

# Threat and Anxiety in US Foreign Policy

**Christopher J. Fettweis**

Those not paying close attention to international affairs in August 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia, might have thought that Moscow's troops had landed in the southern American state, somewhere near Savannah. At the very least, casual observers whose views were formed by the reaction of the US foreign-policy community would have come away with the impression that the invasion represented a clear and present danger to the United States. Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski argued in a *Time* magazine cover story that 'for the West, especially the U.S., the conflict between Russia and Georgia poses both moral and geostrategic challenges', and that the 'international community has not done enough to push back'.<sup>1</sup> Neo-conservatives agreed: Charles Krauthammer argued that 'the fate of far more than Georgia is at stake',<sup>2</sup> and Robert Kagan predicted that 'historians will come to view Aug. 8, 2008, as a turning point no less significant than Nov. 9, 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell'.<sup>3</sup> The presidential candidates competed to appear most outraged, climaxing in Republican nominee John McCain's assertion that 'we are all Georgians'.<sup>4</sup>

The US reaction to the invasion of Georgia is just one of many post-Cold War examples of Parkinson's Law, adapted for international relations. British civil servant Cyril Northcote Parkinson began an essay in *The Economist* in 1955 by observing that 'work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion'.<sup>5</sup> International relations has its own version: insecurity

---

**Christopher J. Fettweis** is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Tulane University in New Orleans. He is the author of *Losing Hurts Twice as Bad: The Four Steps to Moving Beyond Iraq* (W.W. Norton, 2008) and *Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace* (Georgetown University Press, 2010).

expands along with power.<sup>6</sup> As states get stronger, they identify more interests, and the number of threats they perceive tends to grow. Consequently, and perhaps paradoxically, the stronger countries are, the more insecure they often feel. Today, for instance, the United States is simultaneously the world's most powerful country and its most insecure. Parkinson's Law helps explain why so many in Washington interpreted the Russian invasion not as a minor flare-up of a long-standing regional grievance but as a threat to the existence of freedom and security everywhere.

Logic might suggest that power and security ought to be directly, not inversely, related. As state power grows, so too should security; after all, the stronger the state, the less likely is successful conquest from abroad. Presumably, potential challengers should be emboldened by weakness and deterred by strength. Why, then, do strong states often seem to worry more, often about seemingly trivial matters? The tendency for insecurity to expand with power is not merely paradoxical, it is pathological, an irrational aspect of international politics that, like individual psychopathologies, might be corrected if identified and brought into the open.

### **Pathology and strategy**

For individuals as well as states, pathologies – mistaken or incorrect beliefs that inspire irrational action – create their own reality and drive behaviour accordingly. In individuals, pathologies reside in the mind, while state-level pathologies exist as shared irrational beliefs among leaders and the public. Strategic pathologies, then, are incorrect beliefs that drive destructive, or at least counterproductive, state behaviour. The United States suffers from several.

The credibility imperative is a clear example, one that continues to have a particularly strong influence upon the United States.<sup>7</sup> Credibility, when used in policy debates, is a code word for the prestige and reputation of a state; it is, in Henry Kissinger's words, 'the coin with which we conduct our foreign policy', an intangible asset that helps states influence the actions of others.<sup>8</sup> In periods of high credibility, policymakers believe, a state can deter and compel behaviour and accomplish goals short of war. When credibility is low, sceptical adversaries and allies may be tempted to ignore threats and promises. To

national leaders, therefore, healthy credibility seems to be the equivalent of many armed divisions, and is worth protecting at almost any cost.

This belief rests on a shaky foundation, to put it mildly. Decades of scholarship have been unable to produce much evidence that high credibility helps a state achieve its goals, or that low credibility makes rivals or allies act any differently.<sup>9</sup> Although study after study has refuted the basic assumptions of the credibility imperative, the pathology continues to affect policymaking in the new century, inspiring new instances of irrational, unnecessary action. The imperative, like many foreign-policy pathologies, typically inspires belligerence in those under its spell.<sup>10</sup> Credibility is always maintained through action, usually military action, no matter how small the issue or large the odds.

Insecurity, likewise, whether real or imagined, leads to expansive, internationalist, interventionist grand strategies. The more danger a state perceives, the greater its willingness to go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. The 'preventive' war in Iraq is the most obvious consequence of the inflated US perception of threat, but is hardly the only one. America's insecurity pathology is in need of diagnosis and cure, lest Iraq be not a singular debacle but a harbinger of other disasters to come.

Strategic performance can be improved if pathologies are recognised and eliminated. Better policy would result from a dispassionate, rational analysis of material costs and benefits of proposed action. In other words, although states do not always act rationally, they would usually be better off if they did. Of course, this sometimes involves the oversimplification of reality, because such calculations are not normally possible in the real world where neither costs nor benefits are knowable a priori. If they were – if rationality were not bounded – foreign-policy decisions would be easy to make. And any discussion of rationality necessarily implies assumptions about values, since rarely are costs and benefits neatly comparable. No equation can tell a policymaker precisely how many lives are worth sacrificing in pursuit of a particular national interest. Nonetheless, states can take steps toward maximising the chance for rationality in their choices. One obvious way is to recognise the

---

*States do not  
always act  
rationally*

irrational motivators for behaviour, and work to eliminate those impulses that tend to have a high probability of producing low-quality results. Good foreign policy cannot be built upon an irrational foundation. Indeed, rationality in decision-making should be thought of as a minimum requirement for sagacious leaders, for their own good and for that of the international system as a whole.

### **The insecurity pathology in the United States**

For the architects of US foreign policy, one belief has remained constant since the Second World War: we are living in dangerous times. In the 1950s, fears of communism caused the United States to raise and maintain an enormous peacetime military for the first time in its history, an action that would have horrified the founding generation. The Cold War ended, but the perception of threat lived on. Today, the Committee on the Present Danger, first established in the 1950s, has re-emerged to assure America that mortal danger had not gone the way of the Soviet Union. Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich is typical of many American leaders in his belief that the challenges of the current era are every bit as great as those faced by Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, taking it as given that America's present enemies pose a 'mortal threat to our survival as a free country'.<sup>11</sup> To US foreign policymakers, the world is full of enemies and evil, and America must never relax its guard. More than one observer has noted that the United States displays a level of threat perception that is far higher than that of the other great powers.<sup>12</sup>

This feeling of insecurity is not limited to US leaders. Six in ten Americans apparently think that a Third World War is 'likely to occur' in their lifetime; others, including influential opinion-makers, believe it has already begun.<sup>13</sup> In April 2007, 82% of Americans told pollsters that the world is a more dangerous place than it used to be, and that it is getting worse. One year later, another poll by the same firm found that a 'significant majority' of Americans were anxious about US security, demonstrating that in the United States, 'anxiety remains steady over time'.<sup>14</sup>

This level of anxiety is striking when compared to public opinion in other post-Cold War powers. Whether the issue is Islamic fundamentalist terror-

ism or rogue actors such as Saddam Hussein or Hugo Chávez, the United States detects higher levels of danger than any other state. During the Cold War, the pattern was the same: the United States feared an attack by the Warsaw Pact far more than did its West European allies, who presumably had more to lose if such an event occurred; it worried about the influence of communist China more than did South Korea, Japan or the ASEAN states; and it obsessed over the potential pernicious influence of Fidel Castro and the Sandinistas more than did the smaller states of the region.<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that virtually all other states are demonstrably weaker than the United States, and therefore presumably more vulnerable to a variety of threats, they do not seem to worry about their safety nearly as much as does Uncle Sam.

Is the US perception justified? Just because a country is paranoid does not mean that there are not forces seeking to do it harm. Any modern state is confronted with a number of possible dangers and threats. The question is whether those facing the twenty-first-century United States are quite as dire as its leaders seem to believe.

#### *Conventional security threats*

Compared to any other country in the long history of international affairs, the United States is fundamentally safe from conventional assault. It is hard to imagine how even the combined military and economic might of Eurasia (if such a combination were possible) could be harnessed to mount a successful trans-oceanic invasion. Today, a few nuclear weapons would probably suffice to deter any imaginable approaching armada, but even before the nuclear age few serious strategists considered invasion a realistic possibility. 'Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant, to step the Ocean, and crush us at a blow?' wondered Abraham Lincoln in 1838:

Never! All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth (our own excepted) in their military chest; with a Bonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.<sup>16</sup>

Princeton international-relations scholars Harold and Margaret Sprout spoke for many security analysts when they argued in 1939 that by the time the United States entered the First World War, ‘it was manifest, both from indisputable data publicly available at that time and from inferences easily and fairly deductible therefrom’ that a trans-oceanic invasion ‘simply could not occur’.<sup>17</sup>

Not only is the invasion and conquest of the United States virtually unthinkable, but warfare of all kinds is everywhere on the decline. Since the end of the Cold War, inter- and intra-national conflict and crises have

---

*The world is  
a far more  
peaceful place  
than at any  
time in history*

steadily declined in number and intensity.<sup>18</sup> The risk for the average person of dying in battle has plummeted since the Second World War, especially since the end of the Cold War.<sup>19</sup> The incidence of new wars is also at an all-time low.<sup>20</sup> Only one international war has been fought since the invasion of Iraq, and it can be counted only if the common understanding of ‘war’ is stretched a bit. Despite the sound and fury that accompanied the 2008 Russo-Georgian clash, the combined battle-death figure appears to be under 1,000, which means it would

not even qualify as a war using the most-used definitions.<sup>21</sup> By virtually all measures, the world is a far more peaceful place than it has been at any time in recorded history.

This trend is apparent on every continent. At the beginning of 2010, the only conflict raging in the Western Hemisphere was the ongoing civil war in Colombia, but even this conflict is far less severe today than it was ten years ago. Europe, which has in the past been the most war-prone of continents, is entirely calm, without even the threat of inter-state conflict. Little war planning now goes on among the European powers, a rather stark departure from previous eras.<sup>22</sup> Every one of the two billion or so people of the Pacific Rim is currently living in a society at peace. The brief but bloody Sri Lankan civil war was Asia’s only conflict in 2009. In Africa, despite a variety of serious on-going challenges, levels of conflict are the lowest they have been in the centuries of written history we have about the continent. In the greater Middle East, the Israeli–Palestinian issue continues to simmer, if at

a relatively low level, as do the civil war in Yemen and the two counter-insurgency campaigns in which the United States and its allies currently find themselves bogged down.

None of this is to suggest that these places are without problems, or that war is impossible. But given the rapid increase in the world's population and the number of countries (the League of Nations had 63 members at its peak between the wars, while the United Nations currently has 192), a pure extrapolation of historical trends might lead one to expect a great deal more warfare than there actually is. Conquest, it seems, is far less common today than it has been throughout history. Territorial disputes, the most common cause of warfare in the past, have dropped to record low levels, especially among the great powers. International borders have all but hardened. By any reasonable measure, the world is living in a golden age of peace and security, even if it may not always appear so.

If indeed major war is all but obsolete, as an increasing number of prominent observers believe,<sup>23</sup> then surely even the most diehard pessimists can admit that the United States need not fear invasion and conquest. State survival, the key factor behind state behaviour according to 'defensive realists', is today all but assured for even the smallest states.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, throughout most of human history, the obliteration of political entities was a distinct possibility. Polities as diverse as Central Asian empires, Greek *poleis* and German 'princely states' were all at risk of conquest or absorption by powerful neighbours. That this no longer occurs is an under-appreciated break from the past. Since the Second World War, precisely zero UN members have been forcibly removed from the map.<sup>25</sup> Today, states are safe from complete annihilation. The stronger countries are even safer; the strongest is the safest.

A variety of explanations have been proposed to account for this peaceful trend. Some realists take the view that nuclear weapons have thrust peace upon the otherwise conflictual system.<sup>26</sup> Liberal explanations include the expanding number of democracies, multilateral institutions and the deepening complexity of economic interdependence.<sup>27</sup> Constructivists do not necessarily deny the importance of any of these factors, but give primary credit to a change in ideas in contemporary international society.<sup>28</sup> Those

factors exogenous to the human mind are important only to the extent that they affect the way people think, and that society functions. It is ideational evolution, and the corresponding change in behavioural norms regarding conflict, that has been decisive in this view.

All these explanations share one important factor: the change they describe is likely to be irreversible. Nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented, and no defence against their use is ever going to be completely foolproof. The pace of globalisation and economic interdependence shows no sign of slowing. Democracy seems to be firmly embedded in the cultural fabric of

---

*The world  
grew more  
peaceful  
while the US  
cut its forces*

many of the places it currently exists, and may well be in the process of spreading to the places where it does not. The United Nations shows no signs of disappearing. Finally, normative progress, like that which brought an end to slavery and duelling, tends to be unidirectional.

One potential explanation for the growth of global peace can be dismissed fairly quickly: US actions do not seem to have contributed much. The limited evidence suggests that there is little reason to believe in the stabilising power of the US hegemon, and that there is no relation between the relative level of American activism and international stability. During the 1990s, the United States cut back on its defence spending fairly substantially. By 1998, the United States was spending \$100 billion less on defence in real terms than it had in 1990, a 25% reduction.<sup>29</sup> To internationalists, defence hawks and other believers in hegemonic stability, this irresponsible 'peace dividend' endangered both national and global security. 'No serious analyst of American military capabilities', argued neo-conservatives William Kristol and Robert Kagan in 1996, 'doubts that the defense budget has been cut much too far to meet America's responsibilities to itself and to world peace'.<sup>30</sup> And yet the verdict from the 1990s is fairly plain: the world grew more peaceful while the United States cut its forces. No state seemed to believe that its security was endangered by a less-capable US military, or at least none took any action that would suggest such a belief. No militaries were enhanced to address power vacuums; no security dilemmas drove insecurity or arms races; no regional balancing occurred once the stabilis-

ing presence of the US military was diminished. The rest of the world acted as if the threat of international war was not a pressing concern, despite the reduction in US military capabilities. Most of all, the United States was no less safe. The incidence and magnitude of global conflict declined while the United States cut its military spending under President Bill Clinton, and kept declining as the George W. Bush administration ramped the spending back up. Complex statistical analysis is unnecessary to reach the conclusion that world peace and US military expenditure are unrelated.

### *Unconventional security threats*

Conventional war, much less outright assault, is not the leading security challenge in the minds of most Americans today. Instead, irregular or non-state actors, especially terrorists, top the list of threats to the West since 11 September 2001. The primary guiding principle of US foreign policymaking, for better or worse, is the continuing struggle against terrorism. President Bush repeatedly used the term 'Islamofascists' to describe the enemy that he re-oriented the US defence establishment to fight, transforming al-Qaeda from a ragtag band of lunatics into a threat to the republic itself. It is not uncommon for even sober analysts to claim that Islamic terrorists present an 'existential threat' to the United States, especially if they were ever to employ nuclear, biological or chemical weapons. Perhaps it is Parkinson's Law that inspires some analysts to compare Islamic fundamentalists with the great enemies of the past, such as the Nazis or the Communists, since no rational analysis of their destructive potential would allow such a conclusion. Threat is a function of capabilities and intent; even if al-Qaeda has the intent to threaten the existence of the United States, it does not possess the capability to do so.

This is not to deny that Islamist terrorists pose a danger to the United States, or to suggest that policymakers are poised to 'let down their guard', as President Bush has worried. A rational United States, however, would interpret this issue for what it is: a law-enforcement challenge of the first order rather than an existential strategic threat. Fortunately, there is no meaningful dissension in the industrialised world about modern transnational problems such as terrorism, weapons proliferation, human trafficking,

drug smuggling or piracy. Multilateral cooperation, coordination and intelligence-sharing to address such issues are in the interest of every state and occur at high, if often under-reported, levels. Police action against terrorism is much less expensive than war, and is likely to be far more productive.

Even terrorists equipped with nuclear, biological or chemical weapons would be incapable of causing damage so cataclysmic that it would prove fatal to modern states. Though the prospect of terrorists obtaining and using such weapons is one of the most consistently terrifying scenarios of the new era, it is also highly unlikely and not nearly as dangerous as sometimes portrayed.

---

*Responsibility  
lies with  
those who  
ought to  
know better*

As the well-funded, well-staffed Aum Shinrikyo cult found out in the 1990s, workable forms of weapons of mass destruction are hard to purchase, harder still to synthesise without state help, and challenging to use effectively. The Japanese group managed to kill a dozen people on the Tokyo subway system at rush hour. While tragic, the attack was hardly the stuff of apocalyptic nightmares. Super-weapons are simply not easy for even the most sophisticated non-state actors to use.<sup>31</sup> If terrorists were able to overcome the substantial obstacles and use the most destructive weapons in a densely populated area, the outcome would of course be terrible for those unfortunate enough to be nearby. But we should not operate under the illusion that doomsday would arrive. Modern industrialised countries can cope with disasters, both natural and man-made. As unpleasant as such events would be, they do not represent existential threats.

The American public can be forgiven for being afraid of nuclear-, biological- or chemical-armed terrorists, since the messages they have been receiving from US leaders have been uniformly apocalyptic, informed by worst-case thinking. The responsibility for this pathological fear lies with those who ought to know better – who know, for instance, that plastic sheeting and duct tape are not realistic protections against anything, but who recommend their stockpiling anyway.

Terrorists can kill people and scare many more, but the localised damage they can cause is by itself incapable of changing the character of Western

civilisation. Only the people of the West, largely through their own overreaction, can accomplish that. While US analysts spend time worrying about such events, it is worth recalling that the diplomats of any prior age would likely have been quite grateful to have our problems in lieu of their own.

Today's security debate often seems to be driven less by actual threats than vague, unnamed dangers. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld warned about 'unknown unknowns': the threats 'we don't know we don't know', which 'tend to be the difficult ones'.<sup>32</sup> Kristol and Kagan worry that if the United States fails to remain highly engaged, the international system 'is likely to yield very real external dangers, as threatening in their own way as the Soviet Union was a quarter century ago'.<sup>33</sup> What exactly these dangers are is left open to interpretation. In the absence of identifiable threats, the unknown can provide us with an enemy, one whose power is limited only by the imagination. This is what Benjamin Friedman and Harvey Sapolsky call 'the threat of no threats', and is perhaps the most frightening danger of all.<sup>34</sup>

Even if, as folk wisdom has it, anything is possible, not everything is plausible. Vague, generalised dangers should never be acceptable replacements for specific threats when crafting national policy. There is no limit to the potential dangers the human mind can manufacture, but there are very definite limits to the specific threats the world contains. 'To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary', noted Edmund Burke. 'When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes.'<sup>35</sup> The full extent of today's dangers is not only knowable, but relatively minor.

#### *Non-security threats: liberty and prosperity*

Security is not the only vital national interest, of course. Prosperity and democracy are typically items included on the short list of issues for which the United States should be willing to fight. During the Cold War, neither could be taken for granted. The health of the US economy would presumably have been at grave risk if the rest of the world had been swept into the communist camp. A united, hostile, Soviet-led Eurasia could have posed a major threat to the United States. Embargoes or other forms of economic warfare

could have proved devastating to the US standard of living. Furthermore, as economist and political theorist (and later national security advisor) Walter Rostow argued at the time, if totalitarian dictatorships had come to power across the world, the very survival of democracy in the United States would have been imperiled.<sup>36</sup> The precarious balance that every country must strike between liberty and security might have tilted decisively toward the latter if the United States were left alone in a hostile world. It was difficult for Rostow to imagine how American democracy could have long survived as an island in a totalitarian sea. It was therefore imperative for the United States to oppose the spread of communism in Eurasia, to secure the future of both prosperity and liberty.

The vigour with which post-Cold War American administrations have pursued the promotion of democracy around the world might make one believe that without a strong ally, liberty and freedom are powerless and doomed, and even under threat in the United States. One need not be convinced that history has ended, however, to accept the notion that the collapse of communism has left no viable political challenger to democracy and no economic alternative to free markets.<sup>37</sup> No political ideology exists around which to rally a hostile coalition of states against the major democratic powers. Communism and fascism, while perhaps not completely dead, are relegated to the background, and although totalitarianism persists in some regions of the world, political legitimacy in today's international society comes from a mandate from the masses. Even if democracy does not soon infiltrate those last bastions of illiberalism (and it might), it is not losing ground to other forms of government. Meanwhile, 'waves' of democracy have at times swept over the world with very little direct aid from abroad, and it is reasonable to assume that the values of liberty and freedom will endure even without US efforts to promote them.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, although the flavours may differ, free-market capitalism is today almost universally recognised as the fastest route to prosperity and wealth. Were a group of unfriendly governments to come to power in Eurasia, they would still find it in their interest to maintain trade and financial relations with the United States. No state would benefit from cutting ties with the world's largest market and producer of goods. Economic inter-

dependence is, after all, a two-way street; the major trading partners of the United States are all more dependent upon the US market than vice versa.<sup>39</sup> As long as capitalism remains the dominant form of economic organisation, and there is little reason to believe that any change is on the horizon, the economic danger presented by even the most hostile of coalitions will remain extremely low.

### **Explaining the pathology**

If a mismatch between perceptions of threat and reality indeed exists in the United States, how can it be explained? If the connection between power and paranoia is an example of a political pathology, one that compels irrational reactions and behaviour, why is it present? Potential explanations draw from structural features of the international system; those unique to the American experience; and factors of individual psychology.

#### *Systemic-level explanations*

Since great powers have broader interests than do smaller powers, one might expect that the lone hyperpower in a unipolar system would have the broadest interests of all.<sup>40</sup> With great power comes both great flexibility to pursue a wide variety of goals and great responsibility to affect the progression of events. 'Most countries are primarily concerned with what happens in their neighborhoods', says Robert Jervis, 'but the world is the unipole's neighborhood'.<sup>41</sup> As interests expand, new threats appear which, if states are not careful, can soon take on an inflated importance and inspire unnecessary action. Threats to secondary interests can rapidly be misinterpreted as significant dangers if not kept in perspective by a constant, conscious process of evaluation. The expansion of interests as power grows is natural, but the interpretation of those new interests as vital is not. Vital national interests do not change from decade to decade, much less from administration to administration, but interest inflation is a central aspect of foreign-policy pathology in unipolar systems.

Great powers of the past have often proved unable to disconnect vital interests from peripheral ones as expansion occurred. Newly perceived dangers have seemed to require action, which has often taken the form of

further expansion, leading to the identification of new threats. There will never be a time when no threats can be generated by the human imagination. States can never be fully safe if all interests are vital and all threats dire. Insecurity has no natural limits, and if not kept in check can easily lead to overexpansion, overspending and decline.<sup>42</sup>

Historical examples are not difficult to find. Two millennia after its collapse, it is easy to forget that insecurity contributed to the growth of the Roman Empire. Many of its most prominent conquests, from Gaul to Dacia to Iberia, were driven not only by the desire for glory or plunder but also by the sincere belief that the populations along Rome's widening periphery could represent a threat. Cicero observed that many Romans felt that expansion was thrust upon them, as part of a project to rid themselves of 'frightening neighbours'.<sup>43</sup> The fact that most of these neighbours were manifestly weaker did not matter. As its power grew, so too did Rome's insecurity.

Even Rome's most ardent defenders stop short of claiming that Roman expansion can be fully explained with reference to virtuous, defensive motives. But prestige and financial gain were not the only motivations of Roman strategists. As both Cicero and Virgil argued, Rome never felt safe as long as it had enemies, both real and imagined.<sup>44</sup> The most powerful – and in many ways safest – society in the ancient world was unconvinced that its security was assured as long as it had neighbours. Their mere existence constituted a potential threat.

Great Britain exhibited a similar level of insecurity as its power grew throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the boundaries of its empire expanded, new dangers constantly appeared just over the horizon. British politicians and strategists felt that turbulence on colonial borders 'pulled them toward expansion', in the words of historian John Galbraith.<sup>45</sup> The notion that empire could never be safe until all potential threats were addressed encouraged unnecessary and strength-sapping forays into such places as Afghanistan, Zululand and the Crimea.

There is little doubt that the empires of the past did have real enemies that could have been the cause of genuine security concerns. Insecurity is only pathological when elevated to disproportionate, irrational levels. Today the

United States faces far fewer existential dangers than did either the Roman or British empires. American dominance is far greater, as is the strength of its pathology.

### *State-level explanations*

Given that the geographic position of the United States occasionally allows its people the luxury of forgetting about the problems of the world, greater-than-average shock follows when that seeming isolation is shattered by surprise attack.<sup>46</sup> The vast distance separating the United States from any potential foe tends to create the preconditions for overreaction if and when its presumed safety is violated. As a result, surprise attacks have a greater influence on the development of the national-security posture of the United States than any other great power.<sup>47</sup> Since the attacks of September 2001 were a major shock, one might expect a US reaction that was out of proportion to extant threats. As *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman put it, '9/11 made us stupid'.<sup>48</sup>

The United States might also be peculiarly susceptible to the insecurity pathology because of what political scientist Louis Hartz called the 'liberal tradition' in the United States, at least as compared with those states whose intellectual inheritances are based more squarely in the lessons of realpolitik.<sup>49</sup> This liberal political tradition encourages a Manichaeian worldview and a simultaneous acceptance of messianic responsibilities. It is unsurprising to American liberals that their country – a major force for good in the world – is the target of a variety of evil-doers. Islamist fundamentalist terrorists, they argue, harbour hatred for the United States not based upon what it has done, but what it is: the world's leading voice for freedom, democracy and modernity.<sup>50</sup> Realists are usually somewhat more sanguine about the threats facing a state, and are by nature less prone to exaggeration.

Liberalism has been particularly influential in the White House over the past 16 years. The administration of George W. Bush contained a number of people who inhabited the far end of the threat-perception spectrum, and who drove it in a decidedly liberal direction. There is no doubt that the neo-

---

*The liberal  
tradition  
encourages a  
Manichaeian  
worldview*

conservatives, who represent a muscular version of the American liberal tradition, tend to perceive more danger in the international system than do many other observers. Indeed, inherent in many of the definitions of neo-conservatism is a high perception of threat; it is an essential part of what differentiates a neocon from other analysts.<sup>51</sup> The extent to which the United States overestimates the level of danger in the world is at least in part directly related to the influence of neo-conservatives both directly upon policymaking and indirectly in the marketplace of ideas. When neo-conservatives are prominent, as they have been since the Cold War ended, either in administrations or as leading voices of the opposition, the people of the United States are bound to feel more insecure than they actually are.

The liberal tradition has helped foster a sense of moral superiority that is a central feature of the American historical narrative. While it is normal for people to take pride in their country or culture, Americans have long been exceptional in their exceptionalism.<sup>52</sup> A key component of the US national self-image is moral, driven in part by the comparative strength of religious belief in the United States: America is not only unique and essential, but good. And good cannot exist without evil. The greater the power of good, the greater the threat it represents to evil, which will respond in diabolical ways, employing all of the cunning and deception at its disposal. No amount of security will ever be enough to assure safety in a world beset by the forces of darkness; as US strength grows, so too will that of Satan's minions, even if they are not always detectable.

Finally, the United States is served, or held hostage, by a 24-hour news cycle that thrives on conflict and danger. Fear is an essential component of the business model of both CNN and Fox News, a necessary tool to keep fingers away from remote controls during commercial breaks. Voices of reason tend to spoil the fun, and may inspire people to seek excitement elsewhere. News outlets win by presenting stories that are more frightening, angry and simple than those of their competitors, not by supplying historical perspective and reassurance. If no danger exists, it must be created, or at least creatively implied. Truth, as George Kennan noted, is sometimes a poor competitor in the marketplace of ideas. 'The counsels of impatience and hatred can always be supported by the crudest and cheapest symbols', he wrote:

For the counsels of moderation, the reasons are often intricate, rather than emotional, and difficult to explain. And so the chauvinists of all times and places go their appointed way: plucking the easy fruits, reaping the little triumphs of the day at the expense of someone else tomorrow, deluging in noise and filth anyone who gets in their way, dancing their reckless dance on the prospects for human progress.<sup>53</sup>

The noise and filth produced by the American media is louder and thicker than in any other state.

### *Individual explanations*

At least three mental processes may help account for the overestimation of threat among US policymakers. Firstly, a number of scholars have proposed that the creation of enemies is a natural and inevitable part of human social interaction, for both individuals and groups.<sup>54</sup> People need enemies for their own self-image; it is meaningless to be the good guy if there is no corresponding bad guy. Evil will always be found, even if none exists. In the absence of clear enemies foreign policy tends to flounder, as critics accused US foreign policy of doing in the 1990s. The attacks of 2001 merely confirmed what many already believed: our enemies are massing against us. But the psychological need to have a rival does not make a danger real.

Secondly, there seems to be a tendency towards a correlation between power and insecurity, or even paranoia, in individual leaders.<sup>55</sup> Time and again, people who have exhibited borderline deranged behaviour have attracted followers, solidified bases, come to power and remained there for extended periods across a wide variety of settings. It could be there are times when paranoia is advantageous for the would-be leader, since broad purges surely kill conspirators alongside innocents. US leaders are not autocrats, of course, but they do enjoy an unprecedented level of power, which is virtually uncheckable by the international system. Perhaps they too, like the dictator or the king, though not to the same degree, are affected by the destabilising effects of great power.

Finally, security discourse itself may help explain the high level of threat perception in the United States. That we live in a dangerous world has

become something of a truism, a shared belief in the foreign-policy community that is rarely subjected to rational analysis. Official discourse can not only affect popular perceptions but frame potential reactions and shape state behaviour. Constant repetition of the idea that we live in a dangerous world can, over time, easily lead to genuine belief, for leaders and followers alike.<sup>56</sup> A more rational examination of threats could therefore be useful in altering the current conventional wisdom in both popular and strategic circles.

US leaders have repeatedly decided to raise threat levels to encourage Americans to support otherwise unpopular policy choices. This is not new phenomenon; H.L. Mencken observed that in order to create support for America's entry into the First World War, Woodrow Wilson and other US liberals realised that 'the only way to make the mob fight was to scare it half to death'.<sup>57</sup> More recently, the American public showed little enthusiasm for the first Gulf War until President George H.W. Bush began injecting the threat of Iraqi nuclear weapons into his speeches. Likewise, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Dick Cheney were fond of arguing that a failure to attack Iraq could well result in a nuclear attack on the United States. When faced with such choices, the American people understandably go along. Manipulation of popular perceptions by individual leaders surely contributes to the national pathology.

Stoking such fires not only has effects for the short term, raising support for otherwise unnecessary action, but tends to do long-term damage as well. Once lit, such fires are hard to extinguish. Fear and anxiety persist long after they are useful, and continue to drive decisions. It can prove beyond the power of more rational leaders to control them. President Barack Obama has repeatedly demonstrated an instinct toward restraint and moderation, but time and again has decided that the political situation requires hyperventilation, or at least that overreaction would not be costly. On a range of issues, including the Russian incursion into Georgia, the Iranian nuclear programme and the so-called 'Underpants Bomber', Obama's instincts initially produced measured and calm reactions, but each time, criticism from the right, and comparisons with the perceived weaknesses of the Jimmy Carter administration, convinced him to change his reaction and become

much more belligerent. Only in a deeply pathological society is reason a synonym for weakness.

\* \* \*

It will probably never be possible to determine the precise explanatory power of any of these explanations, none of which are mutually exclusive. But in the final analysis, understanding the cause is not as urgent as recognition, treatment and cure. Policymakers would be wise to take account of Parkinson's Law, the natural tendency to see more threats as power grows. In unipolar systems, the dominant state sees more monsters in need of destruction than do lesser states. Unnecessary ventures follow, accompanied by overextension, overspending and eventual decline. Perhaps this tendency to identify more threats as power increases is one of the natural levelling forces of international politics. Unless US leaders wish to see the unipolar moment end sooner than need be, they must recognise that the threats they perceive are generally less dire than they appear.

The pathological, exaggerated sense of threat among many Americans is potentially harmful to the future of the country and the world. Born in irrationality, it inspires equally irrational actions, many of which are costly beyond any possible benefit. With a new administration in power and serious economic uncertainty gripping the nation, one can hope that the American public will be receptive to a more reasonable conception of danger, now that it has seen the results of overreaction. As with alcoholics, sometimes a nation must hit rock bottom before it sees the need to make drastic changes. Iraq should be that rock bottom for America. If the consequences lead the United States to return to its traditional, restrained grand strategy, then perhaps the whole experience will not have been in vain.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> One of Brzezinski's recommendations was that the United States should 'contemplate withdrawing from the 2014 Winter Games, to be held in the Russian city of Sochi'. Apparently it is not only the threat that is never changing, but also the set of possible responses. Zbigniew Brzezinski,

- 'Staring Down the Russians', *Time*, 14 August 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1832699,00.html>.
- 2 Charles Krauthammer, 'NATO Meows', *Washington Post*, 22 August 2008, p. A17.
  - 3 Robert Kagan, 'Putin Makes His Move', *Washington Post*, 11 August 2008, p. A15.
  - 4 John McCain, 'We Are All Georgians', *Wall Street Journal*, 14 August 2008, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121867081398238807.html>.
  - 5 Cyril Northcote Parkinson, *Parkinson's Law: The Pursuit of Progress* (London: John Murray, 1958).
  - 6 See Karl W. Deutsch, *The Analysis of International Relations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 88.
  - 7 The term was coined by historian Robert J. McMahon in 'Credibility and World Power: Exploring the Psychological Dimension in Postwar American Diplomacy', *Diplomatic History*, vol. 15, no. 4, Fall 1991, pp. 455–71.
  - 8 Quoted in Dan Williams and Ann Devroy, 'US Policy Lacks Focus, Critics Say: Bosnia Cited as Prime Case', *Washington Post*, 24 April 1994.
  - 9 Robert Jervis, 'Domino Beliefs and Strategic Behavior', in Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder (eds), *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 20–50; Jerome Slater, 'The Domino Theory and International Politics: The Case of Vietnam', *Security Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, Winter 1993–94, pp. 186–224; Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965–1990* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Paul K. Huth, 'Reputations and Deterrence: A Theoretical and Empirical Assessment', *Security Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, Autumn 1997, pp. 72–99; and Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
  - 10 Christopher J. Fettweis, 'Credibility and the War on Terror', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 122, no. 4, Winter 2007–08, pp. 607–33.
  - 11 Newt Gingrich, 'Bush and Lincoln', *Wall Street Journal*, 7 September 2006, <http://www.opinionjournal.com/editorial/feature.html?id=110008905>.
  - 12 George F. Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger: Current Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1977); James Chace and Caleb Carr, *America Invulnerable: The Quest for Absolute Security from 1812 to Star Wars* (New York: Summit Books, 1988); John A. Thompson, 'The Exaggeration of American Vulnerability: The Anatomy of a Tradition', *Diplomatic History*, vol. 16, no. 1, Winter 1992, pp. 23–43; Dana H. Allin, *Cold War Illusions: America, Europe and Soviet Power, 1969–1989* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994); and Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: US Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994).
  - 13 Will Lester, 'Poll: Americans Say World War III Likely', *Washington*

- Post*, 24 July 2005; Norman Podhoretz, *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).
- 14 Scott Bittle and Jonathan Rochkind, 'Anxious Public Pulling Back from Use of Force', *Confidence in US Foreign Policy Index*, vol. 4, Spring 2007; and 'Energy, Economy New Focal Points for Anxiety over US Foreign Policy', *Confidence in US Foreign Policy Index*, vol. 6, Spring 2008, both available at <http://www.publicagenda.org/foreign-policy/index.htm>.
- 15 See Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 269–70.
- 16 Roy P. Basler (ed.), *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001).
- 17 Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776–1918* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1939), pp. 26–8; see also Bruce Russett, *No Clear and Present Danger: A Skeptical View of US Entry into World War II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
- 18 Ted Robert Gurr and Monty G. Marshall, *Peace and Conflict 2005: A Global Survey of Armed Conflicts, Self-Determination Movements, and Democracy* (College Park, MD: Center for International Development and Conflict Management, 2005); Human Security Centre, *Human Security Report 2005* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Lotta Harbom, Stina Högbladh and Peter Wallensteen, 'Armed Conflict and Peace Agreements', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 43, no. 5, September 2006, pp. 617–31.
- 19 Bethany Lacina, Nils Peter Gleditsch and Bruce Russett, 'The Declining Risk of Death in Battle', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 3, September 2006, pp. 673–80.
- 20 See Nils Petter Gleditsch, 'The Liberal Moment Fifteen Years On', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 4, December 2008, p. 694.
- 21 Natia Kuprashvili, 'Georgia: Conflict Toll Confusion', Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 25 September 2008, available at [http://www.iwpr.net/?p=crs&ts=f&o=346852&apc\\_state=henpcrs](http://www.iwpr.net/?p=crs&ts=f&o=346852&apc_state=henpcrs). The modern definition of war used in much political science research was first discussed in J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *The Wages of War, 1816–1965: A Statistical Handbook* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972).
- 22 See Robert Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 12; and Richard Ned Lebow, 'The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism', *International Organization*, vol. 48, no. 2, Spring 1994, p. 269.
- 23 Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Virtual State: Wealth and Power in the Coming Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); John Mueller, *Retreat From Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989) and *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); James Lee Ray, 'The Abolition of Slavery and the End of International War', *International Organization*, vol. 43, no. 3, Summer 1989, pp. 405–39; Michael Mandelbaum, 'Is Major War

- Obsolete?', *Survival*, vol. 40, no. 4, Winter 1998–99, pp. 20–38; Robert Jervis, 'Theories of War in an Era of Leading Power Peace', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 96, no. 1, March 2002, pp. 1–14; and Raimo Väyrynen, *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- <sup>24</sup> On defensive realism, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, 'Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited', *International Security*, vol. 25, no. 3, Winter 2000–01, pp. 128–61.
- <sup>25</sup> South Vietnam, the only country to disappear against its will in 60 years, only held observer status at the UN.
- <sup>26</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Nuclear Myths and Political Realities', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 84, no. 3, September 1990, pp. 731–45; John Lewis Gaddis, 'The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System', *International Security*, vol. 10, no. 4, Spring 1986, pp. 99–142; and Carl Kaysen, 'Is War Obsolete? A Review Essay', *International Security*, vol. 14, no. 4, Spring 1990, pp. 42–64.
- <sup>27</sup> Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Erik Gartzke, 'The Capitalist Peace', *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 51, no. 1, January 2007, pp. 166–191; Nils Petter Gleditsch, 'The Liberal Moment Fifteen Years On', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 4, December 2008, 691–712; and Stephen G. Brooks, *Producing Security: Multinational Corporations, Globalization, and the Changing Calculus of Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- <sup>28</sup> Evan Luard, *War in International Society: A Study in International Sociology* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1986); Mueller, *The Remnants of War*; and Ray, 'The Abolition of Slavery and the End of International War'.
- <sup>29</sup> Michael O'Hanlon, 'America's Military, Cut to the Quick', *Washington Post*, 9 August 1998, p. C1.
- <sup>30</sup> William Kristol and Robert Kagan, 'Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 4, July–August 1996, p. 24.
- <sup>31</sup> For details, see John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006); and *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- <sup>32</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, 'DoD News Briefing', 12 February 2002, <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636>.
- <sup>33</sup> Robert Kagan and William Kristol (eds), *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2000), p. 4.
- <sup>34</sup> Benjamin Friedman and Harvey Sapolsky, 'You Never Know(ism)', *Breakthroughs*, vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 2006, pp. 3–11.
- <sup>35</sup> Quoted by Corey Robin in *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 72.
- <sup>36</sup> Walter W. Rostow, *The United States in the World Arena: An Essay in Recent*

- History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 544.
- 37 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
- 38 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
- 39 Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured*, p. 140.
- 40 French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine is widely credited with popularising the term 'hyperpower' to describe the United States.
- 41 Robert Jervis, 'Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective', *World Politics*, vol. 61, no. 1, January 2009, p. 200.
- 42 This is the process Jack Snyder first discussed in *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
- 43 William V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome, 327–70 B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 164.
- 44 P.A. Brunt, *Roman Imperial Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 102.
- 45 John S. Galbraith, 'The "Turbulent Frontier" as a Factor in British Expansion', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 2, no. 2, January 1960, p. 168.
- 46 See Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), p. 151.
- 47 See John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Charles F. Parker and Eric K. Stern, 'Blindsided? September 11 and the Origins of Strategic Surprise', *Political Psychology*, vol. 23, no. 3, September 2002, pp. 601–30.
- 48 Thomas Friedman, '9/11 Is Over', *New York Times*, 30 September 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/opinion/30friedman.html>.
- 49 Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955). See also Michael C. Desch, 'America's Illiberal Liberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in US Foreign Policy', *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 3, Winter 2007–08, pp. 7–43.
- 50 Bernard Lewis, 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 266, no. 3, September 1990, pp. 47–60; and David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2003).
- 51 See Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 77.
- 52 Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); and Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998).
- 53 George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (New York: Mentor, 1951), p. 56.
- 54 David J. Finlay, Ole R. Holsti and Richard R. Fagen, *Enemies in Politics* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1967); and Vamik D. Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relationships* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1988).

<sup>55</sup> Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>56</sup> Johnson, *Improbable Dangers*, p. 37.

<sup>57</sup> H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: A Selection* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 114.