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# Continuity and Change in U.S. Security Strategy

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Seal, U.S. Marine Corps

*A new world order is not a fact; it is an aspiration—and an opportunity. We have within our grasp an extraordinary possibility that few generations have enjoyed—to build a new international system in accordance with our own values and ideals, as old patterns and certainties crumble around us.*[1]

George Bush, August 1991

*It's the economy, stupid.*

Clinton campaign, 1992

IN THE FOUR AND A HALF YEARS since the destruction of the Berlin Wall, the euphoria engendered by that event has been tempered by several strong doses of reality. The Gulf War, the senseless self-destruction of Somalia, the brutality of today's Balkan crisis, and the parallel decline of the American social and economic order have dampened our enthusiasm for the once promising new world order. Moral indignation over atrocities aside, America's aspirations for rebuilding the world in its image have necessarily suffered from its own domestic problems and from a growing realization that the new world order is just as chaotic as was the old. It is no longer the vague promise of a new world but the bread and butter issues of economic recovery and social renewal that define the American political agenda.[2]

In attempting to define the emerging world order and our nation's security requirements in it, we must first realize that the new world still plays by the old rules. We must also realize that America's outlook and attitudes toward the world are a reflection of our national character and interests, each of which is deeply rooted in our past. The purpose of this article is to provide a different perspective to the ongoing security debate by focusing on key similarities and differences

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between the old and the new orders. Specifically addressed are the strong threads of continuity which bind the two orders in three critical areas: the workings of the international state system, the American historical experience, and the traditional interests and goals of the nation. In contrast to these threads of continuity, this article then addresses the changing military role in the post–Cold War security environment.

## Continuity: The Nation State System

One enduring feature of the emerging world order is that nation states are still the leading actors. These states remain jealous of their interests and prerogatives. Another feature is that "order" in no way connotes peace. Like interpersonal conflict, war is a fact of life. For states, war is a tool—a means to an end. Since states reflect on a grand scale the base motivations of the humans who populate them, the actions of states reflect basic human instincts for self-preservation, wealth, and mastery. Unfortunately, the nation-state system lacks the restraining forces of civilized society which limits the mischief that individuals can inflict on society.[3]

As a result, raw military power is still the bottom line in international politics. All elements of power are important, but a wealthy state with little military power has limited influence over a poorer one with a substantial military establishment. Japan and Germany may have wealth and influence, but they could not move Saddam out of Kuwait; nor can mere expressions of outrage end tragedies such as those being played out today in the Balkans and the Horn of Africa. Unless the values of a target state leave it vulnerable to economic pressure or moral suasion, military force will remain the final option for influencing the actions of that state.

A final feature of the nation-state system concerns the influence of international organizations, specifically the United Nations. The easing of Cold War tensions has breathed new life into that organization, giving it a legitimacy far beyond that which it has ever known. For all its achievements, however, the United Nations is still a dependent organization. It has only as much authority as its members will allow. Thus, the ideal of international cooperation stumbles on the reality of national sovereignty. Nation states simply do not, as a matter of course, subordinate their vital interests to the wishes of an international body. Neither do great powers bow to the demands of the pygmies, however valid their complaints. And even the weakest of states can defy the will of the international community, as Serbia and Iraq can attest. The division of the U.N. itself into an ineffectual General Assembly and a more authoritative Security Council (complete with veto power) tempers the idealism of the world body with the reality of the nation-state system.

While the nation-state system continues to define world actors, its form is flexible. Cold War bipolarity is clearly gone, but America is neither interested in, nor capable of, establishing hegemony. Multipolarity is a popular description of today's political arrangements, but it suggests parity in all aspects of national power, effectively relegating the U.S. to equal billing with Japan and a loosely defined Western European Union. This is nonsense. No single state or confederation has the military power, diplomatic influence, and economic potential of the United States. While economic troubles and the passing of the Soviet threat may have lessened America's influence in some specific instances, the United States is still very much first in power, influence, and the willingness to lead.

How then is power distributed in this new world order? One observer likens the new order to a layer cake. Militarily, the world is unipolar, with no serious rival to the United States. Economically, the world is tripolar, with the United States sharing center stage with Western Europe and Japan. Finally, in terms of transnational interdependence, the world is multipolar.[4] For America and for the rest of the world, isolation is no longer a political, economic, or military option. For better or worse, the global community is now bound through the virtually unfettered exchange of ideas and integrated financial, commercial, environmental, and security issues.[5]

## Continuity: The American Historical Experience

Ours is not the first generation of Americans to experience a new world order. The upheavals spanning the period between the American Revolution and the Congress of Vienna (1815) produced our first new order, one which was vastly different from that which existed before. Dominated by a largely benevolent Great Britain, this order left America free to develop as a nation in the comfortable shadow of British law, commercial interests, and naval power. To their credit, America's leaders understood that arrangement and capitalized on the opportunities that it presented. The Monroe Doctrine is a prime example of American policy under that order, reflecting the successful melding of national interest, idealism, opportunism, and presumption that typified our nineteenth-century experience.

A second new order emerged from the devastation and ideological divisions of the Second World War. Largely created and maintained by the United States, the architecture of our postwar containment policy was more a reflection of necessity than of our preferred vision of a perfect world—a world more like the United States. Though Americans disliked this world, we were successful in it. Indicative of both our dissatisfaction and success was our ability to bring that era to a peaceful end, on our terms.

If we are to understand the third and still emerging world order, it is important to recognize that Americans are traditionally uninterested in national security matters during times of peace. Throughout most of our history our armed forces were small and neglected. Americans were quick to answer the call to arms when needed, but postwar demobilizations of our citizen armies were swift and severe. Our naval and military traditions are proud, but the genius of America lies elsewhere—in industry, commerce, agriculture, and in the realm of ideas. American ideals of civil liberties, the responsibilities of governments, and economic freedom have not only shaped our approach to the rest of the world, they have helped shaped the world itself.

Long before our revolution, Americans were contemplating a transcontinental American empire. After independence, the new republic embarked on an aggressive and well-coordinated program of expansion. Boldly employing a mix of diplomatic initiatives, economic leverage, and armed aggression against England, Spain, Mexico, and a succession of Indian nations, Americans pursued their well-defined national interests at a frenetic pace. Pursuing what was, in effect, great power status, Americans couched their aggressive designs in the rhetoric of enlightened altruism and divine intent. Terms such as "Manifest Destiny" and "Beacon of Freedom" were not empty phrases. Americans believed in themselves, in the innate superiority of the American system, and in their role as an example for the rest of the world to follow. Nineteenth-century Americans had a keen sense of mission and national purpose and often pursued those interests to the point of irrationality, given their limited means. Americans did all of this with the firm belief that they were somehow apart from, indeed superior to, the European state system. They abhorred imperialism yet conquered a continent and established an imperial regency throughout the Caribbean basin and much of the Pacific. They decried militarism and refused to bear the expense of a strong military, yet they were quick to fight and prospered on a grand scale from territorial expansion won through force of arms. A small professional army and fleet were sufficient to meet defense needs, with volunteers and privateers filling the void during times of crisis.

Early Americans did not think in terms of national security strategy, but they did understand power. They understood that a systematic coordination of political, diplomatic, economic, and military power was needed to protect vital national interests and achieve national goals. For most of our history Americans have been masters of doing just that, largely through an uncanny sense of vision and national purpose. In simple terms, Americans knew where they were going as a nation and spared no effort to get there. The pace was hectic, and diplomacy was often more assertive than limited military means and growing regional differences would justify, but our civilian leadership established policy and used military and naval forces unhesitatingly to support national initiatives.

The unclouded focus on achieving great power status continued unabated through civil war and reconstruction. The trend of aggressive nationalism, which struck roots in America, continued to grow, feeding the fires of our turn-of-the-century foray into overseas expansion. The press for free trade, access to overseas markets, and protection of American citizens and commercial interests increased American presence overseas and led to unprecedented naval expansion.

America's strategic focus began to blur with our entry into the First World War. Americans adopted the lyrics of a George M. Cohan song as a national policy, only to find that when it was "over over there," Europe was still a mess. Feeling more superior to the old world than ever, we washed our hands of the whole sordid episode and went our own way. But a watershed had been reached. America's entry had been a guarantee of total military victory for the Allies, and we knew it. The ill-fated Fourteen Points (a product of American ideals, not interests) aside, military victory and not a rational political settlement had been the national goal. For the first time the United States had embarked on a major national undertaking without a clearly defined and realizable national objective. Fighting to make the world safe for democracy appealed to American idealism but proved a weak and hollow basis for national policy.

Even more than the First, the Second World War reshaped America's outlook toward her position in the world. Not only did the United States emerge from this conflict as the greatest economic and military power, it decided to act the part. The lessons of the failed peace of 1919 and the turmoil of the 1920s and 1930s had been learned. For the first time since Theodore Roosevelt's Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, the United States freely accepted the international obligations which her power and status conferred. Given the state of affairs in Europe and Asia, there was, literally, no other choice.

Though American involvement in the postwar world was a significant departure, it was the Cold War, more specifically the outbreak of war in Korea, that redefined our international position. Until 1950, American goals were achievable by the application of power. Korea changed that. Frustrated in its attempt to win (once again for the sake of winning rather than for a clearly defined political objective), America made a fundamental change of course. No longer could we afford to let our foreign policy oscillate from a wartime obsession with military victory to a peacetime indifference to military considerations. The Russians got the bomb; we got the peacetime draft, the military-industrial complex, and a bad case of national jitters. We began an unseemly scramble for alliances and security assistance programs with a number of odious regimes, seemingly in the absence of well thought-out and adequately supported national policy.

Gone was the vision and singleness of purpose of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Gone too was the unbridled confidence and optimism of the early twentieth. We had achieved our historic national goal and now found ourselves hard-pressed to maintain it. As a status-quo power facing an increasingly powerful and ideologically motivated opponent, America found in deterrence and containment a logical focus for its strategic thought. But they were defensive strategies, geared not toward winning but to *not losing*. As such, they had no foundation in the American historical experience.

Then, unexpectedly, it was all over. As the Soviet Union turned inward, the sad scenario of the Cold War evaporated with the collapse of that "ultimate symbol of Communist failure, the Berlin Wall."[6] Virtually overnight, the "evil empire," which had driven our diplomatic, economic, military, and, to a degree, our domestic political agendas, folded. In a truly anomalous situation, our eastern boundary retreated in victory from Berlin to our own Atlantic coast. While close political, economic, and military ties with Europe would continue, it became inconceivable that President Kennedy's famous declaration of residency in Berlin would have to be repeated by any future American leader. More than ever the real benefit of America's military presence in Europe would be symbolic, giving a psychological boost to emerging democracies and a similar pause to would-be aggressors, who could only benefit from political instability exacerbated by a precipitous U.S. withdrawal.

Before we could fully adjust to our unexpected good fortune, however, we faced another challenge. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was a shock, but it proved a boon as well—at least in the short term. Recognizing the hurdles that would have to be cleared to undo the damage of Iraq's aggression, the immediate assessment was that victory was by no means a foregone conclusion. But Desert Shield/Desert Storm proved fortuitous. Saddam Hussein gave us a rare opportunity to advance the cause of our loftiest ideals while defending a vital economic interest. Better still, his ineptitude allowed us to achieve our goals with a modest investment of blood and treasure. An unvarnished scoundrel who was anathema to virtually everyone, Saddam had the added attraction of vulnerability. Difficulties aside, we could actually strike him—hard. Saddam gave us a chance to show what we could do as a nation, as a military machine, and as the leader of a diverse coalition in a truly supportable moral crusade. With our characteristic focus on the short-term gain rather than long-term political implications of our actions, we did remarkably well in each.

## Continuity: U.S. National Interests

Just as there are enduring realities in the functioning of the nation-state system and in America's historic national development, so too with our national

interests. The interests and objectives outlined in the 1991 National Security Strategy reflect those that have guided our development from the early days of the Republic. The primary interest is, quite naturally, the survival of the nation, of its values and institutions. The second is to promote a strong and expanding national economy. Third is to build and maintain cooperative and politically vigorous relations with allies and friendly nations. Finally, the U.S. will strive to maintain a stable and secure world where political and economic freedom, human rights, and democratic institutions flourish.[7] In short, the U.S. continues its historical quest for the "Holy Grail" of our foreign policy—a peaceful, orderly world governed by law.[8] A world which, in its commercial implications, is remarkably similar to that which Great Britain presided over throughout most of the nineteenth century.

One compelling reason for this continuity of interests lies in an inescapable fact of geography. America is essentially an island nation whose prosperity is tied to international seaborne trade. Thus, America has consistently championed freedom of the seas, open markets, and the rights of Americans abroad. For over two hundred years, in peace and in war, America has liberally employed naval forces to uphold these very principles.

## Change: Peace at Last

Central to any discussion of American security is the military establishment. For the military, the end of the Cold War is both exhilarating and unnerving. A generation of soldiers that have known nothing but cold war must now face the reality of peace. One bit of reality is that America has a deep-seated antipathy to a large standing military. The Cold War has shaped the military man's perception of his place in society, giving him a comfortable feeling of relevance. But the Cold War was an anomaly. It was the only prolonged period in which America faced a real military danger. With the passing of the threat, the relevance of the military in the eyes of Americans is slipping rapidly. Ironically, this comes at a time when the military is heavily engaged in a variety of tasks at home and abroad.[9] Operations such as those in Somalia may keep the military in the headlines, but the message of massive force reductions was soon unmistakable.

***Bad News, Good News, and Opportunities.*** Unlike past demobilizations, today's reductions hit not only the professional officer corps, but career enlisted ranks as well. Alexis DeTocqueville noted some 150 years ago that officers in democratic armies tied their fortunes to the army.[10] Today that can be said of all ranks. In a break with our history, the Cold War has replaced a citizen's army of volunteers and conscripts with a large, professional force. In a modern twist

to this older problem, minorities who have traditionally seen the military as a vehicle for advancement now face being shut out by reduced force levels. They too will increasingly see themselves as casualties of the end of the Cold War.

As disconcerting as force reductions may be, there is good news, both on the moral level and in opportunities for the future. The moral is reflected in a change from the Cold War military strategy. Firmly wedded to the idea of victory in war, the Cold War strategy of not losing never set well with Americans, especially with the professional military. Pursuing a strategy of not losing was bad enough in Korea, where we achieved our goal. It was profoundly disturbing when, as in Vietnam, the goal of not losing proved elusive. And the mere thought of fighting a defensive war in Europe, knowing what a fearful price that would entail, was sobering. Winning such a "victory" would leave little for the survivors to celebrate. Coming on the heels of this distressing scenario, the massive and clear-cut military victory in the Gulf War was therapeutic, despite evolving postwar political ambiguities.

On the practical side, post–Cold War demobilization presents opportunities for enhancing the nation's security. No longer driven by the fear of falling behind a powerful rival in a race for national survival, we can now be more discerning in assessing future security needs. We cannot safely assume that another military threat will not emerge. It will. We do, however, have the relative luxury of great power cooperation and a diminution in the magnitude, if not the frequency, of threats to national interests. As a result we now enjoy far more flexibility in planning for future security needs than we had just three years ago.

After nearly fifty years of concentrating on what we dramatically termed "The Threat," we were presented by the downfall of the Soviet Union with a range of important and heretofore unthinkable opportunities, one of which was to realize immediate economic relief by scaling back on a number of high-cost defense programs. To continue building forces and systems to counter a nonexistent global threat would be illogical, fiscally irresponsible, and contraty to American historical traditions. This is a lesson not only for the Pentagon, but for Congress and the American electorate as well. Buying jobs (and votes) by funding unnecessary bases and programs is a pork barrel tradition that the nation can no longer afford. With nearly one in ten Americans on food stamps and a national debt beyond mortal comprehension, rationalizing the tremendous expense of Cold War military programs is increasingly difficult.[11]

Another opportunity is to restructure our security apparatus to meet the changing environment. The absence of an immediate military threat gives us a chance to define and prepare for emerging defense needs in relative security. The "down side" is the virtual certainty that future forces will be defined not by any rational assessment of defense requirements but by how much money is

left after funding an ever-increasing array of social programs. As both taxes and the deficit rise over the next few years, there can be little doubt that the Defense Department will bear the brunt of still more budget cuts.

***Roles, Missions, and Nontraditional Threats.*** In this atmosphere of austerity, a serious review of service roles and missions becomes ever more imperative, if only to end the suspense in the military community by reaffirming the current division of labor. Regardless of how the debate turns out, tomorrow's services simply must be more complementary. With fewer military forces to cover a world that is just as big and even more complicated than before, there will be little room for inefficiency.

Part of our defense restructuring must also involve a detailed assessment of the nature and magnitude of nontraditional threats and methods for dealing with them. Agencies such as the Coast Guard, Drug Enforcement Administration, Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the Customs Service may, for a time, stand with the military as our first line of defense. Still another aspect of restructuring must include an industrial policy that will preserve our technological and manufacturing edge in critical defense industries.

Faced with growing nontraditional needs and a sudden excess of traditional assets, we may be able to find some benefit in mixing the two. "Excess" Navy ships as well as military reconnaissance and surveillance assets (and crews) may prove useful in the war against drugs if transferred to the Coast Guard. The discipline, field skills, and organizational expertise of infantrymen facing an early return to civilian life may also be of value to agencies seeking to gain control over our porous borders and to regain order in our cities. Admittedly, such programs may be limited in both scale and duration, but transferring selected personnel and equipment from military to civil control will help shift our strength to meet the most immediate security challenge, while providing meaningful employment for a responsible and productive segment of society. A legitimate transfer will also help us avoid the sticky constitutional issues involved in using military forces in a law enforcement role.

A new world of peace, stability, and justice, which seemed so close just four years ago, remains a dream. This is hardly surprising, since there was nothing in the past to suggest that such a fundamentally different world order could evolve so quickly, especially in a time of peace. Thus, for all the changes in the world order, we still live in a world of nation states who are often in violent competition with each other for power, wealth, and security.

As the international political system remains essentially unchanged, so too do the legacies of our historic national development and interests. Traditionally

optimistic, even utopian, Americans believe that the world would be a better place if only it were more like the United States. Over the last fifty years we have paid heavily in lives, dollars, and lost internal development opportunities to make it so. This sacrifice was born not of altruism, but of interest. Now the Cold War is over. We won. As with each of our previous wars, it is now in our nation's interest to focus on other, long-neglected matters. There may be other military challenges looming on the horizon, but that possibility just does not register being as important with a public whose focus is on a number of pressing domestic needs.

If the American public's assessment of the new world order appears rather narrow, so too does that of the military. The military approach to the post–Cold War world targets a vague "uncertainty" as the new threat—as if international uncertainty were something new. Locked in a zero-sum competition for power and influence, the services focus on developing new strategic concepts to protect the nation (and force structure), squabble over roles and missions (and the dollars which go with them), and worry over selling their programs to a government and people whose interest in national security has resumed its normal low level of peacetime importance.

Meanwhile, life in America goes on. While service planners search for historical precedents to justify their separate agendas, the entire military establishment runs the risk of irrelevance by ignoring larger issues that define the unique character of America. With domestic issues and regional challenges replacing a hostile superpower as the gravest threat to the nation, Americans simply have no interest in maintaining a large, Cold War defense establishment. Should the existing military structure be perceived as irrelevant to today's threats, or should the services be seen as special-interest groups scrambling for a share of dwindling national treasure, this uninterest will become open and very hostile opposition. There is nothing in America's past to suggest that we will maintain large forces without a compelling reason to do so. There is also little to suggest that the Pentagon, the Congress, and the American taxpayer will agree on what constitutes a compelling argument. The assertion that an unstable and uncertain world poses a threat to the republic is unlikely to prove convincing to a nation which has little trust in national government, sees no tangible external threat, and is increasingly troubled by its serious domestic problems.[12]

Our challenge, then, is to develop a viable and affordable security apparatus that meets the conflicting requirements of an overdue emphasis on domestic issues and a new world that is still a very violent, unpredictable, and unforgiving place. This will not be easy. It will not be possible, however, if we attempt it with conflicting service programs which ignore the essential character of America and the enduring realities of the international state system.

## Notes

1. U.S. President, George Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, August 1991, p. v.
2. Both the President's State of the Union and his five-point prescription for "a new direction" in foreign policy centered on economic issues. William J. Clinton, "State of the Union Address," 17 February 1993 and "American University Address on International Trade," 26 February 1993.
3. Will and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 81.
4. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "What New World Order?" *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1992, p. 88.
5. John Lewis Gaddis, "Toward the Post-Cold War World," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1991, pp. 103, 104.
6. Geoffrey Perret, *A Country Made by War* (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 486.
7. Bush, pp. 3–4.
8. Walter Russel Mead, "Saul Among the Prophets: The Bush Administration and the New World Order," *World Policy Journal*, Summer 1991, pp. 377–8.
9. Colin L.Powell, "U.S. Forces: Challenges Ahead," *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1992/93, p. 39.
10. Alexis DeTocqueville, *Democracy in America*, v. 2 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 272.
11. In March 1993 a record 27.38 million Americans were enrolled in the food stamp program. Carole Sugarman, "27.4 Million Receiving Food Stamps," *The Washington Post*, 29 May 1993, p. A18.
12. In June 1992 a *Washington Post—ABC News* poll reported that 62 percent of Americans disapproved of President Bush's performance, 77 percent were dissatisfied with Congress, and 83 percent believed the country was going in the wrong direction. E.J. Dionne Jr., "Perot Leads Field in Poll; Bush Rating at New Low," *The Washington Post*, 9 June 1992, p. A7. A similar poll conducted a month into the Clinton presidency shows only 21 percent of respondents claiming trust in the government "always or most of the time." See "The Clinton Presidency: Washington Post-ABC News Poll," *The Washington Post*, 2 March 1993, p. A8.

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