

The Atlantic crisis of confidence

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The succession of blows to American prestige and transatlantic confidence that have issued from the decision to invade Iraq is arguably unprecedented in post-Second World War history. There were other serious traumas—Suez, Vietnam and Bosnia, to name just three—but in none of these earlier crises was there such a precipitous deterioration as in 2002–2004. In early 2002, the United States still enjoyed the overwhelming solidarity of its treaty allies and other international partners as it recovered from the September 11 attacks and concluded military action in Afghanistan. Two years later, even British public opinion having turned against it, the United States was largely isolated.

The sense that US foreign policy was spinning out of control reached a peak with the publication in late April and May 2004 of reports and graphic pictures of Iraqi prisoners being brutalized and sexually humiliated by their American guards. This seismic catastrophe was a grim reminder that, however bad things look, they can always get worse. After all, only weeks had passed since the 11 March train bombings by Islamist terrorists in Madrid, followed by the ejection of a pro-American government by an angry Spanish electorate who replaced it with one that promised to withdraw the Spanish contingent from Iraq. The election results inspired vitriolic charges of appeasement from Republican leaders and the conservative commentariat in Washington. At the end of March, the Iraqi city of Fallujah, in the heart of the ‘Sunni triangle’, was the scene of shooting, burning and the Mogadishu-style mutilation of four American civilian security contractors by a mob of men and boys. The commanders of US troops deployed close by decided that prudence required their non-intervention in a grisly—and televised—ritual that included beating burnt corpses and stringing what remained of them from a nearby bridge. It got worse. In surrounding Fallujah as a prelude to capturing or killing the Americans’ murderers, US troops found themselves confronting a Sunni insurrection. Another insurrection gathered force in the Shi’i south; its leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, may have had only limited support among the population generally, but—as several commentators pointed out—so did Lenin.¹ There were kidnappings of foreign aid workers and contractors,

¹ Harold Meyerson, ‘In Iraq, without options’, *Washington Post*, 7 April 2004.

suicide bombings and shootings across Iraq. Sadr established himself in the holy city of Najaf. So more US troops stood outside another Iraqi city, facing the choice between acknowledging their loss of control and unleashing urban warfare among cherished shrines with inevitable killings of civilians. Then came the pictures.

What makes these events so frightening is that the alliance and broader international context is one in which the United States can no longer expect to enjoy the benefit of the doubt. Until April 2004, even harsh critics of the US refusal to observe legal due process for terrorist suspects at the Guantanamo base in Cuba stopped short of alleging outright torture. Now they could no longer be so sure.² And in a global ideological struggle against terrorist jihad—one which would in all likelihood require new tactics and bend, if not break, old rules—this benefit of the doubt was a disastrous thing to lose.³

This is why balanced assessments of blame for the transatlantic crisis are somewhat beside the point. As will be argued below, there was blame to go around, extending to Paris and Berlin as well as Washington. However, the leadership in Washington should have made it its business to preserve this benefit of the doubt in the service of American global freedom of action. It was probably not worth squandering for a war of uncertain benefit against what was, at worst, a long-term threat.⁴ And by the same token, it is not particularly relevant to determine whether the current fierce transatlantic estrangement is structural or political—that is, whether it is the inevitable consequence of the end of the Cold War and the shock of September 11, or the tragic and avoidable consequence of bad statecraft. The short answer is that there are elements of both, but that bad statecraft—particularly from the Bush administration—has been decisive in turning a serious problem into an unmitigated disaster.

The underlying problem, to be sure, derives from the historically unusual structure of international power relations. America, because of its overwhelming military power, and because of its relatively benign record in using that power, was established from the end of the Cold War as, in effect, the global security provider of last resort—the ultimate enforcer of such international rules and order as could be said to exist.⁵ It followed that US power would be in tension with those rules, at the very least, and at times might have

² 'The violation of the Geneva Conventions and that refusal to let the courts consider the issue have cost the United States dearly in the world legal community—the judges and lawyers in societies that, historically, have looked to the United States as the exemplar of a country committed to law. Lord Steyn, a judge on Britain's highest court, condemned the administration's position on Guantánamo in an address last fall—pointing out that American courts would refuse even to hear claims of torture from prisoners. At the time, the idea of torture at Guantánamo seemed far-fetched to me. After the disclosures of the last 10 days, can we be sure?' Anthony Lewis, 'A president beyond the law', *New York Times*, 7 May 2004.

³ Tony Karon, 'How the prison scandal sabotages the US in Iraq', *Time*, 4 May 2004, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,632967,00.html>.

⁴ This assessment of the threat being long rather than short term does not rely on the benefit of hindsight. I made the same assessment on the eve of the war. See Dana H. Allin and Steven Simon, 'Powell makes the case for a strike on Saddam', *Financial Times*, 6 Feb. 2003.

⁵ François Heisbourg, 'American hegemony? Perceptions of the US abroad', *Survival* 41: 4, Winter 1999–2000, pp. 15, 16.

to stand outside them altogether.⁶ Some tacit acceptance of such American exceptionalism was indicated by European support for NATO's Kosovo war, a war that did not appear, strictly speaking, to have been legal.⁷ And the argument that America must, in some ways, remain the exceptional power was reinforced by the new threat of strategic-level, mass-casualty terrorism.

The argument is nonetheless debatable; it is hard under the best of circumstances to convince public opinion across the globe that the United States should enjoy exemption from rules that other states are expected to obey. For this sort of special dispensation to have any international acceptance whatsoever there has to be a high level of international confidence that American power will be exercised prudently, wisely and benevolently. Such confidence is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, ingredient of international legitimacy, and is precisely what the Bush administration has squandered. The bottom has fallen out of global confidence in America's leadership.

America is now hated by most Arabs, and distrusted by its treaty allies and by much of the rest of the world.⁸ These are not identical problems, but neither are they entirely separate. It would be ridiculous to suggest that signing the Kyoto Protocol and treating the United Nations with more respect would do anything to staunch the flow of recruits to Al-Qaeda. Yet the disaffection of America's friends and the hostility of the many Muslim Arabs who identify the United States as their enemy have both nourished and been nourished by what Zbigniew Brzezinski has called the 'paranoiac' view of the world, encapsulated in President Bush's oft-repeated phrase 'with us ... or with the terrorists'.⁹ While it is understandable that, in the continuing shock of September 11, all else would be subordinated to the war on terrorism, this subordination is neither comprehensible to the rest of the world nor in America's own interest. It means, in effect, the end of US foreign policy—that is, the end of a broadly conceived pursuit of American interests and values extending beyond the problem of terrorism. And the end of foreign policy has a vicious feedback effect, preventing the United States from engaging in and shaping the kind of world that is conducive to winning the war on terrorism.

Strategically, the invasion of Iraq looks like a blunder. Morally, however, it is important to stipulate that the war was a good deed. One of the twentieth century's most bestial dictatorships has been destroyed, and even in the shock and shame of Abu Ghraib, critics of the war should take care to acknowledge that blessing.¹⁰ In any event, strategic self-interest and moral imperative are

⁶ This point is central to the celebrated thesis of Robert Kagan in *Paradise and power: America and Europe in the new world order* (London: Atlantic, 2003).

⁷ Dana H. Allin, *NATO's Balkan interventions*, Adelphi Paper no. 347 (Oxford: Oxford University Press/International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2002), pp. 57–61.

⁸ 'A year after Iraq war: mistrust of America in Europe ever higher, Muslim anger persists', The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 16 March 2004, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=206>.

⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, speech delivered in Washington DC on 28 Oct. 2003, <http://www.prospect.org/webfeatures/2003/10/brzezinski-z-10-31.html>.

¹⁰ I would not pretend that I opposed the war, as a matter of principle, all along. I agreed that the problem

now roughly the same: security and prosperity for the Iraqi people and visible success for the United States look like the only ways to ameliorate the backlash in the Arab world. This does not mean, however, that America's allies and the rest of the world can now be expected simply to adopt the Bush administration's particular concept of the war against terrorism. The administration was deluded—at best—when it identified Iraq as a central front in that war. The bitter irony, of course, is that as a result of America's invasion, Iraq has indeed become a magnet for terrorists and a front in the war against them. The US must now fight terrorism in Iraq, as elsewhere.

The United States has lost the confidence of its partners and is well on the way to losing confidence in itself. This consequence of the Bush administration's 'strange combination of arrogance and incompetence', as Fareed Zakaria puts it,¹¹ is far more damaging and vital than abstract arguments about force and legitimacy, or contending visions of international order. Likewise, confidence will not be restored by continued ideological argument. Rather, as this article will argue, the transatlantic alliance needs to concentrate pragmatically on the key issues of international security: fighting terrorism; controlling weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation; and strategically selective state-building. If this focused cooperation can survive what are likely to be further setbacks in Iraq, then there is hope that the deepening transatlantic alienation can be reversed.

Confusing the issue

The President and his neo-conservative advisers are right to remind us that Islamic terrorists and rogue dictatorships are both evil. But that does not make them the same enemy, and it does not mean that the United States, even with allies, has the strategic resources to fight all of them at once. Richard Clarke, the former director of counterterrorism operations under both the Bush and Clinton administrations, was hardly the first to argue that the conflation of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden pulled America into the wrong country for the wrong war at the wrong time. This has damaged US interests; indeed, Iraq was probably the war that bin Laden wanted the United States to fight.¹² The propaganda of global jihad could hardly be better served than by American military occupation of a country in the heart of the Arab Middle East. The conflation

and the evil of Saddam needed to be addressed; that long-term containment of that problem was an increasing liability; and that the moral and legal case for war looked strong. I was not convinced, however, that the choice for war at that moment in the spring of 2003, with only one major ally, and given the demands of the struggle against Al-Qaeda, was strategically wise. And I was hardly alone in being unnerved by the reckless disregard of the Bush administration for a cost-benefit equation that appeared—in common-sense terms—precarijously likely to swing deep into negative territory if things were not managed wisely. And they were not managed wisely.

¹¹ Fareed Zakaria, 'The price of arrogance', *Newsweek*, 17 May 2004.

¹² See transcript of Clarke's interview by Tim Russert on NBC News, 'Meet the press', 28 March 2004, <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/4608698/>. See also Richard Clarke, *Against all enemies: inside America's war on terror* (New York: Random House, 2004).

has been damaging to the Atlantic alliance because the Bush administration's rationale for war was confusing at best and, at worst, simply incoherent.

The conflation is also damaging because it has had the effect of obscuring a real threat that the Bush administration has correctly identified: the likelihood of terrorists acquiring and using WMD. In the new strategic context since September 11, the Bush administration (and Blair government) made a compelling argument that proliferation of WMD to outlaw regimes such as Saddam's was no longer tolerable. This was not because of any particular evidence of a substantial link between Iraq's regime and Al-Qaeda; rather, it was because of the clearly documented determination of Al-Qaeda to acquire WMD, and the prospective logic of its eventually approaching other sworn enemies of America and the West for this purpose.

The French and German governments, and other critics of the Bush administration, have largely failed to offer convincing answers to the challenge posed by terrorism and WMD. This potential nexus underscores the inadequacy of the traditional definition of pre-emptive self-defence, as Walter Slocombe has argued:

The right of anticipatory self-defence by definition presupposes a right to act while action is still possible. If waiting for 'imminence' means waiting until it is no longer possible to act effectively, the victim is left no alternative to suffering the first blow. So interpreted, the 'right' would be illusory. The administration is accurate when it points out that once a rogue state has achieved a serious WMD capability, effective action to eliminate the capability may well have become impossible. The problem is not so much that WMD can be used with little warning—attacks with conventional weapons have all too often achieved tactical surprise—but that surprise use could be decisive and that the capability can be so successfully concealed that pre-emption is operationally impossible even if warning were available.¹³

Nor have those critics who say it was unlawful and wrong for the US and UK to attack Iraq without explicit UN authority fully explained how the UN might be effective in such cases without at least a degree of US leadership verging on unilateralism. Resolution 1441 was passed unanimously because the other members of the Security Council were substantially convinced that the US would go to war alone if they didn't pass it. Furthermore, the very limited and grudging cooperation that began to come from Saddam in the months before the war happened only because the US and Britain were massing 250,000 troops on his borders. President Chirac conceded as much, but he offered no persuasive suggestion as to how continued compliance could be enforced if the threat of war started to recede.

One could even take the view that the truth about Iraq did not matter—if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, then the international community has no choice but to treat it like a duck. For more than a decade the regime of

¹³ Walter B. Slocombe, 'Force, pre-emption and legitimacy', *Survival* 45: 1, Spring 2003, p. 125.

Saddam Hussein had flawlessly played the part of a serial and recalcitrant violator of UN demands that it dismantle its WMD programmes. If all that turns out to have been, at least in the final years, just a bizarre bit of totalitarian play-acting—well, at least the example will have been set for other rogue regimes about the costs of failing to fulfil Chapter 7 demands on WMD fully, transparently and to the letter.

In all of these respects, the French and German opposition to US policy in the run-up to the Iraq war was not entirely blameless. Moreover, defenders of the Bush administration point out that the intelligence failure regarding Iraqi WMD was not theirs alone. The assessment was general: it included the United Nations Special Commission in Iraq (UNSCOM), the Clinton administration, independent experts, and the intelligence communities of nations that supported the war as well as those that opposed it. The assessment was based on the fact that the Iraqis had ambitious chemical, biological and nuclear programmes before the first Gulf War, that they had clearly made an effort to continue them after the war, and that they had systematically lied about what was going on through the whole UNSCOM period. The assessment also relied to a greater or lesser extent on the reasonable proposition that a regime that was lying so systematically must have something to lie about.

All of this is true enough; and yet, as argued at the outset, the real-world requirements of confidence in American leadership render such excuses largely inadequate, if not irrelevant. The Bush administration painted the threat in the direst terms to justify a war about which many friends of America had good reason to be wary. Even accepting what was then the consensus view on Iraqi weapons programmes, it was reasonable to argue, as Robin Cook did in his resignation speech to the House of Commons, that ‘Iraq probably has no weapons of mass destruction in the commonly understood sense of the term—namely a credible device capable of being delivered against a strategic city target.’¹⁴ Whatever the good reasons for deposing Saddam—and they were many—the credibility of the administration’s case about the specific threat posed by Iraq’s weapons programmes will affect the reception accorded to future American arguments for pre-emptive action.¹⁵

The way forward

Even if George W. Bush were to be voted out of office in November 2004, there is little scope for restoring transatlantic consensus on the legitimacy of America’s use of military force. But there is some reason to hope for a pragmatic transatlantic arrangement to cooperate where possible, to rebuild consensus where feasible, and at least to try to do no more harm.

¹⁴ Robin Cook resignation speech, 18 March 2003.

¹⁵ For a sweeping critique of the intelligence ‘groupthink’ about Iraqi WMD, the war itself and its consequences, see Lawrence Freedman, ‘War in Iraq: selling the threat’, *Survival* 46: 2, Summer 2004.

There are three areas of international security that need to be at the centre of any restored transatlantic consensus—if that consensus is going to have much to do with the real challenges of the real world. The first is clarity and a common vocabulary in the struggle against terrorism. Second is effective cooperation against WMD proliferation. Third is common and realistic action to deal with the problem of failed states, including failed governance in the Middle East.¹⁶

Counterterrorism

Despite initial anxiety, critical transatlantic cooperation on counterterrorism does not appear to have suffered from the Iraq fallout. This cooperation could unravel, however, if Americans and Europeans continue to lose the sense of having a common definition of a common enemy.¹⁷

For Americans, part of the shock, horror and anguish of the collapsing Twin Towers was a shock of recognition about the nature of the world and of America's place in it. Foreigners, including those European allies who wished America well and shared its anguish, could be bemused by this shock. Who were these Americans who—so long after Pearl Harbor, Vietnam and assorted calamities of the twentieth century—could still proclaim an innocence to be lost? Many Europeans also pointed out that they had learned, over decades, how to live with terrorism. Yet the American intuition was essentially correct: this was a new, strategic level of terrorism. Its genocidal strain, if not entirely new, was something newly revealed. Osama bin Laden had been stating his intentions clearly enough, and had succeeded already in murdering hundreds, but now his words became deeds on an epic scale.¹⁸

Given the magnitude and implacable hostility of this jihadist threat, some neo-conservative strategists and writers have taken up the notion that the United States is engaged in a Third or Fourth World War, a global ideological and

¹⁶ There are places, such as Pakistan, where the issues of proliferation and failed states intersect directly, but the main point is that they are central and indispensable elements of any western grand strategy for managing new security threats—notably, mass-casualty terrorism.

¹⁷ In April 2003 a deputy assistant secretary of state, Robert Bradtke, warned that vital American–French cooperation on law enforcement and intelligence-sharing could suffer because of France's opposition to the war. Whether Bradtke was issuing a threat or simply mentioning the likely consequences of the Franco–American feud, his comments highlighted the potential for mutually damaging spillover. See Dana H. Allin and Jonathan Stevenson, 'Punishing France: US shoots itself in the foot', *International Herald Tribune*, 2 May 2003.

¹⁸ For perhaps the earliest published assessment of the strategic reach of Al-Qaeda and jihadist terrorism, see Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin, 'America and the new terrorism', *Survival* 42, Summer 2000. The article summary states that, some 18 months before the September 11 attacks, the authors, who had worked in the section of President Clinton's National Security Council concerned with terrorism, reported that the 1990s had seen 'the emergence of a new, religiously motivated terrorism that neither relies on the support of sovereign states nor is constrained by limits on violence. Its harbingers include the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York; the 1995 sarin-gas attack in the Tokyo subway; the 1996 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building; and the 1998 East Africa bombings. In their effort to inflict damage on a grand scale, some practitioners of the new terrorism seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Although no single individual bears responsibility, the face of the new terrorism belongs to Osama bin Laden, the exiled Saudi who has marshalled a network of operatives in more than 50 countries.'

military struggle like the Second World War and the Cold War.¹⁹ In fact, this argument is not confined to the political right. The liberal British strategic thinker Lawrence Freedman noted soon after September 11 that Al-Qaeda had 'presented itself as a global focal point for a political movement seeking to influence and feed upon many regional conflicts involving Muslim people'; moreover, both the terrorists and the United States 'described the conflict in terms that suggested that the future of the international system was at stake; the responses of their respective allies and supporters confirmed this. On this basis, the campaign could properly be described as a world war.'²⁰

More recently, the political philosopher Paul Berman, another liberal, defended the Iraq war precisely on the basis that it was a necessary blow against a regime representing

a certain kind of political movement—movements animated by paranoid hatreds, by apocalyptic fantasies, and by the fanatical desire to kill people en masse. These have been the big totalitarian movements, Nazism, Fascism, Stalinism, and a few others—movements whose greatest goal was to destroy liberal civilization ... The totalitarian visions live on. Only, instead of being called fascism or some other name from the past, the visions of the present are called radical Islamism and Baathism and suchlike, with doctrines duly descended from their European progenitors ... September 11 showed that totalitarianism in its modern Muslim version was not going to stop at slaughtering millions of Muslims, and hundreds of Israelis, and attacking the Indian government, and blowing up American embassies. The totalitarian manias were rising, and the United States itself was now in danger ... The only proper response was to comprehend the size and depth of that larger [totalitarian] wave, and find ways to begin rolling it back, militarily and otherwise—mostly otherwise ... Iraq, with its somewhat antique variation of the Muslim totalitarian idea, was merely a place to begin, after Afghanistan, with its more modern variation.²¹

Berman is right to identify common totalitarian motifs, including anti-Semitic, anti-'cosmopolitan' paranoia (it is not by chance that New York, world capital of decadence, is routinely targeted) and the death-embracing cult of suicide terror. Fanatically religious Islamists and fascistically secular Baathists do have some things in common, just as Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia had much in common. But the mere mention of these past totalitarianisms reveals the strategic problem with an all-fronts fight against Berman's 'totalitarian wave'. Even at the height of the anti-fascist struggle in 1939–45, the western (mainly English-speaking) democracies did not make war on the totalitarian powers; indeed, they were fighting *in alliance with* one of those powers. Among other things, this was a matter of strategic focus.

¹⁹ Former CIA director James Woolsey is one of the most energetic proponents of this view. See 'Ex-CIA director: US faces "World War IV"', CNN.com, 3 April 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/04/03/sprj.irq.woolsey.world.war/>. See also David Frum and Richard Perle, *An end to evil: how to win the war on terror* (New York: Random House, 2003).

²⁰ Lawrence Freedman, 'The Third World War?', *Survival* 43: 4, Winter 2001, pp. 78, 61.

²¹ Jacob Weisberg, Paul Berman, Thomas Friedman, Christopher Hitchens, Fred Kaplan, George Packer, Kenneth M. Pollack and Fareed Zakaria, 'Liberal hawks reconsider the Iraq war', *Slate*, 12–16 Jan. 2004, <http://slate.msn.com/id/2093620/entry/2093641/>.

Neo-conservatives tend to focus on the subsequent Cold War against that Soviet power and ideology. They believe that the power of their own ideas, and the fortitude of their iconic president, Ronald Reagan, were what won that 'Third World War'. They believe that through the administration of George W. Bush, the same ideas and the same fortitude will win this Fourth World War.

There is a problem here. The exalted pursuit of grand ideas should not come at the expense of adequate attention to empirical reality. In the case of the Cold War, the idea of a monolithic communist threat clouded strategic judgement and drew the United States into a futile and divisive war in Vietnam. The larger reality, fortunately, was a long-term competition of systems that ultimately favoured a united western alliance. Reagan's contribution to the ultimate victory was real but marginal.

In the case of terrorism in the Al-Qaeda mould, nothing is more confusing—even infuriating—to America's allies than the insistence of the Bush White House that attacking Iraq was a way of confronting the enemy that attacked New York and Washington on September 11. Now there is, to be sure, an elaborate case to be made for the Iraq war as part of a grand strategy to address the grievances behind global jihad by democratizing the Middle East. If one accepts certain difficult assumptions—such as the likelihood of turning occupied Iraq into a stable democracy—then the grand strategy has some internal consistency. It certainly has boldness. But what it lacks, again, is the capacity to inspire international and allied confidence. Such confidence will remain elusive for a US leadership that cannot even acknowledge the possibility—suggested by common sense and now demonstrated empirically—that occupying Iraq is likely to *aggravate* terrorist jihad in the short if not the long run.

Addressing WMD proliferation

For American policy-makers and analysts, WMD proliferation and mass-casualty terrorism are now two sides of the same coin, and many of them wonder whether their European counterparts 'get it'. Europeans, for their part, question what kind of non-proliferation policy the Americans expect them to follow, with the Iraq model of counterproliferation discredited, and with the US administration and governing Republican party so overtly hostile to treaty and rules-based instruments such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

There is some evidence, however, of a willingness to search around these disagreements for a degree of pragmatic transatlantic convergence. Backed by a threat to report Iranian non-compliance to the UN Security Council, the French, German and UK foreign ministers were recently able to exert Europe's considerable economic and diplomatic leverage to obtain Iranian agreement to suspend uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities, sign and implement a safeguards protocol for stronger inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and cooperate with the IAEA to correct past safeguards

violations. This distinctly European achievement (albeit one for which the proof will come in the implementation) followed the publication of a draft European security strategy which was conceived—as its authors readily acknowledge—in response to the American elevation of pre-emption in its strategic policy, and to the sense that Europe spectacularly failed to project policy coherence in the Iraq crisis. The European document suggests that a more robust European security strategy is at hand—at least on paper. And while paper products are easy to deride, it is important that the Solana document is well written, straightforward, clear and direct in dealing with the most compelling security threats of the early twenty-first century. These are all qualities that some Americans are quick to judge as alien to European strategic culture—and indeed, the final document as adopted by European Union ministers was watered down somewhat. Still, the process of drafting and debating this document shows that European strategic culture is evolving, and has been evolving since the early failures in the Balkans. Ideas matter, as do their expression and reception by EU ministers.

The original draft sets clear benchmarks against which the European Union may soon be judged. ‘Those who are unwilling to [follow the norms of the international community] should understand that there is a price to be paid, including in their relationship with the European Union.’ Likewise, the document says that ‘we need to develop a strategic culture that fosters early, rapid, and when necessary, robust intervention.’ While this is far from an endorsement of pre-emption, it leans towards the American position. If the promise of this document were fulfilled, it would constitute a serious challenge to the United States, and might actually coax the Americans back into a strategic posture emphasizing global cooperation and a sensible mix of hard and soft power.

In any event, for better or for worse, the United States is constrained in practical terms from pursuing Iraq-style interventions against two outstanding proliferation threats, Iran and North Korea.²² The primary constraint, of course, is America’s military entanglement in Iraq itself. Together with all of its unfortunate consequences, this entanglement arguably does leave room for greater transatlantic harmony—or perhaps just a relative lack of disharmony—in pursuing non-proliferation policies that lie in the grey area between treaty and war. The Proliferation Security Initiative—an agreed programme for interdicting ‘threatening shipments of WMD and missile-related equipment and technologies’, to which eleven countries, including France, Germany, the UK and the US have signed up—is one promising example. The US is also working with its main European allies to develop ideas for a new UN Security

²² An even greater threat, arguably, was Pakistan and the global nuclear supermarket that was being run under the auspices of one of its top nuclear scientists, A. Q. Kahn, who sold technology to a mind-boggling list of clients, including Iran, Libya and North Korea. The United States has decided to accept the bizarre pretence that Kahn ran this black market more or less on his own. Absurd and distasteful as it is, this pretence may serve US and even broader international interests, since Pakistan’s help is needed in the continuing fight against the Taleban and Al-Qaeda, and since there is probably no more direct way to force Pakistan into cooperating against nuclear proliferation.

Council resolution to strengthen international non-proliferation efforts, as proposed by President Bush in his September 2003 speech at the UN General Assembly. Even more radical ideas to interpret or even amend the Non-Proliferation Treaty to close loopholes exploited by North Korea and Iran are under consideration on both sides of the Atlantic.

Failed states

In principle, there is now a transatlantic understanding that dealing with state failure is a strategic imperative as well as a moral challenge. Unfortunately, a common understanding in principle does not necessarily yield a political agreement in practice on sharing the burden of reconstructing these states. Transatlantic recriminations about the debacle in Iraq—a frightening new candidate for state failure—will not make this agreement any easier to achieve.

In fact, some of the progress that was made in the 1990s towards a practical consensus on state-building through transatlantic consortium may have been lost. A decade before September 11, there were plenty of failed and failing states around the world, but very little clarity among transatlantic powers about the latter's strategic interests and moral responsibilities for rescuing them. The absence of the strategic focus that had been provided by the East–West struggle was keenly felt, and could be seen in the confusion of western responses to state breakdown and civil war in Afghanistan, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Zaire/Congo, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone and former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Some of these civil conflicts, as in Afghanistan and Angola, were continuations of Cold War proxy wars that maintained their deadly momentum long after the superpower patrons had lost interest. Others—as in Yugoslavia and some former Soviet republics—were the consequence of the collapse of the last multinational empires and federations. Since both these groups of war fit into the category of unfinished business from the twentieth century's cold and world wars, it was possible to hope that the local carnage of the 1990s was a kind of aftershock—terrible, but temporary. This interpretation fit the general optimism engendered by the peaceful conclusion of the Cold War. A theory of benign globalization suggested that these poor and conflict-ridden regions would eventually be swept up in the tide of global progress and peaceful development. If this was the long-term prospect, then it could be argued that the main responsibility of the powerful, advanced and wealthy states was to maintain the requisite global conditions—free trade, free movement of human and financial capital, secure sources of energy, the absence of global conflict—while attending in the short term to the humanitarian consequences of local conflicts.

As the 1990s dragged on, however, the multiplicity, obduracy, brutality and sheer anarchy of such conflicts pointed to a darker interpretation: that a strong state and competent governance were preconditions for peaceful progress, but that these preconditions were not natural or perhaps even attainable in many

places. The concept of a 'failed state' entered the common discourse of international relations, together with the overriding question: what, if anything, could and would be done to resurrect them?

This question became entangled with two other emerging aspects of the post-Cold War international system. Increasing recognition of the primacy of American power was combined, perhaps inevitably, with increasing concern about the steadfastness of the United States' exercise of that preponderant power. In relation to the problem of failed states, the focus on the United States became sharper as alternative solutions were, or appeared to be, discredited. With the end of the Cold War, new expectations and great demands were placed on the United Nations as an organization, and although it performed admirably in many places, some notable failures—Rwanda and Yugoslavia—underscored its material and cultural limits. Europe (both its institutions and its major powers) proved inadequate to the overriding challenge it faced in Yugoslavia's collapse. Indeed, the notion of America as the 'indispensable' power owed much to the way it was drawn into the role of leading peacemaker to pick up the pieces of Yugoslavia's collapse, first in Bosnia, then in Kosovo. Yet looking at the 1990s as a whole, the American record in dealing with the most horrific consequences of state failure was uneven at best. Its flight from Somalia propagated the new conventional wisdom that a ruthless warlord need only fill a few body-bags to dispatch the last remaining superpower. Haunted, clearly, by that experience, the US not only balked itself but also stymied any effective UN Security Council action to halt the Rwandan genocide. In Haiti, the US role was more honourable and marginally more successful—but critics noted that the motivating interest was in large measure the avoidance of more waves of Haitian refugees. And even in Yugoslavia, where the US led its NATO allies in doing the right thing in the end, initial American diffidence was a big part of what stymied an effective western response until much of the damage—especially in Bosnia—had already been done.

Such was the background to one of the few debates in the 2000 US presidential contest devoted to foreign policy. The George W. Bush campaign accused the Clinton administration of having lost America's strategic focus, squandering its military assets and energy on peacekeeping and 'nation-building' exercises in places far removed from the United States' vital interests. Vice President Al Gore responded with a spirited defence of such US engagements (the salient issue at the time was the Balkans deployments); he noted that nation-building in Germany and Japan had been key ingredients of America's postwar and Cold War foreign-policy triumphs.

It might be imagined that the terrorist attacks of September 11 would have settled this particular debate. Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda had in effect hijacked the failed states of Sudan and then Afghanistan for their base of operations. Since the enormity of the threat from Al-Qaeda was now firmly established, it would seem to follow that the world community, and not least the United States, could no longer tolerate the scourge of failed states—for

strategic as much as moral reasons. And indeed, the strategic threat posed by failed states was highlighted in the Bush administration's National Security Strategy document, which stated on page 1 that 'America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones.' This apparent lesson was underscored by President Bush's promise to Afghanistan, at the outset of the US war there, that the United States would not abandon the country again to its postwar fate. Implicit in this promise was the idea that American neglect of the country in the decade after the Soviet withdrawal had been a catastrophic mistake. Likewise, the debate about military action for regime change in Iraq centred to a large extent on questions of responsibility for the aftermath.

And yet, clear as the lesson and promise might appear, it was not at all clear what the United States would or could do for state-building across the globe. The administration's early reluctance to countenance the extension of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Kabul to the whole of Afghanistan underscored the limits of American and, by extension, international commitment. Moreover, whatever the merits in principle of the argument that state failure around the globe was intolerable to the international conscience and international security, and however blurred the distinction between 'wars of necessity' and 'wars of choice', the practical problem of strategic choice will not easily go away. In the best of all possible worlds, some failed states would be the (presumably fortunate) objects of international ministrations, and some would not. The criteria for choosing who gets pulled into the lifeboat is murky—certainly in moral terms but also in terms of national interest. One serious attempt to lay out such strategic-choice criteria came in the mid-1990s from a team of scholars led by Paul Kennedy. They drew up a list of 'pivotal states' that the western and international communities could not afford to let fail.²³ Yet the inherent flaw in any such attempt at list-making is easy to see: it is unlikely that Afghanistan, before September 11, would have made the shortlist.

American occupation and state-building in Iraq could have ironic consequences for this whole problem. As Morton Abramowitz, a long-time advocate of sustained US engagement in nation-building, has argued:

Bush has probably achieved, inadvertently, what he campaigned for: getting the United States out of nation-building ... He has done this by embarking on nation-building unprecedented since World War II and in a land that we do not know well and that does not play to our strengths. And it was done, it is now clear, with little effective planning and with largely unexamined notions of what can be accomplished.²⁴

Still, for all of the new trauma and uncertainties that have been injected into the problem, meeting the challenge of failed states is in fact one of the clearest

²³ Robert Chase, Emily Hill and Paul Kennedy, eds, *Pivotal states: a new framework for US policy in the developing world* (New York: Norton, 2000).

²⁴ Morton Abramowitz, 'After Iraq, shrinking horizons', *Washington Post*, 31 July 2003.

examples of fairly recent transatlantic cooperation. In the Balkans, at least, that cooperation must be judged as a modest success. On a smaller scale, Britain and France have managed with very limited military deployments to bring some improvement to Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast. French troops under EU auspices have brought some relief to Bunia, Congo. And while the ultimate success of the Afghanistan operation is far from assured, it is worth bearing in mind that both the war and the postwar stabilization operation have been more or less uncontroversial in transatlantic terms. Indeed, the postwar mission in Afghanistan may provide the best model for what NATO as an institution can and should do with itself. If 'nation-building is the inescapable responsibility of the world's only superpower', as James Dobbins insists,²⁵ it is a responsibility that the United States is utterly unable—for material, political and cultural reasons—to shoulder alone. It is, therefore, also an inescapable object of transatlantic cooperation.

A time for insulation

Difficult as these three critical areas of cooperation are, a further challenge will be to insulate them from continuing transatlantic recriminations over Iraq. The administration should stop talking about the Iraq war as the natural and ineluctable consequence of September 11; but if it cannot or will not stop talking that way, the Europeans should close their ears and concentrate on their common interest with the US in fighting Al-Qaeda and its spin-offs. The Iraq debacle has also discredited the military instrument in counterproliferation at a time when that instrument is clearly needed; Europeans will have to act as though it remained potent, while Americans should avoid rattling it in ways that underscore its impotence. Iraq and Afghanistan are the two state-building enterprises at the top of the international agenda. It would be far-sighted of the Europeans to put their anger aside and contribute, under the formal rubric of NATO, to peacekeeping and state-building in Iraq. If they cannot bring themselves to do so—and to be sure, the chaotic conditions there may make it implausible—then they should concentrate with renewed effort and resources on rescuing Afghanistan from its own creeping chaos.

America's allies do need to come to terms with the inescapable importance of American power. It is helpful that Paris has banned the word 'multipolar' from its official discourse, recognizing that it constituted a gratuitous red rag to Washington.²⁶ Multipolarity is a condition, and perhaps an aspiration, rather than a policy; it already obtains in many dimensions of international relations. In international security, however—and even though the limits of American power have been painfully demonstrated in Iraq—there is no system of order in prospect that does not rely on an exceptional American role. Equally, the

²⁵ James F. Dobbins, 'America's role in nation-building: from Germany to Iraq', *Survival* 45: 4, Winter 2003–2004, p. 109.

²⁶ Author's conversations with French officials in Paris and London.

next US administration, whether Republican or Democratic, will need to devote considerable energy and diplomatic capital to restoring alliance and global confidence in the benevolence of American power. Washington cannot continue to act as though leadership consisted of the stronger power announcing its intentions and weaker powers having little choice but to acquiesce.

The Bush administration justified the Iraq war implicitly on the basis of a theory of inherent legitimacy—a legitimacy derived from America's good intentions. The theory is not inherently spurious. It is reasonable to conclude, even with the present chaos there and the immense scandal over US mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners, that the invasion of Iraq has delivered the Iraqi people from a great evil. It is highly dubious, however, to imagine that—on the current trajectory—the rest of the world will simply accept the virtue and legitimacy of American actions. For 50 years American statesmen have recognized that, however much they were convinced of American virtue, it was not enough. Multilateral institutions and alliances are also needed: not only to enhance American power, but also to contain it for the comfort of the rest of the world. One measure of their success is that for more than ten years after the Cold War ended, America's overwhelming power did not provoke any serious reaction on the part of other great powers, or any ganging up on their part to counterbalance it.

The transatlantic alliance, the EU and the UN—and the broader international order that all three institutions are meant to serve—have been severely damaged by the war in Iraq. The Atlantic alliance is more divided than at any time since at least the Suez crisis of 1956; indeed, probably more divided than at any time in its history. Hopes for a more coherent EU foreign and security policy—hopes generated just a few years ago by the most pro-European British prime minister in a generation—have been dashed. The United States, which in late 2001 enjoyed an outpouring of anguished sympathy and the benefits of a truly global coalition against terrorism, now stands almost isolated in the court of global public opinion. And there is a real danger that America—outraged at this opinion, which it fails to understand, and furious at a UN Security Council that proved unable, in Washington's eyes, seriously to address global security issues—will turn its back on both the 'opinions of mankind' and the UN. The consequences would be further isolation for the US, and the progressive disintegration of the international order that was painstakingly built on the rubble of the Second World War. This is a truly worst-case scenario, and it need not happen. But it is not impossible.

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