staff believed, as the National Security Council’s director for European security affairs, Philip Zelikow, put it in October 1990, that it was important “to keep the door ajar and not give the East Europeans the impression that NATO is forever a closed club.”⁶⁰ Internal documents argued that expansion would help avoid nationalist frictions and security dilemmas in Eastern Europe. Moreover, as one State Department official subsequently wrote in 1992,

Democratization and economic development have a better chance of succeeding if national security concerns in the Eastern democracies were reduced by credible,

53 Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 273.

54 Scowcroft to Bush, Dec. 22, 1989, OA/ID 91116, Chron Files, Brent Scowcroft Collection, GHWBL.

55 Zelikow to Gates, Nov. 28, 1990, OA/ID CF00293, Heather Wilson Files, GHWBL; also “President’s Intervention on the Transformation of the North Atlantic Alliance,” July 1990, CF00290, Heather Wilson Files, GHWBL.

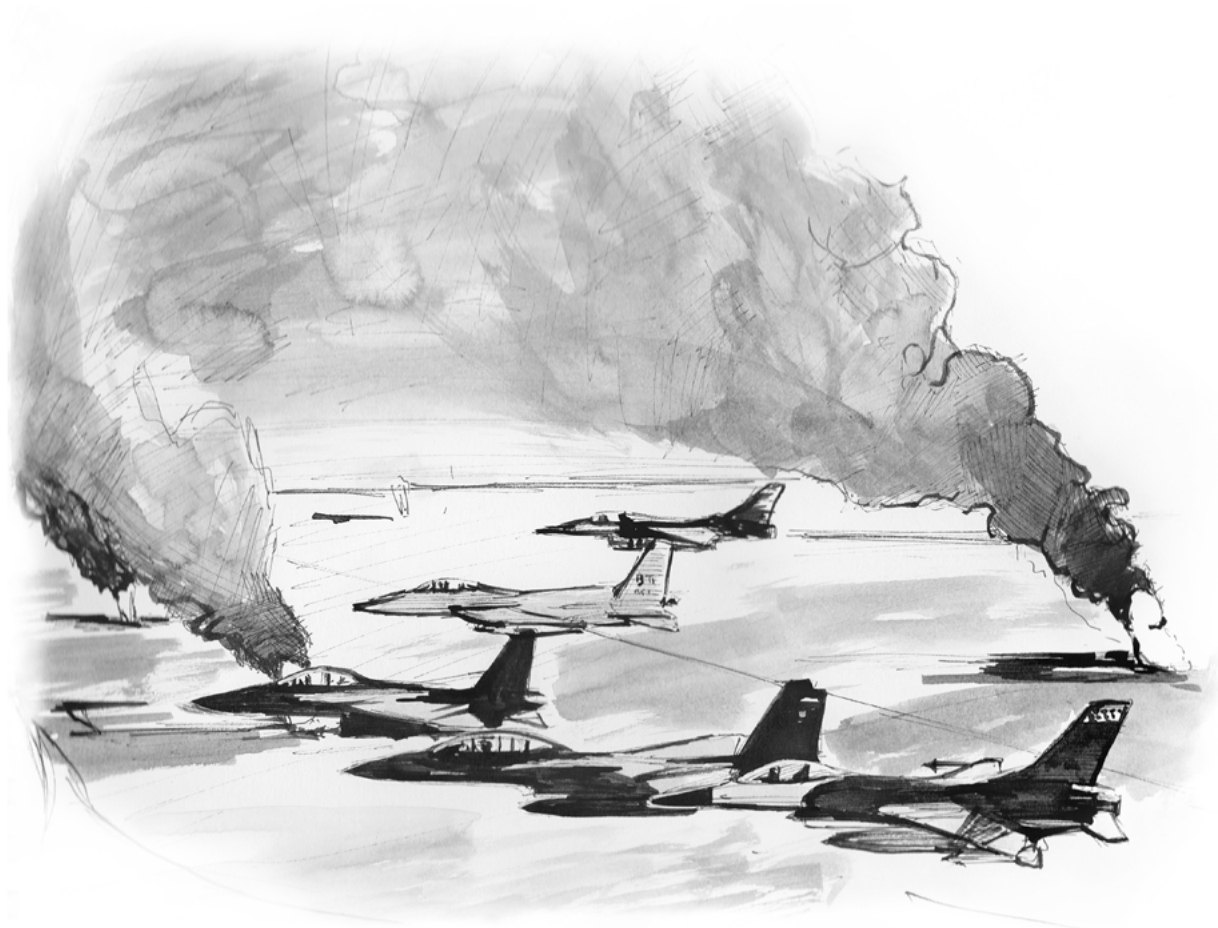
56 London to State, Dec. 11, 1990, CF01468, Philip Zelikow Files, GHWBL.

57 Gorbachev-Baker Meeting, Feb. 9, 1990, in *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989*, eds. Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton, and Vladislav Zubok (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), 683; also USDEL Secretary Namibia to State, March 20, 1990, Department of State FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

58 “Summit Intervention Statement,” undated (1991), CF01693, Summit Briefing Books, NSC Files, GHWBL; also Sicherman to Ross and Zoellick, March 12, 1990, Box 176, Baker Papers, Princeton; MemCon between Baker and Mr. Balladur, June 3, 1991, Box 110, Baker Papers, Princeton.

59 “Points to Be Made for Working Dinner With Prime Minister Mulroney in Canada,” undated, CF01010-CF01010-009, Briefing Books/Briefing Materials, European and Soviet Directorate Files, GHWBL.

60 Zelikow to Gates, Oct. 26, 1990, OA/ID CF00293, Heather Wilson Files, NSC Files, GHWBL.



multilateral security guarantees.⁶¹

In several respects, then, the European crisis of 1989 to 1990 underscored and helped to clarify key elements of Bush administration thinking. This episode reinforced the idea that U.S. ascendancy and the weakening of traditional rivals had created a moment of transition in which Washington could act decisively to achieve lasting structural changes. It affirmed the notion that American influence and U.S.-led institutions could serve a critical stabilizing purpose amid geopolitical uncertainty. Finally, this episode offered evidence for the idea that insofar as U.S. power promoted stability in the international system, its maintenance and even expansion after the Cold War might be more welcomed than resisted. Many of these ideas would soon reappear in the American reaction to a second major international crisis.

The Persian Gulf Crisis and War

The Persian Gulf crisis and war of 1990 to 1991 followed hard upon German reunification. It had an equally pronounced impact on U.S. views of the post-Cold War order. On Aug. 2, 1990, Saddam Hussein's forces invaded Kuwait in a bid to bring that oil-rich kingdom under Iraqi control and thereby redress the Baathist regime's desperate financial and domestic plight. The United States, however, promptly spearheaded a decisive response. The Bush administration mobilized a diverse diplomatic coalition against Iraq while also coordinating a multinational military deployment used first to protect Saudi Arabia and then to evict Saddam from Kuwait. Washington would ultimately deploy nearly 550,000 personnel, 2,000 tanks, 1,990 aircraft, and 100 warships to the Persian Gulf. Its coalition partners would contribute 270,000 troops, 66 warships, 750 combat aircraft, and 1,100 tanks. When, after several months of military preparations and crisis diplomacy, Saddam refused to withdraw, the U.S.-led coalition prosecuted a brief but punishing war to force him out. That conflict did not ultimately oust Saddam

61 Stephen Flanagan to Ross and Zoellick, May 1, 1992, OA/ID CF01526, Barry Lowenkron Files, GHWBL; also "Rome Declaration on Peace and Cooperation," Nov. 8, 1991, CF01526, Barry Lowenkron Files, GHWBL.

from power, as some U.S. officials had hoped, but it did liberate Kuwait and leave Iraq far weaker and more isolated than before.⁶²

If German reunification primarily demonstrated the opportunities of the new era, the Gulf crisis primarily highlighted the dangers. Most immediately, Saddam's invasion threatened the security of critical Gulf oil supplies. It also highlighted larger post-Cold War perils. The crisis showed, as Bush noted in a speech on Aug. 2, that "threats...can arise suddenly, unpredictably, and from unexpected quarters."⁶³ More specifically, the invasion raised the prospect that aggressive dictatorships, armed with unconventional weapons, might exploit the fluidity of the post-Cold War world to make bold plays for hegemony in crucial regions. Saddam "has clearly done what he has to do to dominate OPEC, the Gulf and the Arab world," Cheney said at a National Security Council meeting on Aug. 3.⁶⁴

This fear of incipient chaos and destabilizing aggression pushed U.S. officials toward a strong

lesson."⁶⁵ As early as Aug. 2, Bush framed the crisis as an illustration of why the United States needed to maintain globe-spanning military power, capable of "rapid response" to crises.⁶⁶ Similarly, officials continually reiterated that U.S. engagement was essential to ensuring that the end of bipolarity ushered in something better and not something worse. "We did not stand united for forty years to bring the Cold War to a peaceful end in order to make the world safe for the likes of Saddam Hussein," Baker said in late 1990. America should defend the position of strategic advantage that its Cold War victory had enabled.⁶⁷

The Gulf crisis further affirmed that belief by revealing, far more starkly than before, that *only* Washington could play the crucial stabilizing role. For all the talk during the 1980s about the economic rise of Japan and Germany, when the Gulf crisis broke only America was uniquely capable of spearheading a decisive multilateral response. U.S. diplomacy was central to mobilizing the Gulf War coalition by providing subsidies for key members such as Egypt, offering diplomatic cover to vulnerable participants, and persuading reluctant actors such as the Soviet Union and China not to stand in the way.⁶⁸ U.S. power was even more central in the military arena: No other country had the forces necessary to confront Saddam in his own backyard. "It's only the United States that can lead," Bush noted in his diary in September. "All countries in the West clearly have to turn to us."⁶⁹

The Gulf crisis demonstrated robust global demand for U.S. leadership.

response. "This is the first test of the post [-Cold] war system," Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger commented. "If [Saddam] succeeds, others may try the same thing. It would be a bad

What the Gulf crisis equally demonstrated was robust global demand for such U.S. leadership. Twenty-seven nations ultimately provided military forces for the coalition effort. Coalition partners also provided \$53.8 billion

62 Max Boot, *War Made New: Technology, Warfare, and the Course of History, 1500 to Today* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 337-38; "Sharing of Responsibility for the Coalition Effort in the Persian Gulf (Feb 8 Update)," OA/ID CF01110 to CF01362, Virginia Lampley Files, Box 53, FOIA 1998-0099-F, GHWBL. Other helpful sources include Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Kevin Woods, *The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein's Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2008); Christian Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand: Why We Went Back to Iraq* (New York: Doubleday, 2006); Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995); and many others.

63 Remarks in Aspen, Colorado, Aug. 2, 1990, APP.

64 NSC Meeting, Aug. 3, 1990, Richard Haass Files, Box 42, FOIA 1998-0099-F, GHWBL.

65 NSC Meeting, Aug. 3, 1990, Richard Haass Files, Box 42, FOIA 1998-0099-F, GHWBL.

66 Remarks in Aspen, Colorado. As noted previously, this was the same speech in which Bush publicly introduced the Base Force.

67 James Baker, "America's Strategy in the Persian Gulf Crisis," *Department of State Dispatch*, Dec. 10, 1990, <http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/briefing/dispatch/1990/html/Dispatchv1no15.html>.

68 James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: Putnam, 1995), 1-16, 275-99.

69 Bush Diary, Sept. 7, 1990, in Bush, *All the Best*, 479.

in monetary support and in-kind contributions, nearly covering the total U.S. bill of \$61.1 billion.⁷⁰ This historic multilateral support for U.S. policy was partially a function of easing Cold War gridlock in the U.N. Security Council and partially reflected the heinous nature of Saddam's aggression. Yet it also showed that the energetic use of U.S. power was widely seen as vital to upholding stability and safeguarding public goods such as global oil flows in the post-Cold War era. "We are protecting their interest as well as ours," one administration memo explained, "and it is only fair that they share the burden."⁷¹ Foreign officials acknowledged this dynamic. "The Japanese people, in the last 45 years, have been used to peace provided by you," Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki told Bush at a meeting in September 1990. The Gulf crisis showed that this reliance had hardly ended.⁷²

The realization that Washington had a chance to establish a model of assertive but consensual primacy was at the forefront of U.S. policy in the Gulf crisis. The administration's multilateralism and talk of a "New World Order" sometimes gave the impression that Bush believed that the United Nations would be the primary provider of international security in the 1990s.⁷³ Yet in reality, that multilateralism rested on a growing belief that the end of the Cold War was making it possible to gain broader international support — including through institutions such as the United Nations — for energetic American leadership in pursuit of both U.S. interests and global security. As Bush and Scowcroft later acknowledged, their diplomacy was meant to give "a cloak of acceptability to our efforts and mobilize world opinion behind the principles we wished to project." Scowcroft expanded on this idea. "The United States henceforth would be obligated to lead the world community to an unprecedented degree," he wrote. It should therefore "pursue our national interest, wherever possible, within a framework of concert with our friends and the international community."⁷⁴

This concept of enlightened American

primacy would soon reappear in the DPG and other administration planning documents. In the meantime, the war underscored just how pronounced that primacy was. Saddam's roughly million-man army was eviscerated by U.S. forces, which had built advanced, high-tech weapons and capabilities for use against the Soviets in Central Europe and were now deploying them against a weaker regional adversary. In particular, the Gulf War showcased American dominance in high-intensity conventional conflict, made possible by unparalleled strengths in capabilities ranging from precision-guided munitions to infra-red technology. It further demonstrated how the training and doctrinal reforms made since Vietnam had allowed U.S. forces to utilize these capabilities with astonishing lethality. As one postwar assessment noted, Operation Desert Storm revealed that America had achieved "a revolutionary advance in military capability."⁷⁵ Combined with the fact that the Soviet Union, consumed by internal turmoil, had largely been left on the sidelines, the result was to display just how significant the emerging post-Cold War power disparity was between Washington and any potential rival. "The U.S. clearly emerges from all of this as the one real superpower in the world," Cheney observed in April 1991.⁷⁶

Ironically, this military dominance did not secure quite the result U.S. officials had sought, as Saddam Hussein survived the war in power, with a much-reduced but still-threatening military. The Bush administration declined the opportunity to double down on operational success by pursuing Saddam's forces to Baghdad or otherwise explicitly seeking regime change. In part, this was because the administration hoped — and had, from intelligence sources, some reason to believe — that the historic drubbing Saddam had suffered would cause the Iraqi military to overthrow him. "We genuinely believed...that the magnitude of the defeat was so overwhelming that the army would take out Saddam when the war was over," Robert Gates, Bush's deputy national security adviser,

70 Office of Management and Budget, "United States Costs in the Persian Gulf Conflict and Foreign Contributions to Offset Such Costs," Report No. 20, October 1992, in Darman to Bush, Oct. 15, 1992, Department of Defense FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

71 "Talking Points" for Bush's meeting, undated, Box 1, CF00946, Robert Gates Files, GHWBL; also "Executive Summary," Aug. 27, 1990, Box 1, CF00946, Robert Gates Files, GHWBL.

72 Bush-Kaifu MemCon, Sept. 29, 1990, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA).

73 Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis and the Federal Budget Deficit, Sept. 11, 1990.

74 Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 491, 400.

75 William J. Perry, "Desert Storm and Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 4 (1991): 66-67, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/1991-09-01/desert-storm-and-deterrence>; also Department of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress*, April 1992, Department of Defense FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

76 Cheney Remarks to American Business Council Conference, April 9, 1991, Federal News Service; also "America's Postwar Agenda in Europe," March 1991, CF01468, Zelikow Files, GHWBL.

later recalled.⁷⁷ Bush also mistakenly believed, as he told French officials at the time, that Saddam's "armor was so decimated that they no longer constitute a military threat to their neighbors."⁷⁸ Yet from a broader perspective, this restraint owed to the fact that an administration fully committed to perpetuating American leadership in the post-Cold War era was also wary of going too far. Bush did not want to fragment the Gulf War coalition by exceeding its U.N. mandate. He and his advisers also worried that ridding Iraq of Saddam might require a full-scale military occupation for which there were no existing plans. "We do not want to screw this up with a sloppy, muddled ending," Bush said.⁷⁹

This restraint was later criticized, for contrary to what Bush and his commanders had expected, a significant portion of Saddam's forces — including elite Republican Guard divisions and Iraqi armor — had escaped destruction. Moreover, the war was followed not by a Sunni military coup but by Shia and Kurdish uprisings that caused Saddam's generals to rally around him as the only figure who could preserve a unified Iraq.⁸⁰ The Bush administration declined to intervene in this bloody civil war, fearful that doing so might fracture the Iraqi state and bring Iranian-backed Shia groups to dominance. The concern, one State Department adviser recalled, was that "this was going to create a new Lebanon."⁸¹ As a result, Saddam clung to power and remained capable of threatening the Gulf. "Even in its presently weakened state," Assistant Secretary of Defense Henry Rowen told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee several months after the conflict, "Iraq is still much stronger than any of its neighbors to the south."⁸²

In fairness to Bush — and in light of later U.S. experience invading and occupying Iraq — prudence may still have been the better part of wisdom in 1991. In any event, the somewhat muddled outcome of the Persian Gulf War simply increased the tendency to expand U.S. activism

after the Cold War. In particular, it ensured that Washington would retain a sizable military presence in the Gulf — where it had previously relied on a light-footprint, "over the horizon" approach — as a way of keeping Saddam's regime contained. "Saddam Hussein is sanctioned forever," Bush told European officials in April 1991.⁸³ And in general, the Gulf War further set the stage for an ambitious post-Cold War strategy. The imperative of unmatched U.S. military power; the need for decisive action to head off emergent upheaval; the sense that there was no good alternative to American leadership; the evidence that leadership employed for the collective good could enjoy broad international acceptance: All of these components of the administration's strategic paradigm gained strong support from the crisis. As administration officials subsequently attempted a more systematic expression of post-Cold War policy, they would draw heavily on this mind-set.

To the Defense Planning Guidance

Official thinking about such a policy statement occurred in the context of two key developments in 1991 and 1992. The first was the terminal decline of the Soviet Union. As scholars have noted, the administration's policy toward Moscow in 1991 was often hedged and tentative, in part because of internal disagreements between the State and Defense Departments. Partially as a result, U.S. policy played only a marginal role in the Soviet disintegration.⁸⁴ Yet that disintegration further clarified America's global position. America's long-standing competitor had collapsed and Washington was now without military or ideological peers. "We were suddenly in a unique position," Scowcroft later wrote, "without experience, without precedent, and standing alone at the height of power."⁸⁵ The need to articulate a strategy for this new situation took on greater salience.

77 Robert Gates Oral History, 59, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center, University of Virginia.

78 Bush-Dumas MemCon, Feb. 28, 1991, GHWBL.

79 Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 483. See also Gates Oral History, 59; Richard Cheney Oral History, June 21, 2006, 27, Box 7, Baker Oral History Collection, Mudd Library, Princeton; Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand*, 172-76.

80 See Gordon and Trainor, *Generals' War*, 416-29, 444-46. These issues were compounded by the decision of Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf — who handled the cease-fire negotiations in the absence of detailed instructions — to permit Iraqi forces to fly helicopters in the struggle against rebellious forces.

81 Dennis Ross Oral History, Aug. 2, 2001, 42-43, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center, University of Virginia.

82 Rowen Statement to Senate Foreign Relations Committee, June 6, 1991, CF01391, Virginia Lamplsey Files, GHWBL.

83 Bush-Santer-Delors MemCon, April 11, 1991, GHWBL.

84 James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy Toward Russia After the Cold War* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 18-40.

85 Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 564.

That imperative was strengthened by issues at home. The Gulf War had, in many ways, shown the value of U.S. military dominance. Yet as the Soviet Union unraveled, calls for a post-Cold War peace dividend intensified; many observers, including most candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, advocated cuts significantly beyond what the Base Force envisioned. Clinton advocated

The strategic vision conveyed by the DPG was based on an unvarnished reading of global power dynamics.

cutting military spending by one-third over five years. Former California Gov. Jerry Brown advocated a 50 percent cut over the same period; Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa called for 50 percent cuts over ten years.⁸⁶ In these circumstances, it seemed essential to identify a persuasive paradigm for global engagement after the passing of the Soviet threat. That task fell to the Pentagon — particularly Wolfowitz's Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy — which attempted to offer a coherent statement of American purpose in its classified Defense Planning Guidance. Wolfowitz's staff took the drafting of the report as an opportunity to assess the “fundamentally new situation” in global affairs and to “set the nation's direction for the next century.”⁸⁷ Preparatory work began as early as mid-1991 and, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Wolfowitz's staff (led by adviser Zalmay Khalilzad) drew up a nearly final version by mid-February 1992.⁸⁸

The strategic vision conveyed by the DPG was based on an unvarnished reading of global power dynamics. With the “collapse of the Soviet Union,” “the discrediting of Communism as an

ideology with global pretensions and influence,” and the success of American arms in the Gulf, the United States had established an enviable power position. Moreover, the United States led a “system of collective security and...democratic ‘zone of peace’” that bound the developed West tightly to it. All this amounted to what Cheney publicly described as unprecedented “strategic depth” — a dearth of existential threats, combined with tremendous leeway and influence in shaping global events.⁸⁹

The core aim of U.S. strategy, then, should be to extend this situation well into the future. As the DPG stated:

Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival...that poses a threat on the order of that formerly posed by the Soviet Union. This is a dominant consideration...and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power.

Washington must therefore prevent any adversary from commanding Europe, East Asia, or the Persian Gulf; it should prevent a new hostile superpower from reasserting control over the territory of the former Soviet Union. The goal, in other words, was to avoid a return to bipolarity or multipolarity, and to lock in a U.S.-led unipolar order.⁹⁰

The United States should also seek to sustain and even improve this unipolar order by thwarting other emerging threats and further transforming global politics to American advantage. According to the DPG, America would “limit international violence” by confronting dangers such as regional conflict, international terrorism, and the proliferation of nuclear arms as well as other advanced weapons. It would also make the international environment still more congenial by advancing “the spread of democratic forms of government and open economic systems,” particularly in key regions such as the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The Kremlin had “achieved global reach

86 Alan Murray, “Growth Formulas: Democratic Candidates Offer Host of Proposals to Spark the Economy,” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 6, 1992; “Differences Among the Democratic Candidates,” *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 1992; Norman Kempster, “U.S. Candidates’ Stand on Foreign Issues,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1992.

87 Draft of FY 94-99 DPG; Barton Gellman, “Keeping the U.S. First; Pentagon Would Preclude a Rival Superpower,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 1992. The version of the DPG quoted here consists of the text that was released to the National Security Archive through the FOIA process as well as the text that earlier became available through media leaks.

88 On the process and context, see Wolfowitz, “Shaping the Future”; Edelman, “Strange Career”; see also Popescu, *Emergent Strategy and Grand Strategy*, 123-25.

89 Draft of FY 94-99 DPG; Cheney Remarks to Senate Budget Committee, Feb. 3, 1992, Federal News Service.

90 Draft of FY 94-99 DPG.

and power” because a totalitarian regime had consolidated control of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Preventing another such threat from arising entailed extending the “democratic zone of peace” into the former Soviet empire and beyond.⁹¹

The DPG was a Pentagon document, but it was not blind to the fact that achieving these ambitious goals would require more than military power. Proactive diplomacy and economic statecraft would be essential to promoting democracy and markets, countering terrorism, and impeding proliferation. Most important, maintaining American primacy would require convincing other leading nations to support rather than oppose it. As Khalilzad wrote,

We must account sufficiently for the interests of the advanced industrial nations to discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order.

The United States should thus promote a positive-sum global economy that would help other countries prosper. It should provide international security, leadership in addressing critical challenges, and other common goods that would persuade key second-tier nations to welcome American preeminence. In essence, the DPG made a version of the argument that would later gain currency among international-relations scholars: that unipolarity need not invite concerted counterbalancing so long as Washington used its power to support a benign and broadly beneficial global system.⁹²

The DPG, then, was a more nuanced document than some critics later claimed. Yet there was no mistaking another core message: that unrivaled American military might was the hard-power backbone of the post-Cold War order. U.S. force deployments and alliance commitments provided stability and influence in key regions from East Asia to Europe to the Persian Gulf; the DPG even raised the prospect of extending security guarantees to former members of the Soviet bloc. American military dominance fostered a peaceful international environment in which open markets and open political systems could prosper; it

would also dissuade potential rivals from seeking to challenge American leadership. “We must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role,” the DPG stated. Finally, given the enduring uncertainty of global affairs, unrivaled military primacy would provide the ability to address emerging threats and dangers before they fundamentally disrupted the post-Cold War system. America would not be “righting every wrong,” the document stated, but:

We will retain the preeminent responsibility for addressing selectively those wrongs which threaten not only our interests, but those of our allies or friends, or which could seriously unsettle international relations.⁹³

To be clear, the DPG did not advocate unrestrained interventionism, for such a view would have been badly out of step with the instincts of key administration leaders. Bush had declined to intervene militarily amid the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia in mid-1991, on grounds that there was no vital U.S. interest at stake. “We don’t want to put a dog in this fight,” he wrote in his diary.⁹⁴ Similarly, Cheney and Wolfowitz had long understood that any perception that Washington was going about in search of monsters to destroy would drain public support for an assertive post-Cold War policy. “One of the reasons the [Gulf] operation was so successful was that its purposes were very clear and it had public support,” Wolfowitz had commented in 1991. “That doesn’t translate into a blank check to go around the world using force.” Powell, for his part, had argued that same year that America should use force only in cases where U.S. forces could win decisively and then exit the scene, avoiding the sort of open-ended, indecisive missions that had led to such a fierce domestic backlash in Vietnam. “If...military force regrettably turns out to be” necessary, he said, “I think it should be used in a decisive way.”⁹⁵ Both halves of the DPG’s formulation regarding the role of American military power were thus important. “The world order,” the document stated forthrightly, “is ultimately backed by the U.S.”⁹⁶ But preserving domestic support for such a strategy

91 Draft of FY 94-99 DPG.

92 Ibid.; also William Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 5-41; G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

93 Draft of FY 94-99 DPG; Patrick Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1992.

94 Diary entry, July 2, 1991, in *Bush, All the Best, George Bush*, 527; Bush-Wörner MemCon, June 25, 1991, GHWBL.

95 Quotes from Don Oberdorfer, “Strategy for Solo Superpower: Pentagon Looks to ‘Regional Contingencies,’” *Washington Post*, May 19, 1991.

96 Draft of FY 1994-1999 DPG; Patrick Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1992.

required avoiding unnecessary interventions and using American power selectively.

So how much military power was required to pursue the DPG strategy? The document was somewhat fuzzy regarding specifics, but it left no uncertainty that Washington needed a superiority that was not just unmatched but unrivaled. An initial draft of the document, from September 1991, had stated that “U.S. forces must continue to be at least a generation ahead.”⁹⁷ The February 1992 version emphasized the imperative of winning decisively in confrontations with Saddam-like challengers — who might be armed with nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction — as well as the role of vast technological superiority in upholding deterrence. Furthermore, the document affirmed that the United States would act on a multilateral basis when possible but that it must be able “to act independently when collective action cannot be orchestrated or when an immediate response is... necessary.”⁹⁸

In its totality, the DPG expressed a strikingly ambitious vision for American strategy. Yet it was nonetheless basically aligned with the Bush administration’s broader perspective as expressed to date. So many core themes of the document — the promotion of democracy and market economics, the need for globe-spanning and preponderant military power, the idea that Washington could pursue an enlightened sort of leadership that would invite support rather than opposition — were reiterations or refinements of earlier ideas. Nor was the idea of precluding the rise of a new hostile superpower particularly novel. It drew on the same logic that had impelled Bush to prevent Saddam from dominating the Persian Gulf, and thereby amassing dangerous levels of geopolitical power, and the basic concept of using the Cold War’s end to lock in a more favorable international order. (It also drew on an older U.S. strategic concept, dating to World War II, of preventing rivals from controlling key regions of the world.⁹⁹) In effect, the DPG drew together the administration’s core post-Cold War concepts and linked them to a more explicit overall ambition of preserving U.S. international supremacy. It was not

a sharp break with the administration’s strategic thinking; it can more properly be seen as the culmination thereof.

Yet the February 1992 DPG was also still a draft document, and for a time it appeared to be dead on arrival. Late that month the document leaked to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Reacting to the DPG’s more striking language and ideas — which were emphasized in the media reporting — critics lambasted the Pentagon’s blueprint. Biden declared that “what these Pentagon planners are laying out is nothing but a Pax Americana.”¹⁰⁰ Sen. Alan Cranston memorably accused the administration of seeking to make America “the one, the only main honcho on the world block, the global Big Enchilada.”¹⁰¹ The

The DPG was nonetheless basically aligned with the Bush administration’s broader perspective as expressed to date.

Washington Post editorial board lamented the DPG’s “muscle-flexing unilateralism” as a rejection of Gulf War-era multilateralism.¹⁰² Sen. Edward Kennedy charged that the DPG “aimed primarily at finding new ways to justify Cold War levels of military spending.”¹⁰³ Other observers noted that the DPG seemed focused on stymieing the rise not only of American adversaries but also of traditional allies such as Germany and Japan and non-hostile powers such as India.¹⁰⁴

Blindsided by the leak and subsequent chorus of boos, the Bush administration wavered. National Security Council talking points encouraged Bush to play down the DPG in an upcoming meeting with German officials. “Kohl may express displeasure about the leaked Pentagon paper suggesting that the

97 Dale Vesser to Libby, Sept. 3, 1991, EBB 245, NSA.

98 Draft of FY 94-99 DPG.

99 See Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

100 Melissa Healy, “Pentagon Cool to U.S. Sharing Its Power,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 1992.

101 Barton Gellman, “Aim of Defense Plan Supported by Bush: But President Says He Has Not Read Memo,” *Washington Post*, March 12, 1992.

102 “The New Pentagon Paper,” *Washington Post*, May 27, 1992.

103 Barton Gellman, “Pentagon War Scenario Spotlights Russia,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 20, 1992.

104 Gellman, “Aim of Defense Plan Supported by Bush”; also Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan.”

U.S. wants to block the rise of any new superpower, including German-led Europe,” NSC officials wrote in March 1992. “You should explain that we want to see a stronger, more united Europe.”¹⁰⁵ In public, Bush explained that he had not formally approved — or even read — Khalilzad’s draft. Cheney and Wolfowitz subsequently called upon a top Pentagon aide, Lewis (“Scooter”) Libby, to rewrite the February 1992 draft. The redraft toned down the language of the earlier version while also playing up the importance of alliance relationships and multilateralism. By May, leading newspapers were reporting that the administration had pulled back from its radical vision. “Pentagon Drops Goal of Blocking New Superpowers,” the *New York Times* proclaimed.¹⁰⁶

The reality, however, was different. The DPG was not, after all, some great substantive departure from administration views on post-Cold War strategy. As noted earlier, many of the key military concepts expressed in the document — the imperative of maintaining military primacy based on high-end technological superiority and the need to head off the emergence of new regional hegemonies — had played key roles in the development of the Base Force. Similarly, a document finalized by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in January 1992 significantly foreshadowed the DPG, arguing that America must “preserve a credible capability to forestall any potential adversary from competing militarily with the United States.”¹⁰⁷ During early 1992, moreover, Powell and Cheney had publicly advocated some of the core themes of the DPG in speeches and congressional testimony. “We are...the world’s sole remaining superpower,” Powell had said. “Seldom in our history have we been in a stronger position relative to any challengers we might face. This is a position we should not abandon.”¹⁰⁸

These views were not held solely by Pentagon officials. The president himself largely kept quiet about the DPG in public. But Bush did nonetheless convey that he “was broadly supportive of the thrust of the Pentagon document” once he learned

of it following the leaks, one reporter noted in March, and his private statements confirm this assessment. “We must remain the active leader of the entire world,” he wrote in a note to White House aides that month. “We must not only have the convictions about democracy and freedom, but we must have a strong National Defense posture.”¹⁰⁹ As discussed subsequently, Bush would also strongly endorse many key tenets of the report in his final *National Security Strategy*. Likewise, at the State Department, James Baker implicitly affirmed other aspects of the DPG. He noted in early April that although multilateralism would always be the first preference, America would never relinquish the right to act unilaterally when necessary. “We can hardly entrust the future of democracy or American interests exclusively to multilateral institutions,” he said.¹¹⁰

This is not to say that there was no internal debate or controversy over the DPG. State Department officials — still smarting from intense internal debates over how to handle the breakup of the Soviet Union — offered some anonymous critiques of the DPG, terming the language overblown and counterproductive to the goal of maintaining positive relationships with rising powers such as India.¹¹¹ The DPG also leaned further forward than some U.S. officials would have liked with respect to the potential future expansion of NATO. At the NSC, Scowcroft, a stickler for good process, was displeased that the document had leaked and that the debate had played out publicly as opposed to privately. Similarly, Bush and those around him understood that the muscular language of the document was likely to cause political problems for leaders of allied countries, such as Germany and Japan, that the DPG seemed to identify as potential future competitors. “I know the leak of this draft Pentagon report didn’t help,” read Bush’s suggested talking points for the aforementioned meeting with Kohl.¹¹² Finally, administration higher-ups were clearly nonplussed that the rhetoric of the DPG occasionally seemed to undercut the emphasis

105 See Scowcroft, “Meeting with Chancellor Kohl of Germany,” March 19, 1992, OA/ID CF01414, Hutchings Country Files, GHWBL.

106 Patrick Tyler, “Pentagon Drops Goal of Blocking New Superpowers,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1992; “Pentagon Abandons Goal of Thwarting U.S. Rivals,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1992; Memo to Cheney, March 26, 1992, EBB 245, NSA; “Issues in the Policy and Strategy Section,” April 14, 1992, EBB 245, NSA.

107 Joint Chiefs of Staff, *National Military Strategy of the United States*, January 1992, <http://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nms/nms1992.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-123420-723>.

108 “The Future of U.S. Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), 367; also Cheney and Powell Remarks to Senate Budget Committee, Feb. 3, 1992, Federal News Service.

109 Bush note to speechwriters, March 14, 1992, in Bush, *All the Best*, George Bush, 551; Gellman, “Aim of Defense Plan.”

110 Baker Remarks to Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, April 2, 1992, Box 169, Baker Papers.

111 Patrick Tyler, “Senior U.S. Officials Assail Lone-Superpower Policy,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1992; also Edelman, “Strange Career.”

112 “Chancellor Kohl of Germany,” undated (March 1992), OA/ID CF01414, Country Files, Hutchings Files, GHWBL.

on multilateralism that had characterized U.S. policy during the Gulf War. The administration had always recognized that such multilateralism was both dependent on, and a means of advancing, American leadership. But the DPG's blunt advocacy of preserving American primacy seemed likely to dispel the warm feelings Washington had earned through its reliance on the U.N. Security Council during the Gulf crisis, and to present the image of a superpower determined to maintain hegemony for its own narrow purposes. This was presumably why Scowcroft termed the DPG "arrogant" (as he later put it) and likely to cause diplomatic headaches.¹¹³

Yet these concerns pertained mainly to language, process, and atmospherics, and *not* to core strategic content. Put differently, it would have been hard to identify any leading officials who did *not* think that the United States should maintain unrivaled military capabilities, favorable power balances in key regions, and a global network of security alliances, while also working to promote a stable international environment in which democracy and markets were prevalent and U.S. influence was unsurpassed. Scowcroft, for instance, may have criticized the DPG after the fact (and after the Iraq War of 2003 had soured his relationship with Cheney), but at the time his NSC staff does not seem to have objected to the basic ideas — as distinct from the language — conveyed in the report. Indeed, when a revised version of the document — which was substantively quite similar — was subsequently submitted for clearance, the White House approved it with only minor edits.¹¹⁴ And though State Department officials would later offer, in an end-of-administration review, a vision of post-Cold War policy that placed greater emphasis on international economics and other non-military challenges (as was appropriate in a State Department document), the core premises of the analysis were not dramatically different from those of the DPG.

One collection of State Department papers noted, for instance, that "for the first time in fifty years we do not face a global military adversary" and stressed the remarkably advantageous nature

of that situation. It spoke of the need to prevent proliferation of WMD to authoritarian regimes, for "such a development would dramatically destabilize important parts of the world, and could even threaten the physical security of the United States." It stressed the importance of promoting free markets and free political institutions. Above all, it argued that no one else could lead in these tasks:

The bottom line is that in this time of uncertainty, the United States has a unique role to play — as a provider of reassurance and architect of new security arrangements; as an aggressive proponent of economic openness; as an exemplar and advocate of democratic values; as a builder and leader of coalitions to deal with the problems of a chaotic post-Cold War world.¹¹⁵

In sum, there was far more consensus than debate about the basic merits of the strategy described in the DPG.¹¹⁶

As all this indicates, efforts — whether at the time or later — to sharply distinguish between the primacist strategy embodied by the DPG and the liberal internationalist approach favored by other observers rest on a false dichotomy. For the DPG *did* advance a strategy of liberal internationalism. It emphasized maintaining U.S. leadership of alliances and other institutions, promoting liberal norms, and fostering an open and inclusive international order, in part by ensuring that America retained the preponderant military power and strategic influence needed to accomplish these goals. In the same way, the State Department papers just referenced recognized that American leadership and power were essential components of promoting a cooperative, stable international environment, just as Bush and Scowcroft had recognized during the Gulf War that any "New World Order" would ultimately have to rest on the unrivaled might and unequalled exertions of the United States. The Bush administration recognized, in other words, what some scholars would subsequently become prone to ignoring — that liberal internationalism

113 On Scowcroft's views, see Bartholomew Sparrow, *The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security* (New York: Hachette, 2015), 485-86.

114 See Memo from Don Pulling, April 23, 1992, in EBB 245, NSA; also Wolfowitz to Cheney, May 5, 1992; Wolfowitz to Cheney, May 13, 1992, EBB 245, NSA.

115 See Lawrence Eagleburger to Warren Christopher, Jan. 5, 1993, Freedom of Information Act, in author's possession. I thank Jim Goldgeier for sharing this document with me.

116 Partially in response to the DPG saga, there was a wider-ranging academic debate over the value of U.S. primacy. Robert Jervis, "International Primacy: Is the Game Worth the Candle?" *International Security* 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993): 52-67; Samuel P. Huntington, "Why International Primacy Matters," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993): 68-83.

and U.S. hegemonic leadership were two sides of the same coin.¹¹⁷

Yet if all this is true, then what caused the public blowup when the DPG was leaked? Much of that furor stemmed from the same factors that had caused insiders some discomfort. Because the administration had used such high-flown multilateral rhetoric during the Persian Gulf War — albeit as a way of asserting American leadership — the DPG's unembarrassed support for U.S. geopolitical superiority was unavoidably jarring to many outside observers. "I was a little surprised

nature would become clear after Clinton won the presidency — and proceeded to follow a national security policy that tracked fairly closely with what the document recommended.

Contrary to what the *New York Times* reported, in fact, the DPG was quietly affirmed by the Bush administration in its final months in office. Wolfowitz and Cheney accepted Libby's revised draft, which was then approved (notwithstanding minor edits) by the White House. A public version was published in January 1993 as the Pentagon's *Regional Defense Strategy*.¹²¹ Although the revised paper had tamer language, Wolfowitz assured Cheney, "It is still a rather hard-hitting document which retains the substance you liked in the February 18th draft."¹²²

Indeed, the *Regional Defense Strategy* fully committed to preserving American primacy in support of an open and congenial order. "America's strategic position is stronger than it has been for decades," it averred; Washington

The DPG was quietly affirmed by the Bush administration in its final months in office.

somebody would put this kind of thing down on paper," the diplomatic historian John Lewis Gaddis told a reporter.¹¹⁸

The political context simply fanned the flames. On the right, the DPG landed in the middle of a surprisingly competitive Republican presidential primary, in which Buchanan was calling for geopolitical retrenchment and a more narrowly nationalistic approach to foreign affairs.¹¹⁹ The leak of the DPG also occurred amid heated debates about military spending levels and as Democratic presidential candidates sought to outdo each other in their critique of Bush's foreign policy. It was hardly a coincidence that key players in these debates were among the harshest critics of the DPG. Paul Tsongas publicly blasted the administration for ignoring the United Nations; Clinton's deputy campaign manager, George Stephanopoulos, labeled the DPG exercise "an excuse for big budgets."¹²⁰ The controversy's intensely political

must "maintain the strategic depth that we won through forty years of the Cold War." Likewise, the *Regional Defense Strategy* reaffirmed the value of U.S. alliances and forward deployments, and it made clear that America must be able to "preclude hostile nondemocratic powers from dominating regions critical to our interests." The document emphasized protecting the post-Cold War order by confronting terrorism and weapons proliferation, and by extending "the remarkable democratic 'zone of peace.'" While paying due regard to American alliances and international institutions, the *Regional Defense Strategy* also left no doubt that Washington would use force — alone, if need be — to defeat serious threats to its interests. Finally, the strategy made explicit the idea that America should "dominate the military-technological revolution" as a means of sustaining its preeminence and deterring current or potential rivals. The *Regional Defense Strategy*, in other

117 On this debate, see G. John Ikenberry, "The Future of the Liberal World Order: Internationalism After America," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (May/June 2011): 56–68; vs. Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

118 Peter Grieg, "Hot Debate Over U.S. Strategic Role: Draft Pentagon Paper Stirs Up Controversy on How, and Why, Military Funds Are Spent," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 16, 1992.

119 On Buchanan's views, see, for instance, Robin Toner, "Buchanan, Urging New Nationalism, Joins '92 Race," *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 1991.

120 Patrick Tyler, "Lone Superpower Plan: Ammunition for Critics," *New York Times*, March 10, 1992.

121 Dick Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, January 1993, EBB 245, NSA.

122 Wolfowitz to Cheney, May 5, 1992; also, Wolfowitz to Cheney, May 13, 1992; Memo from Don Pulling, April 23, 1992, all in EBB 245, NSA. In his own account, Wolfowitz recalls that the Department of Defense could not get the revised version approved by the White House or other interagency actors. In fact, the revised DPG (which was subsequently published as the *Regional Defense Strategy*) was approved by the White House in the spring of 1992. And as Wolfowitz himself notes, "Far from being an extreme strategy developed by a small group of Defense Department officials, the DPG not only reflected the consensus thinking of the first Bush administration but became generally accepted defense policy under President Clinton." See Wolfowitz, "Shaping the Future," 59, 206.

words, was simply the DPG in another guise.¹²³ Admittedly, the document did not explicitly restate the idea that Washington should prevent the rise of any new hostile superpower.¹²⁴ Yet this was a distinction without a difference because the goal of preventing hostile nondemocratic powers from dominating key regions — which ran throughout the document — amounted to the same thing.

At the close of Bush's presidency, the administration found other ways of conveying this basic commitment to a primacist strategy. In late 1992, Bush dispatched U.S. troops to provide humanitarian assistance to starving civilians in Somalia. He had done so reluctantly, out of fears that this deployment would result in the sort of open-ended mission he had earlier resisted in the Gulf and the Balkans. As a result, while humanitarian concerns ultimately drove Bush to approve the mission, he sought to define it as narrowly as possible — to limit it to the delivery of aid and the creation of infrastructure for future deliveries. He made clear in two major policy addresses that Washington should always be wary of “running off on reckless, expensive crusades.” But Bush also used these addresses, in December 1992 and January 1993, to further spell out his now-familiar vision for global strategy, a vision that was premised on using unrivaled U.S. influence to promote geopolitical stability, avoid a return to the more threatening climate of earlier decades, and “win the democratic peace...for people the world over.”¹²⁵

Bush's final *National Security Strategy* put forward much the same idea. The 1993 iteration was Bush's foreign policy valedictory, issued in the name of the president himself. It represented his concluding effort to enshrine a prudent yet ambitious post-Cold War strategy. Lest there be any thought that the *Regional Defense Strategy* did not reflect administration policy, or that it was issued simply as a sop to Cheney's Defense Department as Bush's tenure expired, the *National Security Strategy* explicitly endorsed the approach laid out in that document, and even echoed — verbatim — concepts including the importance of “strategic depth” and the democratic “zone of peace.” The lessons of the new era, the *National Security Strategy* argued, were already clear:

that we cannot be sure when or where the next conflict will arise; that regions critical

to our interests must be defended; that the world must respond to straightforward aggression; that international coalitions can be forged, though they often will require American leadership; that the proliferation of advanced weaponry represents a clear, present, and widespread danger; and that the United States remains the nation whose strength and leadership are essential to a stable and democratic world order.

To this end, the document endorsed the retention of critical power-projection capabilities and overweening military power; it called for the United States to promote the forces of global “integration” against threatening “fragmentation.” The *National Security Strategy* made clear that post-Cold War stability would ultimately rest on “an enduring global faith” in America, and it left little doubt that the United States intended to leave behind an era of balanced power and geopolitical divisions, and to shape a unipolar order in its own image. “Our policy has one overriding goal: real peace — not the illusory and fragile peace maintained by a balance of terror, but an enduring democratic peace based on shared values.”¹²⁶

That vision, it turned out, long outlasted Bush's presidency. There was initially some indication that the Clinton administration might undertake a more effacing approach to world affairs, and on the stump Clinton had pledged to pursue defense cuts far greater than those made by Bush. Yet, as the Clinton administration found itself facing largely the same global panorama as its predecessor, it ultimately embraced a strategy very similar to that charted during the Bush years. As early as September 1993, National Security Adviser Anthony Lake gave a major address noting that the defining “feature of this era is that we are its dominant power” and arguing that Washington must use that dominance to promote continued global stability, to prevent aggressive dictators from menacing the post-Cold War order, and to aggressively promote free markets and democracy. “We should act multilaterally where doing so advances our interests,” Lake added, “and we should act unilaterally when that will serve our purpose.”¹²⁷ Likewise, the Pentagon committed to retaining the capacity to defeat two major regional aggressors nearly simultaneously, and in 1996 the Joint Chiefs

123 Dick Cheney, *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy*, January 1993, EBB 245, NSA.

124 On this point, see Popescu, *Emergent Strategy and Grand Strategy*, 123–24.

125 Remarks at Texas A&M University, Dec. 15, 1992; remarks at West Point, Jan. 5, 1993.

126 The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, January 1993, ii, 1, 6, 13 <http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-1993/>.

127 Anthony Lake, “From Containment to Enlargement,” Sept. 21, 1993, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/lakedoc.html>.

of Staff released a document advocating “full spectrum dominance” to mold the international environment and constrain potential rivals.¹²⁸ All of these concepts could have been ripped straight from the 1992 DPG.

Indeed, the outcome of the Pentagon’s Bottom Up Review, undertaken in 1993, demonstrates the strength of the lineage between Bush-era planning efforts and those that followed. Clinton’s first secretary of defense, Les Aspin, had initiated a thoroughgoing review of U.S. military strategy as part of an effort to further reduce defense spending. But as his Pentagon considered the opportunities and imperatives of the post-Cold War world, it ended up embracing its predecessor’s strategy. The final report of the Bottom Up Review emphasized the importance of preventing aggressive authoritarians from dominating key regions. It concluded that America “must field forces capable, in concert with its allies, of fighting and winning two major regional conflicts that occur nearly simultaneously.” This “two MRC” construct was deemed crucial because, as Aspin wrote, “We do not want a potential aggressor in one region to be tempted to take advantage if we are already engaged in halting aggression in another.” Moreover, maintaining a two-MRC capability would serve as insurance against the prospect that any major power might seek to compete militarily with Washington. It would

provide a hedge against the possibility that a future adversary might one day confront us with a larger-than-expected threat, and then turn out, through doctrinal or technological innovation, to be more capable than we expect, or enlist the assistance of other nations to form a coalition against our interests.

Maintaining this dominant force, in turn, was necessary so that

we can replace the East-West confrontation of the Cold War with an era in which the community of nations, guided by a common commitment to democratic principles, free-market economics, and the rule of law, can

be significantly enlarged.¹²⁹

The continuity of basic strategy, moreover, was more than rhetorical. U.S. military spending would decline somewhat under Clinton, to around 3 percent of gross domestic product by the late 1990s (although this decline was partially due to the robust economic growth of that decade). But because most other countries reduced their defense spending faster than Washington did, the United States still accounted for roughly 35 to 40 percent of global defense spending, and it preserved military capabilities far in excess of those of all U.S. rivals combined.¹³⁰

Like the Bush administration, the Clinton administration also repeatedly proved willing to use those capabilities to face down threats to stability in critical regions, such as when it dispatched additional troops to the Persian Gulf in 1994 after Saddam Hussein once again threatened Kuwait, or when it dispatched two carrier strike groups to the Western Pacific after China sought to use military exercises and missile tests to intimidate Taiwan in 1995 and 1996. That latter episode represented a deliberate display of American primacy. As Secretary of Defense William Perry announced, “Beijing should know, and this [U.S. fleet] will remind them, that while they are a great military power, the premier military power in the Western Pacific is the United States.”¹³¹

More broadly, the Clinton administration would undertake a range of policies that fit squarely within the framework laid down by the Bush administration: retention and updating of U.S. alliances in the Asia-Pacific, expansion of NATO in Europe, promotion of democratic concepts and market reforms in countries from Haiti to Russia, active containment of Saddam’s Iraq and other aggressive authoritarian regimes, and efforts to stymie nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere. And rhetorically, the Clinton administration embraced the idea of America as the “indispensable nation,” the country with a unique responsibility for upholding global peace and security — and the unique privileges that came with that role.¹³² Administrations changed, but the basic logic of post-Cold War strategy endured.

In fact, as scholars have now extensively documented, a commitment to maintaining

128 *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, May 1997, Section 3, “Defense Strategy”; Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Vision 2010*, 2; also Alexandra Homolar, “How to Last Alone at the Top: U.S. Strategic Planning for the Unipolar Era,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 2 (2011): 202–12.

129 Les Aspin, *Report on the Bottom Up Review*, issued by Defense Department, October 1993, iii–iv, 7–8.

130 For military spending figures, consult the data available through the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s annual reports and military spending database, available at <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>; also Homolar, “How to Last Alone at the Top.”

131 Art Pine, “U.S. Faces Choices on Sending Ships to Taiwan,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1996.

132 On Clinton-era statecraft, see Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of American Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Patrick Porter, “The American Way: Power, Habit, and Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, forthcoming.

American primacy, and to using that primacy to shape an eminently favorable global environment, became a theme of fundamental, bipartisan continuity throughout the post-Cold War era. This is not to say that there was *no* change in U.S. strategy from the early 1990s onward, for particular policies and rhetorical and diplomatic styles did shift considerably over time — witness the approaches of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama to Iraq, for instance. Similarly, which of the three key regions of Eurasia would receive the greatest attention from U.S. policymakers also shifted during this period. But the first-order judgments about American strategy remained remarkably consistent, and many core objectives and initiatives persisted as well.¹³³ Long after the initial firestorm touched off by the leak of the DPG had been mostly forgotten, the basic ideas and policies the document propounded remained quite relevant.

Conclusion

Twenty-five years after it was drafted, the DPG remains a source of controversy in some circles.

The DPG encapsulated the Bush administration's choice of an ambitious post-Cold War strategy, one that was reaffirmed by subsequent administrations.

While some historians and other analysts have begun to better understand the content and nature of that document, critics have continued to see it as “unsettling” and even “Strangelovian.” Likewise, some scholars persist in deeming the DPG an unprecedented assertion of American hegemony.¹³⁴ As a review of the declassified record demonstrates, however, the reality was more prosaic — but also, perhaps, more interesting. The DPG offered a program for the retention and improvement of America's post-bipolar primacy, but it was hardly unique in its arguments. Rather, the DPG

fit comfortably within the dominant strategic paradigm of the Bush administration, even if the rhetoric was sharper than many officials would have liked. Even before the superpower conflict ended, Bush and his advisers had argued that the United States must lean forward in shaping a promising but potentially perilous post-Cold War world. The logic of American primacy was then reinforced by crises in Europe and the Persian Gulf. After the Soviet collapse, the DPG drew together the key elements of a coalescing strategic mind-set and made the case for American primacy in its starkest and most explicit terms. The DPG thus encapsulated the Bush administration's choice of an ambitious post-Cold War strategy, one that was reaffirmed by subsequent administrations.

Interestingly, then, a review of Bush administration strategic planning makes the DPG appear both more and less important than it was often seen to be at the time. The document was arguably more important in the sense that it represented the earliest, most comprehensive, and most candid statement of American strategy after the Soviet collapse, and in the sense that its core concepts would endure. Yet it was arguably less important than sometimes thought in the sense that its basic content was not particularly controversial within the administration and that it was only one element of a much larger process by which Bush and his advisers came to identify and articulate a post-bipolar approach to global statecraft.

The Bush administration's choice of that strategy, in turn, drew on a mix of important factors. There were, certainly, the long-standing beliefs — both ideological and geopolitical — about America's role in the world, which influenced the administration's outlook from the outset. More immediately, there was the potent cocktail of optimism and wariness that shaped U.S. strategic thinking at the dawn of a new era. Bush and his aides clearly perceived that Washington had a historic opportunity to solidify a post-bipolar order in which U.S. interests and values would be far more privileged than before; they also worried that any lack of assertive American leadership would open the door to multipolar instability and tumult. The result was to push the United States toward an expansive approach meant to reap the benefits while avoiding the dangers of the post-Cold War world.

If nothing else, the emerging record of the

133 See, on this continuity, Leffler, “Dreams of Freedom, Temptations of Power”; Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*; P. Edward Haley, *Strategies of Dominance: The Misdirection of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Posen, *Restraint*.

134 Eugene Jarecki, *The American War of War: Guided Missiles, Misguided Men, and a Republic in Peril* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 12; also Joan Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy From Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of Perfectibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 138.

Bush administration's approach to global strategy indicates that some interpretations of the forty-first president's statecraft need to be revised. For years, the standard depiction of Bush's foreign policy, offered by eminent scholars such as Jeremi Suri as well as former policymakers such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, was that Bush was an adept crisis manager but lacked the vision to identify a new global role for America. Yet in light of the evidence presented here — as well as recent assessments by scholars such as Jeffrey Engel — this interpretation is no longer persuasive.¹³⁵ Over the course of his presidency, Bush and his advisers *did* establish a clear and relatively coherent vision for post-Cold War strategy. That vision was quite ambitious; it was readily apparent in administration strategy documents and key policies. And it would persist, in its broad outlines, long after Bush left office.

But was this a wise strategy? Since the early 1990s, there has developed a substantial literature critiquing the U.S. decision to pursue a primacist strategy, and thus critiquing — implicitly or explicitly — the Bush administration's role in making that choice.¹³⁶ A full assessment of post-Cold War strategy would require more extensive analysis than is possible here.¹³⁷ With the perspective of a quarter-century, however, a more positive view of the Bush administration's strategic decision-making seems warranted.

For one thing, that decision-making was rooted in a generally reasonable assessment of the international environment and America's role therein as the Cold War ended. As Bush-era officials were acutely aware, this was indeed a moment when the geopolitical tectonic plates were shifting more rapidly and disruptively than at any time since World War II. Many leading international relations scholars were predicting that the post-Cold War world would be a nasty place characterized by multipolar instability, rampant nuclear proliferation, and great-power revisionism by Germany and Japan.¹³⁸ Moreover, the major international crises of this period demonstrated that the United States did have a

unique capacity to provide stability and leadership amid profound uncertainty and that there was fairly widespread international support for Washington to play this role. In these circumstances, it was hardly surprising or unreasonable that the Bush administration chose a form of consensual but assertive American primacy as the best approach to protecting international security and U.S. interests. Nor was it surprising that subsequent presidents affirmed this basic concept.

And in retrospect, many key judgments and premises of that approach have fared passably well with time. Bush administration decision-making was, for instance, based on a fairly accurate assessment of the durability of American primacy. At the dawn of the post-Cold War era, leading academic observers often predicted that unipolarity would rapidly give way to a multipolar system in which Japan, Germany, or a united Europe balanced against the United States.¹³⁹ Yet for more than a quarter-century after the Cold War, the United States remained by far the most powerful and capable actor in international affairs. Today, the ongoing rise of China has narrowed America's lead but not nearly erased it. As the most systematic assessment of global power dynamics today concludes, "Everyone should start getting used to a world in which the United States remains the sole superpower for decades to come."¹⁴⁰ The Bush administration believed that American preeminence could last for some time; the trajectory of international politics over the course of a generation affirms that judgment more than it undercuts it.

The trajectory of international politics also affirmed a second belief, which was that assertive American leadership would attract more countries than it repelled. Today, of course, rivals such as Russia and China are contesting American primacy, as part of an effort to assert their own prerogatives. Yet what is remarkable is that the post-Cold War era has not, at least so far, produced a concerted, multilateral counter-balancing campaign against the dominant country in the international system, and that many key second- and third-tier states

135 Jeremi Suri, "American Grand Strategy From the Cold War's End to 9/11," *Orbis* (Fall 2009): 611-27; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Second Chance: The Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower* (New York: Basic Books, 2007). For another early interpretation that has been overtaken, see Hal Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008). For a more positive recent take, see Jeffrey Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017).

136 For instance, Posen, *Restraint*; Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design"; Stephen Walt, "The End of the American Era," *National Interest* 116 (2011): 6-16.

137 But see Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), Chapter 1.

138 John Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1990, 35-50.

139 Kenneth Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, no. 2 (1993): 44-79; Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (1993): 5-51.

140 Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, "The Once and Future Superpower: Why China Won't Overtake the United States," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (2016): 91-104.

have continued to align with Washington. Japan, Germany, and other major industrial countries have remained largely content to be part of the strategic and economic community led by the United States. Front-line states in Eastern Europe and other regions have often seemed to fear American abandonment more than American domination. As Zachary Selden has argued, the dominant tendency has been to balance *with* the United States against threats to the international system — like those now posed by Russia and China — rather than to balance *against* the preeminent power that America has wielded.¹⁴¹

Finally, there is now significant scholarship to support the idea that a primacist strategy indeed accomplished some of the most important goals the Bush administration initially set out. In a recent book, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth provide a robust body of evidence and analysis demonstrating that the persistence of assertive American engagement did have the effect of suppressing security competitions and instability in key strategic theaters while also providing the overall climate of reassurance in which the international economy could continue to thrive.¹⁴² Other scholars have noted the role of America's post-Cold War policies in assisting the continued spread of democracy and market institutions, and in limiting nuclear proliferation in East Asia and Eastern Europe.¹⁴³ Not least, even consistent critics of America's post-Cold War strategy, such as John Mearsheimer, have acknowledged that a persistent U.S. presence in key regions such as Europe and East Asia helped to avoid the major interstate wars that characterized many earlier historical eras, and to avert a rapid return to the more unstable and violent climate that many observers feared when the Cold War ended.¹⁴⁴ All of these points could, surely, be debated at length. Yet if a key premise of a primacist strategy was that assertive American engagement would help produce a more stable and liberal international order than one might otherwise have expected, then there is a defensible argument to be made that this premise, too, looks fairly good twenty-five years later.

A primacist strategy has never been without its

problems, from the economic costs associated with a global military presence to the fact that the United States has periodically succumbed to the temptation to overuse its tremendous power. Today, moreover, the United States faces more serious challenges to its primacy and global interests than at any other time in the post-Cold War era, from a rising China, a resurgent Russia, and an international rogues' gallery that is more empowered and better armed than at any moment since Saddam Hussein's defeat in 1991. Not least, there is some uncertainty as to whether American leaders and the body politic still support such an engaged and assertive strategy, and the policies and mannerisms of the Trump administration may well pose their own challenge to U.S. effectiveness and leadership on the global stage.¹⁴⁵ Yet when one considers the more constructive effects that a primacist strategy has arguably had, and the fact that some of its foundational premises have proven fairly solid over time, one does, perhaps, gain a greater degree of appreciation for the logic of America's post-Cold War strategy, and for the Bush administration's role in shaping that strategy at a moment of great promise and uncertainty in international affairs. 🇺🇸

Hal Brands is a Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). He is the author or editor of several books, including *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (2016), *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (2014), *Latin America's Cold War* (2010), *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (2008), and *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (co-edited with Jeremi Suri, 2015).

He was a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow from 2015 to 2016. He has also consulted with a range of government offices and agencies in the intelligence and national security communities.

141 Zachary Selden, "Balancing Against or Balancing With? The Spectrum of Alignment and the Endurance of American Hegemony," *Security Studies* 22, no. 2 (2013): 330-64.

142 Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

143 See Paul Miller, "American Grand Strategy and the Democratic Peace," *Survival* 52, no. 2 (2012): 49-76; John Dumbrell, *Clinton's Foreign Policy: Between the Bushes, 1992-2000* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 41-61; Mark Kramer, "Neorealism, Nuclear Proliferation, and East-Central European Strategies," in *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies After the Cold War*, edited by Ethan Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 385-463.

144 John Mearsheimer, "Why Is Europe Peaceful Today?" *European Political Science* 9, no. 2 (2010): 387-97.

145 See Hal Brands, "Is American Internationalism Dead? Reading the National Mood in the Age of Trump," *War on the Rocks*, May 16, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/is-american-internationalism-dead-reading-the-national-mood-in-the-age-of-trump/>.