

# The (really) good war? Cold War nostalgia and American foreign policy

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*This article argues that the Cold War nostalgia of the present in the United States is ultimately based upon a poor – instrumentalist – reading of history. If anything, Cold War nostalgia shows the malleability of our present-day understanding of the past.*

‘I miss the Cold War’, complains a fictional US National Security Advisor in the 1997 movie *Peacemaker*. The ‘f...ing Russians’ had allowed 10 nuclear warheads to be stolen. After many twists and turns, one of these warheads ends up in New York where its carrier – a Yugoslav music professor-come-diplomatic envoy for his war-torn nation – sets about to blow up half of Manhattan. At the last moment he is stopped by two larger-than-life American heroes (played by Nicole Kidman and George Clooney). Improbable as most of the movie is, its plotline includes a wide array of post-Cold War era ‘baddies’ and problems: refugee flows from wars in the Caucasus, snipers and chaos amidst the 1992–95 Balkan Wars, terrorists ready to buy nuclear weapons, a Harvard-trained Pakistani scientist willing to sell his know-how to the highest bidder, a crooked Austrian businessmen providing cargo transportation services with no questions asked from Russia to Iran, and a greedy Russian general happy to blow up a nuclear weapon inside Russia to cover his tracks. Indeed, the nightmarish scenarios of the disorderly post-Cold War world fill all 124 minutes of non-stop action.<sup>1</sup>

Missing the ‘certainties’ of the Cold War nuclear balance is hardly reserved to the imagination of Hollywood filmmakers or the 1990s. ‘I look back wistfully at the Cold War’, intoned James Inhofe, the ranking Republican in the Senate Armed Services Committee, in late February 2014. ‘There were two superpowers, they knew what we

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<sup>1</sup> *Peacemaker*. Directed by Mimi Leder (Hollywood, CA: Dreamworks Pictures, 1997).

had, we knew what they had, mutually assured destruction meant something. It doesn't mean anything anymore. Now we have these people who are not rational, not logical, they're nuts'. The irrational folks in Inhofe's statement were the Iranians and the North Koreans but the real problem was another country. 'We can't get any help from Russia now with Iran and Syria, they're just pushing us all over the place', House Armed Services Committee Chairman Buck McKeon explained, before concluding: 'It's a dangerous world'.<sup>2</sup>

Cold War nostalgia is an understandable phenomenon. Between 1945 and 1991 America stood for something universal against a global menace that was Soviet communism. It was the undisputed leader of the free world; its president the commander-in-chief not only of the United States but all like-minded and allied nations (not always overlapping categories). The world was, throughout that period, a seemingly straightforward place: there were good guys and bad guys, there was nuclear balance and deterrence, there was an international system that was, so it seemed, stable and predictable because the two major powers could not fathom going to war against each other. In the United States there was even a broad-based partisan consensus over foreign policy priorities (if not methods); politics stopped, as the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Arthur Vandenberg (R-MI) had insisted in 1947, at 'water's edge'.

And in 2014? The term 'free world' means little. The US president commands far less respect around the world today than his predecessors did at the height of the Cold War. While there are plenty of bad guys around, it has become increasingly fuzzy to define who the good guys really are. Americans have become deeply divided across partisan lines. Throw in the spectre of decline and the rise of the poorly identifiable, heterogeneous 'rest'. America has apparently had a very rough ride in the past quarter century. No wonder if some feel nostalgic!

This article argues that the Cold War nostalgia of the present is ultimately based upon a poor – instrumentalist – reading of history. Despite all the seeming loss of intellectual and ideological purpose, decline in influence and power abroad, and exaggerated internal divisions, the United States continues to hold onto its international primacy. The yearning for a return to nuclear stability, domestic consensus and an era when American exceptionalism was a recognisable fact of modern life are basically ahistorical utterances. If anything, Cold War nostalgia shows the malleability of our present-day understanding of the past.

### **The Myth of Cold War Stability**

The Cold War was, as John Gaddis put it in 1986, a period of 'Long Peace'. This was an unintended consequence of the rapid development of nuclear weapons that made war between the United States and the Soviet Union unthinkable given the potential costs

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<sup>2</sup> "Top Republicans Call for Return to Cold War", *The Daily Beast*, 27 February 2014. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/02/27/top-republicans-call-for-return-to-cold-war.html> (accessed 23 April 2014)

that such a war would have entailed. Many were unhappy with Gaddis' terminology but rarely disputed the major point: the Cold War produced a stable systemic superstructure. Regional wars – Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan to name a few – were, it seems, minor complications – trees in the proverbial forest – when compared to the nuclear peace between superpowers and the stability of the East-West division in Europe that remained fairly unshakeable from the late 1940s to the late 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

The nostalgia for the stability that the Cold War supposedly provided emerged as soon as the Berlin Wall was torn down: John Mearsheimer argued even in 1990 that, 'we are likely to soon regret the passing of the Cold War'. He further prophesied that 'if the Cold War is truly behind us, the stability of the past forty-five years is not likely to be seen again in the coming decades'.<sup>4</sup> John Gaddis, somewhat less nostalgically, wrote about the post-Cold War era as one characterised by the coexistence of 'forces of integration and fragmentation'.<sup>5</sup>

To a large extent, such broad prognostications have turned out to be true in the past quarter of a century, as Srebrenica, Somalia, and Rwanda illustrated horribly. Conflicts festered also in the Middle East, rogue states like North Korea kept threatening their neighbours, and the term 'failed states' entered our lexicon. After 9/11 things got even more complicated. Despite the apparent effort to reinvent the Cold War as a Global War on Terror (GWT), it did not take long for the – retrospectively obvious – fact to sink in that terrorism and communism were not the same beast, that Al Qaeda was no Soviet Union, and that Osama Bin-Laden was far removed from Lenin or Stalin.<sup>6</sup> By the time that Barack Obama was elected in November 2008, the United States appeared to have wasted its unipolar moment. Instead of building a stable international structure, Americans were wallowing in partisan disputes at home and passively observing the relentless rise of the rest. Worse, in the spring of 2014 a resurgent Russia was actively returning to its expansionist games by annexing the Crimean peninsula from the Ukraine (the second-largest Soviet successor state). The forces of fragmentation were winning. A stable bipolar structure was giving way to 'no one's world'.<sup>7</sup>

It is all a familiar story and, like many familiar stories, only partly true. To be sure, the world changed after 1989. Yet, should one really regret the end of the Cold War

<sup>3</sup> John L. Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> John Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss The Cold War", *The Atlantic Monthly* 266:2 (August 1990), 35–50. See also Mearsheimer's "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War", *International Security* 15: 1 (Summer, 1990), 5–56.

<sup>5</sup> Gaddis, "Toward the Post-Cold War World", *Foreign Affairs* 70:2 (Spring 1991), 102–122.

<sup>6</sup> There is little point in providing a long list of books on these issues but interested readers could consult: Bruce Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy: The Dynamics of Choice in the 21st Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010, 4th ed.); Michael Cox and Doug Stokes, *U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.); or Geir Lundestad, ed., *International Relations Since the End of the Cold War: Old and New Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

because it ended an era of global stability? Ask an average Pole, a Hungarian or a Czech national with experience from the pre-1989 era and the answer is likely to be negative. Intuitively, I am also tempted to say no.

The end of the Cold War was not 'the end of history' (in the unfortunate phrasing of Frances Fukuyama) but nor was it a setback to international security. For one, the key element of stability in the Cold War international system – the threat of thermonuclear war and destruction – was of dubious positive consequence and impact. 'The capacity to destroy is difficult to translate into a plausible threat even against countries with no capacity for retaliation', Henry Kissinger wrote back in 1969.<sup>8</sup> While the Soviets and the Americans were keen to avoid direct conflict with each other in the world of MAD, their nuclear arsenals were of little practical use. Moscow and Washington could not turn their immense destructive power into tools of coercion to be used to contain or solve regional conflicts. In fact, one might go a step further and argue that the nuclear arms race increased the likelihood of 'small wars' (or proxy wars) with limited superpower intervention and prompted all manner of other types of interventionism – economic and military assistance to beleaguered governments and aspiring national liberation movements, clandestine manoeuvres and covert action exploits among others. As the Cold War went global and interacted with the process of decolonisation, it also became more violent and created many of those failed states and protracted conflicts that the world only 'discovered' in the 1990s.<sup>9</sup>

Second, take the point that there was no hot war between the United States and the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1991. Was this the case mainly because of the existence of massive arsenals of nuclear weapons? To believe this requires a conceptual leap of faith. The great peace dividends of thermonuclear weapons that is often used to bolster the claim assumes the willingness, on at least one side, to actually go to war to destroy the other superpower if one could achieve such a goal without risking self-destruction. I have yet to come across evidence that any *responsible* American policymaker yearned for the opportunity to 'take out' the USSR (or its major military installations and cities). My knowledge of the other side is less precise. But it would be difficult to conclude that Stalin, Khrushchev or any other member of the Soviet Politburo between 1945 and 1991 were frustrated in the ambition to wipe out Washington, DC (or Paris or London). If anything, they appear most concerned about safeguarding their domestic position of power. This may seem hypothetical and circumstantial. But it seems no more speculative than the presumed logic behind the notion of a nuclear weapons'-induced Cold War stability.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 65.

<sup>9</sup> An essential guide to the globalisation of the Cold War is Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> The best overview of Soviet foreign policy is Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

My point is not that the end of the Cold War made the world more stable and safe or that it automatically led to the expansion of the liberal international system championed by the United States.<sup>11</sup> My simple point is that any nostalgia for the Soviet-American nuclear balance as a bedrock of Cold War international stability is misplaced. The world of MAD was hardly more 'safe' than the world of 2014. Depending on one's vantage point it may well, in fact, have been the opposite.

### The Myth of Cold War Bipartisanship

While the messy circumstances of the post-war international order caused some analysts to yearn for the 'certainties' of the Cold War international system, there has also been a collective gasp of exasperation about the internal divisions that, in the twenty-first century, plague American politics. Today, the warning that George Washington articulated in his Farewell Address in 1796 about 'the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party' seems to ring abundantly true. Twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall new terms like 'hyper-partisanship' appear regularly on editorial pages. Surveys show that Democrats and Republicans are drifting further and further apart regarding issues related to values and beliefs. Government shutdowns – in 1996 and 2013 – seem to prove that 'Over the past 25 years, the split on basic values between Republicans and Democrats has skyrocketed'.<sup>12</sup> 'Our facts and their lies'<sup>13</sup> has become the shorthand for describing how the partisans, on both sides of the spectrum, think.

The increased polarisation of American politics appears beyond dispute. America has, particularly in the twenty-first century, been divided into 'red states' (Republican) and 'blue states' (Democrat), a metaphor coined by journalist Tim Russert during the 2000 election. There is red language and blue language, the former being heard and seen these days on Fox News, the latter, if less consistently, on MSNBC. 'Conservative' and 'liberal' have become code words for right vs. left; all of which is somewhat confusing to European observers who often associate liberalism with a free trade ideology and 'red' as a colour of the radical left.

Similarly, the polarisation of American politics has apparently made it impossible to create 'anything like a domestic consensus on even the broadest outlines of foreign policy'.<sup>14</sup> With the Tea Party to the right and the liberal interventionists to the left, the Obama administration has been placed in a seemingly impossible situation. Any

<sup>11</sup> The basic point in, for example: John G. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> John Avlon, "Hyper-partisanship dragging down the nation", CNN, 7 June 2012. <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/06/07/opinion/avlon-partisan-pew/> (accessed 25 April 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Alex Berezow, "In Hyper-Partisan America It's 'My Facts vs. Your Lies,'" *Forbes*, 7 October 2013. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/alexberozow/2013/10/07/in-hyper-partisan-america-its-my-facts-vs-your-lies/> (accessed 23 April 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Walter Russell Mead, "The Tea Party and American Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs* 90: 2 (March/April 2011), 28–44.

foreign policy action – or inaction – will endure the domestic wrath of increasingly vocal partisan actors. At times the denunciations go to somewhat absurd lengths as when the former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin pontificated on the differences between the American president and his Russian counterpart during the March 2014 crisis over Crimea: ‘People are looking at Putin as one who wrestles bears and drills for oil. They look at our president as one who wears mom jeans and equivocates’. Who the ‘people’ and ‘they’ were in Palin’s description was somewhat unclear but her insightful comments naturally appealed to the anti-Obama part of the American public.<sup>15</sup>

The post-Cold War polarisation of American politics has produced a counterpart: anti-polarisation. That is, many senior politicians and former policymakers on both sides of the partisan divide have formed groups and organisations dedicated to restoring a modicum of partisan cooperation to foreign policy making. One of these is Partnership for a Secure America (PSA), founded in 2005 by former Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton and former Republican Senator Warren Rudman. The PSA’s continuing mission is to ‘slow and ultimately reverse the decline of bipartisan cooperation on national security and foreign policy’.<sup>16</sup> The PSA’s domestic policy counterpart is the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC), founded in 2007 by Howard Baker (R-TN), Tom Daschle (D-SD), Bob Dole (R-KS) and George Mitchell (D-ME). The BPC identifies its mission as overcoming ‘political divides and help make our government work better’.<sup>17</sup>

It is difficult to argue against the quest to find bipartisan solutions to difficult issues in US foreign and domestic policy. At the same time, the PSA and BPC’s missions reflect today’s conventional wisdom: since the end of the Cold War America has become plagued by a level of partisan division not seen since the Civil War (or at least the Great Depression). Characteristically, both PSA and BPC are dominated by wise men (and some women) whose golden years in politics and government service stretched from the 1970s to the early 2000s. They have, it seems, witnessed the increasing partisan polarisation first-hand. Consequently, they wish to go back to a time when the blue state–red state division of the United States was not producing gridlock but politicians of different persuasion were able to compromise. As the late Ernest R. May – a senior adviser to the BPC – put it in 2007, the Cold War has, in a sense, become a domestic American affair: communication across party lines in the early twenty-first century ‘resembled that between Washington and Moscow during the Cold War’. Hence, it was time for ‘a small bipartisan group of wise men and women’ to find a solution to the ‘paralyzing effects of partisanship’.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Thompson, “Palin: People Think of Obama Wearing ‘Mom Jeans’, Putin Wrestling Bears,” *Talking Points Memos (TPM)*, 4 March 2014. [http://talkingpointsmemo.com/livewire/palin\\_people\\_think\\_of\\_obama\\_as\\_weak\\_wearing\\_mom\\_jeans](http://talkingpointsmemo.com/livewire/palin_people_think_of_obama_as_weak_wearing_mom_jeans) (accessed 25 April 2014)

<sup>16</sup> From the Partnership for Secure America website: <http://www.psaonline.org/article.php?id=27> (accessed 23 April 2014)

<sup>17</sup> See the Bipartisan Policy Council website: <http://bipartisanpolicy.org/about> (accessed 22 April 2014)

<sup>18</sup> Ernest R. May, “Bipartisanship and Capital ‘P’ Foreign Policy”, 6 March 2007. <http://bipartisanpolicy.org/news/articles/2007/03/bipartisanship-and-capital-p-foreign-policy-ernest-r-may>



But is the conventional wisdom correct? Has America gone from the golden age of Cold War bipartisan consensus on foreign policy to a post-Cold War era of hyper-partisanship?

The short answer is: not really. Washington, DC, *is* a partisan environment in 2014. Yet, it is not necessarily more partisan than in decades past. Nostalgia for the good old times is ultimately based on little empirical evidence. In fact, American domestic politics have a long history of dysfunction and excess that shows the lack of any true long-term domestic consensus over foreign policy. Nor has there ever been a shortage of sages that have derided the loss of a consensus in some bygone era. A few examples can illustrate the point.

First, if we look back at the early Cold War years, it would seem difficult to argue that domestic politics had a negative impact on finding a broad consensus over the perceived need to adopt the policy of containment. Otherwise, how could we explain the seeming miracle of the Marshall Plan's passage through a Republican Congress or the abandonment of America's long-standing policy of peacetime non-alignment? Americans were, apparently, united in their belief that a mortal foe in the form of the Soviet Union and socialism needed to be curtailed lest the long fight against totalitarianism was to be lost in the aftermath of the Second World War. Any notion of partisanship was, apparently, swiftly put aside when North Korea crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in June 1950.

But is this abundant proof that in 1947 Senator Arthur Vandenberg had convinced all Americans that politics should stop at the 'water's edge'? It might be, except that Americans were hardly united across partisan lines and appeared abundantly eager to use foreign policy as a tool of domestic politics in that era of Cold War consensus-building. Many aspiring and successful politicians used anti-communism as an effective way of discrediting (and destroying) their rivals. Joe McCarthy is, of course, the best known of this lot. But the list is endless and includes several future presidents: Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy among them. While most interpret this as a successful effort to manufacture a durable anti-communist consensus in the United States, I would venture to draw a slightly different conclusion. The attractiveness of anti-communism for a new generation of American politicians also indicates that even in an age when domestic consensus was apparently sorely needed in order to wage the twilight struggle against Soviet Communism, foreign policy was a malleable tool for domestic politicking. Politics did not stop at the water's edge even during the early Cold War.

Secondly, even if a degree of bipartisan consensus over the need to contain communism existed in the 1940s and 1950s, it is impossible to escape the reality that the lifespan of such a consensus was rather short. In the 1960s and 1970s Vietnam – a product of *bipartisan* policy mistakes if there ever was one – raised serious doubts about basic assumptions behind US Cold War foreign policy. More importantly, there was no bipartisan response. Instead, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a prolonged period of confusion. While some preferred the realpolitik approach of the Nixon administration, others found it wanting in its lack of moral or ideological backbone. Emphasis on human rights in the Carter years fell flat as a uniting theme, while the Reagan

administration's return to some of the early Cold War rhetoric caused alarm as well admiration among the American public. Reagan's second-term reversal and apparent embrace of détente with the Soviet Union nicely capped off the great era of confusion. This is not to even mention some of the many other issues that divided Americans internally, from issues related to Civil Rights to debates over social programs.

Thus the Cold War consensus that many in the United States now look back upon nostalgically is to large extent a myth.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, not only is partisanship as American as apple pie but the idea that Americans could move beyond partisan bickering is equally a part of the American political creed. In 1796, George Washington called Americans to reject partisanship in favour of some higher purpose. Some two centuries later Barack Obama would call for Americans to reject the idea that there was a red and blue America: 'not a liberal America and a conservative America – there's the United States of America'. That was in 2004. In January 2009, Obama would attack partisanship in his inaugural address by scolding his former colleagues: 'the time has come set aside childish things'.<sup>20</sup> In between, most American presidents have called for bipartisanship – so that they could enact their specific (partisan) legislation or programmes. Almost without fault, their success has depended upon political skill and electoral results. There is little evidence that the Cold War era was substantially different in this basic sense.<sup>21</sup>

Partisanship is a well-documented fact of post-Cold War American political life.<sup>22</sup> But to bemoan this state of affairs as something 'new' means making highly selective judgments about the past. It means inventing something that never truly existed: a golden age of wise men (and, yes, some women) who could put aside those 'childish things' that we now are apparently so consumed with. Much like the myth of Cold War stability, the notion of a bi-partisan consensus mistakenly reinforces a nostalgia for the good old days that is historically questionable because it cannot be empirically verified.

### The End of American Exceptionalism?

The longing for an era of systemic stability and an age of bipartisan consensus over foreign policy are two types of American Cold War nostalgia. They represent a yearning for an era when the world was a simpler, better place and a time when men and women

<sup>19</sup> For an interesting statistical analysis see Eugene R. Wittkopf and James M. McCormick, "The Cold War Consensus: Did it Exist?" *Polity* 22:4 (Summer 1990), 627–653.

<sup>20</sup> Barack Obama, "Inaugural Address", 21 January 2009. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address> (accessed 23 April 2014),

<sup>21</sup> See: Sean Wilentz, "The Mirage", *New Republic*, 17 November 2011. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books/magazine/96706/post-partisan-obama-progressives-washington> (accessed 21 April 2014).

<sup>22</sup> This is a classic understatement. Some recent works on partisanship include: Peter Hays Gries, *The Politics of American Foreign Policy: How Ideology Divides Liberals and Conservatives Over Foreign Affairs* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With The New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); and Peter Turbowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).



could broadly agree on certain basic, important issues. Neither of these special longings is based upon much hard evidence. But there is a third point that rings true and in part explains the nostalgia for the Cold War. America – the champion of the West and the leader of the free world – has apparently lost its status as a unique global brand.<sup>23</sup>

A fictional example may illustrate this. In a 1990 novel by John Updike, *Rabbit Angstrom*, the main protagonist whines: ‘Without the Cold War what’s the point of being American?’<sup>24</sup> Rabbit put the fictional finger on the button (excuses for the poor pun). As the Cold War gradually became ‘real’ history, America’s unique role as the global guardian of certain important values and freedoms – however self-appointed and contested that role may have been – became progressively less significant. In other words: in 2014 ‘being American’, just does not mean what it used to mean; it does not set one apart from other countries and other peoples in a way that it did in the past.

The Cold War was, after all, what made America appear truly exceptional. Or, to be more precise: the battle over the hearts minds of the world – the struggle ‘for the soul of mankind’<sup>25</sup> – that was part of the Cold War made the United States appear a very special nation. America had, of course, been viewed as the land of opportunity long before 1945. But in the context of the Cold War this image became a different kind of global brand that was backed up by America’s unique strengths – the ability to shape international institutions, economic clout and influence, military preponderance – and made the United States the first among nations. This power was complemented by the dominant and much popularised narrative of American history. From colonies to superpower, periphery to vital centre the United States was the democratic juggernaut that had – a few bumps on the road expected – been transformed from ‘just’ the favourite destination of immigrants in search of opportunity to a nation exporting its way of life to as many parts of the globe as possible. The spread of American studies, American movies, American fast food, American everything was probably the most pervasive cultural phenomenon of the Cold War era. While US foreign policy was not uniformly or uncritically loved around the globe, ‘America’ remained an inspiration to countless people throughout the developing and developed world. Even anti-Americanism was often inspired by the American example; much of the global counter-culture phenomena of the 1960s and 1970s actually originated in the United States. As Richard Pells puts it: ‘By the end of the twentieth century, it seemed as if the world had indeed become “Americanized”’.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Professional historians have done their bit to undermine the notion of American exceptionalism. See: Ian Tyrrell, *The Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006); Eric Foner and Lis McGirr (eds.), *American History Now* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> John Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 147.

<sup>25</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans have lived, hated, and transformed American culture since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 278.

The Cold War *was* the American (half) century. The United States not only wielded its military and economic power but its soft power (however imprecise that concept is) was enormous. Americanisation was a phenomenon that inspired plenty of criticism among those who felt ‘colonised’ by Hollywood and Coca-Cola, who feared the loss of distinctive national cultural traits as American mass culture flooded movie theatres, television screens and shops. But there was ultimately no stopping the spread of American culture and products as consumers expressed their preferences on a global scale.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the success of American consumerism the Cold War proved a fertile ground for the spread of certain cherished American ideals, democracy and free markets foremost among them. No matter that free elections and capitalism were not American inventions; the United States as a nation came to symbolise the ideas and practices that were associated with these central features of ‘liberal internationalism’. Indeed, one could make at least a strong circumstantial case to argue that the American brand (or the ‘free world’ brand) was in large part responsible for the ultimate outcome of the Cold War. The dissident movements inside the Soviet bloc were at least partly inspired by American ideas, partly by the failures of central planning to deliver living standards anywhere close to those enjoyed by the majority of people in the West. There was more than a small grain of truth in George H.W. Bush’s assertion, in his 1989 inaugural address: ‘We know how to secure a more just and prosperous life for man on earth: through free markets, free speech, free elections, and the exercise of free will unhampered by the state.’<sup>28</sup> Of course, such gloating oversimplifies matters a great deal. No such thing as a completely free market ever existed in the United States or elsewhere in the so-called free world.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, it bears stressing that not only did the Cold War elevate the United States into an unprecedentedly powerful position but the way in which the Cold War ended seemingly proved the superiority of the values and institutions that the United States had championed on a global scale.

While the Cold War made America special and exceptional, the victory (if that is what it was) in that war proved anti-climactic. To be sure, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War ushered America’s principal post-war rival off the

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<sup>27</sup> This is hardly the place to provide a long list of titles on these subjects; for general overviews see essays in the following: Andrew Bacevich, *The Short American Century: A Postmortem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Alexander Stephan (ed.), *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy and Anti-Americanism after 1945* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005); and Ulrich Beck, Natan Sznaider and Raiuner Winter (eds.), *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Inaugural Address”, 20 January 1989, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16610> (accessed 25 April 2014).

<sup>29</sup> On this see Melvyn P. Leffler, “Victory: The ‘State,’ the ‘West,’ and the Cold War,” in Geir Lundestad (ed.), *International Relations Since the End of the Cold War: New & Old Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 80–99.

world stage and brought concepts like ‘unipolarity’ into common usage. However, in the early twenty-first century anti-Americanism reached new heights as Washington embarked upon questionable foreign policy initiatives in Afghanistan and Iraq; the economic shocks of 2007–2008 made the United States appear to be teetering at the brink of another Great Depression; and the rise of China and other apparent challengers in the global economy prompted the appearance of a voluminous corpus of (often poorly documented) literature on American decline.<sup>30</sup>

My point is not that America has somehow failed to push the values and ideas of liberal internationalism. If anything, it is the contrary. The spread of elective democracy as a popular method of governance and the globalisation of capitalism as the widely accepted economic model (with vast national variation as to the role of the state) in the past quarter-of-a-century speak for themselves. But it has also made it increasingly difficult – perhaps well nigh impossible – to argue that ‘America’ stands for something unique, something to be emulated. What was once relatively exceptional has become commonplace. Or, as another fictional character reminds us in the first episode of the American cable TV company HBO’s hit series *Newsroom*: ‘BELGIUM has freedom!’<sup>31</sup>

Nostalgia is understandable as part of human nature or as a means to an end in the arena of elective politics. It is also, often, misplaced. American Cold War nostalgia is no exception. Yearning for a return of the certainties of a nuclear stalemate that made international relations more predictable sets aside the very real dangers and killing fields that the world of MAD was plagued with. Fantasising about an era when Democrats and Republicans could agree upon what was in the national interest overlooks the persistence of partisanship throughout the nation’s history. In fact, the only part of American Cold War nostalgia that makes any sense is the simple fact that the United States – while maintaining its preeminent position in terms of military and economic power – has lost its role as a model nation. America simply is less ‘special’ today than it was 25 or 50 years ago. But this should not necessarily be a cause for nostalgia but a recognition that the expansion of elective democracy and a rules based international trade system has made the United States a country that no longer stands out – either as one to be emulated or one to be demonised – in the same way it did during the Cold War.

Instead of reminiscing about – or fantasising for the possible return of – the good old Cold War, it would be better to recognise its unique features and anomalies that, while leaving positive and negative legacies for American foreign policy, are unlikely to repeat themselves.

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<sup>30</sup> For an entertaining antidote to “declinism” see Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America’s Decline: Politics, Economics and A Half Century of False Prophecies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> *The Newsroom*, episode 1, HBO, 24 June 2012.

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