
Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: Meena Bose, Clea Lutz Bunch, John Dumbrell, James Goode, Scott Lucas
Author’s Response from Hal Brands


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How will the 1990s be depicted in U.S. diplomatic history texts? In 1989, Francis Fukuyama anticipated that the end of the Cold War opened up the triumph of liberal Western democracy and the “end of history” with no rivals to the U.S. and its liberalism. When President George H.W. Bush announced within a year that a “New World Order” would become the main objective of the U.S. as it moved to push Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait and pacify the emerging ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, Fukuyama’s thesis seemed to be both confirmed by the ease with which Bush’s global coalition kicked the Iraqi army out of Kuwait and challenged by the ethnic conflicts erupting on the periphery of the former Soviet empire and crises spilling out of failed states in Somalia and Haiti.

From the perspective of 2008, the 1990s has lost much of its appearance of optimism and global hegemony for the United States. September 11th and President George Bush’s ensuing “War on Terror” and invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have shifted the focus on the 1990s. Historians have emphasized the origins of this conflict and the degree to which U.S. leaders failed to anticipate the emerging challenges and develop a sustainable strategy. Recent H-Diplo roundtables demonstrate this transformation. Michael Hunt in The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained & Wielded Global Dominance (2007) devotes a chapter to the 1990s in which he emphasizes the triumph of a neoliberal perspective that noted the integration of the international market economy with the U.S. as “policeman and manager of the emerging neoliberal world order.”¹ Hunt stresses how this self-defined role by U.S. policymakers generated increased problems domestically and abroad and resistance in both areas. Walter Hixson in The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy (2008) places more emphasis on continuity from the late Cold War to September 11th as the U.S. moved from triumphal congratulations over the end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union to U.S. leaders looking for new enemies such as Hussein and Manuel Noriega in Panama but expressing indifference to genocide in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.² Joan Hoff in A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of Perfectibility (2008) views Bush and Clinton as adrift in the 1990s with both failing to address issues of humanitarian interventions, functional versus fictional democracies, and international aid to developing nations. Clinton is criticized for failing to make a systematic overhaul of U.S. policy and for engaging in interventions from Haiti to Kosovo.³

Discussion of the U.S. as global hegemon or debate over whether the U.S. is an empire have
given way to narrower concerns about the financial and economic decline in the U.S. and
their global ramifications. Hal Brands in From Berlin To Bagdad: America’s Search for
Purpose in the Post-Cold War World provides the first of several assessments of this
contemporary period. Brands’ roundtable will be followed by a roundtable on Derek
Chollet and James Goldgeier’s American Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11(2008)
which, unlike Brands’ book, does not examine George W. Bush’s policies. Brands
approaches the 1990s from the perspective of strategy, emphasizing that in the transition
period from the end of the Cold War to the war on terror, American policymakers were
unable to develop a comprehensive strategy to address foreign policy challenges and at the
same time persuade Congress and the American public to support the costs and challenges
of their strategies and interventions. Neither George H.W. Bush’s “New World Order”
strategy nor William Clinton’s emphasis on “Enlargement” with an economic orientation,
which was revised and replaced within two years with “unassertive multilateralism” and
“framework for American leadership” and ad hoc responses to a range of economic,
diplomatic, and crisis situations, successfully matches, in Brand’s assessment, either the
grand strategy of containment in the Cold War or George W. Bush’s strategy after
September 11th.

The reviewers are impressed with Brands’ ability to offer an accessible, comprehensive,
and at times persuasive assessment of contemporary history when few primary sources
are available for research. They do have some reservations and raise questions about
Brands’ thesis as well as his assessment of the three Presidents’ strategies. Brands’
response is vigorous and direct on these questions.

1.) The reviewers welcome Brands’ focus on the efforts of U.S. policy-makers to develop
a persuasive strategy for the post-Cold War period. John Dumbrell applauds the
“combination of fine scholarship and coherent, interesting argumentation” (1) as well as
Brands’ assessment of U.S. political and foreign policy style. Meena Bose and Scott Lucas
agree, although the latter questions whether strategy in the 1990s was as incoherent as
Brands suggests especially in comparison with the Cold War’s containment strategy.
Brands does note many problems with the containment strategy but, in his response,
affirms that containment “proved to be an incredibly durable strategy” and contributed to
“a period of remarkable grand strategic stability compared to the years that followed.” (1)
conflicts over the meaning of containment, the attempts to discard different versions of it
such as “liberation and roll back” in the 1950s or the campaign against détente in the
1970s, and the failures to implement the strategy such as in the campaign to unify Korea or
the Indochina conflicts, is Brands’ conception of containment as a successful strategy
persuasive? Is containment more useful as a “bumper sticker” to maintain public support,
something that Brands stresses as missing in the strategies of the 1990s? Dumbrell also
would have welcomed more integration of international relations theory into the analysis
to enhance the discussion on strategy.
2.) The reviewers are not in agreement on Brands’ assessment of George H.W. Bush’s strategy which extends from managing the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union to the invasions of Panama and Kuwait, a period of rhetoric about a “New World Order” paradigm followed by its abandonment in the escalating conflict in the Balkans. Clea Lutz Bunch and Bose consider Brands to be fairly convincing on Bush, but Lucas questions the separation of the administration’s handling of the end of the Cold War from problems like Kuwait and the Balkans. Instead of a “coherent U.S. strategy to be abandoned,” Lucas suggests that Brands’ evaluation tends to follow a narrative of conflicts rather than an analysis of strategy and its implementation or lack thereof. (1-2)

3.) Brands’ emphasis on Clinton being unable to develop a comprehensive strategy as he moved from “enlargement” to promote trade and democracy to several other terms that will not endure in the textbooks on U.S. diplomacy receives more criticism from the reviewers. Dumbrell, for example, suggests that Brands places too much emphasis on Clinton’s failure to come up with a persuasive “bumper sticker” for his diplomacy and underplays the successful coherence that “democratizing globalization” provided to Clinton’s diplomacy. (1-2) Bose and James Goode note that Clinton faced a variety of old and new issues ranging from trade, to Bosnia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Hussein in Iraq, the Middle East and Israeli-Palestinian issues, relations with European allies and former enemies in Russia and China, emerging concern about the environment and global warming, and, finally, increased terrorist activity by al Qaeda. Goode questions whether Clinton’s record of “supposedly incoherent foreign policies” compares unfavorably with Bush and the war on terror. (2) Lucas also asks whether it is appropriate to assume that all issues should be brought under one umbrella strategy, particularly when the U.S. under Clinton was fully engaged on a global basis from melting ice in Antarctica and the North Pole to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Rwanda and more familiar issues of Israeli-Palestinian conflict and global trade relationships. (2-3) In his vigorous response, Brands emphasizes that Clinton’s commitment to globalization did not lead to a “coherent strategic record” as the administration “was often stymied by Congress and just as often unable to fit the pieces of foreign policy together into an effective whole.” (p. 2 in Brand’s response and see also pp. 199, 204, 224, 229-230)

4.) In his evaluation of the transition from Clinton’s diplomacy to Bush before September 11th, Brands makes an important reference to an emerging unilateralism initiated by Clinton in what the author refers to as “The Post-Post Cold War World,” a period characterized by a decline in multilateralism in areas such as cooperation against Hussein and an increasing tendency by Clinton to act unilaterally in Iraq against Hussein, in Afghanistan and Sudan against terrorist attacks, and in Kosovo without UN approval. Although Brands notes that Clinton remained committed to multilateralism on issues such as arms control and international law, he concludes that public opposition by 2000 had triumphed over Clinton and “multilateralism was dead.” (pp. 238-242, 246-256) Consequently, Brands suggests that the unilateralism usually attributed to the arrival of Bush in the White House had already arrived in Clinton’s responses at least partially under the duress of public and Congressional pressure. Furthermore, Brands argues that Bush had the same problems as Clinton with respect to his diplomacy before 9/11 and, despite taking a more aggressive unilateral stance than Clinton, Brands notes Bush’s
inconsistencies on issues. (pp. 264-269) Scott Lucas, however, disagrees: “Far from being strategically rudderless in January 2001, the Bush Administration—or at least key officials within it—had a clear idea of a new American approach,” regime change in Iraq to demonstrate U.S. global hegemony. Lucas points to the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance and the neo-conservative agenda. (3) In response, Brands notes his discussion of the foundations of post-9/11 policies but argues that the psychological impact of 9/11 on Bush and his advisers such as Condoleezza Rice was more profound than Lucas admits: “This change could be seen in the sense of moral certainty and overweening self-confidence that Bush acquired after 9/11, his new attachment to the earlier-derided concept of democracy promotion, and the shift in Rice’s views on deterrence and rogue states.” (2)

5.) Brands’ assessment of Bush’s strategy in response to September 11th, Afghanistan and Iraq attracts some criticism from the reviewers. Although he is not uncritical of Bush’s “war on terror” and preemption on weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Brands does consider it the most coherent strategy since the Cold War despite its conceptual gaps, its oversimplification of U.S. aims and world realities, the unanticipated consequences of preemption—“profoundly counterproductive as counterterrorism” (p. 320)—the undesirable domestic conduct of the war, and the weakening of the overall U.S. reputation. (pp. 279-280, 291-292, 301-302, 319-320, 326-328) Bunch questions the necessity and lasting appeal of Bush’s bumper-stick diplomacy (3); Bose criticizes the war on terror as a “vague and somewhat illogical concept” (2); and Dumbrell credits Brands with recognizing the “problems and contradictions of pre-emptive war” and oversimplification and misrepresentation of “both global conditions and American foreign objectives.” (1)

6.) Since Brands focuses on strategy in the contemporary context, a central question, as frequently occurred during the Cold War, relates to what President-elect Barack Obama and his advisers will do with Bush’s strategy? Is it on its way to the ubiquitous Windows “Recycle Bin”? Will Obama attempt a significant change in strategy as Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles’ articulated in the 1952 campaign—“roll back and liberation” versus Harry Truman’s “no-win containment”—and discover that international realities and potential destructive costs forced a return to containment plus enhanced rhetoric and covert political action operations? “War on Terror” and “preemption” are likely to disappear from the U.S. diplomatic lexicon with more emphasis on the less controversial and less costly methods to deal with terrorists and the sources of terrorism. Obama will have to address Bush’s unresolved conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, perhaps accepting Iraq’s expressed desire for a U.S. withdrawal as the best opportunity to extricate the U.S. At the same time, Obama has proposed an expansion of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan to deal with Bush’s failure to stabilize the situation there before rushing off to get Saddam Hussein. In his response Brands suggests that Obama might develop a strategy that is “simultaneously more nuanced and more effective”; he predicts that Obama will be more deliberative than Bush but concludes that there is still a consensus that the War on Terror “must be the defining issue of American foreign policy.” Furthermore, Obama will have to develop an integrated policy that sells well to Americans who are “suckers for simplicity.” (3) Will Americans still be “suckers” for a strategy that devotes little consideration to costs? Obama’s administration will have to consider this issue when evaluating appropriate objectives and means in U.S. diplomacy, a central concern in
designing a realistic strategy that Brands omits and that Bush and his advisers appeared to ignore with costly consequences now and into the future. For a collection of eleven essays that address these issues, see Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, eds., *To Lead the World: American Strategy After the Bush Doctrine* (2008), the subject of an H-Diplo roundtable in January.

**Participants:**

**Hal Brands** is completing his Ph.D. in History at Yale University. He is the author of *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World*, as well as articles in *Diplomatic History, Cold War History, Pacific Historical Review, the Journal of African History, The Historian*, and several other journals. He is currently writing an international history of the Cold War in Latin America, and works at the Institute for Defense Analyses in Washington, D.C.

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**Jim Goode** teaches the history of U.S. foreign relations as well as courses on the history of the Middle East at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His most
recent book, Negotiating for the Past: Archaeology, Nationalism and Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1919-1941, was published in 2007. He is currently writing a history of an early Christian Lebanese community in Michigan.

Scott Lucas is Professor of American Studies at the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom. A doctoral graduate of the London School of Economics, he is the author of five books and more than 30 major articles on British and U.S. foreign policy, including The Betrayal of Dissent: Beyond Orwell, Hitchens, and the New American Century (2004). He has just launched the website Enduring America (www.enduringamerica.com) and is writing a book on the grand strategy of the Bush Administration, 2001-2005.
Since the ending of the Cold War, policy makers and scholars alike have weighed the importance of grand strategy for guiding American foreign policy. They have devoted considerable attention to the feasibility of developing an overarching concept comparable to the “containment” strategy that directed U.S. actions abroad for more than forty years. As the United States commences its fourth post-Cold War presidency, however, development of such an overarching doctrine remains elusive. Hal Brands presents a comprehensive and compelling analysis of how Presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush have wrestled with the challenges of establishing broad objectives for American foreign policy and then implementing them.

Upon taking office in 1989, George H.W. Bush faced what Brands describes as a “situation unique in the post-World War era: the possibility that the Cold War might soon be over” (9). President Ronald Reagan had held an unprecedented four summit meetings with his Soviet counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev, in his second term, and Bush, who had served as Reagan’s vice president for both terms, was determined to evaluate U.S. progress in those sessions before continuing discussions. Bush’s “pause” in U.S.-Soviet relations did not produce any strategic changes, and the dizzying events of 1989-1990, beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November, brought a sudden, unexpected, and largely peaceful end to the Cold War.

The Cold War’s end did not mark the end of conflict, of course, and Bush oversaw two significant military engagements during his presidency, the Panama invasion in December 1989 to topple dictator Manuel Noriega, and the 1991 Gulf War. After Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein sent military forces to invade neighboring Kuwait in the summer of 1990, Bush declared that the international community was entering a “new world order.” In this system, countries banded together to ensure that states respected each other’s sovereignty and that aggressors were punished for violating the global code of conduct. The joint U.S.-Soviet condemnation of Saddam Hussein’s aggression marked the first illustration of this new order, and the subsequent United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq appeared to represent a model for how states would build coalitions to pursue common interests. But, as Brands finds, despite the rhetorical appeal of the “new world order,” its application proved more complicated after the Gulf War, particularly in such conflict-ridden areas as the newly autonomous regions of the former Yugoslavia. The concept represented the first attempt at a post-Cold War strategy, but it was broadly viewed as most relevant to the particular situation in which it was conceived, namely, the planning before the first Gulf War.

When Bill Clinton took office in 1993, he focused foremost on budgetary policy, and his attention to foreign affairs had a similar economic orientation. Building upon the successes of the Cold War, the Clinton administration endorsed the spread of democracy abroad through a doctrine that became known as “enlargement.” This strategy focused primarily on promoting trade with other nations as a means to encouraging democratic governance in those states. As commercial growth flourished, so, too, would political reform. The
passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) illustrated the merits of enlargement, but its application proved more difficult in other cases, such as the humanitarian crisis in Somalia or the civil war in Bosnia. While enlargement called for the expansion of democratic values worldwide, the means to this end were not readily evident.

Within two years, the term “enlargement” was no longer in use as a description of the Clinton administration’s foreign policy. Brands attributes this shift to “Clinton’s inability to convince Americans that free trade, human rights, and democracy were sufficiently integral to U.S. security to justify any meaningful sacrifice in their pursuit” (129). The difficulty of determining a uniform set of objectives for the United States to pursue in a world where expectations for American assistance to other states varied highly also contributed to the problem. Clinton achieved numerous successes in foreign policy during his two terms, including a Bosnia peace settlement in 1995 and an agreement to pay past U.S. dues to the United Nations, but he did not develop a unifying framework or vision for the myriad of issues he addressed.

President George W. Bush entered office in 2001 determined to limit military interventions, for which his predecessor has faced much criticism, and to address domestic initiatives through the prism of what he termed “compassionate conservatism.” But the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 pushed foreign policy to the forefront of the national agenda, and within a year, the Bush administration had released a national security strategy that presented American priorities, namely, combating terrorism and halting the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The most controversial aspect of the strategy was its declaration that the United States might attack first if it suspected that another nation was preparing to wage an assault. “Preemption,” as the administration labeled this approach, broke sharply with the American political tradition, but advocates declared it was necessary to maintain the initiative in battling terrorists.

The 2003 Iraq war marked the Bush administration’s single application of the preemption doctrine. When the war revealed that Iraq did not have stockpiles of WMD, as proponents of military action had warned, critics questioned the usefulness of the highly controversial strategy. Brands finds that the president “placed less stress on preemption in his second term, [but] his overall priorities remained the same” (330). An updated 2006 national security strategy compared the battle against terrorists to the “long struggle” of the Cold War. The administration used the phrase “war on terror” as shorthand for summarizing its strategy, a vague and somewhat illogical concept that represented yet another effort to bring coherence to the uncertainty of the post-Cold War world.

Brand’s thoroughly researched case studies are highly informative, and his conclusion about the “coherence conundrum” (339) for the United States in foreign affairs is instructive. Given his extensive historical survey, a fuller discussion of how future presidents might learn from their predecessors in the immediate post-Cold War era about the challenges and merits of strategy development would be useful. Still, Brands presents a nuanced and balanced analysis of the difficulties with developing American national security doctrine, and he sets the foundation for future study of how presidents in the post-9/11 world can grapple effectively with diverse U.S. interests in world affairs.
The Triumph of Nuance?

I must confess: I view the 1990s with considerable nostalgia. In retrospect, those years appear to be simpler times, when the sexual peccadilloes of President Clinton dominated the national attention for several months, “dotcoms” transformed the global business landscape, and American officials argued about how an imaginary surplus should be spent. I sometimes long for the days when Middle East Studies classes were small and esoteric, before I learned the Arabic words for “suicide bomber” and “numerous people killed,” when newscasters did not comprehend the difference between Sunni and Shi’ite. For a brief period after the breakup of the Soviet Union, any international conflict seemed ripe for solution; when Yasser Arafat and Itzak Rabin shook hands on the White House lawn, the world appeared to be on the brink of a massive peace.

The global situation was, of course, far more complex than my nostalgia indicates. In his recent monograph, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America’s Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World*, Hal Brands details the fits and stumbles of American officials as they attempted to devise a strategy for the post-Cold War era. Brands has produced a thorough, well-researched, and cohesive study of the years between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the “war on terror.” With graceful and informative prose, the author details this recent era of uncertainty, connecting it to the ultimate triumph of simplistic policy formulations that currently guide the Bush Administration. During the decades following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Americans attempted to “identify themes of international relations as clear-cut as the clash between liberalism and communism, to articulate strategies as logically firm and rhetorically persuasive as containment.” (38) In his work, Brands captures the essence of the intellectual trauma and institutional malaise that emerged in the post-Cold War era, explaining that both American politicians and the public felt uncomfortable with policy “drift.”

Brands paints a convincing picture of the presidency of George H.W. Bush and the moral, intellectual, and strategic uncertainty that accompanied the demise of the Soviet Union. He argues that President George H.W. Bush attempted to slow the pace of reform in the Soviet Union—rather than venturing headlong into a post-Soviet era—due to concerns that dramatic change could lead to revolution, fascism or a return to dictatorship. According to the author, while the president did not initiate change, he proved masterful at managing it through his (oft mocked) prudent approach to foreign affairs. Yet Brands claims that “At crucial points, too, it was Kohl or Gorbachev who pushed for change, not Bush. In this view, it seems more appropriate to say that events drove the president rather than the other way around.” (33) In an attempt to reassert American power, Bush engaged in dramatic military interventions in Panama and Kuwait, displaying to world leaders that force remained an integral component of American policy, and proclaiming a “New World Order” to structure foreign affairs. (82-83) But the implications of this “New World Order” were inchoate and obscure, possibly leading to multiple interventions around the globe; this
uncertainty forced Bush to abandon his fledgling global paradigm. Thus, Bush ultimately failed to provide a simple guiding principle for American foreign policy.

President Bill Clinton also struggled to create an effective framework to steer the actions of policymakers and inform the public. His administration explored a number of guiding principles—such as the economy and human rights—but could not seem to identify a theme that resonated deeply with the American public. As a result, Clinton’s policies suffered from lack of public interest and could be easily undermined by his opponents. Ultimately, Brands avers, Clinton failed “to convince Americans that free trade, human rights, and democracy were sufficiently integral to U.S. security to justify any meaningful sacrifice in their pursuit.” (129) Clinton’s critics argued that his policies lacked the focus and moral clarity of containment, leading to confusion about global priorities. In addition, the public found economic motives distasteful in world affairs; they needed, “to feel good about their policy” and to “identify a greater moral good to make up for his inevitable dealings with unlikable regimes.”(238) Brands also indicts Clinton for his singular focus on the Middle East, stating that his obsession with the Arab-Israeli peace process caused him to neglect other critical issues. Ultimately, peace was boring: by the end of Clinton’s term, Americans cared very little about foreign affairs. Thus, it became difficult for Clinton to stimulate public interest and support for his policies. In the end, the president rejected the simplistic paradigms of “bumper sticker diplomacy” and embraced complexity. But the lack of a core principle, Brands argues, created its own problems, and allowed Clinton to pursue competing goals such as simultaneously seeking the expansion of NATO and liberalization of Russia. (229)

After this confusing era of policy drift, George W. Bush provided a coherent new strategy for the conduct of foreign affairs with the “war on terror.” This new paradigm had the benefit of a simple moral clarity, dividing the world into two camps: Pro-American and pro-terrorism. As Brands puts it “the war on terror provided intellectual refuge from a world that was intractably complex and unfamiliar. The notion that the globe could be dichotomized between terrorists and freedom lovers was a welcome one, giving Americans an uncomplicated means of thinking about their international role.” (334) As in the Cold War, the “war on terror” created a framework for priorities and simultaneously produced some strange bedfellows as the president garnered support from dictators in Uzbekistan and Pakistan. Given the initial domestic support for the “war on terror,” Brands argues that the American public derived significant comfort from a simple, easy to comprehend, dichotomous foreign policy.

I must admit that I thoroughly enjoyed this book and found few flaws between the covers. Notwithstanding the recent animosity between the two major political parties, the author manages to maintain a fairly evenhanded approach to Republican and Democratic administrations. A few quibbles: Brands tends to laud some administrations and criticize others for events, which were basically out of their control. George W. Bush did create an effective new paradigm with the “war on terror” but without the events of September 11, 2001, he would have lacked public consensus. Similarly, Bill Clinton’s focus on the Middle East might seem more reasonable if Arafat or Barak had been willing to concede a few more yards of territory in Jerusalem, leading to a comprehensive peace.
The book raises some interesting questions. Must the American government, because of the necessities of our democratic political structure, resort to “bumper sticker diplomacy?” Is it true, as the author puts it, that “the most reliable method of creating domestic political consensus on foreign policy is to provide an attractive and intellectually facile conception of the U.S. role in international affairs”? (337) If one reads this book without knowing of Bush’s abysmal poll ratings, one might conclude that simplicity has triumphed. Even Brands points out that “Bush’s rhetoric was more effective as a domestic political tool than a description of foreign affairs.” (301) But to what extent has that rhetoric failed to satisfy the public and ultimately been deemed heavy-handed and lacking nuance? The war in Iraq and other foreign policy missteps have inspired widespread interest in global affairs, and the election of Barack Obama, the candidate representing change, is further confirmation that Bush’s approach became too simplistic for public consumption. Furthermore, it is premature to assess the “war on terror” as an enduring framework of American policy. It may represent a long-term strategy, or it could become a footnote to the Cold War, an emblem of our reluctance to abandon dichotomous models. Hopefully, From Berlin to Baghdad and similar works will inspire a debate on the nature of the “war on terror,” the need for doctrinal simplicity, and the future trajectory of American foreign policy.
This excellent study deals with the efforts of U.S. policy-makers to find an integrating purpose for American foreign engagement following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Its main focus is on the period of international history which ended with 9/11, and in President George W. Bush’s proclamation of the War on Terror. This era, from 1989 to 2001, was characterised by a preoccupation with selling American internationalism to Americans in a world of strategic uncertainty, international complexity and in the absence of clear enemies. Brands leads us carefully through the efforts of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton to make conceptual internationalist sense of post-1989 complexity. Bush’s New World Order floundered because of “the marked disadvantage of lacking the confidence of its creators” (100). Clinton offered what Brands calls “unassertive multilateralism” as well as democratic enlargement (117). Brands sees Clinton as a leader who appreciated the subtleties of the post-Cold War global environment, but who – especially in the vague second term commitment to a “framework for American leadership” – eventually became a prisoner of its complexity (262).

The central strength of this book lies in its combination of fine scholarship and coherent, interesting argumentation. Brands is to be congratulated for daring to apply detailed historical methodology to that most remote of historical periods: the day before yesterday. The arena from which journalists and political scientists have largely retreated, and to which most professional, document-oriented, historians have yet to arrive, is too often poorly served. Along with another recent study of the 1989-2001 era by Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier,1 From Berlin to Baghdad offers an object lesson in how to write effective and scholarly contemporary history. Especially in view of the tardiness of the Clinton Presidential Library in opening its foreign policy archive, Berlin to Baghdad is unlikely to be outpaced in the near future by studies which draw on a wider range of confidential documentation. Brands is able to build on a substantial public record, as well as on a large secondary literature. He should be especially congratulated for his use of non-American sources. As a study of U.S. foreign policy, From Berlin to Baghdad is American-centered, but it also displays significant knowledge and understanding of political events and perspectives beyond the United States. If the book’s general approach has a weakness, it relates to the author’s disciplinary timidity. Brands writes as a confident and skilled traditional historian – albeit one working in an environment chronically short of raw documentation. He does not draw to any significant extent on International Relations theory. The post-Cold War era saw major debates about the implications of 1989 for realist theory and about the nature of U.S. hegemony. Beyond a brief account of Francis Fukuyama and the “end of history,” Brands misses the opportunity to enrich his book with such discussions.

Brands does not halt his narrative with 9/11. To a greater extent than Chollet and Goldgeier, he provides an account of the George W. Bush’s foreign policy. Given the massive literature now surrounding the Bush response to 9/11, Brands understandably

1 Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the war on Terror (New York, 2008).
struggles to make original arguments. Nevertheless, Brands clearly recognises the problems and contradictions of pre-emptive war. He describes the War on Terror as “a conceptually simple and comfortable means of defining U.S. involvement in the world” (333). The dilemmas of post-Cold War complexity, as well the nature of contemporary international threat, are seen as encouraging the Bush administration to oversimplify and misrepresent both global conditions and American foreign objectives. Again, the discussion in the later chapters would have benefited from a more conceptually based discussion of the nature and trajectory of American global power.

My major differences with Brands in the matter of historical interpretation relate to his treatment of Clinton. The 42nd president is depicted as losing his way, failing to find much in the way of integrating purpose, and even eventually losing control of his foreign policy to the Republican Congress. Brands has some excellent material on the personalities and conduct of the Clinton foreign policy. However, Brands places too much emphasis – as indeed Clinton himself did – on the need to find a “bumper sticker” replacement for anti-communist containment. Brands underestimates the degree to which the commitment to democratising globalisation, conceived in both political and economic terms, provided coherence to Clinton administration thinking right up to the end of the second term. Rather than losing control of foreign policy, it might equally be argued that the Clinton administration’s conceptualisation and conduct of foreign policy was reinvigorated by the need to respond to the Republican congressional challenge. It certainly is the case that Clinton lost major foreign policy votes in Congress (though the rather ambiguous nature of the Clinton commitment to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty deserves more emphasis). Clinton also, however, continued to win important foreign policy votes – notably on the normalization of trade relationships with Beijing, smoothing Chinese entry into the World Trade Organization – in the later years. Clinton did adapt his foreign policy thinking to the international developments and threats of the later 1990s. Of course, major blunders, such as the assault on Sudan, were made. Brands’ treatment of the action in Kosovo, emphasising the degree to which such action undermined general U.S. strategic objectives, is persuasive. Yet Brands’ picture of a second term Clinton administration in conceptual and operational chaos is overdrawn.

Detailed differences aside, *From Berlin to Baghdad* is a wonderful example of contemporary historical scholarship.
It is coincidental that Hal Brands has chosen a title, suggesting the failed attempt of the imperial German government to dominate the Middle East a century ago? Does recent United States (U.S.) policy, perhaps, provide a worthy successor for that long-ago project? Such speculation aside, *From Berlin to Baghdad* presents a survey of well-known events. There are no great revelations, nor should we expect them; most secrets from this period are still locked away. In this field any author who writes about contemporary issues encounters the problem of locating adequate sources. A now-deceased colleague once jokingly compared them to gleaners in a freshly harvested field. Indeed, as one moves through this well-written narrative, documentary evidence thins noticeably. For the Clinton and Bush II administrations, Brands naturally has to rely on newspapers, journal articles and public papers of various government agencies.

Given the limitations of this genre, Brands has done a good job of drawing together what was available. He reminds us, for example, that as early as 1992 the Pentagon developed a strategy for ensuring “that no enemy rose to the level of the former Soviet threat,” that “power, not principle, was to be at the base of national security strategy.” (97) Although rejected at the time, a “toned-down version” reappeared briefly in the Clinton years, and then, of course, the second Bush administration wholeheartedly embraced the original doctrine in 2001. (204) In this way, Brands prompts us to remember that such concepts have pedigrees; they seldom spring up overnight. His study makes an important contribution, and he rightly observes at the outset that having all this foreign policy information between two covers provides a welcome service.

The thesis of the work is familiar. In fact another recent work, *America Between the Wars From 11/9 to 9/11* makes a similar argument; and there may be others. Brands declares that U.S. foreign policy is most successful when its objectives are clear and unambiguous, such as during the cold war when the idea of containment of the Soviet Union encapsulated the national challenge and steered the American people to shoulder an immense burden. Since 9/11 the so-called “war on terror” has served a similar purpose. What lay between the end of one and the beginning of the other, the long decade (1989-2001), which provides the focus of the book, represented a time of confusion in U.S. foreign policymaking, when the Bush I and Clinton administrations struggled, without much success--according to Brands--to craft a replacement for that simple slogan of bipolar rivalry, which had guided the nation since the end of World War II.

In the long-term, this organizing structure may not serve very well, but it seems to have attracted a number of advocates, including Brands, and it might be useful, therefore, to suggest some refinements, thus, gradually, to progress toward deeper understanding and firmer analysis of this recent past. One ought to question, it seems to me, the assertion that a cold war consensus, with its consequent moral clarity, existed up to the end of the 1980s.

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1 Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier. *America Between the Wars From 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror.* (New York, 2008).
Surely, any consensus had badly fractured by the mid-1970s, if not earlier, as questionable government practices in the execution of American foreign policy became public knowledge, driving many Americans into opposition. Such revelations certainly clouded any sense of moral certitude.

Likewise, with the “war on terror,” an early rush to support the president quickly cooled, as implementation of administration policies seemed to compromise fundamental American values. Even at the outset it would surely have been an exaggeration to argue that Americans had little choice but to subscribe to the president’s worldview. (264, 279). What, for instance, was the response of those of Middle Eastern ancestry or members of the sizable American Muslim community? Brands omits any reference to these groups, although they have been the subjects of numerous studies.²

And while on the topic of the Middle East, two additional thoughts come to mind. One, a reminder that Jordan was by no means the only regional state to oppose the use of force against Iraq in 1991. (51) (Algeria, Libya, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen supported, unsuccessfully as it turned out, an Arab solution to the crisis.) The other, a regret that the attempted rapprochement of Iranian president Muhammad Khatami (1997–2005) and the Clinton rebuff received no more than five lines in an endnote. (367)

Returning to broader questions, can we still agree today that “the toppling of the Taliban and the destruction of al Qaeda’s Afghan infrastructure” represented coups for Bush? (233) These were momentary at best. And what of the detainees at Guantanamo, who receive no mention in this narrative? One has to question such a singular omission. Perhaps these examples point to the inevitable pitfalls of chronicling what are essentially current events.

Reflecting further on recent developments, the reader has to wonder whether U.S. interests were any more poorly served by the supposedly incoherent foreign policies of the long decade than by those implemented since 9/11. When we consider that during the decade of the 1990s both policy makers and the American public were adjusting to a radically altered environment, how much more could have been achieved under those circumstances? And was it really Clinton’s lack of a “coherent vision” that subverted his authority in diplomacy and defense or rather the dominance of the Republican right in Congress and the president’s personal problems, neither of which arose directly out of concern over the direction of foreign policy. (261)

As Brands continues to wrestle with the complexities of recent U.S. foreign policy, it is to be hoped that he will insert more of his own perspective and find a stronger voice. Throughout the current volume, he adopts a certain diffidence, which occasionally becomes troubling. I am thinking in particular of two examples, his almost casual reference to the genocide in Rwanda and to atrocities at Abu Ghraib. In the former case he refers to the “understandable if perhaps unfortunate” (my emphasis) decision of President Clinton not to commit troops, and in the latter to revelations of torture as “no doubt disconcerting.”

² Amaney Jamal and Sunaina Maira. “Muslim Americans, Islam and the ‘War on Terrorism’ at Home and Abroad.” Middle East Journal 59:2 (Spring 2005).
If I may add a personal note, I can well remember the shame I felt, as an American, walking daily through the streets of Cairo in spring 2004 as news and photos of the Abu Ghraib scandal emerged. Those revelations were more than “disconcerting.”

At this early stage, Hal Brands has done well to limit his purview to U.S. foreign policy as glimpsed from Washington and not to try to incorporate other perspectives. He will have many years to craft a comprehensive study of this important period, as more documentary evidence becomes available. For now, he has made a good and useful beginning.
When Hal Brands’ *From Berlin to Baghdad* arrived on my desk, I eagerly opened it. For years, I had bemoaned to colleagues and to students the lack of an incisive analysis of U.S. foreign policy between 1991 and 2001. In particular, I was discomfited by books which bemoaned the indecision of Bill Clinton while failing to engage with the strategic approaches set out by the Administration. In a post-9/11 environment, amidst a rolling production of works on the foreign policy of Bush the younger, the vacuum on the 1990s was even more noticeable and problematic.

Now Brands has published one of two books --- the other being Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier’s *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* --- which promise to evaluate the post-Cold War decade in U.S. foreign policy. In combination with works taking a longer, historical view of 21st-century American strategy, such as Andrew Bacevich’s edited collection *The Long War*, these studies promise an analysis transcending two-dimensional assertions of continuity or break in policymaking, broad-brush sketches of a U.S. imperium, and polarising debates of hard power v. soft power.

My excitement was only heightened when I read Brands’ opening lines:

“We have found our mission and our moment”, said George W. Bush on September 20, 2001. Although Bush was referring to the launching of a global “war on terror,” his words also signalled that the decade of incoherence known vaguely as the post-Cold War era was at a close. (1)

The assertion is a vital challenge, not only in the study of the 1990s but in a reconsideration of U.S. foreign policy from 1945. The accusation of “incoherence” goes beyond “indecision”, for it indicates that the issue is not one of failure to consider and put forth a strategic concept, but the failure to ensure that elements of the concept --- strategy, objectives, and presentations --- are harmonious.3 Set in conjunction with portrayals of U.S. Cold War policy as a series of “strategies of containment” and post-2001 policy as a unifying “war on terror”, the hypothesis is both provocative and promising. Indeed, within the space of an Introduction, Brands moves from the 1990s in contrast to a stable Cold War framework (“There emerged no overall conception of foreign policy as structure or durable as anticommunism and containment”) to perpetual tensions putting that stability into question (“As one looks more closely at the similarities [from the American perspective, that is] between the Cold War and the war on terror, it becomes difficult to shake the

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1 Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (Public Affairs, 2008).


notion that the dilemmas encountered by American policy makers during the 1990s go to the heart of U.S. political and foreign policy style.” (1-2, 6)

At the same time, it is a challenging hypothesis to sustain. Brands has to cover three Administrations, a geographical sweep from Europe (both “old” and “new”) to Asia to the Middle East to Africa to Latin America, and a rapidly-shifting political culture operating in a rapidly-moving technological and media environment. In the end, it's a bit too much for the 400 pages, which have sections of insight but also long passages of uncertainty and even confusion. “Incoherence”, in the pursuit of U.S. foreign policy, is the bane of both Presidents and the most promising of scholars.

Brands' initial problem is an imbalance between his critique of the Clinton Administration and its predecessor, led by George H.W. Bush. Brands is able to maintain attention to the prospects and problems for Clinton's strategic approach; in contrast, his consideration of the elder Bush is almost exclusively a narrative of the conflicts (late Soviet Union, Panama, Iraq) rather than a study of an Administration's global conception.

The problem for Brands is an artificial separation of the American contest with Moscow ---the textbook-standard “Cold War”, if you will --- from episodes and conflagrations outside that bipolar framework. Thus he devotes a chapter to “Claiming Victory” over the Soviets, diverting briefly to mention Tiananmen '89, and then moves to a chapter on Panama and the Gulf War of 1990-91 before returning to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The two spheres were never distinct in U.S. foreign policy, however. From the 1950s, when the U.S.-Soviet (and U.S.-Chinese) conflicts escaped European and Asian confines and moved around the globe, there was a Cold War beyond the Cold War or possibly entangled Cold Wars. One only has to glimpse the complications of the Iran-Nicaraguan Contra-Lebanon episode to appreciate that this far from constructive dynamic would continue through the 1980s.

Brands' failure to deal with that complexity leads to a dual difficulty. Eschewing his Introduction, he falls back on a settled pre-1989 model of “containment” and then juxtaposes that with a post-1989 vacuum in strategic conception. The alternative explanation --- that there was no coherent U.S. strategy to be abandoned or “lost” by the elder Bush and his advisors --- is never a possibility. To be fair, Brands does try to rescue his interpretation with 15 pages on the projection of the “New World Order”, but the analysis peters out into references to free trade and the (very underappreciated) Defense Planning Guidance of 1992/93.

When Brands moves from the elder Bush to the Clinton Administrations, he offers an intriguing twist of analysis. Having under-determined the former’s strategic approaches, he over-determines the latter’s. His opening hypothesis poses no problems, with a Clinton trying to "cast U.S. policy in ideals that appealed to Americans on an emotional and intuitive level" and "to meet the exigencies of post-Cold War affairs" (102). It even raises a smile, as the President dismisses George Kennan’s injunction to present U.S. foreign policy in a “thoughtful paragraph or more, rather than trying to come up with a bumper sticker”: “That’s why Kennan’s a great diplomat and a scholar and not a politician.” (109) He then
makes a giant leap, however: "If the intellectual predilections of Clinton's advisers encouraged a policy based on human rights and democracy, the internal dynamics of the staff reinforced these themes." (107)

The error of over-emphasis arises in part by a treatment of the rhetoric of the 1992 Presidential campaign as policy gospel and in part by a focus on National Security Anthony Lake and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright (and a reduction of their views) to the exclusion of all other high- and mid-level officials. However, its shakiest foundation is a conflation of the concept of "humanitarian intervention" with the Clinton Administration's strategic consideration --- and first-term pursuit --- of "enlargement".

Clinton's references in his campaign speeches both to economic interests in foreign markets and to the spread of democracy abroad did not encompass humanitarian cases such as Somalia. More importantly, the policy review that led to the September 1993 declaration of a policy of "engagement and enlargement" was not premised upon, and did not even include, a commitment to humanitarian intervention beyond select cases. Instead, the policy's emphasis was on a “free community of market democracies”. And that in turn linked intervention to economic interest; as Douglas Brinkley has evaluated, “Only when anarchy reigned in a major trade pact region--Bosnia or Northern Ireland, for example--would Clinton play global peacemaker.”

Brands also hinders his critique with other over-determinations. He is quite right to note, “Beginning with Oslo, the administration gave priority to the Israel-Palestine and Arab-Israeli peace processes.” (183) He is on far shakier ground to indicate that this was developed in conjunction with policy towards the twin problems of Iraq and Iran: “This combination of threats and opportunities allowed Clinton to develop a fairly cohesive strategy for Middle Eastern affairs.” (182) The policy of “dual containment” of Baghdad and Tehran was not fashioned in lock-step with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; it was forced upon the Administration by a combination of the incomplete resolution of the 1991 Gulf War, Congressional pressure, and the power vacuum in the Persian Gulf. The error is a significant one because it leads Brands to overlook one of the most important Clinton-era policy statements, Anthony Lake's 1994 “rogue states” article in Foreign Affairs.5

Brands is right that the issue was not one of the Clinton Administration’s failure to pursue a strategic approach. What he overlooks, ironically given the possibilities for his hypothesis of “incoherence”, is that the approach was incomplete. Engagement and enlargement might fit well with an approach to East Asia (although it should be noted that this also meant setting aside human rights considerations in policy on China). It might be applicable to a renewed American relationship with Europe, even if that brought commitments such as the 1995 brokering of an agreement on Bosnia or the 1999 military operations in

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Kosovo. At the same time, however, there were cases --- the “rogue states” and the sites of humanitarian crises from Africa to the Caribbean --- that had to sit alongside, rather than within, that strategy. That tension, rather than an evolution in strategic thought or an escalation of global challenges, underlay the Clinton Administration’s second-term rejection of “a concise statement of U.S. strategy” (197).

From Berlin to Baghdad is to be commended for opening up the strategic question with respect to the 1990s. The problem is that, just as the dimensions of that question eventually overwhelmed Clinton and his advisors, so it finally defeated Brands. This is even more evident when the author shifts his attention to the George W. Bush years and the “war on terror”.

Brands asserts, “Bush’s was a more coherent strategy than any that had been laid out since the end of the Cold War...On a conceptual plane, at least, Bush’s strategy represented a return to the focus and clarity that had been absent for more than a decade.” (292) The directness of the analysis, however, obscures the weaknesses behind it.

First and perhaps foremost, Brands’ assessment only comes into effect after September 11, 2001. Before that, the President merely “both pleased and disappointed those who had hoped for a vigorously unilateralist foreign policy”. There is no indication that the Administration had any notion of the global role for the United States; Bush simply emerges in particular cases, such as the China crisis of April 2001, as an unexpectedly “patient diplomat”. (267-268)

The omission is significant. Far from being strategically rudderless in January 2001, the Bush Administration --- or at least key officials within it --- had a clear idea of a new American approach. Through the use of a demonstration case, namely “regime change” in Iraq, the U.S. could establish its unipolar era. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld encapsulated the strategy on 1 February 2001, “Imagine what the region would look like without Saddam and with a regime that is aligned with U.S. interests. It would change everything in the region and beyond. It would demonstrate what U.S. policy is all about.”

Brands refers to officials, activists, and even documents (the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance) that envisaged that quest for the unipolar more than a decade earlier, but he does not seem to appreciate their significance. As a result, he confuses cause and effect: he portrays “the war on terror [as] an understandable reaction not only to 9/11 but also to the decade that preceded it” (334), when in fact that war served as a rationalising construct to pursue the strategic quest for a perpetual “preponderance of power.” Doing so, he quotes but misses the significance of Condoleezza Rice’s remark, “What the war on terrorism has done is it’s given us an organizing principle.” (332)

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7 See the analysis in Scott Lucas and Maria Ryan, “Against Everyone and No One: The Failure of the Unipolar in Iraq and Beyond” in David Ryan (ed.) TITLE (Routledge, 2009).
Put bluntly, if Brands under-determines the foreign approach of the elder Bush’s Administration and over-determines the approach of the Clinton Administration through the reduction to “humanitarian intervention”, he gets distracted in re-telling the tale of the younger Bush and his advisors. Yes, the Administration was devoted to “weaving... [a compelling] narrative about the national purpose” (301), but that was not its distinctive strategic goal. Rather, it was --- after both the Cold War and post-Cold War worlds proved too complex for easy resolution --- the conversion of power from means into an end.

I offer these offers and responses not because I think Brand’s book is an ineffective contribution to scholarship and contemporary analysis. Far from it: this is an important work not just because it covers, thoroughly and often thoughtfully, 1990s U.S. foreign policy but because its attempt to raise broad questions about U.S. strategy has a resonance that will last for some time. While Brands stumbles because he settles for the simplicity of a pre-1989 strategic unity in U.S. policymaking and because he fails to appreciate the nature of the unity sought from January 2001, his conclusion is the opening salvo for the scholarly critique that needs to be pursued:

“The unsettled state of affairs that prevailed from 1990 until 2001 was utterly unsatisfying from a rhetorical standpoint and was, at times, ineffective on a practical level. But if incoherence had been problematic, by 2005, an oversimplified coherence appeared little less so.” (339)

Author’s Response by Hal Brands, Institute for Defense Analyses

Thanks to John Dumbrell, Clea Lutz Bunch, Meena Bose, James Goode, and Scott Lucas for their reviews, and to Thomas Maddux for organizing this roundtable. In their comments, the reviewers raise a number of issues that merit further discussion (as well as one—my alleged “diffidence” to the Rwandan genocide—that does not). In my response, I’ll focus on four.

The first of these has to do with the Cold War and its legacy. Specifically, the reviewers rightly question how coherent and single-minded a strategy containment really was. Given the manifold influences that went into U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, the fact that containment often led to policies that were totally incoherent from a strategic perspective, and the waxing and waning of the Cold War consensus that occurred from the late 1960s onward, is it really proper to use that doctrine as a reference point for evaluating U.S. diplomacy during the post-Cold War period?

I think so, for two reasons. First, despite all the factors mentioned above, it remains indisputable that over the course of the Cold War, containment proved to be an incredibly durable grand strategy. For both good geopolitical reasons and not-so-good domestic political reasons, containment and anti-communism retained a stranglehold on the broad outlines of U.S. foreign policy that, while weakened somewhat during the 1970s, was never fully broken. Richard Nixon’s move toward détente, it is now clear, was part of an effort to update and stabilize containment rather than to move beyond it; Jimmy Carter’s efforts actually to move beyond containment failed parlously. Overall, while the Cold War was hardly the golden age of consensus and strategic clarity its admirers sometimes portray it as, it was nonetheless a period of remarkable grand strategic stability compared to the years that followed.

The relevance of containment to the post-Cold War period also stemmed from the imposing—and, as touched on above, inflated—legacy commanded by the doctrine following the demise of the Soviet Union. During the 1990s, nuance was hard to find in appraisals of containment, its coherence, and its effectiveness. Most prominent, mainstream observers saw that doctrine as a paragon of simplicity and clarity in contrast to the confusion that characterized the early post-Cold War world. Calls for a “new Mr. X,” the way that the Clinton administration anointed enlargement as “the successor to containment,” and countless, similar comments all testified to the way that perceptions of containment helped shape the foreign policy debate long after that doctrine had become obsolete. Whatever containment’s actual record as a grand strategy, its legacy was difficult to escape during the post-Cold War era.

A second issue raised by the reviewers is whether Clinton’s foreign policy was as wandering as it often seemed, or whether his commitment to globalization might be interpreted as that administration’s guiding strategic precept. There is no question that Clinton saw economic liberalization as central to his foreign policy, and worked diligently—and, as I point out, with some degree of success—to this end. Yet to interpret
these achievements as constituting a coherent strategic record is problematic, in several respects. For one thing, Clinton was never as effective an opener of markets as he is often thought to have been, as his experience with Japan in 1993-94 and the subsequent (and continuing) travails of the Free Trade Area of the Americas indicate. For another, during Clinton’s presidency as at the present, public acceptance of free trade and globalization remained rather shaky. Witness the defeat of fast track during Clinton’s first and second term, the Seattle protests in 1999, the stalled free trade agreements currently stuck in Congress, and the NAFTA-bashing that occurred during the 2008 Democratic primaries. Third, to focus on free trade and globalization as the hallmarks of Clinton’s foreign policy is to miss a broader, and far less flattering, picture. Expanding our view to encompass National Missile Defense and the ABM Treaty, the defeat of the ICC and CTBT, policy toward Iraq, and NATO expansion and its attendant effects on relations with Russia, one sees not a president in command of a coherent diplomatic agenda, but rather an administration that was often stymied by Congress and just as often unable to fit the pieces of foreign policy together into an effective whole.

What about 9/11 and its impact on U.S. diplomacy? Did the terrorist attacks of late 2001 really spur a paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy, or, as Lucas suggests, did it simply allow George W. Bush to implement a hegemonic project that his advisers had long nurtured? On this score, there is no doubt that many of the intellectual foundations of the war against Iraq, and of post-9/11 foreign policy more generally, were in place well before that date. Contrary to Lucas’s assertion, I hardly ignore these influences; they occupy an important place in my discussion of Rice’s views on foreign policy, neo-imperial sentiment in the late 1990s, the run-up to the Iraq war, and the Bush administration’s rationale for pursuing an expensive and perhaps unworkable missile defense system.

As I argue in chapters 9-10, though, it won’t do to say that 9/11 was merely a stepping stone between the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance and the invasion of Iraq. A full understanding of the evolution of Bush’s foreign policy must await the opening of the archives (a prospect that, given this administration’s penchant for secrecy, looks distant indeed), but at this relatively short remove it seems undeniable that 9/11 had a profound psychological effect on the president, Rice, and probably other top-level officials as well. This change could be seen in the sense of moral certainty and overweening self-confidence that Bush acquired after 9/11, his new attachment to the earlier-derided concept of democracy promotion, and the shift in Rice’s views on deterrence and rogue states. Indeed, the traumatic and transformative effects of 9/11 are central to explaining the ascendancy of those who had long argued for a more aggressive approach to foreign policy. Numerous writers have pointed out that officials like Rumsfeld, Douglas Feith, and others favored overthrowing Saddam well before 9/11. What is often lost in these assessments is that this policy gained relatively little traction early on. As Andrew Bacevich notes, for all the talk of regime change, the Bush administration’s policies toward Iraq between January 21 and September 10, 2001 actually differed very little from those pursued by Clinton in his last two years in office. Moreover, during this early period, the officials who would eventually become so influential in the push for war with Saddam were hardly
domineering presences in the administration. Does anyone remember now that in the summer of 2001, Rumsfeld was rumored to be on his way out at the Pentagon?

It was only with 9/11 that these officials and their counsel became dominant within the administration. The effect of 9/11 was to bring the emotionally-charged and profoundly moralistic views of the president into alignment with those of his most hawkish advisers, and to marginalize officials—such as Colin Powell—whose more nuanced perspective on foreign policy seemed inappropriate amid the political atmosphere that took hold after the attacks. In sum, it was a convergence of forces—rather than the simple activation of a long-held plan to reassert U.S. supremacy in the Middle East—that produced the Iraq war and gave Bush’s diplomacy its shape.

Finally, what does the experience of the post-Cold War period portend for future presidents? Are we to be doomed to a choice between oversimplification and incoherence in our foreign policy? Or does the election of Barack Obama represent a decisive break with the Bush legacy, and a turn toward a foreign policy that is simultaneously more nuanced and more effective?

There is some reason for optimism. The Bush years have in many ways been a chastening experience for Americans, and the country’s appetite for moralistic crusades appears somewhat to have diminished. In light of the personality of the incoming president, moreover, it seems likely that this administration will be more deliberative than its predecessor, perhaps easing the echo-chamber effect often found in the Bush White House.

Yet the reductionist tendency remains strong. As problematic as the War on Terror has proven, there still seems to be a consensus that this must be the defining issue of American foreign policy. When John Edwards described the War on Terror as nothing more than a bumper sticker during the 2008 primaries, he was roundly denounced not simply by Republicans but by Democrats like Hillary Clinton (our next secretary of state?) as well.

Moreover, like each of his predecessors, Obama will sooner or later face the challenge of tying together the various components of U.S. foreign policy in a morally attractive way. If there is one lesson of the post-Cold War period, it is that Americans, like most people, are suckers for simplicity. What we really want is for someone to tell us a good story about the world and our part in it. And, most of the time, we want these stories to be more appealing and less complicated than the way things are in reality. This was the case for much of the Cold War; it has been the case during the War on Terror as well. For Obama to break this pattern will require all of his considerable political acumen, and then some.

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