

PATTERNS OF AMERICAN FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

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I. THE VALUES GUIDING US FOREIGN POLICY

At first glance, the basic values of US foreign policy seem confusing and contradictory. Frequently, they have been described in terms of polarizing opposites: for example, geopolitical realism versus universal idealism, or non interventionist isolationism versus interventionist internationalism, or unilateralism versus multilateralism, etc., etc. The following is an attempt to understand, by way of analysis, the basic orientations of US foreign policy in so far as these are a consequence of different patterns of normative self-interpretation.

I.1. Utopian-Idealist Orientation

The Utopian variant of collective self-interpretation is directly linked to American colonial history. In terms of their colonial history, Americans are Europeans who – sometimes voluntarily, sometimes less so – left Europe behind. For them, Europe was synonymous with a hierarchic politico-social order, a close ideological interaction of church and state, a fateful involvement in feudal-absolutist and (at a later stage) nationalist rivalries and conflicts and, not least, a massively experienced religious intolerance. What these Europeans were seeking in the New World was a free and pious life devoid of oppression and, consequently, a good and happy life. The Old Testament's tale of the Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt provides an appropriate metaphorical backdrop. Europe is Egypt, which God's wandering people has left, while America is the Promised Land. Metaphors are also taken from the New Testament: America is the shining city on the hill, the New Jerusalem. You do not become a citizen of this city by birthright, but by declaring yourself a supporter of "project America" as laid down in the Declaration of Independence of 1776: all men are created free and equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The project of a free society

committed to individually pursued happiness is both a universal and a divinely authorized project. The sociologist S. Lipset has summarized this specifically American undertaking as follows: "God has led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light unto all nations."¹ So, what is due to all people is – by quasi-providential wisdom – bound to originate from America. America will have to lead the world. In the mid-nineteenth century, Herman Melville encapsulated this American credo in an enchantingly enthusiastic formula: "... we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours.... Long enough have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us."² This universal credo has remained in effect until today, even if nowadays it presents itself in a somewhat more prosaic form. Former US Secretary of State Warren Christopher once said: "When I travel abroad, it is eminently clear to me why America is still the world's predominant power. The nations of the world look to us as a source of principled and reliable leadership. They see us as an optimistic people, motivated by a broad view of our interests and driven by a long view of our potential. They follow us because they understand that America's fight for peace and freedom is the world's fight. If we wish to preserve our leadership, we must continue to act in the best traditions of our nation and our people."³

Until today, therefore, America has seen itself as something exceptional – the shining city on the hill. Of course, such a perception of oneself has its moral connotations. By necessity, the shining city on the hill requires its opposite, that is, places of depravity, moral squalor and political morass. This, now, fully establishes the preordained character of the political world theatre as a struggle between perfection and depravity, between good and evil, between God and the devil. Such a concept of the world leaves no room for compromise. The evil and the wicked must be exterminated. Compared to the culture of other western states, Americans are, therefore, until today, prone to assume that there is an absoluteness in morals. And committing oneself to the good cause does morally justify the means, even the use of

¹ **Lipset, S. M.** 1996. *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, p. 64.

² **Melville, H.** 1954. *Weissjackete oder die Welt auf einem Kriegsschiff* (orig. *White-Jacket or The World in a Man-of-War*, 1850). Leipzig: Dieterich, p. 21+.

³ **Warren, Chr.** Quoted in: **Unger, F.** 1996. *Die Weltsicht der Weltmacht. – Wissenschaft und Frieden* 4/1996, S. 6.

extreme military means. “Force, force to the utmost,”⁴ the idealist Wilson proclaimed as the adequate American maxim in war. The discussion of the equation between ends and means always tends to perceive ends as having a higher value while neglecting the moral weight of the means. Europeans undoubtedly think in a more complex and dialectic way – or, as M. Weber put it, in terms of ethical consequentialism rather than deontological ethics (i.e. the belief that certain acts are right or wrong in themselves regardless of their consequences).

Consequently, Americans and Europeans have different concepts of politics. In the European context, politics is plausibly and logically defined as the “art of the possible,” while in the American context – equally plausibly and logically – it is seen as a moral crusade, be it to abolish slavery (Civil War), be it to bring colonialism to an end (Spanish-American War), be it “to make the world safe for democracy” (World War I) or, finally, to overcome ideological totalitarianism (World War II). As Lipset put it aptly concerning R. Reagan’s policy towards the Soviet Union: “Ronald Reagan was as American as apple pie when he spoke of the evil empire as the enemy.”⁵ And vice versa: What was tragic about Bush sen. was the fact that he fought the second Gulf war to hunt down a Hitler *redivivus* but, for practical political reasons, chose to let him live.

I.2. Skeptical Orientation

With the phrase “for practical political reasons,” a second pattern of collective self-interpretation becomes visible. And this pattern, too, has its own background of political ideas. It is worth remembering that the ideas of the Enlightenment were deeply rooted in the minds of the American Founding Fathers. Admittedly, the Enlightenment in America – similar to the situation in Germany – did not assume an anti-religious stance. Quite the opposite. As the text of the Declaration of Independence elucidates, there is an almost intrinsic agreement between the Enlightenment and religious morals. But the Enlightenment also developed – very independently of any form of religion – a life and dynamics of its own. And this dynamics was not about Utopian enthusiasm. It was rather about a specific kind of skepticism, which can be called the purely secular variant of the Enlightenment. It reveals itself in the form of a basic mistrust of human nature, its selfishness and passions, its constitutional greed and craving for fame, its pride and envy. And the crucial

⁴ **Wilson, W.** Quoted in: **Mann, G.** 1984. Gedanken zum Geist der amerikanischen Aussenpolitik. – **Allen, R. V. et al.** 1984. Die geistigen Grundlagen der Atlantischen Gemeinschaft. Mainz: Hase & Koehler, S. 21.

⁵ **Lipset** 1996, p. 65.

question of the Enlightenment was how progress for mankind can be achieved despite these rather unfavorable anthropological conditions. John Adams, the second President of the United States, eloquently expressed this skeptical variant of the Enlightenment: “Emulation next to self-preservation will forever be the great spring of human action, and the balance of well-ordered government will alone be able to prevent that emulation from degenerating into dangerous ambition, irregular rivalries, destructive factions, wasting seditions and bloody, civil wars.”⁶ (Quotation translated back from German.) James Madison, one of the authors of the famous “Federalist,” not only saw in such a skeptical anthropology the justifying reason but even the enabling reason of constitutionally limited – that is, democratic – politics. “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition ... It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”⁷ Interestingly enough, the American constitutional structure is based in its entirety on this anthropological skepticism. According to its inner logic, it is not the assurance of basic rights (as in the German constitution) that keeps freedom alive, but only institutional “checks and balances.” Within the systematic structure of the American constitution, the part on basic rights follows the part that focuses on the institutional organization of the political system. Guarantees as to basic rights are just amendments. The Fathers of the Constitution were all convinced – and this is the typical trait that marks the spirit of the Enlightenment, to which they were committed – that, with this Constitution, they had found the ideal form per se for human beings to live together. Matter-of-factly, such insights claim to be a universal model and decisive authority; and they do establish – almost as if by copyright – the other form of American exceptionalism, which is just as effective.

Of course, such exceptionalism also inspires ideas in the field of foreign policy, and it does so in two ways. On the one hand, there is the idea that by establishing the “system of checks and balances” – from the separation of powers at the level of federal government to the relationship between the Union and the individual states – the ideal political system per se was found or invented. It would and should function as a role model for the rest of the world. George Washington and others accepted it as a self-evident truth that the “United States of Europe” would – once all the structural obstacles had been removed – choose to follow the same path that the “United States of America” had already taken. Therefore, there is a tendency to expect that

⁶ Adams, J. Quoted in: Hornung, K. 1984. *Freiheit in unserer Zeit: Geschichte, Politik, Erziehung*. Stuttgart: Horn, S. 23.

⁷ Hamilton, A., Madison, J., Jay, J. 1958. *Der Föderalist*. Hrsg. und mit einer Einleitung vers. von Felix Ermacora. Wien, Mainz, p. 295.

other nations will “reinvent” the American system, which would only require minor supportive efforts in the field of foreign policy to be made by the USA.

The second variant of a “checks and balances” concept transfers a domestic constitutional structure to the international system. This perspective then makes it necessary to establish balances first and foremost by taking an active-interventionist approach – quite in the sense of the old European “balance of power” system. In terms of political ideas, this concept follows Thomas Hobbes; in practical politics, it was brought to bear in Europe by the Congress of Vienna, which established a balanced system of five Great Powers that actually did safeguard peace in Europe for the decades to come.

The USA, too, mentally experimented with this concept at a rather early stage, even with the implied consequence of abandoning the idea of American exceptionalism and uniqueness. For example, the Federalist Hamilton was eager to see the USA grow simply to become a power of European caliber, and he was quite frank in formulating a farewell to the dream of American exceptionalism: “Have we not already seen enough of the fallacy and extravagance of those idle theories which have amused us with promises of an exemption from the imperfections, weaknesses, and evils incident to society in every shape? Is it not time to awaken from the deceitful dream of a golden age, and to adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our political conduct that we, as well as the other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue?”⁸ In the form of political realism, this perspective shaped the style of the Cold War Era in our century – which, by that time, had been imbued with the very ideology of the exceptional role of America in world history and its resulting leadership responsibility. That is a concept very close to European perspectives. It is called the realistic approach in foreign affairs.

2. PARADIGMS OF AMERICAN FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

The above mentioned conflicting value orientations come to the fore under concrete historical circumstances. It is plausible to differentiate between two major historical periods – the watershed being the turn of the 20th century. This was the time when the US had been consolidated internally by reaching

⁸ Quoted in: **Schweigler, G.** 1994. *America First.* – **Dembinski, M. et al.** 1994. *Amerikanische Weltpolitik nach dem Ost-West-Konflikt.* Baden-Baden: Nomos, p. 27.

its natural geographical limits with a population exceeding that of all other industrialised countries and with an economy outdistancing that of all others as well. Emerging from decades of preoccupation with itself the United States began to consider new radical approaches to the world. And, as in the past decades, the controversy revolved around the principal difference between a moralistic/idealistic and a more realistic approach. Thus the new political dispute replicated the traditional and inherited viewpoints on a more global level.

Analytically linking the fundamental value orientations (idealistic versus realistic) to the historically determined geographical dimensions (continental focus versus global focus) the result will be a theoretically fruitful four-field matrix illustrating paradigmatic choices in terms of American foreign and security policy. They can be identified as

- “Civiliationism” (moral uplifting/promoting freedom);
- “Isolationism” (non-interventionism/sovereignty);
- “Democratic Internationalism” (democratic self-determination/American Leadership);
- “Realism” (National Interest Policy/Hegemony/Imperialism).

It goes without saying that this matrix can only be an analytical instrument for further investigation rather than a plain depiction of political reality. In reality the different paradigms sometimes represent themselves in a clear-cut fashion (cp. Wilsonianism versus Rooseveltianism), but sometimes they mix, overlap and intersect. As seems to be the case particularly for the more realistic paradigms, an additional idealistic flavour is needed to appeal to the public and gain its support. Conversely the idealistic paradigms undergo some realistic reconsideration in terms of implementation. The same applies to the geographical dimension. Notwithstanding the discernible historical watershed at the beginning of the twentieth century, specifically “continental” perspectives linger on in the globalist era – especially the concern for national sovereignty. Conversely, globalist aspects are already foreshadowed in the continental era – especially the undisputed claim to “natural” US expansionism. The following matrix shows the different political choices.

American Exceptionalism

| <p style="text-align: center;">Geographical dimensions</p> <p>Political principles</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Continental focus</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Global focus</p> |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Moralistic-idealistic principle</p> | <p><u>Catchwords:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * “A City upon a Hill” (Winthrop) * “Manifest Destiny” (O’Sullivan) <p><u>Paradigms:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Civilizing Indians * Overspreading the Continent | <p><u>Catchwords:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * “Making the world safe for Democracy” (Wilson) * “The American Century” (Luce, 1941) * “Paradox of American Power” (J. Nye) <p><u>Paradigms:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Democratic internationalism: national self-determination and international cooperation * American leadership: rebuilding the world in the American image * Global governance/ soft power |
| <p>Realistic principle</p> | <p><u>Catchwords:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * “Steer clear of permanent alliances” (G. Washington) * ”... leave the parties to themselves” (Monroe) <p><u>Paradigms:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Isolationism * Non-Interventionism * Sovereigntism | <p><u>Catchwords:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * “Speak softly and carry a big stick” (Th. Roosevelt) * US – “the sole superpower” (R. Kagan) <p><u>Paradigms:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * National interest strategy * Dominance/(benign) Hegemony * (reluctant) Imperialism |

2.1. The Civilizational Paradigm: From the “City upon a Hill” to “Manifest Destiny” and beyond

It all began with the famous sermon of John Winthrop to the Puritan immigrants aboard the *Arbella* in 1630, before they set sail for their voyage to America: “Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. /.../ We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; /.../ mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. /.../ For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”⁹ To be “a city upon a hill” – and thus separated from all others – is the first reference to what was later to become the claim to being a chosen people with a superior civilization. What it actually meant, though, to be a chosen people with a superior civilization, changed dramatically over time. In the revolutionary years that led to independence and national statehood, it was the remarkably new way by which Americans had accomplished their revolutionary goals. In contrast to the French revolution with its civil war bloodshed, dictatorial episodes and Napoleonic results, Americans could point out that their revolution endured none of these problems. Therefore it was a sort of exemplary revolution – not least due to the fact that their revolutionary guidelines enshrined in the Declaration of Independence had only to assert themselves over foreign armies but not societal class structures and obsolete feudalism. Americans were evidently more progressive and more blessed than Europeans. Beyond that the revolutionary guidelines themselves set the American experiment apart. Their conspicuously individualistic orientation focusing on individual liberty and the pursuit of happiness distinguished it particularly – testifying to civilizational progress and divine blessing. So the meaning associated with being a “City on a hill” had evidently changed but not the underlying awareness of being exempt from the normal course of history and simultaneously representing a civilizational role model for all mankind. When during much of the 19th century “the pursuit of happiness” inspired millions of Americans to migrate to the American West, this Expansionism was again justified by its exceptional character – namely the civilizational progress that came with it. The journalist J. O’ Sullivan in 1845 coined the phrase for this kind of undertaking: “manifest destiny.” He there

⁹ **Winthrop, J.** 1630. A Model of Christian Charity. (Sermon held to the Protestant Immigrants aboard the “*Arabella*” in 1630). – The Winthrop Society. <http://www.winthropsociety.com/doc_charity.php>, (accessed June 10, 2010)

by defined the westward expansionism of the United States as the civilizational entitlement “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions...”¹⁰ He was not at all alone in this perspective. A famous lithography by J. Gast titled “Westward Ho/Manifest Destiny” shows people tracking westward accompanied by a larger-than-life virgin floating above their heads and – typically – carrying a textbook under her right arm. The message is clear: expansionism is not simply about acquiring territory, it is rather about spreading civilizational progress. Being committed to spreading civilizational progress was to become a firmly anchored and deeply rooted part of the American creed. Even in the days when the United States had left behind her continental limitations in pursuit of more globally defined political goals, this element of civilizational commitment would not disappear. McKinley’s justification of the annexation of the Philippines in 1901 sounds more like going on a civilizational errand than undertaking a colonial effort: “There was nothing left to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them.”¹¹ No wonder that Europeans not familiar with this strand of American self-perception deplore and more often denounce this attitude as hypocrisy – as a pseudo-moral cover-up of their actual political motives.

2.2. The Isolationist/Non-interventionist Paradigm

American exceptionalism has still another face. Being set apart from the normal course of history likewise implied some more “realistic” political considerations from the very beginning. Enlightened skepticism brought about the notion that the United States embarking on a radical new democratic course should avoid the contaminating contact with a Europe that is not only geographically far away but also morally below the standards that are valid and effective on the American Continent. So it was no wonder that the very first president of the United States, George Washington, warned against so-called “entangling alliances” in his famous farewell address on September 17th, 1796. Only by steering clear of political engagement with a – so to speak – “pre-modern” Europe could peace and prosperity be secured for the United States: “The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little

¹⁰ **O’Sullivan, J. L.** 1845. Manifest Destiny. – U.S. History Resources. http://1.scds.org/resources/US-History/1845_John%20L.%20O%27Sullivan,%20On%20Manifest%20Destiny.pdf>, (accessed June 10, 2010)

¹¹ **McKinley, W.** Quoted in: **Cashman, S. D.** 1984. From the Death of Lincoln to Rise of Theodore Roosevelt. New York: New York University Press, p. 346.

political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.

Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities.

Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. If we remain one people, under an efficient government, the period is not far off, when we may defy material injury from external annoyance. /.../

/.../ Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice?

It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world; so far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do it.”¹²

It can be said that during all of the 19th century, the advice of G. Washington was honestly heeded. An important doctrinal expression of this attitude was the Monroe doctrine. It then encapsulated the overall mindset of the American people. The doctrine’s message to European governments was not to try to expand further their systems to the New World. In return, the United States would refrain from intervening in European struggles. And, indeed, when the question arose in Monroe’s cabinet whether help should be provided to Greek patriots in their liberation struggle against Ottoman control, the United States stayed out with an almost classical statement by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams: “America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will recommend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benign sympathy of her example. She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assumed the colors and usurped the standards of freedom... She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.”¹³ Skepticism

¹² **Washington, G.** 1796. Farewell Address to the People of the United States, September 17, 1796. [The Independent Chronicle 1796]. – US Government Info. <http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/blgwfarewell.htm>, (accessed June 11, 2010)

¹³ **Adams, J. Q.** Quoted in: **Kennan, G. F.** 1994. On American Principles. – Foreign Affairs, March/April 1994, p. 118.

with regard to the clarity of issues turns into isolationism. From the beginning, this link between skepticism and isolationism has set the pattern, particularly when dealing with European affairs.

2.3. The Paradigm of Democratic Internationalism

Turning to the third paradigm of American exceptionalism takes us back to the idealistic self-perception of American politics. W. Wilson – presumably ahead of his time – tried to confer the idealistic impulse of American politics upon European countries. This impulse was imbued with some sort of missionary universalism: could the blessed situation the United States had enjoyed for so long not be transferred to a Europe that traditional power politics had ruined so much, as the results of World War I were evidently showing? Naturally, the finest hour of trying to establish a new political order will always come after a major military conflict. From Wilson’s perspective, though, a new political order always meant a democratic order both internally and externally: internally in the form of securing freedom, and externally in the form of – among other things – securing peace. Nowhere else is there such a close conceptual connection between the idea of domestic constitutionality and international order as in the concept of democratic internationalism. It is not only about securing the “benign sympathy of our example,” but committing oneself to massive and determined interventionism. It was Wilson who initiated the definitive return of the US to Europe after its absence from Europe for over 100 years. And he did so in a very specific way. When the American instruments of power had brought an end to World War I, he drew – from the necessity to establish a new political order – the strategic conclusion that the former European “balance of power” should be replaced by a system of “collective security” which would allow for the conditions necessary to safeguard peace in the long run.

As the “League of Nations,” this system of collective security led a short and meager existence – not least because there was no support from the political elite of the United States. Wilson’s concept of “collective security” failed because of the veto of the American Congress. This is quite revealing. Like a spotlight, it highlights, once again, the strength of the other – that is, the well established isolationist – concept. After the end of World War II, the time for a renewed Wilsonianism had come once more. For in 1945, it was by no means clear that the cooperation of the victorious powers would finally be superseded by the competition between different political and social systems and by the strategy of containment. Quite on the contrary, the US (that is to say, Roosevelt) was quite idealistic in assuming that – after German fascism had been brought to an end – nothing would stand in the way of

a peaceful future for the community of nations. The path forward would be the assumed normality and civility in the mutual relationships of states, an international peace based on democracy and economic liberalism. Even during World War II, Roosevelt had made basic preparations to that end, among which the System of Bretton Woods and the founding of the United Nations were arguably the most important innovations. Roosevelt, though, added so much American preponderance to internationalism that it now became acceptable to the political elite of his country as well. Above all, it was America's role as the "leading power" that was safeguarded in every respect and that made sure that this new attempt at Wilsonianism did not fail. We only have to think of the dollar, which became the world's key currency, or America's veto power on the UN Security Council. It must be said, though, that this kind of democratic internationalism was – so to speak – in the air. As early as 1941, the founder of the Time-Life publishing empire, Henry Luce, had coined the term "American Century." Proceeding on the assumption that Americans are "the most powerful and vital people on earth," the American nation could become – he maintained – the "center of ever-widening spheres of influence, the Good Samaritan."¹⁴ But in order to ensure a dynamic globally operating economy it is necessary to establish a concomitant moral order (the order of the Good Samaritan), and to this end it is necessary to make the world congenial to US principles. Thus the "American Century" is de facto meant to be the century of global leadership of the United States. The argument for American leadership, though, is not tantamount to American hegemony. For leadership is not about dominating the world, it is about shaping it in a way that serves not only the national interest of the United States but that of others as well. Recently, J. Nye has delineated a political concept in which America's "soft power", i.e., its political, social and cultural attractiveness moves the rest of the world in a direction that is set in advance by American standards. Part of this "soft power" is the presumed ability of the American system to take into consideration the interests of other nations and to find common ground. The reason for this is quite simple: an unrivalled superpower can afford to be a benign power.

2.4. The "Balance of Power" / Hegemonic Paradigm

The "balance of power" / hegemonic paradigm again rests firmly on the skeptical viewpoint. It can be summarized in the off-quoted words "The world is a dangerous place." So in order to feel secure it is necessary to focus exclusively on the primacy of a national interest policy and its concomitant

¹⁴ Luce, H. Quoted in: LaFeber, W. American Exceptionalism as Foreign Policy. – Foreign Service Journal, March 2000, p. 27.

(military) power considerations in order either to maintain a balance of military power or even better to exploit military weaknesses of other powers and at the end of the day dominate the rest of the world. Particularly the experience of the Cold War period boosted and illustrated the dynamics of such a political concept. The “balance of power” was never meant to be an end in itself. With its built-in arms race it was geared producing a final winner and victor. After 1990 the winner and victor was historically determined – in the form of the US towering above others in terms of military technology, economic development, social cohesion and (partly) cultural attractiveness. No wonder that those whose ambition was always to control instead of shaping the political environment saw their big chance to push for global American hegemony. They favoured this stance for several reasons:

1. Human nature is inherently inclined to make bad choices; accordingly the nature of the international system (the players of which are humans) is inherently anarchic.
2. A dominating power can reduce or even remove international anarchy.
3. If the US does not fill its natural role as dominating superpower, somebody else will.
4. US dominance, i.e., international US hegemony is a “benign” hegemony because America will exercise its power with some restraint in accordance with its idealistic mindset.

It is only the fourth point where American exceptionalism comes into play once again: America may be a monster, a Hobbesian behemoth – but “a behemoth with a conscience,”¹⁵ as the theoretician Robert Kagan put it. Often it is just this exceptionalist flavour to American hegemony that mobilizes anti-American feelings. Is not the claim to be a benign hegemonist plain hypocrisy – due to the fact that plain and simple hegemonism cannot be sold to a public that is used to moralizing politics? Publicly talking about the devil and other impediments to a better world, hegemonists de facto think and act – critics maintain – in the framework of economic exploitation, strategically outmaneuvering other countries and imposing US control on the international system. So it is open to debate whether G. W. Bush’s policies with their inherent moralistic claims (compare his words after 9/11: “Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.”¹⁶) were a sort of a hidden hegemonism or vice versa a sort of Wilsonianism, albeit in boots. Perhaps the protagonists of these policies are uncertain themselves.

¹⁵ **Kagan, R.** Quoted in: **Maynes, Ch. W.** 2001. *Contending Schools*. – The National Interest, Spring 2001, p. 51.

¹⁶ **Bush, G. W.** 2001. President’s Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance at The National Cathedral, Washington D. C., September 14, 2001. <http://remember911.albertarose.org/Bush9-14.htm>, (accessed June 12, 2010).

The current question is: Will the policies of Obama represent a more authentic return to Wilsonian policies and a real departure from hegemonic dreams? Only time will tell.

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