

# The Benevolent Empire

by Robert Kagan

Not so long ago, when the Monica Lewinsky scandal first broke in the global media, an involuntary and therefore unusually revealing gasp of concern could be heard in the capitals of many of the world's most prominent nations. Ever so briefly, prime ministers and pundits watched to see if the drivewheel of the international economic, security, and political systems was about to misalign or lose its power, with all that this breakdown would imply for the rest of the world. Would the Middle East peace process stall? Would Asia's financial crisis spiral out of control? Would the Korean peninsula become unsettled? Would pressing issues of European security go unresolved? "In all the world's trouble spots," the *Times* of London noted, leaders were "calculating what will happen when Washington's gaze is distracted."

Temporarily interrupting their steady grumbling about American arrogance and hegemonic pretensions, Asian, European, and Middle Eastern editorial pages paused to contemplate the consequences of a crippled American presidency. The liberal German newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau*, which a few months earlier had been accusing Americans of arrogant zealotry and a "camouflaged neocolonialism," suddenly fretted that the "problems in the Middle East, in the Balkans or in Asia" will not be solved "without U.S. assistance and a president who enjoys respect" and demanded that, in the interests of the entire world, the president's accusers quickly produce the goods or shut up. In Hong Kong, the *South*

---

ROBERT KAGAN is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and is director of its U.S. Leadership Project, which examines America's role in the post-Cold War world and the challenge of providing effective global leadership.

China Morning Post warned that the "humbling" of an American president had "implications of great gravity" for international affairs; in Saudi Arabia, the *Arab News* declared that this was "not the time that America or the world needs an inward-looking or wounded president. It needs one unencumbered by private concerns who can make tough decisions."

The irony of these pleas for vigorous American leadership did not escape notice, even in Paris, the intellectual and spiritual capital of anti-hegemony and "multipolarity." As one pundit (Jacques Amalric) noted wickedly in the left-leaning *Liberation*, "Those who accused the United States of being overbearing are today praying for a quick end to the storm." Indeed, they were and with good reason. As Aldo Rizzo observed, part in lament and part in tribute, in Italy's powerful *La Stampa*: "It is in times like these that we feel the absence of a power, certainly not [an] alternative, but at least complementary, to America, something which Europe could be. Could be, but is not. Therefore, good luck to Clinton and, most of all, to America."

This brief moment of international concern passed, of course, as did the flash of candor about the true state of world affairs and America's essential role in preserving a semblance of global order. The president appeared to regain his balance, the drivewheel kept spinning, and in the world's great capitals talk resumed of American arrogance and bullying and the need for a more genuinely multipolar system to manage international affairs. But the almost universally expressed fear of a weakened U.S. presidency, provides a useful antidote to the pervasive handwringing, in Washington as well as in foreign capitals, over the "problem" of American hegemony. There is much less to this problem than meets the eye.

The commingled feelings of reliance on and resentment toward America's international dominance these days are neither strange nor new. The resentment of power, even when it is in the hands of one's friends, is a normal, indeed, timeless human emotion—no less so than the arrogance of power. And perhaps only Americans, with their rather short memory, could imagine that the current resentment is the unique product of the expansion of American dominance in the post-Cold War era. During the confrontation with the Soviet Union, now recalled in the United States as a time of Edenic harmony among the Western allies, not just French but also British leaders chafed under the leadership of a sometimes overbearing America. As political scientist A.W. DePorte noted some 20 years ago, the schemes of European unity advanced by French financial planner Jean Monnet and French foreign

minister Robert Schuman in 1950 aimed “not only to strengthen Western Europe in the face of the Russian threat but also—though this was less talked about—to strengthen it vis-a-vis its indispensable but overpowering American ally.” Today’s call for “multipolarity” in international affairs, in short, has a history, as do European yearnings for unity as a counterweight to American power. Neither of these pro-

fessed desires is a new response to the particular American hegemony of the last nine years.

And neither ‘of them, one suspects, is very seriously intended. For the truth about America’s dominant role in the world is known to most clear-eyed international observers. And the truth is that the benevolent hegemony exercised by the United

*In truth, the benevolent hegemony exercised by the United States is good for a vast portion of the world’s population.*

States is good for a vast portion of the world’s population. It’s certainly a better international arrangement than all realistic alternatives. To undermine it would cost many others around the world far more than it would cost Americans—and far sooner. As Samuel Huntington wrote five years ago, before he joined the plethora of scholars disturbed by the “arrogance” of American hegemony: “A world without U.S. primacy will be a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth than a world where the United States continues to have more influence than any other country shaping global affairs.”

The unique qualities of American global dominance have never been a mystery, but these days they are more and more forgotten or, for convenience’ sake, ignored. There was a time when the world clearly saw how different the American superpower was from all the previous aspiring hegemony. The difference lay in the exercise of power. The strength acquired by the United States in the aftermath of World War II was far greater than any single nation had ever possessed, at least since the Roman Empire. America’s share of the world economy, the overwhelming superiority of its military capacity—augmented for a time by a monopoly of nuclear weapons and the capacity to deliver them—gave it the choice of pursuing any number of global ambitions. That the American people “might have set the crown of world empire on their brows,” as one British statesman put it in 1951, but chose not to, was a decision of singular importance in world history and recognized as such. Ameri-

ca’s self-abnegation was unusual, and its uniqueness was not lost on peoples who had just suffered the horrors of wars brought on by powerful nations with overweening ambitions to empire of the most coercive type. Nor was it lost on those who saw what the Soviet Union planned to do with its newfound power after World War II.

The uniqueness persisted. During the Cold War, America’s style of hegemony reflected its democratic form of government as much as Soviet hegemony reflected Stalin’s approach to governance. The “habits of democracy,” as Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis has noted, made compromise and mutual accommodation the norm in U.S.-Allied relations. This approach to international affairs was not an example of selfless behavior. The Americans had an instinctive sense, based on their own experience growing up in a uniquely open system of democratic capitalism, that their power and influence would be enhanced by allowing subordinate allies a great measure of internal and even external freedom of maneuver. But in practice, as Gaddis points out, “Americans so often deferred to the wishes of allies during the early Cold War that some historians have seen the Europeans—especially the British—as having managed them.”

Beyond the style of American hegemony, which, even if unevenly applied, undoubtedly did more to attract than repel other peoples and nations, American grand strategy in the Cold War consistently entailed providing far more to friends and allies than was expected from them in return. Thus, it was American strategy to raise up from the ruins powerful economic competitors in Europe and Asia, a strategy so successful that by the 1980s the United States was thought to be in a state of irreversible “relative” economic decline—relative, that is, to those very nations whose economies it had restored after World War II.

And it was American strategy to risk nuclear annihilation on its otherwise unthreatened homeland in order to deter attack, either nuclear or conventional, on a European or Asian ally. This strategy also came to be taken for granted. But when one considers the absence of similarly reliable guarantees among the various European powers in the past (between, say, Great Britain and France in the 1920s and 1930s), the willingness of the United States, standing in relative safety behind two oceans, to link its survival to that of other nations was extraordinary.

Even more remarkable may be that the United States has attempted not only to preserve these guarantees but to expand them in the post-Cold War era. Much is made these days, not least in Washington, of

the American defense budget now being several times higher than that of every other major power. But on what is that defense budget spent? Very little funding goes to protect national territory. Most of it is devoted to making good on what Americans call their international "commitments."

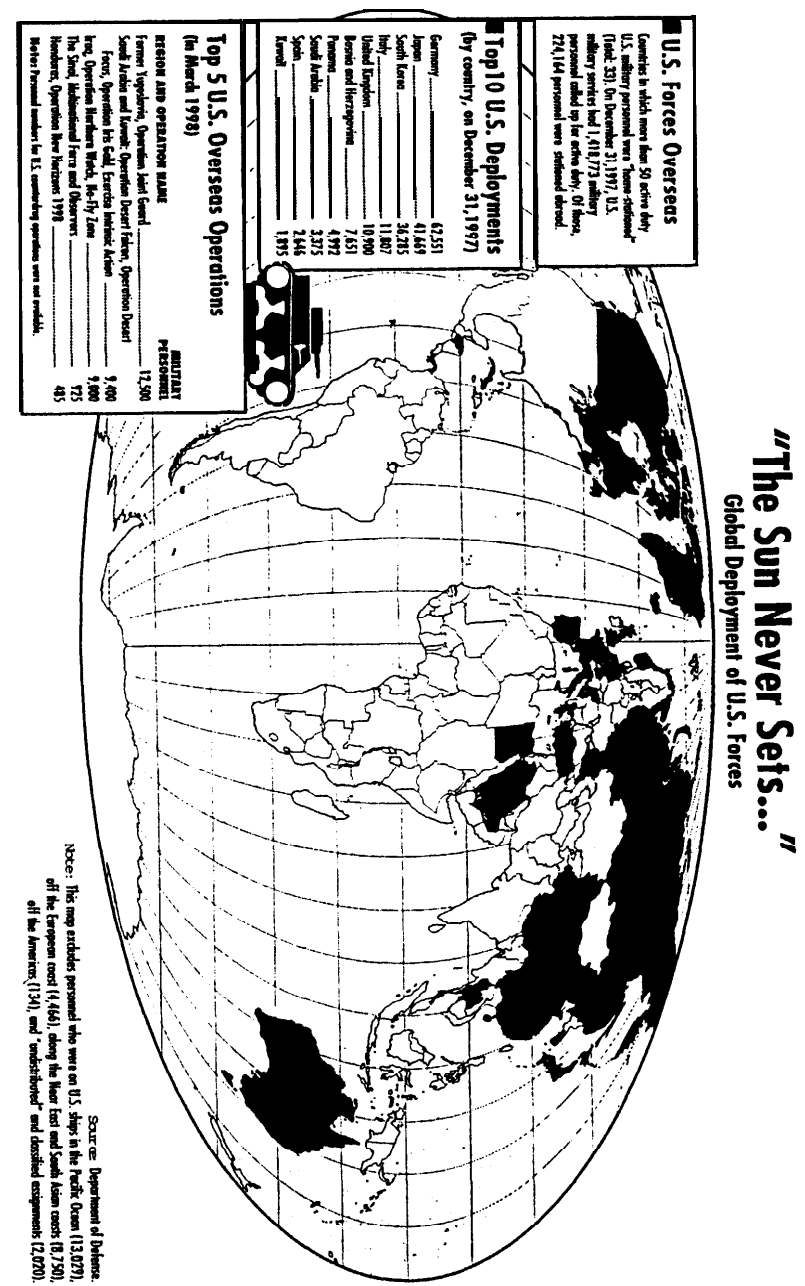
Even in the absence of the Soviet threat, America continues, much to the chagrin of some of its politicians, to define its "national security" broadly, as encompassing the security of friends and allies, and even of abstract principles, far from American shores. In the Gulf War, more than 90 percent of the military forces sent to expel Iraq's army from Kuwait were American. Were 90 percent of the interests threatened American? In almost any imaginable scenario in which the United States might deploy troops abroad, the primary purpose would be the defense of interests of more immediate concern to America's allies-as it has been in Bosnia. This can be said about no other power.

Ever since the United States emerged as a great power, the identification of the interests of others with its own has been the most striking quality of American foreign and defense policy. Americans seem to have internalized and made second nature a conviction held only since World War II: Namely, that their own well-being depends fundamentally on the wellbeing of others; that American prosperity cannot occur in the absence of global prosperity; that American freedom depends on the survival and spread of freedom elsewhere; that aggression anywhere threatens the danger of aggression everywhere; and that American national security is impossible without a broad measure of international security.

Let us not call this conviction selfless: Americans are as self-interested as any other people. But for at least 50 years they have been guided by the kind of enlightened self-interest that, in practice, comes dangerously close to resembling generosity. If that generosity seems to be fading today (and this is still a premature judgment), it is not because America has grown too fond of power. Quite the opposite. It is because some Americans have grown tired of power, tired of leadership, and, consequently, less inclined to demonstrate the sort of generosity that has long characterized their nation's foreign policy. What many in Europe and elsewhere see as arrogance and bullying may be just irritability born of weariness.

If fatigue is setting in, then those nations and peoples who have long benefited, and still benefit, from the international order created and upheld by American power have a stake in bolstering rather than denigrating American hegemony. After all, what, in truth, are the alternatives?

Whatever America's failings, were any other nation to take its place,



the rest of the world would find the situation less congenial. America may be arrogant; Americans may at times be selfish; they may occasionally be ham-handed in their exercise of power. But, *excusez-moi*, compared with whom? Can anyone believe that were France to possess the power the United States now has, the French would be less arrogant, less selfish, and less prone to making mistakes? Little in France's history as a great power, or even as a medium power, justifies such optimism. Nor can one easily imagine power on an American scale being employed in a more enlightened fashion by China, Germany, Japan, or Russia. And even the leaders of that least benighted of empires, the British, were more an-ognnt, more bloody-minded, and, in the end, less capable managers of world affairs than the inept Americans have so far proved to be. If there is to be a sole superpower, the world is better off if that power is the United States.

What, then, of a multipolar world? There are those, even in the United States, who believe a semblance of international justice can be achieved only in a world characterized by a balance among relative equals. In such circumstances, national arrogance must theoretically be tempered, national aspirations limited, and attempts at hegemony, either benevolent or malevolent, checked. A more evenly balanced world, they assume, with the United States cut down a peg (or two, or three) would be freer, fairer, and safer.

A distant, though unacknowledged cousin of this realist, balance-of-power theory is the global parliamentarianism, or world federalism, that animates so many Europeans today, particularly the French apostles of European union. (It is little recalled, especially by modem proponents of foreign policy "realism," that Hans Morgenthau's seminal work, *Politics Among Nations*, builds slowly and methodically to the conclusion that what is needed to maintain international peace is a "world state.") In fact, many of today's calls for multipolarity seem to spring from the view, popular in some Washington circles but downright pervasive in European capitals, that traditional measures of national power, and even the nation-state itself, are *passé*. If Europe is erasing borders, what need is there for an *overbearing* America to keep the peace? America's military power is archaic in a world where finance is transnational and the modem is king.

We need not enter here into the endless and so far unproductive debate among international-relations theorists over the relative merits of multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar international "systems" for keeping the peace. It is sufficient to note that during the supposed heyday of *multipolarity*—the eighteenth century, when the first "Concert of Europe" operated-war



The world's crossing guard?

among the great powers was a regular feature, with major and minor, and global and local, conflicts erupting throughout almost every decade.

We should also not forget that utopian fancies about the obsolescence of military power and national governments in a transnational, "economic" era have blossomed before, only to be crushed by the next "war to end all wars." The success of the European Union, such as it is, and, moreover, the whole dream of erasing boundaries, has been made possible only because the more fundamental and enduring issues of European security have been addressed by the United States through its leadership of NATO, that most archaic and least utopian of institutions. Were American hegemony really to disappear, the old European questions—chiefly, what to do about Germany—would quickly rear their hoary heads.

But let's return to the real world. For all the bleating about hegemony, no nation really wants genuine multipolarity. No nation has shown a willingness to take on equal responsibilities for managing global crises. No nation has been willing to make the same kinds of short-term sacrifices that the United States has been willing to make in the long-term interest of preserving the global order. No nation, except China, has been willing to spend the money to acquire the military power necessary for playing a greater role relative to the United States—and China's

military buildup has not exactly been viewed by its neighbors as creating a more harmonious environment.

If Europeans genuinely sought multipolarity, they would increase their defense budgets considerably, instead of slashing them. They would take the lead in the Balkans, instead of insisting that their participation depends on America's participation. But neither the French, other Europeans, nor even the Russians are prepared to pay the price for a genuinely

***For all the bleating about hegemony; no nation really wants genuine multipolarity.***

multipolar world. Not only do they shy away from the expense of creating and preserving such a world, they rightly fear the geopolitical consequences of destroying American hegemony. Genuine multipolarity would inevitably mean a

return to the complex of strategic issues that plagued the world before World War II: in Asia, the competition for regional preeminence among China, Japan, and Russia; in Europe, the competition among France, Germany, Great Britain, and Russia.

Kenneth Waltz once made the seemingly obvious point that "in international politics, overwhelming power repels and leads other states to balance against it"—a banal truism, and yet, as it happens, so untrue in this era of American hegemony. What France, Russia, and some others really seek today is not genuine multipolarity but a false multipolarity, an honorary multipolarity. They want the pretense of equal partnership in a multipolar world without the price or responsibility that equal partnership requires. They want equal say on the major decisions in global crises (as with Iraq and Kosovo) without having to possess or wield anything like equal power. They want to increase their own prestige at the expense of American power but without the strain of having to fill the gap left by a diminution of the American role. And at the same time, they want to make short-term, mostly financial, gains, by taking advantage of the continuing U.S. focus on long-term support of the international order.

The problem is not merely that some of these nations are giving themselves a "free ride" on the back of American power, benefiting from the international order that American hegemony undergirds, while at the same time puncturing little holes in it for short-term advantage. The more serious danger is that this behavior will gradually, or perhaps not so gradually, erode the sum total of power that can be applied to protecting

the international order altogether. The false multipolarity sought by France, Russia, and others would reduce America's ability to defend common interests without increasing anyone else's ability to do so.

in fact, this erosion may already be happening. In the recent case of Iraq, America's ability to pursue the long-term goal of defending the international order against President Saddam Hussein was undermined by the efforts of France and Russia to attain short-term economic gains and enhanced prestige. Both these powers achieved their goal of a "multipolar" solution: They took a slice out of American hegemony. But they did so at the price of leaving in place a long-term threat to an international system from which they continue to draw immense benefits but which they by themselves have no ability to defend. They did not possess the means to solve the Iraq problem, only the means to prevent the United States from solving it.

This insufficiency is the fatal flaw of multilateralism, as the Clinton administration learned in the case of Bosnia. In a world that is not genuinely multipolar—where there is instead a widely recognized hierarchy of power-multilateralism, if rigorously pursued, guarantees failure in meeting international crises. Those nations that lack the power to solve an international problem cannot be expected to take the lead in demanding the problem be solved. They may even eschew the exercise of power altogether, both because they do not have it and because the effective exercise of it by someone else, such as the United States, only serves to widen the gap between the hegemon and the rest. The lesson President Bill Clinton was supposed to have learned in the case of Bosnia is that to be effective, multilateralism must be preceded by unilateralism. In the toughest situations, the most effective multilateral response comes when the strongest power decides to act, with or without the others, and then asks its partners whether they will join. Giving equal say over international decisions to nations with vastly unequal power often means that the full measure of power that can be deployed in defense of the international community's interests will, in fact, not be deployed.

Those contributing to the growing chorus of antihegemony and multipolarity may know they are playing a dangerous game, one that needs to be conducted with the utmost care, as French leaders did during the Cold War, lest the entire international system come crashing down around them. What they may not have adequately calculated, however, is the possibility that Americans will not respond as wisely as they generally did during the Cold War.

Americans and their leaders should not take all this sophisticated whining about U.S. hegemony too seriously. They certainly should not take it more seriously than the whiners themselves do. But, of course, Americans are taking it seriously. In the United States these days, the lugubrious guilt trip of post-Vietnam liberalism is echoed even by conservatives, with William Buckley, Samuel Huntington, and James Schlesinger all decrying American "hubris," "arrogance," and "imperialism." Clinton administration officials, in between speeches exalting America as the "indispensable" nation, increasingly behave as if what is truly indispensable is the prior approval of China, France, and Russia for every military action. Moreover, at another level, there is a stirring of neo-isolationism in America today, a mood that nicely complements the view among many Europeans that America is meddling too much in everyone else's business and taking too little time to mind its own. The existence of the Soviet Union disciplined Americans and made them see that their enlightened self-interest lay in a relatively generous foreign policy. **Today**, that discipline is no longer present.

In other words, foreign grumbling about American hegemony would be merely amusing, were it not for the very real possibility that too many Americans will forget—even if most of the rest of the world does **not**—just how **important** continued American dominance is to the preservation of a reasonable level of international security and prosperity. World leaders may want to keep this in mind when they pop the champagne corks in celebration of the next American humbling.

---

### WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Spring 1993 issue of *International Security* invited a number of authors to comment on American hegemony in a forum entitled "Primacy and its Discontents." In his article "**The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise**," UCLA professor Christopher Layne cites Kenneth Waltz and employs neorealist theory to argue that multipolarity will blossom again sometime between 2000 and 2010; Columbia University professor Robert Jervis, in his article "**International Primacy: Is the Game Worth the Candle?**," argues that primacy is no longer a worthy goal, since "with the development of nuclear weapons, the spread of liberal democracy, and the diminution of nationalism, war among the most powerful actors is unlikely"; and Har-

vard University's Samuel Huntington, in "**Why International Primacy Matters**," advances an argument for American primacy that he may no longer believe in. Charles Krauthammer, in "**The Unipolar Moment**" (*Foreign Affairs: America and the World*, Vol. 70, No. 1, 1990-91), also makes a case for American hegemony, an opinion he now seems largely to have abandoned.

A good source on American policy, already cited in this article, is John Lewis Gaddis' *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Drawing on archival material from former communist countries, Gaddis argues that Western scholars have traditionally underemphasized the role of ideology during the Cold War.

The United States Information Agency (USIA) on a daily basis compiles summaries of editorial commentary from around the world. Searchable archives of the **Daily Digest** are available online at the USIA Web site. For links to other relevant Web sites, as well as a comprehensive index of related articles, access [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

**The new meeting place of  
the foreign policy community...**

<http://www.foreignpolicy.com>

Selected MI-text articles from the current issue of **FOREIGN POLICY** . Access to international data and resources . Over 150 related Web site links . Interactive Letters to the Editor . Debates . 10 years of archival summaries and more to come...

*Access the issues!*

# The Perils of (and for) an Imperial America

by Charles *William Maynes*

In their public discourse, Americans have come to the point where it is hard to find a foreign-policy address by any prominent figure in either party that does not make constant reference to the United States as the indispensable nation, the sole superpower, the uniquely responsible state, or the lone conscience of the world. William Kristol and Robert Kagan, editors at the conservative Weekly *Standard*, have unabashedly called upon the United States to take the lead in establishing a “benevolent global hegemony”—though how benevolent it would be is unclear since they propose to attain it through a massive increase in U.S. defense spending. Likewise, former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his new book, *The Grand Chessboard*, speaks openly of America’s allies and friends as “vassals and tributaries.” He urges, only slightly tongue-in-cheek, an imperial geostrategy designed “to prevent collusion and maintain security dependence among the vassals, to keep tributaries pliant and protected, and to keep the barbarians from coming together.” In the pages of this very magazine, David Rothkopf, a former senior member of the Clinton administration, expressed this mood of national self-satisfaction in a form that would be embarrassing to put into print, were it not so ardently felt: “Americans should not deny the fact that of all the nations in the world, theirs is the most just and

---

CHARLES WILLIAM MAYNES is president of the *Eurasia Foundation*.

the best model for the future.” (See “In Praise of Cultural Imperialism!” in **FOREIGN POLICY** 107.)

The taproot of this growing geopolitical delirium, of course, is the extraordinary range of America’s current position internationally. Probably not since classic Rome or ancient China has a single power so towered over its known rivals in the international system: Today, only the U.S. military retains the ability to reach into any region in the world within mere hours. The U.S. economy has become the envy of the world. Others continue to copy our political system, hiring our media handlers and campaign strategists to work in countries whose languages and cultures they barely understand. Finally, the “soft” power of U.S. culture reigns supreme internationally. For what it is worth, few foreign pop stars can rival America’s Madonna or Michael Jackson, and American cinema smotheres all foreign competitors.

Another characteristic of U.S. power deserves mention: The price America exacts from its “vassals” is more tolerable than the one previous imperial powers extracted from their subjects. The United States imposes extraordinarily light military burdens on its allies. Britain and France made their colonies fight for the motherland in World Wars I and II, and the colonies provided many of the soldiers that policed their empires. In the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf Wars, America permitted its Japanese and European allies to watch largely as bystanders, while American troops did most of the fighting. In a post-Cold War world, the United States remains willing to pick up a totally disproportionate share of the expense of maintaining the common defense for the indefinite future. By some estimates, the costs for NATO expansion could run as high as \$125 billion by 2012, prompting European commentators, such as former German defense planner Walther Stuetzle, to declare that the United States must be prepared to “pick up the tab.” What other imperial power would have remained silent while its allies made it clear by statements and actions that they would not pay a single extra penny for a common alliance objective such as NATO expansion?

Former imperial powers also made sure their colonies served the economic interests of the metropole, which maintained a monopoly in key industries and enforced schemes of imperial preference to favor the home economy. In contrast, America’s imperial strategy has evolved over the years into that of importer and financier of last resort. The United States has without much debate assumed the role of world economic stabilizer, often adversely affecting its own interests. America’s

political tradition of constitutional democracy, much more secure after the civil rights movement, also makes it difficult for Washington to follow a harsh imperial policy, even if it were so inclined. With their belief in the "white man's burden" or "la mission *civilatrice*," the European powers—and America for that matter in the conquest of the **Philippines**—were able to display, when necessary, extraordinary cruelty in the pursuit of stability. Now, in its recent imperial wars, America has been concerned about press reports of a few civilian casualties.

Ironically, of all the burdens the United States now imposes on its foreign subjects and vassals, Madonna may be the heaviest. Few foreigners accept the American position that market forces alone should dictate cultural patterns—that if the citizens want to buy it, the priests and professors should retire to their monasteries and libraries and let it happen. Many foreigners secretly sympathize with the French or Russian or Israeli position that they have the duty to protect their admittedly great cultures, even if doing so occasionally violates some of the finer points of free trade or speech. Indeed, one wonders whether American officials would cling so ardently to their own position regarding international free trade in cultural goods if it turned out that market forces were in fact overwhelming the United States with, say, the culture of the Middle East or Latin America. The number of Spanish-speaking immigrants arriving in the country, and their desire to hold on to their culture and language, represent a clear market test, yet Americans become very disturbed when these new entrants insist on maintaining their use of Spanish. The "English only" movement or the race to install V-chips in home television sets to control what minors may view each suggests that many Americans harbor some of the same concerns about preserving their culture as the French and others.

The cultural issue apart, American hegemony is benign by historical standards. Therefore, it is fair to ask, as Kagan has in several earlier articles: Why not entrench that hegemony for the betterment of all humankind? After all, one can acknowledge that one's own country is not always as principled, consistent, benign, or wise as the national self-image persistently requires that its leaders regularly affirm, yet still reach the conclusion that while American hegemony may not be the best of all possible worlds, it may be the best of all likely worlds. In other words, American hegemony may be better than any alternative hegemonic arrangement, and, historically, hegemony has proved preferable to chaos.

## THE CASE AGAINST U.S. HEGEMONY

What then is the case against Kagan's call for American hegemony? It can be summed up in the following manner: domestic costs, impact on the American character, international backlash, and lost opportunities.

### Domestic costs

Many like Kagan who support a policy of world hegemony often assert that the domestic cost of such a policy is bearable. They point out that the percentage of **GDP** devoted to American defense, around 3 percent, is the lowest it has been since Pearl Harbor, and the country is now much richer. True, the United States still spends more for defense than all the other major powers combined, but it is hard to argue that it would be unable to continue carrying this burden or even to increase it.

What proponents of this school of thought fail to point out is that the defense spending to which we are now committed is not terribly relevant to the policy of global hegemony that they wish to pursue. In an unintended manner, this point emerged during the last presidential campaign. Senator Robert Dole, the Republican nominee, publicly complained that his old unit, the 10th Mountain Division, had carried the brunt of America's post-Cold War peacekeeping responsibilities in places such as Haiti and Bosnia, and its men and women had gone months without rest or home leave.

He was, of course, right in his complaint. But the Clinton administration could not do much to reduce the burden placed on the 10th Mountain Division, for the United States has very few other units available for peacekeeping duty. If America is to strive to be the world's hegemon, in other words, not only will the U.S. defense effort have to be radically restructured, but the costs incurred will mount exponentially unless we are willing to cut existing sections of our military, a point on which the new **hegemonists** are largely silent. The U.S. commitment in Bosnia provides a glimpse into the future. The burden of U.S. involvement, initially estimated at \$1.5 billion, surpassed \$7 billion in April 1998 and will continue to grow for years to come.

Before the manipulation of budget estimates started in connection with the effort to gain Senate ratification of **NATO expansion**, even the most conservative estimates suggested that American taxpayers would be compelled to contribute **\$25 billion to \$35 billion per year** over the next 10 to 12 years to pay for NATO expansion. The true costs may well



be much higher. And NATO expansion is just one of the expensive building blocks required to pursue a policy of hegemony.

There is no clear geographical limit to the obligations that a quest for hegemony would impose. The American desire to remain the dominant

security power in Europe drove Washington, against its will, to establish, much like the Austrians or the Turks at the beginning of this century, an imperial protectorate over the former Yugoslavia. Now, as officials spot disorder in other important parts of the globe, there is official talk of using NATO troops in northern or central Africa, if necessary. Corridor chatter

has even begun among some specialists about the need to send troops to the Caspian area to secure the oil there. Where will the interventionist impulse end? How can it end for a power seeking global hegemony?

The costs of hegemony will not just be military. Modern-day advocates of hegemony have lost sight of one of the crucial characteristics of the golden age of American diplomacy: From 1945 to 1965, America's dominant image rested more on the perception of its role as the world's Good Samaritan than as the world's policeman. Nearly 60 years ago, Henry Luce, the founder of *Time* magazine, issued one of the most famous calls for American dominance internationally. He understood that a quest for world leadership requires more than a large army. In his famous essay "The American Century," Luce urged his fellow citizens to spend at least 10 percent of every defense dollar in a humanitarian effort to feed the world. He recognized that to dominate, America must be seen not only as stronger but better. The United States needs to do its share internationally in the nonmilitary field and now, as the sad state of the foreign affairs budget demonstrates, it frankly does not. But is the country willing to pick up the nonmilitary costs of a quest for global hegemony?

With their neglect of this issue, today's new hegemonists are almost a parody of the Kaiser and his court at the beginning of this century. Like their German cousins, the new hegemonists are fascinated by military might, intoxicated by the extra margin of power America enjoys, and anxious to exploit this moment to dominate others. They want to reverse almost completely the direction American foreign policy has taken for most of the period following World War II. America's goal

has always been to lift others up. Now, it will be to keep them down. In Kagan's own words, American power should be deployed to control or prevent the "rise of militant anti-American Muslim fundamentalism in North Africa and the Middle East, a rearmed Germany in a chaotic Europe, a revitalized Russia, a rearmed Japan in a scramble for power with China in a volatile East Asia."

His choice of words is instructive. America's goal would be not simply to protect this country and its citizens from actions that militant, Islam might direct against American interests but to prevent the very rise of militant Islam. We would not only stand up to Russia were it to become hostile to U.S. interests but would try to prevent the very revival of the Russian people and state. And we would attempt to control the spread of "chaos" in the international system. All these tasks would require the United States to intervene in the internal affairs of other states to a degree not seen since the immediate postwar period, when the United States and the Soviet Union stationed their vast land armies on the soil of former enemy territories.

One of the most bitter lessons of the Cold War was that when American and Soviet soldiers sought to impose a political order on populations (or at least resolute parts of them) that resisted such efforts—namely in Afghanistan, Korea, and Vietnam—casualties began to mount. If the United States attempts a policy of global hegemony, Kagan and other proponents cannot claim it will incur low costs by citing the size of the current defense budget or referring only to the dollars spent. The character of that budget will have to change, and the price will be not only in dollars spent but in bloodshed. Is the country prepared for that, particularly when those asked to die will be told it is in the name of hegemony, not national defense? Will Americans be comfortable with an image of their country as the power always brandishing the clenched fist and seldom extending the helping hand?

### Impact on the American Character

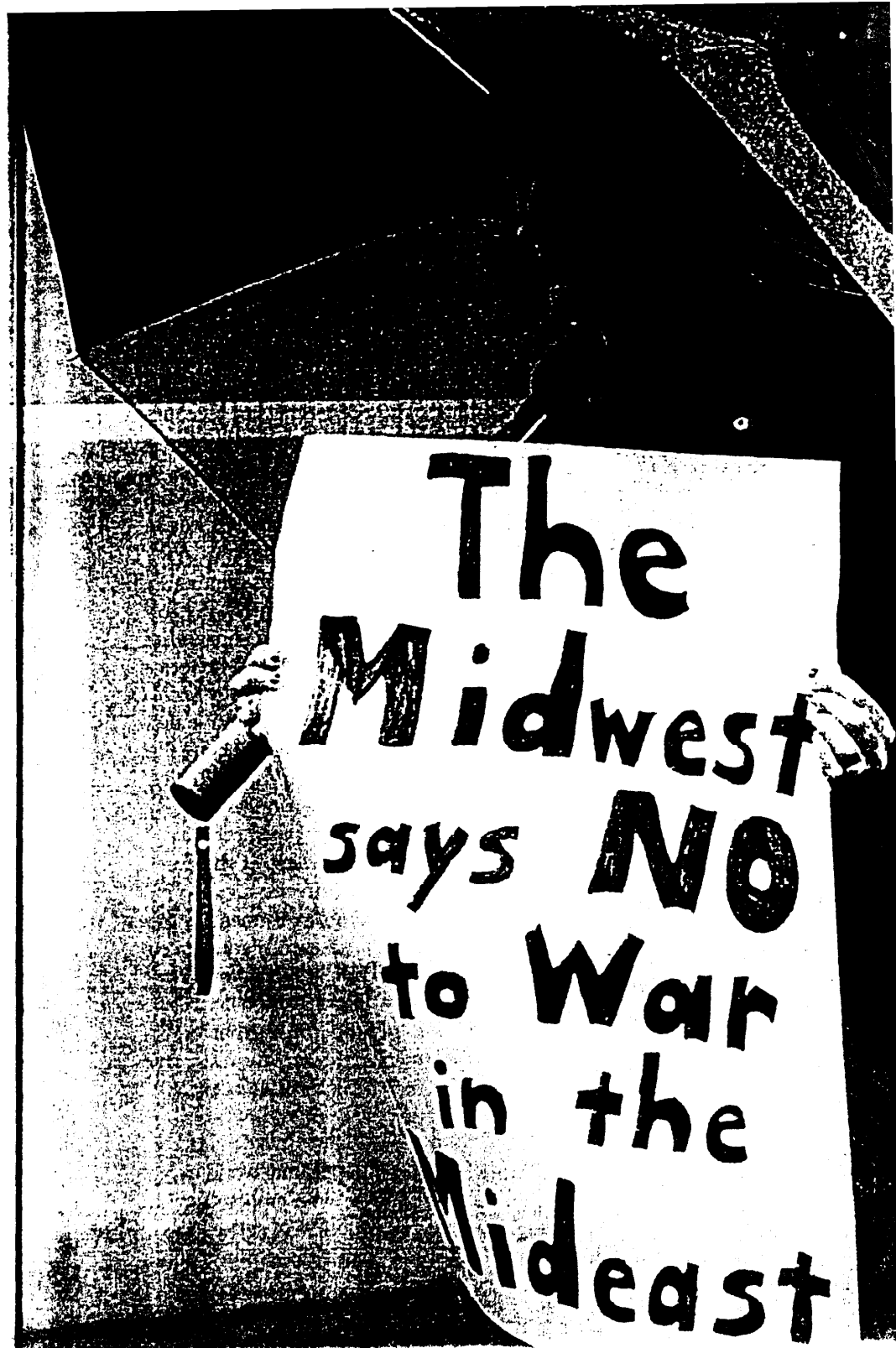
A quest for hegemony would have a corrosive effect on the country's internal relations. The United States could carry out such a quest only by using the volunteer army, which fills its ranks predominately with people who come from a segment of America that is less internationally minded than those who wish to use the U.S. military for geopolitical purposes. Former secretary of labor Robert Reich, among others, has pointed out that America is developing into two societies—not so much black

versus white but cosmopolitan versus national, or between those who have directly, even extravagantly, reaped the benefits in recent years from the new globalized economy and those who have paid its price in terms of military service, endangered jobs, and repressed wages. The former may represent between 15 to 25 percent of the population. Its representatives travel widely, speak foreign languages (or at least can afford to hire a translator), and feel as at home in Rome or Tokyo as they do in New York. Almost none of their sons and daughters serve in the U.S. military. Facing them are the vast majority of citizens who will no doubt be asked to pay the price of their country's policy of hegemony.

Can America embark on a quest for global primacy with those responsible for pursuing this course paying almost no price for its execution? Will American democracy permit a situation like that of ancient Rome, where the rich sit in the stands to watch the valiant exertions of those less fortunate below?

In the early days of the post-Cold War period, it was not at all uncommon to hear foreign-policy practitioners refer to the American military in terms that suggested they were modern Hessians, available for deployment to any corner of the globe that policymakers wished to pacify or control. Ironically, prominent among the new interventionists were a number of humanitarian-aid officials—who are normally not enthusiastic about military deployments abroad—arguing that since the U.S. army consisted of volunteers who had accepted the king's shilling and, after all, had little to do in a post-Cold War world, they should be ready to serve in humanitarian missions, even if these were not related to core American security concerns.

The ease of victory in the Gulf War contributed to this new enthusiasm for the use of military force. If Iraq, with one of the most powerful armies in the world, could be so easily subdued, how could there be much danger or pain in deploying U.S. troops into the growing number of ethnic or religious conflicts emerging around the world? After the disaster in Somalia, one heard less of such talk. But empires need to have either Hessians or a populace anxious to march off to war. Fortunately, America has neither. Not to understand this fundamental point risks causing a major political explosion domestically at some unexpected moment in the future. Of course, the argument that the United States should not seek global hegemony does not mean America should not work with others to develop a shared response to some of the new challenges on the international agenda . . . but that is a different subject and article.



( I n t e r

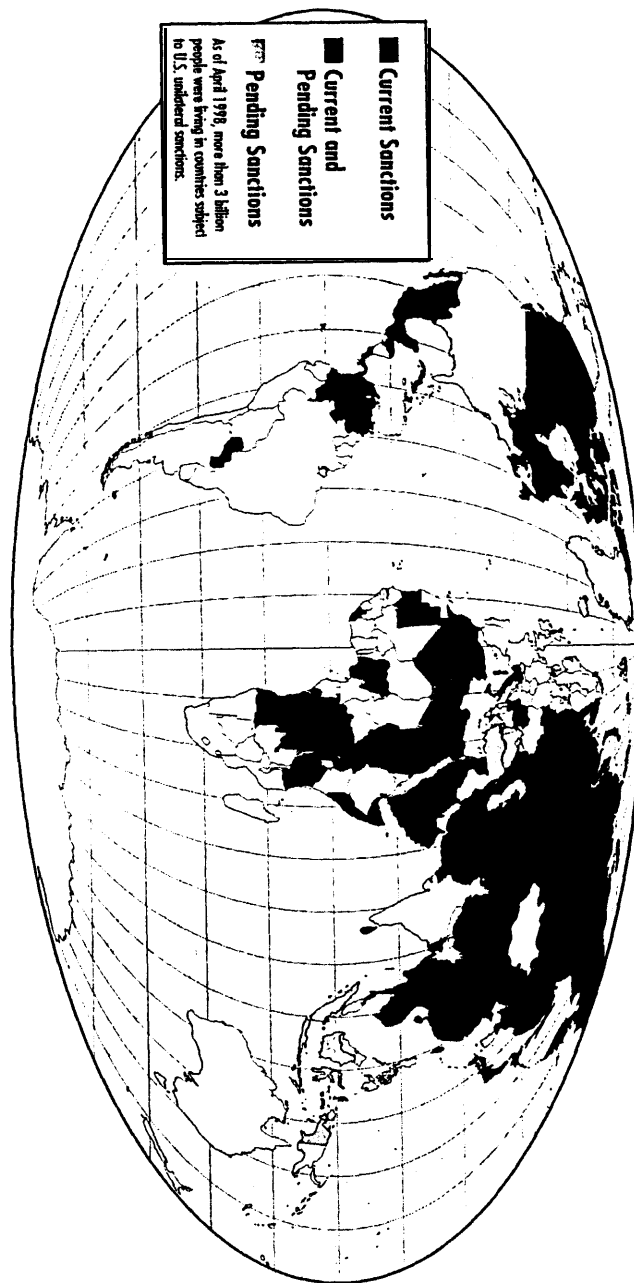
Suppose, despite all of these obstacles, a quest for world hegemony could succeed. We still should not want it. As Henry Adams warned in his autobiography, the effect of power on all men is “the aggravation of self, a sort of tumor that ends by killing the victim’s sympathies.” Already the surplus of power that America enjoys is beginning to metastasize into an arrogance toward others that is bound to backfire. Since 1993, the United States has imposed new unilateral economic sanctions, or threatened legislation that would allow it do so, 60 times on 35 countries that represent over 40 percent of the world’s population.

Increasingly, in its relations even with friends, the United States, as a result of the interplay between administration and Congress, has begun to command more and listen less. It demands to have its way in one international forum after another. It imperiously imposes trade sanctions that violate international understandings; presumptuously demands national legal protection for its citizens, diplomats, and soldiers who are subject to criminal prosecution, while insisting other states forego that right; and unilaterally dictates its view on UN reforms or the selection of a new secretary general.

To date, the United States has been able to get away with these tactics. Nevertheless, the patience of others is shortening. The difficulty the United States had in rounding up support, even from its allies, in the recent confrontation with Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was an early sign of the growing pique of others with America’s new preemptive arrogance. So was the manner in which the entire membership of the European Union immediately rallied behind the French in the controversy over a possible French, Malaysian, and Russian joint investment in the Iranian oil industry that would violate America’s unilaterally announced sanctions policy against Iran. In March 1998, while reflecting on President Bill Clinton’s visit to South Africa, President Nelson Mandela strongly rejected a trade agreement with the United States that would limit transactions with any third country, declaring that “we resist any attempt by any country to impose conditions on our freedom of trade.”

**Lost Opportunities**

Perhaps the biggest price Americans would pay in pursuing world hegemony is the cost in lost opportunities. Even those who propose such a policy of hegemony acknowledge that it cannot succeed over the longer run. As Kagan himself has written, we cannot “forget the truism that all



**A Sanctioned World**  
Countries Subject to or Threatened by U.S. Unilateral Sanctions

Source: For tracking of U.S. unilateral sanctions: *Unilateral Economic Sanctions: A Review* (Washington: President's Export Council, June 1997). U.S. state and local sanctions are tracked on the Web site of the Organization for International Investment. Sanctions pending in the U.S. Congress are reported on the Web site at USA's Europe. Map is derived from April 1998 data.

great powers must some day fall." One day, in other words, some country or group of countries will successfully challenge American primacy.

There is an alternative. We could use this unique post-Cold War moment to try to hammer out a new relationship among the great powers. Today, the most inadequately examined issue in American politics is precisely whether or not post-Cold War conditions offer us a chance to change the rules of the international game.

Certainly, there is no hope of changing the rules of the game if we ourselves pursue a policy of world hegemony. Such a policy, whether formally announced or increasingly evident, will drive others to resist our control, at first unsuccessfully but ultimately with effect. A policy of world hegemony, in other words, will guarantee that in time America will become outnumbered and overpowered. If that happens, we will once and for all have lost the present opportunity to attempt to change the rules of the game among the great powers.

Why should we believe there could be an opportunity to alter these rules? There are at least three reasons:

- War no longer pays for the great powers. For most of history, wars have paid. The victor ended up with more land and people. Over time, almost all of the latter accepted the sway of the new occupier. That is how most of the great nations of the world were built. With the rise of modern nationalism, however, it has become more and more difficult to absorb conquered territories without ethnic cleansing. Successful recent examples of seizing territory include the Russian, Polish, and Czech border changes after World War II, which involved brutal exchanges of populations. Unsuccessful examples of seizing territory include those in which the indigenous populations have remained, such as Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Indonesia's occupation of East Timor, and India's incorporation of Kashmir. Moreover, although ethnic cleansing does still take place today in a number of locations worldwide, those carrying out such practices are not the great powers but countries still in the process of nation-building along nineteenth-century lines. For most of the great states, in other words, war is not an option for power or wealth seeking. War is reserved for defense.
- Instead of seeking international power and influence through external expansion, most established powers now seek both through internal development. Postwar Germany and Japan have confirmed that these are more reliable paths to greater international prominence than the ones pursued since 1945 by Britain and France, both of

which have relied on military power to hold their place in the international system only to see it decline.

- The behavior of great states in the international system that have lost traditional forms of power in recent decades has been remarkably responsible. Postwar Germany and Japan, as well as post-Cold War Russia, have all accepted being shorn of territories with notably few repercussions. A principal reason was the treatment of the first two by their rivals and the hope of the third that the rest of the world would not exploit its weaknesses so as to exclude Russia from the European system, but would instead take aggressive steps to incorporate it. In this regard, a policy of hegemony sends exactly the wrong message, particularly if one of our purposes is to prevent Russia from ever "reviving" in a way that threatens us.

Regrettably, as we approach the millennium, we are almost at the point of no return in our post-Cold War policy. We are moving along a path that will forsake the chance of a lifetime to try to craft a different kind of international system. Like France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain in the middle, and Germany at the end, the United States does much to influence international behavior by the model it sets. It is still not too late to make a real effort to write a new page in history. If we pass up this opportunity, history will judge us very harshly indeed.

---

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

In their article "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy" (*International Security*, Winter 1996-97), Barry Posen of MIT and Andrew Ross of the U.S. Naval War College analyze the principal theoretical trends that have emerged in response to America's "unipolar" moment. In particular, the authors examine the practical policy implications of neo-isolationism, selective engagement, cooperative security, and U.S. hegemony.

By making use of historical case studies, Josef Joffe, editorial page editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, suggests that post-Cold War America could learn a lesson or two from imperial Germany. In his article "Bismarck or Britain?" (*International Security*, Spring 1995), Joffe argues that the United States should update and improve the Bismarckian model of great-power relations by pursuing alliances that inexorably link the welfare of others with America's and that discourage foreign nations from coalescing into rival power blocs.

In "Less is **More**" (*National Interest*, Spring 1996), Christopher Layne of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government relies on East Asia as a case study to argue that the United States should pursue a "minimalist grand strategy" that depends upon "global and regional power balances to contain newly emerging powers." Because of America's "relative immunity" from external threats, Layne endorses a "buck-passing" strategy that encourages regional U.S. allies to take the lead in dealing with East Asian security issues. In his book **Isolationism Reconfigured** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), the late Eric Nordlinger of Brown University argues that America's military supremacy offers a unique opportunity to cut defense spending, end security alliances, and address problems primarily through multinational institutions.

Previous articles in **FOREIGN POLICY** that have addressed the issue of American primacy in the international system include: Albert Coll's "America as the Grand Facilitator" (Summer 1992), Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz's "American Hegemony: Without an Enemy" (Fall 1993), and Charles William Maynes' "Bottom-Up Foreign Policy" (Fall 1996).

For a specific case study of the spiraling costs and potential pitfalls of American hegemony, readers should consult **NATO Enlargement: Illusions and Reality**, edited by Ted Galen Carpenter and Barbara Conry (Washington: CATO Institute, 1998). Richard Haass, director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, warns of the potential pitfalls of unilateral American sanctions, in his article "Sanctioning Madness" (*Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997).

Several recent public-opinion surveys illustrate the widening gap in attitudes between the general public and foreign-policy practitioners, particularly with regard to America's perceived duties and obligations as a world leader: American Public **Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy** 1995, edited by John Rielly (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1995), America's Place **in the World II** (Washington: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, October 1997), and **The Foreign Policy Gap**, by Steven Kull, I.M. Destler, and Clay Ramsay (College Park: Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland, October 1997).

For links to relevant Web sites, as well as a comprehensive index of related articles, access [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

## SAVINGS CERTIFICATE

SAVE 33%

**YES**, I accept your special offer to receive **FOREIGN POLICY** at 33% OFF the regular subscription rate—just \$21.99 for 1 year (4 issues).

NAME (PLEASE PRINT) \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_ COUNTRY \_\_\_\_\_

Payment enclosed:  Check  
 Charge my:  AMEX  MASTERCARD  VISA

CARD NO. \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_ EXP. DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Bill me later

Satisfaction Guaranteed or your money back on all unmailed issues. Canada/Mexico add \$8.00. Other foreign countries add \$15.00

**For even faster service, call 1-800-678-0916 or fax to 202-483-4430.**

## FOREIGN POLICY

4E6F6

FOREIGN POLICY is full of international scope, and it gives you the framework to understand the morning's headlines.. ."

—Thomas L Friedman, *The New York Times*

"FOREIGN POLICY is a must read.. .a source of valuable information and significant thinking from many places and intellectual disciplines.. ." —Bill Bradley

"incisive and in-depth coverage of the new global economy."  
—Jeffrey Sachs, Harvard University

"FOREIGN POLICY has acquired a facelift, but more important than its new look is the rebirth of its intellectual enthusiasm and sense of urgency.. ." —Newt Gingrich

"FOREIGN POLICY combines rigorous thinking with lively writing.\*"  
—Zbigniew Brzezinski

"FOREIGN POLICY is the best source of information and debate about international affairs." —Mario Vattgas Llosa

"AU policy these days is global policy, and FOREIGN POLICY is the place to find new, interesting, and readable thinking about it" —Larry Summers

# FOREIGN POLICY

To subscribe, see the subscription cards  
in this issue or call 202-939-2230.