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The Obama Doctrine

A legacy of continuity in
US foreign policy?

Edited by Michelle Bentley
and Jack Holland



The Obama Doctrine

President Obama's first term in office was subject to intense criticism; many felt not only that he had failed to live up to his leadership potential, but that he had actually continued the foreign policy framework of the George W. Bush era which he was supposed to have abandoned. This edited volume examines whether these issues of continuity have been as prevalent during the president's second term as his first.

Is Obama still acting within the foreign policy shadow of Bush, or has he been able to establish his own approach towards international affairs, distinct from his predecessor? Within this context, the volume also addresses the idea of legacy and whether Obama has succeeded in establishing his own distinct foreign policy doctrine. In addressing these questions, the chapters explore continuity and change from a range of perspectives in International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis, which are broadly representative of a spectrum of theoretical positions.

With contributions from a range of US foreign policy experts, this book will be of great interest to students and scholars of US foreign policy, Foreign Policy Analysis and American politics.

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Introduction

Jack Holland and Michelle Bentley

In 2009, President Barack Obama was inaugurated under the highest of expectations. Hailed as a dynamic and effective political operative who would reverse the controversial extremes that had characterised the George W. Bush era, Obama was held up as an ‘antidote’ to the War on Terror and the contentious foreign policy decisions associated with the ‘Bush Doctrine’. Obama’s first term, however, was subject to intense criticism; many felt not only that he had failed to live up to his leadership potential, but that he had actually continued – and in some cases intensified – the foreign policy framework he was supposed to have abandoned. Far from a ‘change we can believe in’, US foreign policy under Obama comprised a case of ingrained political continuity; the ideas of his predecessor were alive and well. Indeed, Obama’s failure to bring about wholesale change at the White House was one of the reasons why his prospects for re-election in 2012 were initially considered so uncertain. Obama was re-elected, however; and this edited volume examines whether, with a solid re-election under his belt, these issues of continuity have been as prevalent during the president’s second term. Has Obama continued to act in the foreign policy shadow of his predecessor, or has he been able to establish his own approach towards international affairs, distinct from the Bush Doctrine? Is there an Obama Doctrine? And what is its legacy?

This book builds on our previous edited volume – *Obama’s Foreign Policy: Ending the War on Terror* – which focused on Obama’s foreign policy changes and continuities during his first term. This book examines the entirety of Obama’s time in office, including his second term, assessing the wider context and impact of his presidential legacy. Of course, a number of Obama’s signature foreign policy achievements have been delivered late in his second term, including a nuclear deal with Iran (see Chapter 8), agreement on climate change in Paris (see Chapter 13), and the normalisation of US–Cuba relations (see Chapter 14). The book brings together a range of academic authors, each working in their area of expertise, in order to explore the most pressing issues Obama has faced in office and deploying a range of cutting-edge theoretical approaches in doing so. In the following chapters, Obama’s personality and policy preferences are located in a variety of contexts in order to identify and examine his contestable development of a distinct Obama Doctrine. Topics include nuclear weapons,

energy security and economics, alongside analyses of US relations with Iran, China and Russia. Drawing on frontier work in International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis, theoretical approaches applied include: discussions of systemic constraint (relative American decline in the international system); economic and strategic realignment (a neo-classical realist analysis of shifting international and domestic imperatives); rhetorical coercion and entrapment (embedded narratives on terrorism and counter-terrorism); cultural constraints (understandings of terrorism in the media, popular culture and everyday life); emotion and affective investment (the emotional commitment to longstanding policies and ways of thinking); comparative analyses of change and continuity in specific policy areas (nuclear weapons, drones and energy security); and reflection on the drivers of change and ‘use’ of time as a discursive resource (by presidents and scholars).

This is an important task. Obama’s legacy is fiercely contested. For those who would hold Obama’s record up as evidence of presidential success, however, this legacy is derived largely derived from his multiple domestic victories: healthcare reform, economic recovery, and the creation of a more perfect union. Nonetheless, Obama’s foreign policy has also been highly significant and, arguably, a necessary, if imperfectly realised, remedy for the excesses of the Bush Doctrine. Where the Bush Doctrine introduced pre-emptive military solutions to potential security threats before they were fully manifest, Obama has exercised caution and a preference for diplomatic solutions when possible. Where the Bush Doctrine hoped for allies but did not rely upon them, Obama has, at times, been noted as leading from behind and keen to see US allies do their part in burden sharing. Where Bush pursued a ‘one percent doctrine’ (preparing for low-probability, high-impact events) in the wake of 9/11, Obama has played a far longer game that embraces the complexity and uncertainty of the international system as inherent and unavoidable conditions of the modern world to be managed, not removed. And yet Obama leaves office having destabilised Libya through airstrikes and with American warplanes bombing Syria, with US boots on the ground. One of the most reluctantly interventionist US presidents in history leaves office with US forces fighting Islamic terrorists and extremists in the Middle East, including in the very country in which he lambasted his predecessor’s war as ‘dumb’. For a president guided by the informal slogan of ‘don’t do stupid shit’, this is surprising. How has a president fixated on refocusing and then ending the War on Terror ended up in this position? What is the nature of Obama’s complex foreign policy legacy? Is it a legacy of continuity in US foreign policy?

Of course, the issue guiding this book above all others concerns an effort to make sense of an ‘Obama Doctrine’. Is there one? What is its nature? What characterises and defines it? Usually the term ‘doctrine’ is seen to encompass a set of beliefs or a stated principle, which might guide policy and teach others. The term appears in religious, legal, military and political guises. While all four realms have influenced the formation of an Obama Doctrine, it is the political or foreign policy doctrine that concerns us here. Broader than the specific notion of a military

doctrine, this formation is concerned with Obama's overarching stated and implied approach to foreign policy. It is a guiding vision that structures and informs how foreign policy is conceptualised, articulated, prioritised, formulated and enacted. To illustrate, it is possible to identify the implementation of a specific military doctrine – shock and awe – during the presidency of George W. Bush. This specific military doctrine was designed to impact an enemy's physical and psychological resources, through rapid escalation and deployment: in short, the use and demonstration of overwhelming military superiority. It formed a relatively small component of a much broader approach to foreign policy, which has been characterised as comprising key policy preferences, such as pre-emption (the nullification of threats before they are fully manifest, which has at times been defined as *the* Bush Doctrine) within a post-9/11 context of lowered thresholds for the toleration of acceptable risk (sometimes called the 'one percent doctrine', in which highly unlikely but potentially consequential eventualities – such as terrorist attacks – are treated as certainties). More broadly still, the Bush administration has been understood by a range of analysts to possess overarching stated and implicit principles which guided their approach to foreign policy. These include muscular unilateralism, Wilsonianism with boots, Anything But Clinton, Just Say No, and a philosophy of neoconservatism, to name only a few. These terms attempt to label and summarise the 'Bush Doctrine' at the broadest level of an orientation towards foreign policy, itself composed of more specific military doctrine(s). It is in this broadest sense – at the level of a general, stated or implicit, foreign policy orientation – that we ask, 'What is the Obama Doctrine?'

To answer this question, the book is structured in four parts. In Part I, 'Power and tradition: situating Obama's foreign policy', the book locates Obama's foreign policy in a range of relevant contexts. In Chapter 1, Nicholas Kitchen considers Obama's position within US political, economic and military history. For Kitchen, the Obama administration has been mindful that the response to 9/11 and the strategic preoccupation with terrorism had thrown the US off course. It therefore sought to refocus US foreign policy around a more limited conception of the national interest rooted in a more realistic appraisal of the limits, not just of American power, but of state power itself. As a result, the Obama administration's approach to international security has been one of issue management as opposed to the problem-solving approach of the Bush and, to a lesser extent, Clinton administrations. In Chapter 2, Adam Quinn offers the related but divergent argument that economics has been at the heart of the development of an Obama Doctrine. He notes that the Obama presidency began with an economic crisis that sapped the resources of the state and created a political environment in which government spending was under pressure. Obama took over from a presidency that was notable both for expensive foreign interventions, vast expansion of the security budget, and a lax attitude to funding these commitments with revenue. Obama's legacy then is one of adjusting US foreign policy to meet fiscal restraints. In Chapter 3, Jack Holland situates Obama's foreign policy within a different context: that of traditions of American foreign policy. Holland argues that the Obama Doctrine 'has been Jeffersonian in

formulation and prosecution', which has meant that it has often run up against 'the demands of world hegemony in the twenty-first century'. Fortunately, like Quinn and Kitchen, Holland notes that decline suits Obama's relative reluctance to go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. For these three authors, then, strategic reassessment, economic decline and the Jeffersonian tradition provide three potentially complementary drivers of a more cautious foreign policy approach.

Part II explores the legacy of the Bush Doctrine through Obama's linguistic and cultural inheritance. In Chapter 4, Michelle Bentley argues that Obama's presidency was initially constructed around the abandonment of the controversial phrase 'War on Terror', in an effort to break down the contentious linguistic constructions that had characterised the post-9/11 era. However, the language of war remained central to Obama's foreign policy discourse and has continued to characterise US foreign policy, albeit to a lesser extent. In Chapter 5, Richard Jackson and Chin-Kuei Tsui explore the origins, nature and evolution of this War on Terror discourse under Bush and Obama, noting the linguistic shifts of Obama's second term. They find that 'there is much greater continuity than change in US counterterrorism policy', with changes constituting minor adaptations at the periphery of the dominant paradigm, due to the unchanged structural conditions of the War on Terror, which trap Obama as the star of America's counter-terrorism *Groundhog Day*. In Chapter 6, Ben Fermor continues a constructivist focus on language and culture, also exploring the limited changes apparent in Obama's foreign policy discourse. He agrees with Jackson and Tsui that 'as Barack Obama took office in January 2009, his ability to shape American foreign policy was constrained by the discursive structures already in place' because the Bush Doctrine had helped to cement 'understandings of how America should conduct itself in a world inhabited by Osama bin Laden, al Qaida and "Islamic extremists"'. However, Fermor argues that Obama's legacy is one of increased multilateralism and 'intelligent interventionism', with a subtle shift in the core narratives of the War on Terror through a process of broadening and narrowing. Fermor shows how Bush's core identity markers – good Americans and evil terrorists – were reworked by Obama to fit into a colonial language of civilisation and barbarism. The result of this reworking, Fermor argues, has been the broadening definition of an American Self, which enables international collaboration, faced with a narrowed framing of a dehumanised Other, rendering the task of degrading and destroying America's enemies a political necessity. The productivity of discourse also features in Ty Solomon's chapter. In Chapter 7, Solomon explores the fact that Obama's administration is the first in nearly a decade to pursue official negotiations with Iran over its nuclear programme, despite the discursive difficulties of doing so. In contrast to most extant realist work, Solomon pursues an analysis of the confrontation as socially constructed and mutually constitutive of the US and Iran's international identities. Moreover, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, the chapter extends constructivist thinking about identities by incorporating the importance of affective dynamics in identity construction. Together, then, these chapters consider the role of language, culture, identity and emotion in Obama's formulation of a

foreign policy doctrine, demonstrating a shared concern for the nature and limitations of the structural context and drivers of US policy.

The book's third part considers some of the most important and fundamental foreign policy challenges the Obama administration faced. In Chapter 8, Jason Douglas and Andrew Futter reflect on Obama's nuclear weapons legacy, noting that progress has been made on a number of issues, including the New START (nuclear arms reductions treaty), diversification in US deterrence capability, and agreement with Iran over its disputed nuclear programme. For Douglas and Futter, these achievements should be read as continuity with subtle change: evolution, not revolution. Yet Obama's greatest legacy may be as yet underappreciated: the re-emergence of nuclear disarmament as a genuine political goal and guiding principle for future administrations. In Chapter 9, Christopher Fuller addresses one of Obama's most notorious and divisive policy choices: the frequent and widespread use of unmanned aerial vehicles (drones, or remotely piloted air systems). The scale and extent of this programme are considerable as Obama has overseen the construction of arguably the most significant assassination programme in US history in terms of size, reach and use. Fuller explores the operation and justification of this key plank of Obama's foreign policy legacy and of an emerging Obama Doctrine. In Chapter 10, Nicolas Bouchet explores one of the foreign policy features most important to the Bush Doctrine: democracy promotion. Analysing the case study of Egypt, Bouchet argues that Obama's approach to democracy has blended a higher degree of realist pragmatism into liberal concerns than did his predecessor. In Chapter 11, Maxine David explores US–Russia relations throughout Obama's presidency. David paints a mixed but broadly pessimistic picture of US–Russia relations, contrasting early successes such as the New START and increasing cooperation in Afghanistan with later difficulties such as the Magnitsky Act, the Edward Snowden affair and, in particular, proxy conflict in Ukraine and Syria. In Chapter 12, Oliver Turner considers US foreign policy towards China. Despite being debated by politicians as a real or potential threat to US interests in both of Obama's presidential campaigns, US–China policies have remained relatively cautious and pragmatic. Turner argues that Obama has had to work hard to avoid alienating states which are no doubt nervous about China's rise, but which benefit greatly from it. In Chapter 13, Jonna Nyman analyses Obama's energy security legacy. Nyman argues that Obama was elected on a promise of renewed leadership on climate change that would strengthen American security. However, in office, Obama's energy security strategy 'not only continued but *expanded* exploration and exploitation of conventional and unconventional fossil fuels'. For these authors, then, Obama's legacy is of altered rhetoric, but little substantive impact.

The book's fourth and final part explores the Obama Doctrine's place in history. Chapter 14, by Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister, explores the nature of the Obama Doctrine and its discursive position as a historical legacy. First, Jarvis and Lister reflect on efforts to articulate Obama's foreign policy record from within his administration, exploring the construction of major successes and

failures. Like the majority of contributors to this volume and commentaries on US foreign policy, they note that two principal features have defined the Obama Doctrine – incrementalism (in the pursuit of otherwise lofty goals) and retrenchment – as driven by economic woes and evidenced, for example, in leading from behind in Libya and apparent hesitancy in Syria. By way of explanation, they consider the possibilities of structurally driven continuity, cyclical variations between transformationalists and incrementalists, and the potential uniqueness of every presidential doctrine. Second, and in particular, Jarvis and Lister focus on efforts to situate the Obama administration's legacy historically. In his second term, what has been remarkable has been the return to the theme of change, constructed through appeals to particular (punctuated and disjunctive) conceptualisations of time. Obama has gone out of his way to suggest that his legacy will include the ending of the War on Terror and rectifying the failings of his predecessor, most obviously in Iraq but also in Afghanistan. As well as frequently referencing historical American failures and successes, Obama has also looked to the future to situate his legacy, promising a prosperous twenty-first century shaped by capable people, as was the twentieth. A combination 'of historical providence, national character and presidential determination is that which ... explains Obama's certainties about the successful future awaiting the US'. On the latter, as Republicans and Democrats gear up their election campaigns, the stakes could not be higher and choices clearer. Obama's legacy is consequential but not irreversible.

Part I

Power and tradition

Situating Obama's foreign policy

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1 Ending ‘permanent war’

Security and economy under Obama

Nicholas Kitchen

In my contribution to *Obama's foreign policy: ending the War on Terror* (Kitchen 2013), I argued that the domestic war-weariness of the American public had enabled Obama to jettison the War on Terror as a strategic concept and to refocus on the structural realities of the global economy, most obviously with the rebalance to Asia. At the same time as concluding that in the Obama presidency we were witnessing a reorientation of the geographic focus of American foreign policy, I offered the tentative suggestion that we might also be at the beginning of a change in the nature of American primacy itself: from unipolar dominance to a form of divested hegemony, where allies and partners were increasingly called upon to contribute to the provision of global public goods. If pursued, this deeper strategic shift, I predicted, would be met with political and bureaucratic resistance within the United States, a resistance reinforced in public discourse by America's cultural reverence for its military institutions.

This chapter revisits this theme, at the end of Barack Obama's second term in office, and prompted by a remark in the president's 2014 State of the Union address. ‘America’, Obama said, ‘must move off a permanent war footing.’ This statement had clear implications for the conduct of the United States' campaign against violent extremism, completing the strategic refocusing and political rebranding of the Global War on Terror (GWOt). But Obama's rhetoric has deeper implications for the conduct of American foreign policy, since ‘permanent war’ has been the strategic norm for the United States for the past seventy years. Has Obama's time in office laid the groundwork for such a significant strategic shift in American foreign policy, or will the legacies of the Cold War and the War on Terror continue to loom large over US strategy?

Establishing permanent war: the United States after 1945

Permanent war is not a natural condition for the United States. Geographically secure since the European powers had been warned off the American hemisphere, the United States had neither the pressing need nor the political desire for sustaining significant federal military structures, and, of course, the Constitution permitted the federal government only limited war-making powers. Although the United States was the world's largest economy by the outbreak of

the First World War, Woodrow Wilson's reticence to involve the country in Europe's cynical and self-interested power politics was supported by the majority of his compatriots. Of course, the United States had gone to war for reasons of power and interest in the past, and would do so again in 1917, but following the war, as on previous occasions, the military establishment required for the task was in large part dismantled. From having had over 4 million men under arms at the end of the war, the US demobilised 3.25 million within nine months, and by the end of 1919 the army had been reduced to around 250,000 enlisted men. Military spending returned to pre-war levels of around 1 per cent of GDP by 1923.

If the 1920s and 1930s would later become characterised as a period of isolationism in US foreign policy, the Japanese attack on the American navy at Pearl Harbor laid to rest the debate between neutrality and interventionism. The United States entered the war with far greater designs on the nature of postwar order than those that had accompanied the country's entry into the First World War. However, in completing the interwar period's unfinished transition from British to American hegemony, it was far from clear that this would mean permanently maintaining the kind of significant military establishment usually associated with hegemonic powers. Although the United States emerged from the Second World War with overwhelming preponderance – as Mikhail Gorbachev would later lament, 'the only big country that had waxed fabulously rich on the war' (Kimball 1992) – American planners had approached the end of the war with a vision of order-building that embedded its power in a system of multilateral institutions (Ikenberry 2001, pp. 163–214). Drawdown proceeded unfettered, with military spending dropping from a peak of \$83 billion in 1945 to \$9 billion in 1948, with active duty personnel falling from 12 million in 1945 to 1.4 million in 1950.

The speed and depth of the United States' postwar drawdown might be considered surprising, particularly since US strategists appear to have reached consensus that the power of the Soviet Union represented a compelling threat in the first months of 1946.¹ Yet drawdowns of this sort were the norm in the American experience (Boot 2012). War was very much a temporary condition, and wartime dispensations granted by legislators to the executive branch were treated as strictly limited exceptions. But by the time of the Korean War, after which active-duty service personnel fell by nearly one-third, much of this could be accounted for by Eisenhower's New Look strategy that prioritised nuclear forces, and overall defence spending was maintained.

What had happened was that *NSC 68*, 'the first comprehensive enunciation of American security policy' and a document that amounted 'to an American declaration of permanent Cold War', had begun to be implemented (US National Security Council 1950; Brands 1989). Defence spending had increased from just under 5 per cent of GDP in 1950 to double-digit levels during the war, and would average almost 9 per cent from the end of the war through to the end of the 1960s, a period in which the US economy grew by an average of 6.5 per cent a year. If *NSC 68*'s purpose had been, in Dean Acheson's phrasing, 'to so

bludgeon the mass mind of “top government” that not only could the President make a decision but that the decision could be carried out’ (Acheson 1969, p. 374), its success was evident in the debate around whether investment in defence capabilities should trump the requirement to balance the federal budget.

Yet the requirements of strategists could only be met if the political conditions would permit them. Containment was constructed as much as an expression of the universal nature of American values as the necessary requirements of the zero-sum logic of a security dilemma (Jervis 2001). The political conditions that enabled containment resulted from domestic coalition-forming that tacked together Dean Acheson’s Europe-first internationalists with the Asia-first school of Robert Taft in order to sustain general support for American internationalism, particularly among Congressional opinion (Snyder 1991, pp. 255–304). Driven by the likes of John Foster Dulles and Dean Rusk, a global anti-communist consensus, rooted in strategic ideas such as the domino theory and monolithic communist expansionism, demonstrated how the ‘cross-currents of uniqueness and universality’ in American identity could be simultaneously integrated into grand strategy (Foley 2007, p. 435).

For over forty years containment would swing between activism and détente, a reflection of the balance of power and ideas between hawks and doves (Gaddis 2005). The experience of Vietnam raised doubts about American ideals on the one hand and American capabilities on the other, animating American politics from the presidential candidacy of George McGovern to the songwriting of Bob Dylan, and from the revisionist history of William Appleman Williams to Henry Kissinger’s concerns about overextension that underpinned détente (Nelson 1995). In response to a perceived collective failure of nerve by the Nixon and Carter administrations, neoconservatives argued for a revival of moral purpose and the assertion of American material power (Halper and Clarke 2004, pp. 55–58). Such arguments were heated, and produced significant changes in strategy, but they were shifts of degree. Throughout the Cold War, the goal of containing the Soviet Union, and the need for the United States to maintain a state of perpetual readiness for war, remained constant. Containment became a basic assumption of American political life, a grand strategy that defined not just American internationalism but American culture. Anti-communism energised politics in the United States from unions to universities and from movies to churches. It infected American society and culture with pathologies of nationalism, intolerance and suspicion (Whitfield 1996).

The missing drawdown: failing to end the Cold War

The Cold War had expanded the American state, leaving a more powerful presidency, a more secretive government and less constraining Congress. Believing democratic decision-making to be an inherent weakness in such an ultra-securitised climate, policy-makers had adopted, and the public had largely accepted, unprecedented privations of traditional American liberties (Maynes 1990). The power of the military-industrial complex, the designation of enemy

ideologies, the annexation of constitutional powers by the executive from Congress, the culture of classifying information, the secret institutions of the national security infrastructure: all had redefined the American people's relationship with their government to the detriment of their constitutional rights (Halperin and Woods 1990).

Some in the political commentariat saw the end of the Cold War as an opportunity for a peace dividend. In this reading, the Cold War was an anomaly, the bulk of a 'seventy year detour' from the main road of American diplomatic history (Moynihan 1990). The editor of *Foreign Affairs*, William Hyland, wrote that 'for the first time in half a century, the United States has the opportunity to reconstruct its foreign policy free of the constraints and pressures of the Cold War' (Hyland 1990). 'The peace dividend', wrote his counterpart at *Foreign Policy*, was 'not just about the money that will be freed up' but also about 'the categories of thought that will finally be opened up' (Maynes 1990).

This approach in many ways mirrored the views of the American public, a reality that was reflected on either side of party-political divide in the presidential primaries in 1991 and 1992. Democrat Paul Tsongas focused on the scale of the budget deficit necessitated by high military spending, arguing that 'if our security needs have lessened, our level of military spending should reflect that change' (Clymer 1991). For the Republicans, Pat Buchanan made a serious challenge for the sitting president's party nomination, a campaign that made possible Ross Perot's independent candidacy in the general election itself, in which the latter would define himself as an economic nationalist committed to balancing the federal budget.²

So as the Soviet Union fell, both Washington insiders and the country at large felt the need to debate the balance of American political life: the roles of the executive branch, the media and the military, the balance between government secrecy and freedom of information, and the need to restructure domestic liberties and industrial organisation as part of a clear transition from war to peace (Moynihan 1992; Pessen 1993). Yet there is little evidence that these kinds of questions were seriously addressed in government itself, or within the foreign policy bureaucracy that owed its twentieth-century growth to the grand strategy of anti-communist containment. Among the major foreign affairs think tanks, those outliers such as the CATO Institute and Heritage Foundation that did take retrenchment seriously, and academic voices such as Eric Nordlinger (Nordlinger 1991, 1995), were marginal to the debate, their advocacy of a drawdown dismissed by the new president's National Security Advisor in a major foreign policy speech, as 'the rhetoric of Neo-Know-Nothings' (Lake 1993). In the 1990s, American governing elites were concerned not with how to dismantle containment, but with how to replace it.

Defence spending did fall somewhat in the 1990s as certain Cold War commitments were scaled back, but levelled off by the middle of the decade and by the end of the Clinton presidency had begun to rise again. The Clinton administration's proffered grand strategy – democratic enlargement – essentially sought to globalise the Western order that had been built in opposition to the Soviet

bloc, with the president likening the strategy to the domino theory in reverse: encouraging and supporting rather than preventing a succession of mutually reinforcing societal changes that were in the interests of the United States (Brinkley 1997). Whilst such a strategy was motivated by and reflected a set of liberal goals deeply influenced by ideas of democratic peace and globalisation, underpinning it was the simple, brute fact of American dominance.

What International Relations theorists began to describe as structural unipolarity was a curious condition, particularly as it appeared to be reinforced rather than eroded during the course of the 1990s (Layne 1993, 2006; Thompson 2006). But for those in the policy establishment here was confirmation that what they tended to refer to as primacy could be sustained (Wohlforth 1999). Perversely, a consequence of such dominance might be to reduce a state's sense of its own security – the extent of its perceived limits means that all sorts of disturbances can threaten it (Jervis 2006). Permanent war was therefore maintained in the 1990s not because the United States itself continued to be threatened by foreign enemies, but because American policy-makers came to identify the unipolar structure of the system, and America's place in it, as the object of defence.

In practice, this resulted in a security discourse that was both expansive and vacillated with events: a nervous hyperactivity that reflected a definition of American interests that was global in scope and that therefore apparently regarded each and every occasion where America's interests were not met in full as representing a reduction of American power. Revisionist great powers, rogue states, failed states, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, ethnic conflict, civil war, genocide and mass atrocities, violations of human rights, drugs, organised crime, resource conflicts, migration, pandemics, natural disasters: in American political discourse it seemed any number of issues could be securitised and advanced as threats to national security, requiring the United States to remain ever alert (Buzan 1998).

For some, this was perfectly reasonable: a safety-first approach to a dangerous world. As Robert Kagan put it, 'there is no certainty that we can correctly distinguish between high-stakes issues and small-stakes issues in time to sound the alarm' (Harries 2000, p. 28). For Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the level of uncertainty as to the threat you might face meant 'putting it in the mind of an opponent that there is no future in trying to challenge the armed forces of the United States' (House Armed Services Committee 1992). Indeed, maintaining forces into the post-Cold War world recognised that the main threat to the United States arose from its being perceived abroad as weak and irresolute (Gaffney Jr. 2000). Therefore, however challenged, the United States had to be able to respond emphatically. Powell again: 'I believe in the bully's way of going to war. I'm on a street corner, I got my gun, I got my blade, I'ma kick yo' ass' (Gates Jr. 1995).

In the face of this approach, conservatives and realists in this period complained of a 'frantic' search for new missions and visions for United States foreign policy, efforts that the CATO Institute concluded 'are so wide ranging as

to constitute a campaign of threat procurement' (Carpenter 1992). Permanent war had created inertias and path-dependencies that had a deep influence on strategic debate. The very language of foreign policy debate was inherently internationalist (Clarke and Clad 1995, pp. 49–63), and the notion that United States might not be engaged in an enduring battle to sustain world order was not one that foreign policy professionals were minded to admit. Just as academic Sovietologists had not been able to conceive of the subject of their discipline ceasing to exist (Cox 2009), so America's foreign policy experts remained resolutely unable to detach themselves from notions of credibility and leadership, despite the radical structural shift in the United States' strategic environment (Steel 1995, pp. 113–114). The Cold War may have ended, but the United States proved unable to end the Cold War.

Purpose renewed: the Global War on Terror as grand strategy

The Global War on Terror was in many ways a strategic concept explicitly constructed to fill the vacuum that anti-communist containment had left during the 1990s. Indeed, such was the determination of former Cold Warriors within the Bush administration to solve the threat deficit problem of the prior decade that they sought explicitly to cast the War on Terror as a 'long war', a defining struggle that would act as a lode star for the conduct of US foreign policy: in short, a grand strategy for the United States.

Whilst the United States strategic environment hadn't changed, the events of 9/11 shifted society and policy-makers' perception of threat in a way that allowed the country and the foreign policy elite to coalesce around a defined purpose for American foreign policy (Holland 2009). Part of the explanation for the nature of the post-9/11 shift lies with the personnel in the administration's senior foreign policy team, a mix of neoconservative democratic globalists and assertive nationalists, a number of whom had been hawkish Cold Warriors in the Reagan era and who were intensely comfortable with the notion of permanent war. And for a period, as Americans rallied round the flag and domestic politics created incentives for threat inflation, the Bush administration's 'vulcans' seemed to have finally settled on a new guiding principle for America's military might (Mann 2004).

The result was that counterterrorism was expanded through the Iraq war to encompass an attempt to comprehensively reorder the Middle East. This new overarching imperative of US foreign policy was pursued with overwhelmingly military tools, unsurprisingly, given the extent to which the Cold War security architecture had been maintained. At the same time, those means were not immediately clearly suited to addressing non-state actors, hence the early identification of terrorists with their state allies. The overthrow of the latter would inaugurate a fundamental remaking of the Middle East, draining the swamp of motivation for a disaffected Muslim youth long denied the benefits of political and economic freedom by their post-colonial authoritarian rulers.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the War on Terror was the geographic focus it placed on the Middle East, particularly as the invasion of Iraq shifted resources and attention away from Al Qaeda's Afghanistan base. But the War on Terror both re-established norms and processes of permanent war in American politics and society and inaugurated new ones. Congress's 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force granted the president authority to use all necessary and appropriate force against those whom he determined 'planned, authorized, committed or aided' the 9/11 attacks – providing the overarching authority for military campaigns against an almost unlimited range of individuals and groups. International affirmation was forthcoming, with the language of post-9/11 United Nations Security Council resolutions reinforcing the legal basis for American military action that could potentially be carried out in anticipation of terrorist attacks (Byers 2002). Alongside the obvious shifts in the rhetorical tone of foreign policy – Bush was unashamed to be a 'war president' – the bureaucratic restructuring of the American national security apparatus amounted to a comprehensive updating of architecture of permanent war for a new era. The administration created a new Department of Homeland Security, strengthened the money-laundering controls of the US Treasury, and reallocated responsibilities between the various domestic and foreign intelligence and security services whilst granting them new powers of surveillance and detention.

The Bush administration also threw money at the War on Terror. The Department of Homeland Security was budgeted \$43 billion, almost as much as the State Department. The seventeen agencies of the 'intelligence community' came to command a collective budget in excess of \$80 billion. And the 'regular' defence budget, which excludes the 'exceptional' costs of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, doubled in a decade from \$267 billion in 2000 to \$533 billion in 2010. Andrew Bacevich's concern that such extensive growth of the national security state might put the United States on the 'path to permanent war' if anything underplayed its impact, since it built upon a Cold War architecture of permanent war that had never been dismantled (Bacevich 2010). Such concerns were even shared by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who warned that

America's civilian institutions of diplomacy and development have been chronically undermanned and underfunded for far too long.... when it comes to America's engagement with the rest of the world, it is important that the military is – and is clearly seen to be – in a supporting role to civilian agencies.

(Tyson 2008)

Gates may have been preparing to leave the Pentagon when he made that statement in July 2008, but by November he had agreed to stay on under the incoming Democratic president, whose campaign had been explicit in rejecting many of the Bush administration's counter-terrorism tactics, and tapped into the public's war-weariness seven years on from 9/11. Ultimately the Global War on Terror failed to sustain itself as grand strategy in the way its proponents had

hoped. Such an outcome was perhaps unsurprising, requiring a feat of ‘macro-securitisation’ that was always likely to be a herculean task, given its reliance on terrorists’ capacity to continue to carry out large-scale attacks, the willingness of allies to accept a war paradigm, and Al Qaeda and its ilk’s inability to pose a genuine ideological alternative to liberal order (Buzan 2006). That said, the War on Terror was responsible for two of the United States’ three longest wars in its history, and sustained significant increases in defence, homeland security and intelligence spending, all on top of a missing drawdown from the country’s last major conflict. The American economy may have seemed able to sustain it, but the long-term trend in America’s military commitments continued steadily upward.

Pushback: dumb wars and debt

Obama’s election was made possible by the financial crisis of 2008, a crisis that made America’s leaders appear feckless and the United States’ political and economic model inoperative. The clarion call of Obama’s campaign rested on the hope that change was possible. Yet Obama’s proposals for change were clearer and better developed in the sphere of foreign policy than in economic affairs. Here, candidate Obama ran hard on his opposition to the discredited Iraq war, contrasting the dumb war in Iraq with the necessary war in Afghanistan, and more generally proposing to return American foreign policy to a more consensual, multilateral variant, less reliant on the tools of military force.

Once in office, the administration’s first steps were largely symbolic, designed to ‘signal to the world that he is the unBush’ (Freedland 2009). In the first hundred days of détente, Guantanamo Bay, the symbol of American lawlessness in the War on Terror, would be closed and torture repudiated; troops would be withdrawn from Iraq; former pariahs including Venezuela, Cuba, Iran and Syria would be offered the chance to come in from the cold; moderate Muslim opinion would be cultivated and international institutions re-engaged (Kitchen 2011).

At the same time, Obama was far more cautious than his predecessor in articulating doctrine as such. Bumper stickers for Obama’s approach to strategy have been left to anonymous officials who pronounce that the administration ‘leads from behind’ or believes the key task of foreign policy is ‘don’t do stupid shit’. When pushed, the president has been willing to offer a ‘strong belief that we don’t have military solutions to every problem’ (Yglesias 2015). This has been evident in the administration’s willingness to push diplomatic and multilateral approaches to problem solving – most obviously with Iran – and to tone down exceptionalist rhetoric, usually with a hedge to the universalisability of American values which emphasises that different cultures may apply liberal norms differently.

The administration’s caution is bound up in a sense of the limits of what American power can achieve. Whilst unwilling to describe himself as a realist, Obama is on record as admiring how the arch-realist foreign policy team of the George H.W. Bush administration managed the dying breaths of the Soviet